

## Chapter Two

# Justinian the Great

*The legacy of Rome endures in Byzantium*

**M**ighty Rome was no more. But as you may remember, the empire had been divided in two many years before. Though the city of Rome had fallen, and the western half of the empire with it, in the east the empire continued, centered on its magnificent capital: Constantinople.

At its beginning, 600 years or so before the birth of Christ, Constantinople had been nothing more than a modest Greek town called Byzantium (buh-ZAN-tee-um). But while the town may have been humble, its location was not. It stood on a triangle of land that jutted out into the Bosphorus Strait, a gleaming ribbon of water that was the gateway between Europe and Asia.

If you spin your globe and find the Mediterranean Sea, follow it eastward, past Greece and the Aegean Sea and into the smaller Sea of Marmara. Do you see a little further east the deep waters of the Black Sea? Only a thin bridge of land separates the Black Sea from the Sea of Marmara, and that neck of land, in turn, is divided by a narrow channel: the Strait of Bosphorus. This tiny opening is the only meeting place between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean where a ship could sail

from the shores of western Asia to the far reaches of Europe. There, perched like a watchtower above the Bosphorus Strait, sat Byzantium. Whoever controlled the town also controlled the Strait, and therefore, all of the ships traveling back and forth between Europe and Asia.

Of course, such an important spot would not go unclaimed by the power that was Rome, and so in 324 A.D., the great emperor Constantine declared that Byzantium would be the site of a grand new capital, a wondrous city modeled after Rome itself. When he died in 337, the city was given his name, Constantinople.

After the empire was divided, Constantinople remained its eastern capital, the only Roman capital now that Rome itself had fallen. The city was immensely strong: the Bosphorus Strait protected its southern and eastern ramparts, and a deep inlet called the Golden Horn guarded it to the north. Any attacker would have no choice but to approach from the west, and there the emperors had caused a huge wall to be built, three layers deep. Within such a dauntless fortress, the kings of Constantinople felt safe from any enemy.

And yet on an afternoon in January of 532, heavy columns of black smoke rose over the city's center. Citizens cowered in their houses, their doors barred, listening fearfully as bands of armed men ran howling through the streets, striking down anyone they could find. In the palace, the emperor sat hunched on his throne, his face in his hands, his wife by his side, his last few loyal advisors huddled nearby. Constantinople was burning, but it had come under no attack from without. The proud city had been brought to its knees by its own people.

And it had all started with a game.

Of course, people have cheered and shouted at sporting events for thousands of years, and the Romans of Constantinople were no different. They had even built their own arena, just like the stadium where you might go to watch a baseball