

The city had survived in part thanks to massive walls that protected it from the armies of its enemies. By 1453, however, Constantinople had been ravaged by the black death plague and weakened by internal religious dissension. It was also being threatened by a mighty new world power, the Ottoman Empire.

Constantinople's ruler at the time was Emperor Constantine XI Palaiologos, the fourth son of Emperor Manuel II Palaiologos. As he grew into adulthood, Constantine demonstrated great skill as a military general and administrator. In October 1448 his older brother, Emperor John VIII, died without children, and Constantine was proclaimed emperor the following January.

Both Constantine and his predecessor had supported the union between the Greek Orthodox and Catholic Churches of Constantinople and counted on the reunification to elicit military and financial support from the Pope and the Catholic nations of Europe if Constantinople was threatened. However, much of the city's population opposed the union between the churches, and the proposed merger failed to materialize and could not be invoked to elicit foreign assistance.

Four years into Constantine's rule, the city came under attack by Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II, who surrounded and then attacked Constantinople in April 1453, bringing a force numbering as many as 100,000 men and several massive cannons to tear down the protecting walls. Under 10,000 men, including Italian soldiers, were available to defend the city.

Constantine was hoping to receive military help from abroad. However, one month into the siege, a small Venetian fleet, after having searched the nearby seas, reached Constantinople and reported to the emperor that no relief vessels were on their way. The defense of the city was left to its inhabitants.

On May 29, 1453, the Ottomans' final offensive began. Several waves of troops charged through the damaged walls, focusing on a section in the north-west part of the city that had been built earlier, and was much weaker than the rest. The attackers managed to breach this section and entered the city, but were pushed back by the defenders. Finally, elite infantry Janissary troops attacked the wall and inflicted deadly wounds on the Genoese general in charge of its defense. His wounding caused a panic in the ranks of the Genoese troops, who retreated into the city and towards the harbor. The remaining defenders eventually were overwhelmed and could not prevent the Ottomans from entering the city.

The Janissaries pressed forward, largely unopposed. Many local soldiers ran back home to protect their families, the Venetian sailors retreated to their ships, and the Venetian fleet narrowly escaped prior to the Ottoman navy assuming control over the waters surrounding the city. Shortly after the Venetian ships left, a few

Genoese ships and even some of the emperor's ships followed them and narrowly escaped. Some Genoese soldiers escaped to the countryside, the rest surrendered or committed suicide by jumping off the city walls.

After the initial penetration, the Ottoman army fanned out along the main thoroughfare of the city and converged upon the Augusteum, the square that fronted the great church of Hagia Sophia, where a huge throng of civilians had sought refuge and gathered to pray for divine protection. Once the church doors were breached, the troops separated the congregation according to what price they might bring in the slave markets and ushered them away.

Looting was initially carried out by Ottoman sailors and marines who entered the city via other walls before the arrival of the regular troops. As soon as the regular troops were inside the city, they began to seize and enslave every person who came their way. All those who tried to offer resistance were put to the sword. In many places the ground could not be seen, as it was covered by heaps of corpses.

The Ottoman soldiers then plundered the city. They took silver and gold vessels, precious stones, and all sorts of valuable goods and fabrics from the imperial palace and the houses of the rich. All the valuables and other booty were taken to Ottoman camp, as were sixty thousand Christians who had been captured. Women were raped, virgins and nuns deflowered, youths were violated, and most of the elderly, infirm, wounded and sick were killed, and the remainder were chained up and sold into slavery.

In the last hours of fighting, Constantine threw aside his purple imperial regalia and descended to the streets to fight alongside his soldiers.

"The fall of the city is imminent," warned his counselor and good friend Sphrantzes, standing beside him. "What do we do now, Master? Seek to negotiate surrender terms that allow you to escape?"

Constantine's answer was surprising: "Nothing."

"What do you mean? Can we allow the heathens to rule over our empire, and march to conquer the entire world?"

Constantine gave his friend a sad, affectionate look and replied: "We opposed Mehmed's forces the best we could. We gave them a good fight, but they prevailed. However, their success is transitory and their cause will ultimately be doomed."

"I don't understand" replied Sphrantzes.

"It's simple" explained Constantine. "The Ottomans will become masters of as much of the world as their malice allows, but at some future time the rule of these wicked men will end and just ones will regain power. God willing, mankind will endure."

"So, why did we fight at all? Why oppose them in the first place?"

"Because, had we acquiesced to their demand that we turn into their vassals, we would have become as evil as they. Right must always battle wrong, for it is the proper thing to do no matter the outcome. Besides, there is always another day, another fight, and there was always a fair chance that the good in us and in humans would prevail, even if the victories, like the defeats that follow them, were only temporary."

"What are we to do now, Master?" urged Sphrantzes.

"There is no we in this. Our destinies separate here. You are to run to the western wall, and lead its defense as long as you can, but try to remain alive and perhaps be ransomed."

"How about you, my Lord?"

"I have my sword. The city has fallen and I am still alive. That must be remedied."

Sphrantzes rushed away and never saw his master again.

Mehmed II rode into the city and called for an immediate halt to the looting. He then issued a proclamation that all Christians who had avoided capture or who had been ransomed could return to their homes without molestation. However, many had no homes to return to, many more had been taken captive and sold into slavery. And scores had perished.

The fall of Constantinople shocked Europeans, who viewed it as a catastrophic event that harbored the end of their civilization. Many feared other Christian kingdoms would suffer the same fate as Constantinople. The Ottoman threat continued for two centuries until, as predicted by Constantin, it ceased.

On the other hand, the migration waves of city scholars and émigrés in the period following the sacking of Constantinople caused a revival of Greek and Roman studies that led to the development of the Renaissance's humanism and science. These learned émigrés brought to Western Europe the accumulated knowledge of their civilization. Their exodus to mainland Europe, mainly Italy, marked the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the Renaissance.

The fall of Constantinople and its aftermath serve as lessons for our times. There is no empire, however powerful, that lasts forever; evil rulers must be opposed;

the ills they inflict upon the populations they govern will at the end be followed by the progress of the human species as a whole.

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