At the time of the fall of the Western empire its Eastern counterpart seemed so strong — strategically more difficult to attack, wealthier and with a higher morale. There were far fewer internal disputes over the leadership; church and state enjoyed good relations as opposed to their mutual hostility in the West; there was a considerable free peasantry in contrast to the serfs on the big landed estates in the West. But it was not long before the political and economic patterns of the West repeated themselves in the East.

The seventh century was a disastrous one. The Islamic conquest of Syria, Palestine and Egypt was doubly shattering. On the one hand, these were the most economically advanced and densely populated areas of the Empire, and their loss meant the loss of considerable tax revenue. The loss of Egypt was particularly significant because it was from there that corn was imported to provide for the large, often unemployed and unruly mob of Constantinople. On the other hand, important religious and cultural centres had been lost — Alexandria, one of the most powerful centres of Greek culture, Antioch, and the holiest Christian city of all, Jerusalem. And the Islamic advance continued. In the 650s the Arabs took Cyprus and Rhodes and the Byzantine fleet was defeated. Constantinople itself was besieged from 674–78 by land and sea (and would be again in 717–18), the city surviving thanks to the invention, during the siege, of Greek Fire, a composition of sulphur, nitre, naptha and asphalt which took fire when mixed with water and was thus particularly effective in naval engagements. Armenia would fall in 691 and North Africa in 697. In the meantime Arab assaults on Asia Minor led to the decline of many hitherto prosperous cities.

The loss of Egypt meant that the corn for Constantinople now had to be obtained from Thrace, but the seventh century also saw deep penetration of the Balkans, including Greece, by Slavs and Avars, who even besieged Constantinople in 626, but above all, by the Bulgars so that Byzantine control of Macedonia and mainland Greece was reduced to a few coastal cities.1

As the Germanic tribes moved westwards and broke through the barriers of the Roman Empire their places in the Balkans, Danubian basin and eastern central Europe were taken by Slavonic...
5 The Byzantine Empire 600–1071 AD