

The Byzantine Empire's diplomatic tradition served it well for most of the thousand years it existed after the fall of the Western Roman Empire. However, by the end of their empire, its allies and enemies no longer responded to its diplomatic overtures. Over the years, the poor treatment of the Western Powers' diplomats bred a deep dislike of the Byzantine Empire and its citizens. The theological differences between the Papacy and the Pentarchy, based on the concept of papal primacy, widened the gap as well when mixed in with the diplomats that the two religious powers sent to each other. Eventually, the relationship between the East and the West became so bad that the West would no longer rouse itself to help the East when it was being attacked by the Ottoman Turks, who were the ones to finally completely conquer the Byzantine Empire and bring the rule of the Romans to an end. It was the Byzantine diplomatic tradition that eventually brought about the empire's end; what was done to get a temporary advantage over their neighbours started long, deep-seated grudges that eventually destroyed the empire that the Byzantines were so proud of.

Byzantine diplomacy, on the surface, appeared to be completely contradictory to achieving their goals. When an important delegate was sent to them from a powerful group of people, rather than treating them well as the delegate undoubtedly would expect, they would often treat them poorly. An example of this comes from a letter sent back to the Holy Roman Emperor Otto I by Liutprand of Cremona, the man he had sent there to speak to the Byzantines on behalf of the Holy Roman Empire. Otto, despite being a new power in the Western world, as he established the Ottonian Dynasty, was still a power. Despite this, Liutprand's letters reveal the poor treatment that his representatives went through in Constantinople. He complains that almost as soon as he and the other delegates set foot in the city, which they were not allowed to do until the "eleventh hour", they were placed under house arrest like criminals. The house that served as

their prison was reported to always be either too hot or too cold. As the final insult, the wine they were given by their hosts, the only drinkable liquid around, apparently tasted as if it was mixed with “pitch, resin and plaster”. They were also prevented from seeing the Emperor or any other important person right away.¹

This contrasts with the treatment given to the Rus, who had visited under the auspices of Vladimir I to see what the Byzantine religion was like. They were given the grand tour of Constantinople, being awed and dazzled by the riches on display and by the beauty of the services in the Hagia Sophia. They reported in the Russian Primary Chronicle that they “knew not whether they were on heaven or earth”. When they left, they were loaded down with presents by the Byzantine state.² The Rus, at the time, were not that important in the general sense of who was a potential powerful threat. And yet, they were treated in a far better manner than the Ottonian delegation later would be. The explanation for the Byzantines’ actions is that since the Ottomans were actually powerful and a possible threat, they therefore treated their diplomats poorly to keep them off-balance for when negotiations between the two empires started. However, this makes it easy to understand why later Westerners would have been reluctant to help the Empire when it asked. Resentment towards the Byzantines for treating what the Westerners would have seen as complete barbarians and infidels better than their civilized selves would have built up over the centuries, slowly eroding the idea of Christian unity with the Empire.

The Crusades exemplify the acceleration of these ideas. The Crusades got progressively worse as they came and went, ravaging what the Byzantines saw as their lands and claiming

¹ Liutprand of Cremona, “Report of His Mission to Constantinople”, Medieval Sourcebook, 1996, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/liudprand1.asp>

² Deno John Geanakoplos, *Byzantium: Church, Society, and Civilization Seen through Contemporary Eyes*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 353

them for their own. When Alexius I Comnenus sent a delegate to the papacy to ask for help with reclaiming his lands from the Arabs, he was not expecting Pope Urban II to call for a crusade against the infidels. Of course, once the Westerners arrived in Constantinople, things went downhill quickly between the two groups. Keeping in mind the way Western diplomats were described to have been treated, it is unlikely that the two groups would have been able to come to an agreement regarding the lands that the Europeans would eventually reconquer from the Arab forces; the Byzantines would have seen the Westerners as far less civilized than themselves, and the Westerners would have remembered and most likely been treated poorly, as was the tradition in Constantinople.

The disrespect shown to and by the Byzantines also led to more problems between the Crusaders and the Emperor. During the First Crusade, a Crusader named Bohemond led the attack on the city of Antioch. Once it was taken, Bohemond claimed that the Byzantines, who had sent reinforcements, had disappeared when he had needed them most. When he later had to go back to Western Europe, he continued to complain about the Byzantines and how they had betrayed him.³ Considering that this was written down, it suggests that Bohemond's allies believed his accusations. It is already known that the Byzantines had a poor reputation amongst the Westerners. This accusation simply lowered their reputation even further in Western Europe.

Another example of the differences between the two cultures and their diplomacy was the Byzantine tradition of writing the agreements between people down. While not taking place between the East and the West, an account by an Arabic Muslim shows how the Byzantines would use this habit to get an upper hand. A representative of one of the many Arabic rulers, the unnamed writer recalls how he went to Constantinople to clear up some questions his leader had over land they had gotten for turning over a rival claimant for the imperial throne. When he got

³ Joseph Gill, *Byzantium and the Papacy: 1198-1400*, (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1979), 1-2

there, he of course had to wait to see a bureaucrat. When he finally managed to do so, it was claimed that the matter had already been settled; of course, it had been settled in favour of the Empire. When the writer stated that it had not been settled, he was called a liar as he could not produce the paperwork needed to prove his assertions.⁴ As the Arabs were a notable power in the East at the time, it is not a stretch of the imagination to believe that such a scenario could occur between Eastern officials and Western diplomats. Through the medieval period, writing was mainly the domain of the church, as they were the only people who really knew how to read. Because of this, it is again not much of stretch to think that the West would not be the most comfortable with writing; to see it used against them to ‘cheat’ them out of their just rewards would have encouraged resentment and the stereotype of the ‘tricky Greek’.

Relations between the Papacy and the Eastern Church, while generally continuous, were also often turbulent. At the root of their troubles with each other was the concept of papal primacy. The Westerners believed that the Pope was the head of the Christian Church, as he was the leader of the holy city of Rome, the city where Saint Paul the Apostle was martyred; the Byzantines, on the other hand, believed in what was called the Pentarchy. The Pentarchy was the belief that in Christianity there were five equally holy cities, not just one. These cities were Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, Constantinople and Rome.

So it can be seen that both the Westerners and the Eastern Christians saw Rome as a holy city. The only problem was that the Byzantines saw Rome as one of five holy cities; the first among equals at most. The Westerners, on the other hand, insisted that Rome was more holy than the other cities because it was where God’s representative resided and where Peter, the apostle that Jesus said would be the rock of the Church, went after Jesus’ death. This did not sit well with the other holy cities’ patriarchs. While such claims of having an apostle preach in

⁴ Geanakoplos, *Byzantium*, 341-342

one's city would have been rare in the West, they were not overly rare in the Byzantine Empire. Therefore, to the patriarchs, the emperor and the citizens at large, this emphasis on Rome being holier than the other cities was strange. For was it not them that could lay claim to ruling over, at the very least, Jerusalem, where Jesus was crucified, and where Abraham tried to sacrifice Isaac? In their minds, they had a much better claim to having the holiest city in Christendom.

Papal primacy also had another problematic facet in its core concepts. If Rome was the holiest city in all of Christendom, and the pope was God's representative on Earth, then that would mean that everyone, including the emperor, should bow down to the pope and obey his decrees. In the Byzantine Empire this was not acceptable. The Emperor had been in firm control of the Eastern Church for centuries. The patriarchs answered to him, and this suited their way of ruling. For the emperor, bowing down to a foreign leader would destroy his control over his empire and his claim to power.

The Byzantine love of showing off their capital city, Constantinople, to awe and cow foreigners,⁵ also eventually became a weakness rather than an asset for the diplomats of the empire. Before, the magnificence of the palaces, the Hippodrome and the Hagia Sophia had cowed the Western Powers. However, this awe of the Byzantine wealth and beauty, combined with the poor treatment of important delegates, eventually led to the papal diplomats and priests seeing the wealth as a sign of wickedness and indulgence, contrary to the ascetic teachings of Jesus. Amongst secular powers, stories of the Byzantines' great wealth eventually led to greed overtaking awe in their kings' minds.⁶ Within both forms of Western power, the over-indulgence on flagrant display came to be seen as a sign of wickedness and softness. The Byzantines turned

⁵ Jeffrey D. Brubaker, 2009. "The End Followed In No Long Time: Byzantine Diplomacy and the Decline in Relations With the West from 962 to 1204". MA Thesis, University of Arlington. Ann Arbor: ProQuest/UMI (Publication No. 1467855), 68

⁶ Brubaker. "The End Followed", 15

from powerful allies into ripe victims ready to be conquered by the more ‘worthy’ and ‘deserving’ Westerners, and brought back onto the path of true Christianity.

This eventually came to a head in the Great Schism of 1054. After that, the Church would never be able to reunite again. That is not to say that the emperors that came afterward did not use the promise of reunification for their own gain. Alexius I Comnenus, in asking for help from Pope Urban II, used the promise of reunification to get soldiers for reinforcements in the battles to regain control of the Fertile Crescent, which had been conquered by the Arabs at the time.⁷ This request resulted in the First Crusade. As mentioned above, the Crusades did not help East-West relations. This was not purely because of the sacking that Byzantine lands went through. It was rooted in the lack of reinforcements mentioned before. The Crusaders believed that the entire point of the Crusades was the recapture of Jerusalem. In their eyes, the Byzantine Empire’s lack of enthusiasm for fighting their way down the eastern coast of the Mediterranean, laying siege to all the cities along the way, was a sign that the Byzantines were not good Christians. For as far as the Westerners were concerned, Jerusalem was where Jesus was martyred, and therefore the most important city in Christendom, excepting Rome where God’s earthly representative resided; therefore, the Byzantine’s reluctance to help them reclaim it from infidel hands meant that they were not good Christians.⁸

This idea strained things even further between the popes and the emperors. They had provided the men that Alexius had asked for. The fact that those men were carving out their own kingdoms, therefore, was what the Byzantines deserved for being bad Christians. The Byzantines did not see it like that. While the pope had sent troops to help their army reclaim their former lands, the Western soldiers had caused even more damage to the remaining Byzantine Empire

⁷Gill, *Byzantium and the Papacy*, 1

⁸Brubaker, “The End Followed”, 3

than they had helped. Therefore, it was not difficult for the emperor to come to the decision that reuniting the Christian Church at that time was no longer an option.

The later Crusades continued to strain the relationship between the empire and the papacy. As more and more Westerners came through the empire, mucking things up, the possibility of reunification became an ephemeral dream. By the end of the empire, not even the promise of reunification, or even the Byzantines following through on recognizing papal primacy could save the empire from the Ottomans. They had made too many promises and had not followed through too many times, and their magnificence and conspicuous consumption had become their own worst enemy. The secular Westerners were also uninterested in helping the empire, having been cheated and looked down upon too many times to trust the Byzantine state. The Byzantine diplomatic tradition, after doing so well for so many centuries, had become the very thing that had left the empire without allies when it needed them most.

Works Cited

Brubaker, Jeffrey D., 2009. "The End Followed In No Long Time: Byzantine Diplomacy and the Decline in Relations With the West from 962 to 1204". MA thesis, University of Arlington. Ann Arbor: ProQuest/UMI (Publication No. 1467855).

Geanakoplos, Deno John. *Byzantium: Church, Society, and Civilization Seen through Contemporary Eyes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986.

Gill, Joseph. *Byzantium and the Papacy: 1198-1400*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1979.

Liutprand of Cremona. "Report of His Mission to Constantinople". Medieval Sourcebook, 1996.
<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/liudprand1.asp>