

# Economic factors in the decline of the byzantine empire

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“ Economic Factors in the Decline of the Byzantine Empire” In this article taken from The Journal of Economic History, Peter Charanis discusses the factors that economically affected the decline of the Byzantine Empire. His discussion is based on the fact that past scholars, such as English historian Edward Gibbon who wrote The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, thought the Byzantine Empire was in a constant state of decline throughout its existence, but he disagrees. He says that more recent scholars have found that it was, in fact, one of the great empires in history.

He references to historians such as Fridtjof Nansen, author of *L'Armenie et le proche Orient*, who said that the Byzantine culture “ is and will remain one of the most remarkable works of architecture, and if the Byzantine culture had created nothing but that, it would be sufficient to classify it among the greatest. ” Charanis is convinced that most scholars today reject Gibbon’s theory, and this article discusses why he believes so. Because the Byzantine Empire endured for over a thousand years and was the center of civilization until the middle of the eleventh century, it could not be looked at as a constantly declining empire.

According to Charanis, it preserved antiquity, developed new forms of art, and held back barbarians. Byzantium produced great soldiers, statesmen, diplomats, reformers, and scholars. It was also successful at spreading the gospel among pagan tribes. Charanis quotes Czech historian F. Dvornik who wrote *Les Slaves byzance et Rome au IX* saying Byzantium “ molded the undisciplined tribes and made nations out of them; it gave to them its religion and institutions, taught their princes how to govern, transmitted to

them the very principles of civilization - writing and literature. " Byzantium was a great power and a great civilizing force," Charanis said. He believed that war and religion were the two principal factors that molded the society of the empire and determined its external position. Because war was a normal state during Byzantium's thousand year existence, war was not a reason to believe that it was constantly declining. For example, in the seventh century, the Sarcens, Slavs, and Bulgars reduced the empire greatly, but the seventh century emperors reorganized the administration of the empire to cope with the situation at hand.

In the eleventh century however, the empire was not as fortunate to recover from certain military reverses that occurred. There were disastrous defeats that they never fully recovered from, and this is what finally led to the beginning of their decline. One very important factor, according to Charanis' sources such as Russian historians' books and works, were the conditions the Manzikerts left the empire in. It had such a huge impact on the social and economic life of the empire, and this was the basis of its virtual disappearance.

Byzantium relied so fully on the social and economic aspect of their culture, that an attack to this was fatal. The Manzikert military aristocracy was far from what the Byzantines were accustomed to, and caused the soldiery-peasantry to decline which was a large part of their state. Up until this point, emperors were able to rework the empire and reorganize things so that Byzantium could thrive, but after their " large estate", which had been a huge party of their society, was attacked, it was almost impossible.

Charanis believes that the aristocracy that was put in place in the eleventh century was also another large factor of decline. Instead of being a social and economic based empire, it was a military aristocracy. The soldiers were the holders of the military estates, and the aristocracy absorbed the estates of the peasants. The focus of the emperors was the happiness of the soldiers and not of the peasants, or all the other people in the empire, and this was also a large source of decline in Byzantium.

Once the emperors of the eleventh century realized that this system was not working quite as well, they tried to create an anti-military policy, which consummated a depression in soldiers. This entire struggle that occurred after the seventh century caused the empire to participate in a series of civil wars affected its sources and manpower, according to Charanis. Other serious factors that caused the decline were the weakening of the central administration, the failure to enforce measures of protection for the soldiery-peasantry, and the grants of privileges made to the aristocracy.

It has been said that another reason for their decline was the strict controls they placed on commerce and industry, but Charanis disagrees and says it is extremely doubtful that this was their weakness. He backs up this argument by saying that when those controls were most strictly enforced, was when their empire was at its greatest. He goes on to say that the period of the greatest decline is marked by the breakdown of these controls.

Tenth century Byzantine emperor Romanus Lecapenus wrote in one of his novels that the extension of power to the strong and the depression of power to the many would "bring about the irreparable loss of the public good."

Charanis agrees with him saying that “ His prediction had come true. The disappearance of the free peasantry, the increase in the wealth, privileges, and power of the aristocracy, and the consequent depression of the agrarian population constitute, I think, some of the principal factors in the decline of the Byzantine Empire. ”

Charanis' evidence is clearly all there and cited, but it is somewhat difficult to understand his references. They're numbered at the bottom and his numbers are meant to further explain certain points throughout the article. Another problem I have with his evidence is that they are mostly books written by foreign authors, and I can't read the titles. I believe that Charanis has clearly proven his point and thoroughly discussed his thesis; however, his argument was not extremely bold, because he is arguing one historian's theory (Edward Gibbon), and agreeing with every other historian who believes the Byzantine Empire was great.

His argument was more fact-based, and proven through certain points of notoriety throughout the existence of the empire, and his presentation of these points seemed unorganized. In fact I found the organization of this article to be somewhat confusing. He seemed to jump around from century to century and fact to fact. I believe it would have been much more efficiently written if he had discussed the certain centuries of the empire in chronological order. This also would have more effectively shown the factors that led up to the decline of the Byzantine Empire.

Instead he jumped around discussing things that related to the factors, but not thoroughly discussing what order the things happened and why one led

to the next. Charanis did not raise new questions in his argument. He simply argued Gibbon's theory, and used other historians to back his argument up. In fact, most of the historians that Charanis used as references were quite old, for example, Fridtjof Nansen, a Norwegian author from 1928. No recent authors or suggestions were raised from Charanis' article.

I think that overall this article offered some very thorough and credible information about the decline of the Byzantine Empire, but since his original argument was that Gibbon was wrong, he should have used more examples of historians that supported Gibbons theory and argued their points as well. Though he had many historians to back up his argument, his thesis mentioned Gibbon. He definitely proved his point and listed many factors that caused the decline of the Byzantine Empire, but I would have liked to see less confusing organization and newer information that supported his argument.