

MEANWHILE, BACK IN



BYZANTIUM

by Kathryn Reetzke

Have you ever seen an eagle with two heads in nature? Probably not, yet I'm sure you may have seen one on a flag, like the Serbian flag featured in this article. You may have even seen one at your church or carved onto the side of a building. Stone carvings of the double headed eagle have been found in Mesopotamia and Anatolia (Turkey) many years before Constantinople was a capital city and the Byzantine Empire was founded. However, it has become well known as a symbol of the Byzantine Empire. In 1259 AD, the Palaiologos family brought this heraldic symbol (to identify their family on banners, clothing, or shields) with them when they became leaders of the Byzantines. The Palaiologos family intermarried with the Komnenos family (Byzantine rulers) and served as military leaders rose to power after the fall of the Latin/Catholic ruler John IV Laskaris (4th Crusade) in 1259. This family ruled the Byzantine Empire until Constantinople fell to the Ottomans in 1453.

The niece of the last Palaiologos Emperor, Zoe, was married to Ivan III of Russia in 1472, bringing the symbol of the double headed eagles to the Russian ruling class. There is also archaeological evidence that Serbia used this symbol as well from as early as the 12th century. The symbol continued to be used by other governments after the fall of Constantinople in 1453 amongst Orthodox Christian countries and church offices.

The two heads on the eagle symbolize the political and spiritual authority of the ruling family. The symbol was typically embroidered on clothing, banners, and items owned by the ruling family, only later in Russia and the Greek Orthodox Church is it depicted on flags. The Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople also uses this symbol on the outside of the building that houses Patriarch Bartholomew in modern day Istanbul.



Double-headed eagle emblem of John VIII Palaiologos (r. 1425–1448). Open Access.



Republic of Serbia flag. Open Access.



Photo of Double Headed Eagle on the Basilica of St George of the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople. 19th Century facade