

The Siege of Constantinople (1453)

An Excerpt from the Upcoming Primer on the Latter Crusades
By Lord Sir Paul de Marseilles

Mehmet II was proclaimed the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire on February 18, 1451. His father had told him to end the Byzantine interference with Ottoman ambitions. It was a message which was not lost on his son. Mehmet was 19 years old in 1451 and would reign over his Empire for thirty years. He had an extensive knowledge of science, philosophy, and world geography. He spoke over six languages including Arabic, Greek, Latin, Hebrew and Persian. He was a student of history. In his leisure time, he had the exploits of Alexander the Great read to him in the original Greek. He intended to become a world conqueror by bringing the banners of Jihad to Europe.

His ambition and intelligence were largely hidden from the European leaders who thought he would be a weak and ineffective ruler. After all, his father had been forced to come out of retirement twice to save the Empire when he was a prince. Mehmet seemed more interested in the intellectual world of science and arts than in war. A brief glimpse of his resolve arose shortly after his coronation. Mehmet visited his father's harem where he received congratulations on his accession. Halima Hatun, one of his father's favorite wives, had recently given birth to Ahmet, his baby brother. During his visit, he spoke warmly with her regarding the future while his baby brother was strangled in his bath to ensure that he would have no rivals. Mehmet married Halima to one of the noblemen of his Court. It was an incident which went unnoticed by western leaders.

Mehmet quickly reorganized the administrative functioning of the Empire and increased its annual revenue. He executed a series of treaties, including one with the Byzantine Empire, which secured his western borders and then swiftly put down a rebellion in Antolia. The Byzantines severely misread him. They had housed Prince Orhan, a pretender to the Ottoman throne, for several years in Constantinople. Following the signing of the treaty, Byzantine ambassadors arrived and demanded an increase in the money paid for Prince Orhan's upkeep. The implicit threat was that Prince Orhan would be let loose to create havoc if they didn't receive the money. Mehmet promised he would give the proposal due consideration. The Byzantines received his answer in April of 1452.

The Last Heirs to the Roman Empire

The people of Constantinople didn't think of themselves as "Byzantines". That term wouldn't be used until centuries later. The Byzantines were Roman. They were the last direct descendants of the Roman Empire's culture and heritage. While Rome had been repeatedly sacked by barbarians, Constantinople, the Eastern Capital of the Empire, had remained largely untouched. It projected an aura of wealth and power. It was a city made of marble, gold, and mosaics. It was built under the supervision of the Emperor Constantine in 324. It was the home of a Hippodrome which had rivaled Rome's. The church of Hagia Sophia was built in the heart of the city by the Emperor Justinian. It was the largest cathedral in the world for nearly a thousand years and a source of wonder for visitors for centuries. Constantinople was the third most important city to Christian Europe next to Rome and Jerusalem. It was the center of the Orthodox Church. It had been the storehouse of the Christian relics ranging from the head of John the Baptist, to the nails from the cross of Christ and the crown of thorns.

The Empire had once spanned from Italy to Tunis. At its height, Constantinople held more than 500,000 people. Unfortunately, the Empire had long since begun its descent from power. Starting around 500 A.D., the Byzantines became involved in a series of wars with the Huns, the Slavs, the Bulgars, the Russ, the Serbs, the Magyars, the Normans, and the Seljek Turks. Each of these encounters had left the Empire diminished in both manpower and land holdings. The encounters with the Seljek Turks (particularly at the Battle of Manzikert in 1071) had decimated the Byzantine army and resulted in the loss of much of their possessions in Asia Minor. The Empire had managed to regain some of the coastal areas around the Black Sea and the Mediterranean with the help of the Western Europeans during the First Crusade (1095-1099). More than 110 years later, the Crusading armies of Western European almost destroyed the Empire during one of history's more ironic Crusades ever. The Fourth Crusade had begun as an attack on Egypt. With the aid of a wily Venetian Doge (who managed to put the Crusaders in such debt that they were willing to do almost anything to get out of it), the Crusade resulted in the sacking of Constantinople in 1204. By 1261, the Byzantines had taken back their Capital and some small portions

The Siege of Constantinople (Continued)

of their former Empire. By 1453, the city's population was less than 50,000. The Empire could only count Constantinople, its suburbs, and a few islands as its possession.

The City had been besieged twenty-three times in its history and had only fallen once (to the Crusaders of the 4th Crusades in 1204-1205). Over twelve of these attempts had been by Muslim armies. It was built on a triangular peninsula that marked the southeastern most point of Europe and was on the edge of the Bosphorus River which divided Europe from Asia. The Sea of Marmara was to the south of the city. The Golden Horn, a deep water inlet, ran to the north of the city and flowed into the Bosphorus river which ran to the northeast and east. The Theodosian Walls, named for the Emperor who had them built, covered the western portion of the city. They were over 1,000 years old. A deep ditch, almost sixty feet wide, lay before these walls. The outer walls of the city were over seven feet thick at their base and rose to over thirty feet in height. These outer walls were studded with 96 towers. A fortified Terrence stood behind the outer walls and in front of the inner walls. The inner walls were 16 feet thick at their base and were over 50 feet in height. This series of inner walls had 96 towers which alternated with those of the outer walls. In addition to these fortifications, a great chain stretched across the Golden Horn from a tower on the north part of the city to the sea walls of Galata, the fortified city on the other side of the Horn. Constantinople had the more impressive military fortifications of the medieval ages. Unfortunately, it was no longer the medieval ages and time had passed the "Apple of the East". Developments in warfare had brought the use of gunpowder, cannon, and explosives. The city which had stood for over 1,000 years would be taken in less than 53 days.

The Building of the Rumeli Hisari

True to his word, the Byzantines received Mehmet's answer in April of 1452. Mehmet arrived on the European side of the Bosphorus River with over 6,000 stone masons. These masons were told to build a fort less than nine miles upstream from Constantinople. The fort was to be located at the narrowest point of the Bosphorus River. It was seven hundred meters across the river from the Anadolu Hisar (the "Castle of Asia") which had been built in 1394 by the Ottomans. The masons worked feverishly for the next four months. They took material from ruined Byzantine churches, monasteries and monuments. When the local Byzantines attempted to stop the raiding, they were killed by Mehmet's cavalry. Byzantine envoys were sent to complain that the construction of the fort was in violation of the treaty. Mehmet told them that he was taking nothing for the Empire had nothing beyond the land immediately adjacent to its' Capital. If he wanted to build a fortress, the Byzantines had no right to stop him. The Ambassadors continued to protest. Mehmet patiently listened to their arguments and then had several beheaded. The remaining ambassadors were sent back to their Emperor with instructions that anyone who raised this issue to him again would be flayed alive.

By the end of August of 1452, the "Rumeli Hisar" (the "European Castle") stood on the banks of the Bosphorus. Mehmet retained a Hungarian cannon maker named Urban to build cannons worthy of the two forts. Urban worked throughout the Fall of 1452. In early November, two Venetian galleries rowed from the Black sea through the Bosphorus. Cannon balls from Rumeli Hisar landed harmlessly by the ships as they passed by it. Another Venetian galley ran the gauntlet two weeks later and was blown out of the water. Just in case the Byzantines didn't get the message, the ship's captain was impaled on the banks of the river as a message to all Europeans that the river, the lifeline of the Byzantine Empire, now belonged to the Ottomans. Mehmet dismissed the masons and ordered that all ships coming down the Bosphorus were subject to search. Western opinion of this new Sultan quickly changed in light of recent events.

Constantine XI, the forty-eight year old Emperor of Byzantium, realized the danger. He made desperate calls for help to the West. Pope Nicholas V was willing to help but only if the Orthodox Church affirmed the Union which had been repudiated prior to the Varna crusade. This schism within the Orthodox Church was so great that Byzantine Emperor never had a formal coronation. Virtually none of the Orthodox Patriarchs would have anything to do with the union. It was bitterly opposed by most of the Orthodox laity. Laukes Notares, a Grand Duke of the Empire, allegedly proclaimed, "I would rather see the Sultan's turban among us than a Cardinal's tiara." Most of the European leaders remembered the Byzantine's failure to support the Varna crusade and had little appetite to repeat that experience. The Venetians had no real desire to endanger their profitable commercial relationships with the Ottomans. After much debate, nine Venetian merchantman loaded with troops came to the aid of the city. Seven of these ships would leave and would never return. The Genoese government

The Siege of Constantinople (Continued)

sent word to its colonies on the Black sea to make the best deal they could if the city should fall. Giovanni Guistianani Longo, a member of one of the great families of the Republic, sent two large galleons loaded with over 700 soldiers to help the city. These soldiers had been outfitted with his own funds. He was an expert in siege warfare and was appointed to command forces on the city's walls. Constantine did his best to ready the city's defenses. He stockpiled food and supplies and redistributed weapons. He sent work crews to repair and rebuild the walls. By the time the siege began, there were less than 7,000 troops to defend over 14 miles of wall and seaward fortifications. Over 2,000 of those troops were foreign mercenaries. In total, each one of the defenders had to defend approximately 10 ½ feet of wall assuming that all of the defenders were able to in their assigned positions. This was almost never the case during the siege.

Constantine XI wasn't the only one to realize the danger. For over 1,000 years, the Byzantine Empire had held a position of artistic and intellectual sophistication that few in Western Europe could dream of matching. Scholars and artisans fled the Empire by the hundreds to the city states of Italy, Spain and France. They brought with them their learning, engineering, and technical skills. The Renaissance was, in some small part, aided by this immigration.

The Gathering Storm

The Ottomans had always been a land based military force. Some Europeans made their fortunes by carrying its trade and armies around the eastern Mediterranean. To the shock of the Byzantines, the Ottomans had assembled a fleet off the coast of the city of Gallipoli. The fleet was commanded by Suleyman Baltaglu, a Bulgarian convert, and consisted of over 120 galleys, sailing barges, sloops, cutters, biremes, and triemes. The Ottoman army had assembled in Thrace and numbered over 80,000 regular troops and 20,000 irregulars. The troops were drawn from all over the Ottoman Empire. They consisted of the Sipahis (provincial cavalry), the Akinci (the irregular light cavalry), the Basibozuks (literally the "head breakers"), sappers (miners who worked to destroy fortifications), and other auxiliary units. The most impressive of these units were the Janissaries. The Janissaries were a professional standing army composed of slaves. The Christian subjects of the Ottomans yearly gave up a certain percentage of their children to become slaves of the Sultan. These children were converted to Islam and then trained for years. The strongest became Janissaries. The brightest would go into administrative posts of the Empire where they had the opportunity to rise to the highest levels of governmental service. The Janissaries were highly disciplined professional soldiers and loyal to the Sultan who personally determined their rise or fall. They were members of the Sultan's personal household and were fed, housed, clothed, and paid a salary at his expense.

Murat, Mehmet's father, had recruited Christians skilled in the making of cannons, artillery, gunpowder, and saltpeter into his army. The Venetians and Genoese, ever hungry for profit, had sold technology and mercenaries skilled in firing these weapons to the Ottomans for a price.

This army had sixty-nine cannons which were grouped into 14 to 15 batteries. Each battery employed one large cannon with several small ones. The Ottomans called their formation "the bear and its cubs". The "bears" were capable of inflicting devastating damage. Some cannons could fire stone balls ranging from 200 to 1500 pounds. The great cannon, created by Urban, was over 27 feet long with a 30 inch wide barrel and could throw a 1,340 pound ball over a mile. The army also brought with it makeshift foundries capable of making cannon barrels and balls on the field. It was an army designed for a single purpose, to destroy the last remaining defenses of the Byzantine Empire. The Byzantines were outnumbered by more than 10 to 1 and they faced new technology that had never been employed against them.

The Siege

Mehmet's army and navy surrounded the city on all sides except the Golden Horn. He pitched his tent outside of the walls of Constantinople on April 5, 1453. As was customary under Islamic law, he offered to spare the city if they surrendered immediately and converted to Islam. There was no answer. In the morning of April 6, 1453, his cannons began the bombardment of the city. This bombardment continued almost nonstop until May 29, 1453.

The Siege of Constantinople (Continued)

Labor battalions filled in the great ditches in front of the western walls. On April 12, 1453, a sea battle at the mouth of the Golden Horn raged as the Ottomans attempted to break the great chain which guarded the inlet. Their attempts were unsuccessful. By April 20, 1453, Mehmet was so disgusted by the failures of his admiral that he ordered that the soles of the man's feet to be beaten to a pulp and then exiled him as a beggar. Undeterred by this set-back, Mehmet decided upon a novel solution. His engineers and carpenters built a road from the Bosphorus River to the City of Galata on the northern shore of the Golden Horn. The road was over one and a quarter mile long. They created huge wooden cradles with wheels and metal tracks. Hundreds of Ottoman laborers and oxen pulled over 70 ships overland and into the Golden Horn. The city's defenders could only stare in shock at the sight of Ottoman warships floating in the Golden Horn. The Byzantine fleet was now trapped between Ottoman ships behind them and an Ottoman fleet in front of the chain. The north side of the city was open to attack and the cannon fire roared into the West and North side of the city.

By the beginning of May of 1453, a series of infantry assaults commenced against the western walls supported by continuous artillery bombardment. Huge sections of the city were destroyed and its inhabitants worked throughout each night to repair the damage to the fortifications. Food ran short and the defenders had to leave their posts in order to forage to feed their families. Ceaseless rounds of prayers and invocations were made within the city. Sappers and counter-sappers played their dangerous game underneath the walls of the city. By May 3, 1453, a Venetian crew flying the Ottoman standard and disguised as Turks managed to slip out of the Golden Horn to see if there would be any relief from Western Europe. They returned on May 23, 1453 with the news that no relief force had been sighted in the Aegean Sea. All but one of the crew had agreed to return to carry the news knowing that they would be returning to deaths. The Emperor wept.

By May 18, 1453, Mehmet's engineers constructed siege towers. Mehmet was unsatisfied with the progress of the northern and western bombardment. His engineers came to another novel approach. They built a bridge across the Golden Horn, a body of water that stretched some 750 meters from shore to shore. Once the bridge was completed, the Ottoman army began moving additional cannon and men towards the northern part of the City. On May 24, 1453, Mehmet offered terms to Constantinople one last time. Emperor Constantine XI was to pay 100,000 gold coins per year or, in the alternative, the city's inhabitants could leave and take all the possessions that they could carry out of the gates. The Empire was broke. Its primary asset was its heritage. Leaving its history behind was no longer an option.

The siege was accompanied by strange portents and signs. On May 24, 1453, there was a lunar eclipse. The people of the city held religious processions throughout the city in the hopes that a miracle would save them. A hailstorm then whipped throughout the city and the surrounding area. The next day, an impenetrable fog surrounded the city and its buildings. When the fog lifted, the dome of the Hagia Sophia was lit with a strange reddish glow. Mehmet was deeply disturbed but was reassured by his advisors who told him that this was a sign of their impending victory. The Byzantines believed these omens as signs that God had left them.

On May 28, 1453, Mehmet ordered his troops into position. Over 2,000 ladders were brought up to be placed against the walls. The Ottoman fleet stationed ships against the great chain and the ships within the Golden Horn formed a semi-circle against the seaward side of the city. Mehmet himself met with his commanders. He promised he would personally lead the attack and that the troops, if victorious, would be allowed to loot the city for three days. The defenders held one last ceremony in the Hagia Sophia. Large scale religious processions were conducted throughout the city in prayer for good luck in the upcoming battle.

The final assault came at 1:30 a.m. on May 29, 1453. A full scale bombardment rained into all sides of the Constantinople. The Basibozuks were in the first wave against the outer walls but were beaten off after two hours of vicious hand to hand fighting. Regular Ottoman infantry made up the second wave and were supported by artillery which opened a breach in the outer wall in the northwest part of the city. They were unable to reach the inner wall. The Janissaries were the third wave and were led by Mehmet himself as far as the beginning of the outer ditch. They managed to penetrate the inner wall and began to fan out throughout the city. They were quickly followed by another wave of Ottoman infantry. Constantine XI was last seen fighting the Janissaries near the Gate of St. Romunus. His body was never seen again. A small fleet Venetians ships were able to make their way out of the harbor packed with refugees. The Ottomans navy had abandoned their posts and gone ashore in the hopes of being able to beat the army to the richest sources of plunder.

The Siege of Constantinople (Continued)

Mehmet made his triumphant entry through the Adrianople Gate in the afternoon of May 29, 1453. The sacking of Constantinople was to have lasted three days. Mehmet had promised to allow the sack of the city as long as his army did not destroy the public buildings which now belonged to him. When he saw the wreckage of the buildings, he repented at their destruction and order the sacking halted. Constantinople was renamed Istanbul and became the new capital of the Ottoman Empire. Mehmet earned the title "Fatih" or "The Conqueror". He was twenty-one years old.

The Aftermath

The Fall of Constantinople was a massive psychological blow for the Orthodox Church and Western Europe. With the loss of one of the oldest Empires in Europe, the western Europeans began to realize the threat that the Ottoman Empire posed to them and, more importantly, to their economic interests. From 1453 onward, the idea of Crusade began intertwined with economic self interest. The call for another Crusade to recover Constantinople was largely unanswered by Western Europe. The Christian nations of Europe still possessed the Mediterranean and most of the Aegean Sea. However, the taking of the city was a huge victory for the Ottoman Empire for political, economic and religious reasons. The city held a special place with the Islamic religion. Ayyub, the Prophet's own standard bearer, had died at the feet of its walls in a siege in 669. The ultimate conquest of the city had been predicted in the Hadith, the body of sayings attributed to Mohammad. The conquest allowed the Ottomans to become the dominant power around the Black Sea and gave it huge opportunities at the trade flowing both to the West and the East. Finally, Mehmet could claim that he was the Master of the Roman Empire.

Mehmet had the Church of the Holy Apostles, the traditional site of the crowning of Byzantium Emperors, demolished and built a mosque complex over it. He would rebuild the city over the next several decades. He directed the building of aqueducts, markets, roads and new homes. A new covered Bazaar was built within the city. A naval arsenal and an armory were built next to the Golden Horn and the Bospharous River. Both the "old" and the "new" imperial palaces were built to house the Imperial family and the administrative center of the Ottoman Empire. Mehmet and his descendants repopulated their Capital with Armenians, Greeks, Latin Christians and Moslems from all over the Empire. By the end of his reign, the city had a population of over 75,000 people and had been rebuilt to reflect a new personality, a personality more befitting to an ever expanding Empire. Within five years, the Ottomans were able to bring Serbia back into the Empire. By 1463, the Ottomans completed their conquest of Bosnia. By 1467, the Ottomans brought virtually all of Albania under their control. Constantinople had been one of the greatest port cities in the world. In 1453, Mehmet looked westward across the Mediterranean for new frontiers to conquer. He saw a small Island which had been a thorn in the Ottoman's side for generations. The Island was called Rhodes. Rhodes and a small group of adjacent islands were still held by one of the last of the Military Orders, the Knights Hospitallers. The battle for the Mediterranean was about to begin in earnest. But first, he had to finish his conquest of Eastern Europe.

Sources: Stephen O'Shea, *Sea of Faith* (Walker & Company, 2006); John Julius Norwich, *The Middle Sea* (Vintage Books, 2006), Roger Crowley, *Empires at Sea* (Random House, 2008); Roger Crowley, *1453, the Holy War for Constantinople and the Clash of Islam and the West* (Hyperion, 2005), John Freely, *The Grand Turk, Sultan Mehmet II* (Overlook Books, 2009); Caroline Finkel, *Osman's Dream, the History of the Ottoman Empire* (Basic Books, 2005); Norman Housley, *The Later Crusades* (Oxford University Press, 1992).

