

The fall of the capital of the Byzantine Empire, Constantinople, to the Muslim Turks in May 1453 was a disastrous event for the Christian world, who viewed it as the beginning of the end of their faith. That Constantinople was going to fall to the Ottoman Turks was a foregone conclusion. The beginning of the end of the Byzantine Empire had been the disastrous defeat of their once-victorious army at the hands of the Seljuk Turks at the battle of Manzikert in 1071. During the following centuries the Turks conquered the whole of

Anatolia and were united under the Ottoman dynasty into one single sultanate. The Catholic West, instead of aiding the hard-pressed Byzantines, stabbed them in the back. In 1204 'Crusaders', paid by Venice, sacked Constantinople, and the city itself, like the rest of the empire, began a long, sad decline.

The Western invaders were eventually expelled but the Ottoman Turks, taking advantages of the ravages of the Black Death, crossed into the Balkans in 1356, seizing Byzantine lands there. By 1396 the whole of Bulgaria was in Ottoman hands, and Constantinople itself – practically all that was left of the empire – was surrounded by Turkish-occupied territory and cut off from the West.

The city was a mere shadow of its former self and its disastrous decline was reflected in the city's population – an impressive one

million in the twelfth century had been reduced by the 1450s to a mere 100,000. Constantinople, however, continued to trade both with the West and the East, while the Theodosian Walls – built in the fifth century in the reign of Emperor Theodosius II (401-450) – remained intact and protected the city from enemy attack with their 5.7 km (3.5-mi) long moats and triple line of walls and fortified towers which stretched from the Sea of Marmara to the Golden Horn.

Constantinople was given a respite when a most unlikely savior appeared in the East in the

shape of the savage but brilliant Mongol warlord Timur Lenk, or Tamerlane (1336-1405), who defeated the Ottomans at the battle of Ankara in 1402. This gave the city a reprieve for half a century mainly due to Ottoman civil wars and the fact that after a failed siege in 1422 Sultan Murád II (1404-51) chose to live in

peace with the Byzantines. He argued, sensibly, that Constantinople posed no threat in the hands of the feeble Byzantines and that an Ottoman attack upon the city might unite the divided and decadent Christians against the Muslim menace.

Mehmed II

Unfortunately Murád II – admired and respected by Ottomans and Byzantines alike – died in February 1451 and in his place as sultan was taken by a callow, arrogant, drunken and aggressive youth of 19, Mehmed II, who was to rule and make war on his neighbours until his death from overindulgence at age of 49.



Mehmed II had many bad qualities but he was determined and was to prove, with time, a good military leader. His one overriding, indeed consuming, passion was to take Constantinople and make it the capital of an Ottoman Empire that would straddle the world. He had the temerity to call himself the ‘Shadow of God upon Earth’ and with the fall of the Byzantine capital that seemed justified. After all, walls that had stood for a thousand years had been breached and stormed by his Ottoman troops.

In the summer of 1452 Mehmed II had recruited and paid a Hungarian gunmaker, Urban, a huge sum to build him a monstrous gun that would be able to breach the walls of Constantinople. By January 1453 Urban’s gun was ready for inspection at Adrianople (the Ottoman capital to the west of Constantinople): its barrel measured 8.1 m (26ft 8in) in length, had a caliber of 20.3cm (8in) and required a crew of 700, but could lob a cannonball weighing a tonne (1 ton) over 1.6km (1 mi).

Obviously Mehmed II had the hardware for a successful siege and during the spring he called up men from across his vast empire that stretched from the Balkans in the west to Anatolia in the east. He had a huge army concentrated at Adrianople comprising 80,000 regular troops (including 12,000 janissaries), 20,000 bashi-bazouks (irregulars) and 20,000 ghazi (religious fanatic) volunteers.

The Siege Begins

The first step in Mehmed’s relentless assault upon Constantinople began a year before he commenced the formal siege of the city. First and foremost Constantinople’s access to grain from the Black Sea had to be cut. Mehmed, no respecter of Christians or the niceties of diplomacy, broke all his father’s agreements with the Emperor Constantine XI – who had

ascended the throne in 1449 – and sent his army to occupy Byzantine territory along the Bosphorus.

The Ottomans, partly using Christian slave labour, began to construct a fortress at the shoreline. In only five months, between 14 April and 31 August 1452, the Turks had constructed a fort named, in appropriately grisly fashion, Boghaz-Kesen, or the “Throat Cutter”, by Mehmed. The fort soon lived up to its name. In November 1452 a Venetian ship – ignoring the Turkish blockade of Constantinople – was hit with a single shot and sunk. The crew were slaughtered and the captain Antonio Rizzo, was impaled. His body was left to rot as a warning for others that if they ignored the fort’s guns at their peril.

None of the Italian states, except of the pope, lifted a finger to aid Constantinople and in the doomed city the population realized that the hapless Venetian captain’s gruesome fate was only a foretaste of what the barbaric Turks would do to them. For once all the disparate elements of the city’s population – Greeks, Balkan Slavs, Italians and others – united in a desperate resolve to fight to the bitter end. One man had more reason than any other to fear Turkish atrocities. He was in fact an Ottoman Turk and an distant relative of Mehmed: Prince Orhan. HE and his men would fight with more desperation and courage than the Byzantines.

Mehmed II spent the following winter making elaborate and meticulous preparations to attack Constantinople by the following spring. An unpleasant surprise in March 1453 was the appearance of the Ottoman fleet under Suleyman Baltoghlu in the Marmara. Thus Constantinople’s seaborne lines of communication were cut.