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 20.3 cm (8in) and required a crew of 700, but could lob a cannonball weighing a tonne (1 ton) over 1.6 km (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 Bosporous.

The Ottomans, partly using Christian slave labour, began to construct a fortress at the shoreline. In only five months, between 14 pril 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 other that if they ignored the fort’s guns at their peril.

None of the Italians 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.
Dispositions

The first Ottoman detachments arrived beneath the walls of Constantinople on 1 April and were met by Byzantine skirmishers. As more Turks arrived Constantine XI, who took an active part in the defense, ordered the bridges across the outer moat burnt and the gates shut and bolted; meanwhile the walls were manned. It was a valiant effort but he had only 7000 Byzantines and 5000 foreigners (mainly Italians) facing over 100,000 Turks.

On 6 April Mehmed moved his main camp closer to the walls. He faced an unenviable task, despite his enormous numerical preponderance, since the walls were in good repair. Where should he attack? The Marmara Sea Wall was strong and was protected by a strong current and underwater reefs. The Golden Horn Wall was also strong. So the assault had to be made against the massive Land Wall. A logical place would be to attack the Blachernae district that protruded northwards from the wall. But the Byzantines – brilliant fortifiers – had reinforced its defenses. The actual Theodosian Walls consisted of three separate but parallel lines of walls fronted by a 18.2 m (60 ft) moat that could be flooded in an emergency. The Outer Wall – which lay behind this moat and a low crenellated breastwork – was 7.6 m (25 ft) high and had a strong square tower every 46-56 m (50-60 yards). Facing a powerful enemy with few troops the emperor decided to man the Outer Wall with Byzantines and his Italian allies. Prince Orhan’s Turks held the harbor while Done Pére Julia’s Catalans held the Hippodrome. The Sea Walls were thinly held as the Byzantines, rightly, expected Mehmed to launch his main attack against the Land Wall. The defenders’ artillery was unusable due to the shortage of saltpeter in the besieged city but the troops had good armor, far superior to that of the lightly armored Turks.

Mehmed placed the Rumelian army under Karadja Pasha from the Golden Horn to the Lycus Valley and from there to the Marmara, Ishak Pasha’s Anatolian Army. Mehmed pitched his red and gold silk tent about 400 m (440 yds) from the Land Wall with his best troops and Urban’s monstrous gun around him.

The Attack Begins

On 9 April the Ottoman admiral Baltoghlu Pasha made an unsuccessful attempt to break through the boom erected by the defenders across the Golden Horn. That same day, the Turks began to attack two forts, Therapia and Studius, to the west of the Land Wall. The castles held out until 11 April when both capitulated. The brave defenders, some 76 men, were impaled on Mehmed’s express orders in front of the Land Wall to show what happened to those that resisted his will. A third fort, on the island of Prinkipo, held out and the garrison chose to burn itself to death rather than fall into the hands of the Turks.

On 12 April the Turks began bombarding the Theodosian Walls and the artillery fire would continue without interruption for six weeks. The Ottoman guns were heavy and unwieldy with a tendency to slide off their mud and wood firing platforms. Urban’s giant gun only fired seven times a day, so complex and time-consuming was the process of lading and firing it, but it had a deafening roar and did great damage to the wall and the defender’s nerves.

By 18 April the wall across the Lycus Valley – the weakest section of the Theodosian Walls – had been completely destroyed by General Gustiani Longo (the emperor’s field commander) had it repaired by Byzantine volunteers. That same day, two hours after sunset, Mehmed launched his first attack against the area, known as the Mesoteichion. The Turks had filled in the moat and rushed the wall

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1 Dispositions - military preparations
2 detachments - group of troops
3 skirmishers - troops fighting small battles
4 preponderance - great number
5 crenellated breastwork - low parts in a wall for firing weapons
6 saltpeter - an important ingredient to gunpowder
7 boom - a long beam
8 Mesoteichion - “Middle Wall” in Greek
but were thrown back by the heavily armored Byzantines and Italians led by Longo. The fighting lasted for four hours with the Turks losing 400 men to no loss for the Christians. Morale⁹ among the defenders soared.

Two days later came an even greater success when Baltoghlu Pasha tried and failed to defeat a fleet of Italian ships that were sailing to Constantinople with badly needed supplies of grain. The Turkish galleys were no match for the heavy Italian ships which blasted their way through with cannon and Greek Fire¹⁰. The enraged Mehmed – who had seen the defeat unfold before his eyes – dismissed the hapless admiral.

Mehmed took charge and managed to move part of his fleet overland to the Golden Horn without the Byzantines being able to stop it. Now Constantinople was threatened from the north and a bravely led night attack, on 28 April, to launch fire ships against the flotilla¹¹ failed due to spies in Pera. The Venetians and Genoese, sworn enemies, began to fight among themselves prompting Constantine XI to tell them: ‘The war outside our gates is enough for us. For the pity of God, do not start a war between yourselves.’ Thus admonished, the squabbling Italians buried the hatchet – but only temporarily.

On 7 May the Turks made a night attack against the Mesoteichion section of the Theodosian Walls that ended with the sultan’s standard bearer¹², Amir Bey, being killed by the Byzantine knight Rhangabe. Five days later another night assault ended in defeat. Turkish attempts to build underground tunnels for mining were discovered. The Scottish mercenary knight, John Grant, in Byzantine service, led the defenders in counter-mining and flooding the Turkish tunnels. On 18 May the Turks saw their massive siege tower opposite the Mesoteichion go up in flames after the Byzantines made a night raid and blew it up with a powder keg¹³. By 23 May further tunnels had been eliminated after the Byzantines captured the Serb mining engineer in the sultan’s service. After refined torture he revealed everything he knew and Grant’s anti-mining unit set to work. But that very same day a lone Venetian vessel sailed into the harbor with the devastating news that there would be no Western fleet to save Constantinople. Morale began to slide.

On 24 and 25 May morale collapsed. In an age of deep religious fervor and belief in omens and signs, the events of these two days could only have a catastrophic impact. The first day during a procession, the Holy Icon¹⁴ of the Mother of God was dropped and the whole proceedings were interrupted by a thunderstorm that flooded the streets. The following day, the city was blanketed in a thick fog that was unusual for the time of year. The populace, remembering the ancient prophesy that Constantinople would fall when the emperor had the same name as the founder, Constantine the Great, was convinced the fog hid God’s departure from the Holy City.

What the defenders did not know was that morale among the besiegers was also low. After a seven-month-long siege with an army that now numbered 150,000 only setbacks and humiliations had been experienced. The sultan’s ministers – all Murad II’s men – and especially the Grand Vizier¹⁵, Halil Pasha, were unimpressed with the boasts and arrogance of the 21-year-old ruler. Mehmed wanted a grand assault during the night of 28/29 May and agreed to withdraw if that failed.

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⁹ morale - confidence, enthusiasm
¹⁰ Greek Fire - oil shot out then set ablaze
¹¹ flotilla - a fleet of ships
¹² standard bearer – soldier that held the flag/banner of the army
¹³ powder keg - a barrel filled with explosive objects, a bomb
¹⁴ icon (ikon) - a devotional painting of a holy person
¹⁵ Grand Vizier - the highest advisor to the sultan
The Grand Assault

Medieval armies besieging a stubborn enemy would offer terms. If these were rejected then the city would, if stormed, be shown no mercy. This was the fate that would now befall Constantinople. By 28 May all the preparations had been completed on both sides. Across the doomed city the Christian populace, knowing that the last battle was upon them, assured each other that they would fight. In the evening, everyone, including the emperor, attended mass where both Orthodox and Catholic 

16 prayed to God for deliverance. Catalans, Castilians, Venetians and Genoese as well as the Byzantine Greeks stood shoulder to shoulder and took Holy Communion together from their respective clergy.

At 1:30 am Mehmed signaled for the huge horde of poorly disciplined and lightly armed 

bashi-bazouks 

17 to attack in the Lycus Valley. During the two hours of fighting Christian defenders stood their ground, leaving hundreds of enemy dead. But Mehmed was only wearing down the defenders in preparation for further assaults. The Anatolian army attacked — in wave upon wave — but each successive surge of men was halted, cut to pieces and sent reeling back in retreat. Similar attacks against the Sea Walls failed equally miserably and even Mehmed began to lose faith in a Turkish victory. There were now only the Janissaries — some 12,000 of them — left for the final, desperate attack.

16 Orthodox and Catholic — two groups of Christians at that time
17 bashi-bazouks — poorly trained members of the Ottoman army

At that moment as the Janissaries accompanied by Ottoman musical corps, attacked, two disasters befell the defenders. Firstly the Turks discovered that someone had left the small gate (kerkaporta) open between the Blachernae and the Theodosian Walls. The attackers wasted no time in rushing the open gate. The Byzantines hurried to defend it but were simply swamped by sheer numbers. At the same time Giustianni Longo was wounded and despite Emperor Constantine XI pleading with him to stay he was taken aboard a Genoese ship which sailed to Chios where he died two days later. The Genoese fled in panic down to the harbor or to Pera. The Venetians blamed betrayal while the Byzantines fought on in sheer desperation.; the emperor died fighting. The Turks opened the gates, more of their troops poured in and they penetrated the city. Orhan’s Turks fought to the death, knowing they would die slowly at the hands of the bloodthirsty Mehmed, and the Catalans fought to the last man defending the Hippodrome and Old Palace. The Turks ran amok in the city, looting, killing and raping, until even Mehmed had had enough and by evening imposed some order. Some 50,000 Byzantines were enslaved while 4000 were killed in the battle. The greatest siege of all time was over.

Aftermath

The fall of Constantinople was a highpoint in the relentless and ruthless expansion of the Ottoman Empire. Mehmed II became known by his honorific title, Fatih, or ‘Conqueror’. During the next three centuries, until and equally famous siege and battle beneath the walls of Vienna in 1683, the Turks remained the scourge of Christian Europe.