Most accounts of European civilization neglect the place of Byzantium. The Byzantine world is often dismissed as a chapter in the history of the decline of the Roman Empire, whose legacy in the conventional account was taken up by the western monarchies and modern Europe emerged from a path that supposedly goes back to Rome and Athens. In this account, which will be challenged in this chapter, the main offspring of Byzantine civilization – Orthodox Christianity – was given a marginal role in European civilization in general and hardly figures in discussions on the place and significance of Christianity in that history. The general representation of the Byzantine tradition has been one of decline and irrelevance (see Arnason 2000a).

In the Grand Narratives the history of Europe has been essentially portrayed as the history of the Latin West, which was given an undue continuity and unity. This is a view that is increasingly challenged today in light of a more general recognition of a wider conception of the European heritage and the need to take into account the historical experience of those parts of Europe whose route to modernity was shaped by the encounter with Russia and the earlier legacy of the eastern Roman Empire. Any assessment of the European legacy today will need to consider the place of Byzantium in the history of Europe.

The historical significance of Byzantium for a broader conception of Europe as a civilizational constellation should not be underestimated. The argument in this chapter is that the Byzantine Empire, as it was known, was an important transmitter of classical antiquity and that consequently continuity in European history cannot be entirely considered without reference to Byzantium. In addition is the significance of that tradition for those parts of South-Eastern and Eastern Europe that came under the influence of Orthodox Christianity, most notably
Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania, Greece and Cyprus. The Byzantine Empire was the most important basis of Christianity for centuries before the rise of the West and transmitted the cultural, legal and political legacy of the Roman Empire to Europe. In the present day with the revival of Orthodoxy and the enlargement of the EU to include parts of Europe that had been previously marginalized, the Byzantine legacy needs to be incorporated into a broader understanding of Europe, including Russia, Belarus and the Ukraine. In view of the emphasis placed in this book on a conception of Europe as formed out of interaction with the cultures and civilization of those parts of the world with which Europeans came into contact, it seems essential to include in an account of the European heritage a consideration of the encounter with Russia. Russia, itself more than a nation and empire, but a civilization in its own right that is part European and part Eurasian, was deeply influenced by the Byzantine tradition and given its impact on Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe for much of the twentieth century, it is hardly marginal to the European historical experience.

Europe is constituted as much in its margins as in the centre. As is argued throughout this book, the very notion of a centre and margins needs to be replaced with a new emphasis on Europe as a world historical region comprised of borderlands. Borderlands are not present only in the periphery; they are everywhere and not defined by reference to a single centre but in terms of a multiplicity of centres. In the account offered in this chapter those parts of Europe that were influenced by the Byzantine world and later by Russia constitute not only a borderland, but an integral part of the wider European civilizational constellation. Russia itself is more than a nation-state and empire but a civilization that has been significant in shaping European and world history. Russia embodies both European and Asian civilizational components, but it is best seen as a Eurasian civilizational form in its own right. No account of the origin of the idea of Europe can neglect the Russia counter-discourse (Neumann 1996). This has been one of the main competing discourses of the idea of Europe and one that also played its part in the formation of a European consciousness.

**Re-evaluating the Byzantine Empire**

While Byzantine civilization did not survive the westward expansion of Islam and more or less disappeared in 1453 following the fall of its capital Constantinople to the Ottomans, it was important because the civilizational pattern that Byzantium established in Late Antiquity,