12.23: Southeastern Europe in the Late Middle Ages

Meanwhile, in Eastern Europe, the restored Byzantine Empire was unable to fully re-establish itself even as a regional power in the Aegean. The warring Italian city-states of Genoa and Venice controlled many of the best ports of the Aegean and Black Sea, and a new Turkic power, that of the Ottomans, was rising in Central Anatolia in the aftermath of the Mongol destruction of the Saljuq sultanate. Emperor Andronikos II (r. 1282 – 1328) hired a company of mercenaries from the region of Spain called Catalonia, but this Catalan Company, although it won some victories against the Turks, eventually turned on its employer and established a state in Athens that would last for seventy years. With the failure of the Catalan Company to shore up Byzantine defenses in Anatolia, by 1331, nearly all Byzantine territory in Asia Minor had fallen under Turkish rule; shortly thereafter, the nascent Ottoman Empire began expanding into southeastern Europe.

Figure 1: Late Medieval Serbian Monastery
Author: Petar Milosevic
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The disintegration of the Byzantine state did allow for the fourteenth-century flourishing of Serbian and Bulgarian Empires, whose cultures emerged as a melding of both Greek and Slavic elements to create a unique synthesis of cultures and institutions. In the end, though, these Empires would eventually be overwhelmed by the Turks, with the Ottomans conquering Serbia between 1389 and 1459 and Bulgaria in 1396. But even as the Byzantine state crumbled, intellectual activity flourished in the Orthodox Church. Greek intellectuals of the fourteenth century sought to engage with the thought of Aquinas and experiment with new forms of prayer and meditation.

In the end, Ottoman power swept away all resistance, Bulgar, Serbian, and Byzantine, and in 1453, the Turkish army conquered Constantinople. After two thousand years, the last remnant of the Roman Empire was gone. In the meantime, though, the fall of the Byzantine Empire would also be one factor eventually contributing to Europe’s Renaissance.