The Decline and Fall of the Byzantine Empire

From World Civilizations: The Global Experience

Shortly after the split between East and West (Christian Churches in the 11th century), the Byzantine Empire entered a long period of decline. Turkish invaders who had converted to Islam in central Asia began to press on its eastern borders, having already gained increasing influence in the Muslim caliphate. In the late 11th century, Turkish troops, the Seljuks, seized almost all the Asiatic provinces of the empire, thus cutting off the most prosperous sources of tax revenue and the territories that had supplied most of the empire’s food. The Byzantine emperor lost the battle of Manzikert in 1071, his larger army was annihilated, and the empire never recovered. It staggered along for another four centuries, but its doom, at least as a significant power, was sealed. The creation of new, independent Slavic kingdoms in the Balkans, such as Serbia, showed the empire’s diminished power.

(Byzantine) emperors appealed to Western leaders for help against the Turks, but their requests were largely ignored. The appeal helped motivate Western Crusades to (attempt to recapture) the Holy Land (from Muslim control), but this did not help the Byzantines. At the same time, Italian cities, blessed with powerful navies, gained increasing advantages in Constantinople, such as special trading privileges – a sign of the shift in power between East and West. One Western Crusade, in 1204 ... actually turned against Byzantium. Led by greedy Venetian merchants, the Crusade attacked and conquered Constantinople, briefly unseating the emperor and weakening the whole imperial structure. But the West was not yet powerful enough to hold this ground, and a small Byzantine Empire was restored, able through careful diplomacy to survive for another two centuries.

Turkish settlements pressed ever closer to Constantinople in the northern Middle East – in the area that is now Turkey – and finally, in 1453, a Turkish sultan brought a powerful army, equipped with artillery purchased from the West, against the city, which fell after two months. By 1461, the Turks had conquered remaining pockets of Byzantine control, including most of the Balkans, bringing Islamic power farther into eastern Europe than ever before. The great eastern empire was no more.

The fall of Byzantium was one of the great events in world history. ... It was a great event because the Byzantine Empire had been so durable and important, anchoring a vital corner of the Mediterranean even amid the rapid surge of Islam. The empire’s trading contacts and its ability to preserve and spread classical and Christian learning made it a vital unit throughout the postclassical period.

Reflection: What do the authors of Traditions & Encounters point to as a reason for the downfall of the Byzantine Empire that the excerpt above fails to mention?