The Decline and Fall of the Byzantine Empire

By about 1,100 CE the mighty Byzantine Empire started to decline. As with the Western Roman Empire before it, there were a number of contributing factors for its decline and eventual collapse.

After the great church schism of 1054, The Byzantine began feeling pressure from the western side of Europe. Often encouraged by the Roman Catholic Church, armies began to march on the Byzantine capital of Constantinople. Trade suffered, and to cut costs, a “land-for-military service” deal the government had made with the farmers was removed. In revolt, the farmers stopped being loyal to the army, and so its numbers and power greatly declined. When Vikings from the north conquered portions of the Byzantine in the southeast, the emperor looked to the city of Venice for help. In return, Venice was granted tax and toll free trading rights. This led to Venice eventually taking control of trade around the Mediterranean. The loss of income further weakened the empire.

Meanwhile, during the 1200’s, Christian Knights from the west and Muslims from the east invaded and took control of more and more Byzantine lands. The reduction in lands meant less and less resources and supplies. Soon, the empire was reduced to a small plot of land around Constantinople. Constantinople fought valiantly, but when Ottoman Turks from the east showed up with a new invention - guns and cannons - Constantinople could not withstand the siege on their city. In 1453, Constantinople fell to the invading Turks. They renamed the city Istanbul, and it became the first capital city of the Ottoman Empire. It still stands today in the modern day country of Turkey.

Long after its demise, The Byzantine Empire continues to influence culture today. Justinian’s Code still serves as the backbone for most legal systems in the west. They also helped spread the ideas of Christianity into the east. Most importantly however, the Byzantines copied and preserved the knowledge of ancient Greece and Rome, and ensured that their knowledge of mathematics, science, and health would not be lost. In fact, upon fleeing Constantinople for the west (mostly Italy), many historians believe the Byzantines helped usher in the great era of intellectual growth known as the Renaissance period.