The bazaars of Constantinople awed visitors, Benjamin of Tudela, a Jewish traveler from Spain, saw merchants there from the Middle East, Egypt, and Eastern Europe. “The city’s daily income,” he noted, “what with rent from shops and markets and taxes levied on merchants coming by sea and by land, reaches 20,000 gold pieces.” As the cities of the Western Roman Empire crumbled, Constantinople prospered. With its high walls and golden domes, it stood as the proud capital of the Byzantine Empire.

THE GROWTH OF BYZANTINE POWER
You will recall that, as German invaders pounded the Roman Empire in the west, emperors shifted their base to the eastern Mediterranean. The emperor Constantine rebuilt the Greek city of Byzantium and gave it the name Constantinople. In 330, he made Constantinople the new capital of the empire. From this “New Rome,” roads fanned out to the Balkans, to the Middle East, and to North Africa. In time, the eastern Roman Empire became known as the Byzantine Empire.

Constantinople – The vital center of the empire was Constantinople. The city was located on the shores of the Bosphorus, a strait that linked the Mediterranean and Black seas. Constantinople had an excellent harbor and was guarded on three sides by water. Later emperors built an elaborate system of land and sea walls to bolster its defenses. Equally important, Constantinople commanded key trade routes linking Europe and Asia. For centuries, the city’s favorable location made it Europe’s busiest marketplace. There, merchants sold silks from China, wheat from Egypt, gems from India, spices from Southeast Asia, and furs from Viking lands in the north.

At the center of the city, Byzantine emperors and empresses lived in glittering splendor. Dressed in luxurious silk, they attended chariot races at the Hippodrome, an arena built in the 200s. Crowds cheered wildly as rival charioteers careened their vehicles around and around. The spectacle was another reminder of the city’s glorious Roman heritage.

A Blending of Cultures – After rising to spectacular heights, the Byzantine Empire eventually declined to a small area around Constantinople itself. Yet it was still in existence nearly 1,000 years after the fall of the Western Roman Empire. As the heir to Rome, it promoted a brilliant civilization that blended ancient Greek, Roman, and Christian influences with other traditions of the Mediterranean world.
THE AGE OF JUSTINIAN

The Byzantine Empire reached its greatest size under the emperor Justinian who ruled from 527 to 565. Justinian was determined to revive ancient Rome by recovering the provinces that had been overrun by invaders. Led by the brilliant general Belisarius, Byzantine armies re-conquered North Africa, Italy, and southern Spain. The fighting exhausted Justinian’s treasury and weakened his defenses in the east. In the end, the victories were temporary. Justinian’s successors lost the bitterly contested lands.

Hagia Sophia – Justinian left a more lasting monument in the building. To restore Roman glory, he launched a program to beautify Constantinople. His great triumph was the church of Hagia Sophia, or “Holy Wisdom”. Its immense, arching dome improved on earlier Roman buildings. The interior glowed with colored marble and embroidered silk curtains. Seeing this church, the emperor recalled King Solomon’s temple in Jerusalem. “Glory to God who has judged me worthy of accomplishing such a world as this!” Justinian exclaimed. “O Solomon, I have surpassed you!”

Inside the church, dazzling mosaics adorn the walls. This mosaic shows Christ Pantocrator, center, flanked by Emperor Constantine IX Monomachus and the Empress Zoe.

Completed in less then six years, Justinian’s Church of Hagia Sophia stood as the largest religious building of its day. A huge dome dominated the church. Four minarets, or narrow towers, were added later. After the empire’s fall in 1453, the Hagia Sophia served as a mosque and, in recent years, as a museum.

Sunlight filters through the window and highlights the interior of the Hagia Sophia. In its early days, gold glittered from the ceiling, and marble gleamed from the walls.
Code of Laws – Justinian is best remembered for his reform of the law. Early in his reign, he set up a commission to collect, revive, and organize all the laws of ancient Rome. The result was the Corpus Juris Civilis, or “Body of Civil Law,” popularly known as Justinian’s Code. This massive collection included laws passed by Roman assemblies or decreed by Roman emperors, as well as the legal writings of Roman judges and a handbook for students.

Justinian’s Code had an impact far beyond the Byzantine Empire. By the 1100s, it had reached Western Europe. There, both the Roman Catholic Church and medieval monarchs modeled their laws on its principles. Centuries later, the code also guided legal thinkers who began to put together the international law in use today.

Absolute Power – Justinian used the law to unite the empire under his control. He ruled as an autocrat, or sole ruler with complete authority. The emperor also had power over the Church. He was deemed Christ’s co-ruler on Earth. As a Byzantine official wrote, “The emperor is equal to all men in the nature of his body, but in the authority of his rank he is similar to God, who rules all.” Unlike feudal monarchs in Western Europe, he combined both political power and spiritual authority. His wife, Theodora, aided his control. A shrewd politician, she served as adviser and co-ruler to Justinian and even pursued her own policies.

Changing Fortunes – In the centuries after Justinian, the fortunes of the empire rose and fell. Attacks by Persians, Slavs, Vikings, Mongols, and Turks were largely unsuccessful. The empire thus served as a buffer for Western Europe. Beginning in the 600s and 700s, however, Arab armies gained control of much of the Mediterranean world. Constantinople itself withstood their attack, and the Byzantines held onto their heartland in the strong central government and a prosperous economy.

Peasants formed the backbone of the empire, working the land, paying taxes, and providing soldiers for the military. In the cities of the empire, trade and industry flourished. While Western Europe was reduced to a barter economy, the Byzantine empire preserved a healthy money economy. The bezant, the Byzantine gold coin stamped with the emperor’s image, circulated from England to China.

BYZANTINE CHRISTIANITY
Christianity was as influential in the Byzantine Empire as it was in Western Europe. But religious divisions grew between the two regions.

Differences East and West – Since early Christian times, differences had emerged over Church leadership. Although the Byzantine emperor was not a priest, he controlled Church affairs and appointed the patriarch, or highest Church official, in Constantinople. Byzantine Christians rejected the pope’s claim to authority over all Christians.

Further differences developed. Unlike priests in Western Europe, the Byzantine clergy kept their right to marry. Greek, not Latin, was the language of the Byzantine Church. The chief Byzantine holy day was Easter, celebrated as the day Jesus rose.
from the dead. In contrast, western Christians placed greater emphasis on Christmas, the birthday of Jesus.

**Schism** – During the Middle Ages, the two branches of Christianity drew farther apart. A dispute over the use of *icons*, or holy images, contributed to the split. Many Byzantine Christians prayed to images of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the saints. In the 700s, however, a Byzantine emperor outlawed the worship of icons, saying it violated God’s commandment against worshipping “graven images”.

The ban set off violent battles within the empire. From the west, the pope took a hand in the dispute, excommunicating the emperor. Although a later empress eventually restored the use of icons, the conflict left great resentment against the pope.

In 1054, other controversies provoked a schism, or permanent split between the Eastern (Greek) Orthodox and the Roman Catholic churches. The pope and the patriarch excommunicated each other. Thereafter, contacts between the two churches were guarded and distant. They treated each other as rivals rather than as branches of the same faith.

**CRISIS AND COLLAPSE**

By the time of the schism, the Byzantine Empire was declining. Struggles over succession, court intrigues, and constant war undermined its strength. As in Western Europe, powerful local lords gained control of large areas. As the empire faltered, its enemies advanced. The Normans conquered southern Italy. Even more serious, the Seljuk Turks advanced across Asia Minor. A nomadic people out of central Asia, the Seljuks had converted to Islam their migrations westward.

**The Crusades** – In the 1090s, the Byzantine emperor called for western help to fight the Seljuks, who had closed the pilgrimage routes to Jerusalem. The result was the First Crusade. During later crusades, however, trade rivalry sparked violence between the Byzantine Empire and Venice. Venetian merchants persuaded knights on the Fourth Crusade to attack Constantinople in 1204. For three days, crusaders burned and plundered the city, sending much treasure westward. Western Christians ruled Constantinople for 50 years. Although a Byzantine emperor reclaimed the capital in the 1260s, the empire never recovered. Venetian merchants gained control of Byzantine trade, draining the wealth of the empire. More threatening, the Ottoman Turks overran most of Asia Minor and the Balkans.

**Constantinople Falls** – In 1453, Ottoman forces surrounded the city of Constantinople. After a siege lasting two months, they stormed the broken walls. When the last Byzantine emperor was offered safe passage he replied, “God forbid that I should live an emperor without an empire.” He chose instead to die fighting.
Forces led by Ottoman ruler Muhammad II entered the city in triumph. The ancient Christian city was renamed Istanbul and became the capital of the Ottoman Empire. Hagia Sophia was turned into an Islamic house of worship, and Istanbul soon emerged as a great center of Muslim culture.

THE BYZANTINE HERITAGE
Although Byzantine power had faded long before, the fall of Constantinople marked the end of an era. To Europeans, the empire had stood for centuries as the enduring symbol of Roman civilization. Throughout the Middle Ages, Byzantine influence radiated across Europe. Even the Ottoman conquerors adapted features of Byzantine government, social life, and architecture.

What was the Byzantine heritage? For 1,000 years, the Byzantines built on the culture of the Greek world. Byzantine civilization blended Christian religious beliefs with Greek science, philosophy, arts, and literature. The Byzantines also extended Roman achievements in engineering and law.

The Arts – Byzantine artists made unique contributions, especially in religious art and architecture, that influenced western styles from the Middle Ages to the present. Icons, designed to evoke the presence of God, gave viewers a sense of personal contact with the sacred. Mosaics brought scenes from the Bible to glowing life. In architecture, Byzantine palaces and churches blended Greek, Roman, Persian, and other Middle Eastern styles.

The World of Learning – Byzantine scholars preserved the classic works of ancient Greece. In addition, they produced their own great books, especially in the field of history.

Like the Greek historians Herodotus and Thucydides, Byzantine historians were mostly concerned with writing about their own times. Procopius, an adviser to the general Belisarius, chronicled the Byzantine campaign against Persia. In his Secret History, Procopius savagely criticized Justinian and Theodora. He called the emperor “both an evil-doer and easily led into evil…never his own accord speaking the truth.” Anna Comnena is considered by many scholars to be the western world’s first important female historian. In the Alexiad, she analyzed the reign of her father, Emperor Alexius I. Comnena’s book portrayed Latin crusaders as greedy barbarians.

As the empire tottered in the 1400s, many Greek scholars left Constantinople to teach at Italian universities. They took valuable Greek manuscripts to the West, along with their knowledge of Greek and Byzantine culture. The work of these scholars contributed to the European cultural flowering that became known as the Renaissance.