E. Byzantine Society and Politics

The centralization of Byzantium resembled the political structure of early China. The emperor was head of both state and church. The power of the emperor was sustained through an elaborate bureaucracy. As in China, aristocrats dominated the bureaucracy, but there was some openness to all ranks of society. Provincial governors were appointed from the center, and a system of spies sought to preserve loyalty to the central government. The military consisted of soldiers recruited locally and granted land in return for service. The military requirement was hereditary. Hereditary military commanders were able to establish considerable regional control. The military system successfully held off the Muslim advance in Eastern Europe until the fifteenth century.

Byzantine society and economy depended on the role of Constantinople. The imperial bureaucracy regulated all trade. Food prices were kept low to feed the enormous population, but taxes on the peasantry were high. The dominance of Constantinople led to the decline of other imperial cities. Trade linked Byzantium with Asia, the Middle East, and northern Europe. Luxury industries flourished in the capital. Although merchants became wealthy, they never exercised much political control. Cultural life centered on Hellenism and the development of Orthodox Christianity.

Particularly in the monasteries, a tradition of icon painting became prominent. In the eighth century, some emperors attacked the use of religious symbols, such as icons, in worship. Iconoclasm the attack on icons in religious worship created a popular reaction. The use of icons was eventually restored.