

The Conquest of Constantinople 1453: The Visions and Strategies of Sultan Mehmed II*

By

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INTRODUCTION

Constantinople was the capital city of the Byzantine Empire which was part of the ancient Roman Empire. The city was founded in 324 AD by Emperor Constantine the Great, the first Roman Emperor who later embraced Christianity. Constantinople means Constantine's city and it was also known as the New Rome. It was one of the world's most magnificent cities located on two continents, Asia and Europe.

During the golden age of the Byzantium Empire which lasted for some two centuries (from 850 to 1050), Constantinople was a Mecca of cultures. During this period, Byzantine sets the standard of civilization and civil law. It was during this era too that some of the greatest of the Byzantine art, architecture and craftsmanship were produced. It was also a time that marked by a booming monetary economy when gold coin for instance, being accepted as a standard for commercial transactions and currency.¹

The empire, however, fell into decline in about the middle of the eleventh century. This was evident when the centralised government based in Constantinople began to disintegrate. The factors that set the decline in motion was the onslaught by the Turks who conquered much of Asia Minor and the assertion of independence by the Slav people of Eastern Europe.

Constantinople fate was sealed which ended its glory as the centre of the Byzantine Empire came in 1453. This was the year when it was seized by Sultan Muhammad II or popularly known as Mehmed the Conqueror (*al-Fatih*) following which Constantinople was renamed Istanbul, and declared as the Ottoman capital in 1457.

Before the invasion, for centuries Muslims associated the conquest of the Byzantine capital as a triumph for a just world. The ninth-century philosopher al-Kindi prophesied that the "Mahdi" or "rightly-guided one" would return to "renew Islam" and cause justice to triumph for all. He will rebuilt Constantinople and established peace on the whole earth. The great Muslim historian Ibn Khaldun related a *Hadith* (Tradition of the Prophet) stating that "He who will replaces the Byzantine emperor and spend his treasures in God's path will be the expected [Mahdi] when he enters Constantinople".²

Believing that the *Hadith* was genuinely from the Prophet, it had been one of the prime motivation for the early Muslim to take on Constantinople. The first Muslim attempt to take the Byzantine capital was made in 669 when Caliph Mu'awiyah of the Umayyid Caliphate despatched an expeditionary force overland from Damascus. The campaign failed and even cost the life of one of the most prominent surviving companions of the Prophet, Abu Ayyub al-Ansari. The failure was attributed to lack of experience and the necessary tools for a siege in warfare, since Constantinople was a well-fortified city.³

Even though the Muslim army made several attempts to capture Constantinople during the subsequent centuries they were to no avail. The city came under serious threat by the Muslims only with the rise of the Ottoman. However, no serious attempt to take Constantinople was made by them, not even in their march across into Europe in the fourteenth century. Indeed, they bypassed the city since it was then considered not a priority in their military objective. Constantinople gained another respite when Sultan Bayezid (1389-1402) nicknamed *Yildirim* (the Thunderbolt) whose paramount ambition including to have the city under his domination, was defeated by Timurlane in 1402. Sultan Murad II (1421-44 & 1446-51) laid siege to Constantinople in 1421, but had to abandon it in order to deal with an uprising in Anatolia.⁴

The enthusiasm over conquering the Byzantine capital, however, rekindled following the aggressive expansion of the Ottoman rule under Sultan Murad's son, Mehmed II. This interest was further ignited by religious sentiments when the Ottomans took the campaign to conquer the city as part of a divine obligation. This Ottoman's sentiments was popularly related to a *Hadith* which claimed that the Prophet had said to his disciples:

"Have you heard of a city with land on one side and sea on the other side?" They replied: "Yes, O Messenger of God." He spoke: "The last hour [of Judgement] will not dawn before it is taken by 70,000 sons of Isaac. When they reach it, they will not do battle with arms and catapults, but with the word "There is no God but Allah, and Allah is great". The first sea wall will collapse, and the second time the second sea wall, and the third time the wall on the land side will collapse. And rejoicing they will enter in".⁵

Apart from this *Hadith*, another alleged sayings which relates the conquer of Constantinople that motivated the Ottomans to storm the city is "they will conquer Konstantiniya. Hail the prince and the army to whom that good fortune will be given".⁶ Taking these *Hadiths* as motivation and wishing that Constantinople be part of their dominion, undoubtedly the Ottomans took it as their religious duty in their military campaign to conquer the city. For Sultan Mehmed II he believed that the prince referred to by one of the *Hadiths* was he himself and he was the right person to lead the Muslims to conquer the Byzantine capital.

LIFE AND VISIONS OF SULTAN MEHMED II

Sultan Mehmed II was born on March 30, 1432, in Edirne. He was the fourth son of Sultan Murad II. Mehmed ascended the Ottoman throne on February 18, 1451 at the age of twenty one and he was one of the most ablest Sultans in the house of Othman. The young Mehmed upon ascending the Ottoman throne was not only an able military commander with military talents in organising logistics, feeding, moving and directing an army, but also a far-sighted statesman. He was also reputed for his great intellectual capacity and literary attainments.⁷ He knew both the history and geography of the world and a master of astrology. He was fond of Persian poetry, and wrote himself some poems. He was also interested in arts and invited a gifted artist, Bellini from Venice to his court. Sultan Mehmed was a devout Muslim, who was fluent in at least three major languages of the day, Arabic, Turkish and Persian.⁸

A Venetian visitor, Giacomo de' Languschi who met Sultan Mehmed during the time of the conquest among other things described him as "well complexioned, large in body of moderate height, gifted with princely liberality, stubborn in purpose, bold in his actions, a pursuer of knowledge and everyday had Roman and other histories read to him".⁹ His pleasures were the study of the state of the world and the science of war. Indeed, many of the states and provinces in Europe were already under his rule. According to Giacomo, Sultan Mehmed also believed that the world must be united in faith and kingdom. To him, to make this unity a reality, there was no place in the world more worthy as a centre than Constantinople.¹⁰ Apart from these objectives, it was also his principal goal to revive the empire of his ancestor,

Bayezid by bringing all the lands in Europe, south of the Danube, and all the lands in Asia, west of the Euphrates, under direct Ottoman rule.¹¹

Sultan Mehmed was very ambitious, and was persistent in pursuing his aims. He declared in a number of occasions his determination to be the prince who should achieve this supreme triumph for Islam. To realise the dreams, Sultan Mehmed engaged himself with plans for the conquest of Constantinople almost from the first moment of his accession to the Ottoman throne. During the formative years of the consolidation of his aspiration, Sultan Mehmed was guided by a number of advisers such as his Vizier, Zarghanos Pasha, and Shihab al-Din who was his spiritual mentor.

STRATEGIES AND MANOEUVER

The city of Constantinople occupied a peninsula roughly triangular in shape, with slightly curved sides. The land-walls stretched from the Blachernae quarter on the Golden Horn to the Studion quarter on the Sea of Marmara in a gently convex curve; some four miles in length. The walls along the Golden Horn were about three and half miles in length; they stretch in a concave curve from Blachernae to the Acropolis Point, now known as Seraglio Point, which faces north toward up the Bosphorus. From the Acropolis point it was a distance of about five and half miles; the walls went around the blunt apex of the peninsula, facing the entrance to the Bosphorus, then in a slightly concave curve it ran along the Marmara shore.¹²

Constantinople was protected by a triple line of wall, the two inner of which were very massive, flanked by towers at distances of 170 feet. Before the invention of cannon, the wall was practically impregnable.¹³ On Monday April 2, 1453 just before the official siege was declared by Sultan Mehmed, Emperor Constantine XI, the last Byzantine Emperor, ordered the bridge across the moats to be destroyed and the gates of the city closed. Under the instruction of a Genoese engineer, Bartolomeo Soligo, a great boom was put in place stretching across the entrance to the harbour of the Golden Horn. It consisted of a chain fixed at one end of the Tower of Eugenius under the Acropolis and at the other to a tower on the sea-walls of Pera.¹⁴

Sultan Mehmed's diplomatic and military activities during the first year of his reign showed his intention and wish to transform the Byzantine capital into "a centre jewel in the ring of the Ottoman Empire".¹⁵ As a reflection of his extraordinary diplomatic skills Sultan Mehmed employed a number of approaches to enhance his strategy to conquer Constantinople. One of the strategies adopted before he started the military campaign was making several treaties in the western borders with the Serbians and the Hungarians. These diplomatic treaties prevented them from aiding Constantinople when it was under siege.

Another strategy adopted by Sultan Mehmed was to stifle Constantinople of any supply through the Straits of Bosphorus and to command it. This was done by ordering the erection of a great fortress, known as Rumeli Hisari on the European side of the straits, at its narrowest point. The fortress was situated on the opposite side of another fortress, Anadolu Hisari which had been erected earlier by Bayezid. The construction of Rumeli Hisari was completed on August 31, 1452. It was made up of pinnacle wall of several yards thick and fifty feet high; the roof were covered with thick sheets of lead. It was 800 feet long and roughly 160 to 320 feet wide. Its highest tower rose more than 200 feet over the sea.¹⁶ The fortress commanded not only the Bosphorus, but also the Golden Horn, the inlet which Constantinople was built, and effectively controlled the shipping to and from the city.¹⁷

Apart from these strategies and manoeuver, Sultan Mehmed also took into consideration the time factor and the efficiency of the Ottoman artillery which would give much bearing in his campaign. This in view that any long siege would give the Hungarian and Venetian forces the opportunity to come to the aid of the besieged city.¹⁸ The aid would boost the defense of the city and could also lead to the draining of the Ottoman resources and denting the fighting spirit of attacking soldiers. In his planning, Sultan Mehmed made a concerted effort to improvise his artillery. His effort was made easier by the expertise provided by a Hungarian engineer, named Urban who came to offer his assistance in autumn 1452.

Prior to his presence in the Ottoman camp, Urban offered his services as a maker of artillery to the Byzantine Emperor, but the emperor could not pay him the salary he thought to be his due, nor could he provide him the raw material that he needed. Urban then approached Sultan Mehmed and offered his service to cast a cannon which he declared could blast even the walls of Babylon. Urban's offer delighted Sultan Mehmed who gave him attractive incentives and provided all the technical assistance that he needed. A foundry was established at Adrianople and within three months Urban managed to cast a cannon which the Sultan placed on the walls of his castle at Rumeli Hisari and successfully sank the Venetian ships that had attempted to run the blockade at the Straits of Bosphorus.¹⁹

Following the success, Sultan Mehmed then asked Urban to cast a cannon twice the size of the first and the biggest. The monster cannon, the Basilica which was also casted at Adrianople was completed in January 1453. The length of its barrel was estimated to be twenty-six feet and eight inches. It was eight inches thick and forty eight inches in diameter. The cannon was so powerful that it was able to throw balls of 800-1200 pounds. After it was tested, Sultan Mehmed directed the Basilica to be transported from Adrianople close to Constantinople. It was drawn by sixty oxen, with

two hundred men marching beside it in order to keep the gun-carriage steady. The journey to transport the cannon took six weeks. Two hundred and fifty workmen marched ahead of it, to smooth the way and repair bridges. Apart from the big cannon the smaller ones which were more numerous were also casted.²⁰

In his promulgation of strategies to conquer Constantinople Sultan Mehmed was careful not to overlook anything. Apart from the preparation for overland assault by his army, they were also reinforced by 140 battle-ships, and as many as 320 other boats. The effective part of this armada consisted of 18 triremes and 48 biremes.²¹ The armada was strengthened by a large fleet of special war vessels propelled by oars. His attacking men were made up of an estimated a hundred and fifty thousand, including twelve thousand janissaries and a vast number of irregulars.

Emperor Constantine was equally engaged in making preparations for the defence of his capital. He collected supplies of every kind. He did his best to repair and strengthen the walls of the city, which had been neglected, and allegedly poorly repaired by fraudulent Greek builders.²² He summoned the aid of Christian princes of Western Europe for his coming struggle. In the hope of getting full support from the Pope, he agreed to a scheme of union between the Greek and Latin Churches, compromising much the demands to the latter. A grand service was held at St. Sophia to formalise this union and Cardinal Isidore, the legate of the Pope, a Greek by birth, presided. It was attended by the Emperor and all his court, clergy and officers of the state. The reconciliation made by Constantine, however, backfired. The move offended the main body of the Greek clergy, and to the great majority of the people of Constantinople, since there was a deep-rooted friction and hatred between the members of the two churches. As a result, the people of Constantinople was divided into two camps.²³ Because of the division, it was estimated that out of a hundred thousand of its population, less than six thousand actually took up arms in support of the Emperor against the Turks when the onslaught took place.

THE CONQUEST OF CONSTANTINOPLE

The siege of Constantinople began on April 6, 1453 which was proclaimed after the Friday prayers and lasted for seven weeks. The Ottoman army camped on the hills to the west of Constantinople north of the Golden Horn beyond the Sea of Marmara. On April 12, the defending fortress of the city was bombarded continuously for more than six weeks by powerful cannon balls. Urban's monster cannon although it could only be fired seven times in a day, each of those shots caused enormous damage to the defense of the city.²⁴

After two weeks of siege the final outcome of the campaign was far from successful. Although Constantinople was short of supply and fighting men, it was successfully defended. Initial attempts by the Ottoman army to storm the city did not yield any promising result. The deadlock had some effect on the spirit of the fighting soldiers. Sultan Mehmed was fully informed that strategically the longer the stalemate prevailed the slimmer the chance for him to subdue the city. Aware of this constrain, particularly when the land attack alone will not defeat the Byzantine, Sultan Mehmed planned for an active naval attack. It was due to this passive role of the Bosphorus that during the night of April 21-22, Sultan Mehmed ordered his vessels dragged overland, over the Galata Hill into the Golden Horn, putting them in position to fire on the sea wall from the other side, thereby spreading the Byzantine defenders even more thinly.²⁵

The route taken for the ship was from the present-day Bay of Dolmabahce, near the southern end of the Bosphorus, across the vine-covered hills to the north of Pera and down to the district now known as Kasim Pasha. In order to facilitate the transportation the route was cleared of underbrush, covered with planks, and in the steepest spots provided with railings. The track, which resembled a launching runway, was greased with sheep and ox tallow. It was over this runway that the vessels were hauled on rollers from Bosphorus to the Golden Horn.²⁶

The manoeuver proved to be a brilliant military feat since it provided the Ottoman another line of attacking column which caught the defender of Constantinople by surprise. Despite the tactic deployed there were still doubt in the Ottoman camp over the success of the whole campaign. At the council meeting held in the Turkish camp on the night of May 26 to review the campaign, the Grand Vizier, Halil Pasha who was not in favour of the attack from the very beginning urged the abandonment of the assault. Sultan Mehmed who believed his planning would ultimately pay off refuse to budge. Instead of abandoning the siege, on Sunday May 27, he conferred with his commanders, visited his troops and announced that if the soldiers stormed the walls and captured the city, they would be given lucrative incentives.²⁷

For Sultan Mehmed a difficult decision had to be made and during this crucial time the morale of his army was extremely important. Realising that time was running short and the outcome of the siege needed to be decisive, he declared on Monday May 28, to be a day of rest and atonement. For the day, the Sultan ordered his troops to cleanse their soul and to focus their intention by directing them to observe fasting. The Sultan offered rewards for the first who managed to enter the city, but also warned that traitors would be punished severely. His endeavour to raise the spirit of his army was also

greatly assisted by Sheikhs and dervishes who mingled around the camps and motivated the soldiers.²⁸

Zarghanos Pasha who was Sultan Mehmed's trusted Vizier under his orders also went around in disguise, eavesdropping on the soldiers to measure their enthusiasm. The incentives and the religious fervour successfully raised the spirit of the soldiers. This was reported by Zarghanos to the Sultan.²⁹ The final preparation was made on Tuesday morning before the conclusive assault began. The Sultan himself spent the day inspecting his troops and giving them his orders. He met his admiral, Hamzah Bey and directed him to spread his ships along the whole of the Marmara shore. Directions were also given that the attacking column should be given scaling-ladders and should attempt wherever and whenever possible, either from the ships or from the small boat to scale the wall of Constantinople.³⁰

During the night, Sultan Mehmed personally walked around in disguise to hear the opinions discussed by the soldiers. He thus involved himself with the details of the preparation. After being satisfied with the arrangements, he summoned his ministers and army commanders to his tent to brief them the final details of the assault. He reminded them that for centuries it had been the sacred duty of the faithful to capture Constantinople and that the *Hadiths* promised success. He also convinced them that the city was not impregnable and the enemy were few and exhausted. They were also short of arms and provisions, and divided between themselves.³¹

In the early morning of Wednesday May 29, the Ottoman troops burned their camps and shouted that tomorrow night they would sleep in Constantinople. The first attack was launched by the irregulars and adventurers who advanced to the walls wishing to install ladders to scale the wall. They were driven back with heavy losses, but achieved the Sultan's purpose of tiring the defenders and draining their ammunition. The second assault, more serious was made by crack Anatolian divisions, armoured, disciplined soldiers, who also failed to breach the defenses and were forced to withdraw. Finally in the early light of dawn, the Sultan sent in his elite troops, his bodyguards, his archers and lancers and the twelve thousands men of the corps of Janissaries.³²

The strategies adopted by Sultan Mehmed paid off. Waves of invading armies, the torn wall and the high spirit of the Ottomans was of no match the demoralised defending Byzantines. Constantinople was finally captured on the May 29, 1453 after being besieged for fifty-four days. On the first day of the conquest, Sultan Mehmed entered the city in a procession, stopped the pillage and proclaimed "Hereafter my capital is Istanbul".³³

Sultan Mehmed next move after the conquest of Constantinople was to restore the city to its former greatness. Much of the city's population and economic prosperity had disappeared long before the conquest. Sultan Mehmed first task was to repopulate Istanbul. Decrees were issued guaranteeing protection of the lives and properties of all inhabitants, regardless of religion, who recognised the Sultan and paid taxes to him.³⁴ Sultan Mehmed sought to make his capital a microcosm of all races and religious elements in the empire. Muslims, Armenians, Jews, Greeks, Slavs, and others came from all parts of the empire to settle in the city. Many Jews were attracted from as far as western Europe, where they were being subjected to a new wave of persecution at this time. Appeals were sent throughout the Muslim world for those of the faithful who wished to rise with the new capital of Islam.³⁵

Efforts to repopulate the city were accompanied by construction works. Thousands of homes, bridges, markets, streets, and factories had fallen into ruins during the latter centuries of Byzantine rule were repaired with tremendous vigour. War prisoners were allowed to earn their freedom by working on road construction, while peasants from the Balkans were placed in and around the capital to tend orchards and fruit gardens and guard the flocks that would supply food for the capital. As a result, within a short time Istanbul once again thronged with humanity.³⁶

ISTANBUL AND THE OTTOMAN POWER

Sultan Mehmed was only twenty three years old when he conquered Constantinople. According to Von Hammer the conquest of the city closes the first of the seven periods into which he divided the Ottoman history. The first period being the 150 years of its rapid growth from the rise of Othman to the conquest of Constantinople.³⁷ The conquest of the city enabled the Ottomans to possess a great commercial, administrative and military centre which facilitated the assimilation, control and defense of the Ottoman conquests. Constantinople also controlled the waterways between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, keeping a virtual stranglehold on the European trade with the hinterlands to the north and east, bringing in considerable revenue.³⁸ After the conquest of Constantinople, Sultan Mehmed also involved himself in sixteen other campaigns which enabled the Ottomans to expand their empire effectively to Anatolia and Eastern Europe.³⁹

The fall of Constantinople struck the western Christendom with a sense of alarm. Lamentation arose from the Christian princes of Europe who had not done much to save it. An eleventh-hour reinforcement to aid Constantinople with a papal armada of Venetian galleys also failed to penetrate farther than the shores of the Aegean. It was a calamity which threatened Western

civilisation itself. Such were the resulting impression brought about by the fall of the city.⁴⁰

The date of the fall, May 29, 1453 has been enshrined among the myth of history as the turning point between the Middle Ages and the modern age.⁴¹ For the Turks the conquest symbolised the completion of a transition from frontier march to empire.⁴² To the Turks and the Muslim in general the capture of Constantinople was one of the most important events in history. Thereafter, for nearly five hundred years, the Ottoman Turks dominated the Near East and the eastern Mediterranean. With the establishment of strong central government in Istanbul, the Ottomans also played a significant role as the defender of the faith in protecting the Muslim lands from the encroachment by the European powers during the age of discovery.

CONCLUSION

Sultan Mehmed died on the May 3, 1481 and replaced by Bayezid II. The combination of his visions, far-sighted manoeuvre and smart planning as well as his brilliant strategies enabled Sultan Mehmed to capture Constantinople, which his predecessors had failed to achieve. His success had put a strong foundation for the Ottoman Empire to be inherited by his successors. The capture of Constantinople also led Sultan Mehmed laying claim of all territories once under the Eastern Roman Empire, including the Balkans, the southern coast of the Crimea and Italy.⁴³

Apart from being a true founder of the Ottoman Empire, Sultan Mehmed II was also credited for establishing the ideological and economic bases of Ottoman territories stretching from the Danube to the Euphrates.⁴⁴ In his effort to establish a bureaucratic machinery in his centralist empire, Sultan Mehmed employed experts of various origins - Persian, Azeris, Arabs, Greeks, Jews, Italians as well as native Ottoman.⁴⁵ Sultan Mehmed also appeared to have been the first Ottoman, perhaps the first Muslim ruler, to codify state laws based on the ruler's independent law-making power. His two codes or *Kanunname* dealt with state organisation, penal law, and the relations of the state and the military class with the tax paying subjects. The law codified by Sultan Mehmed remained the core and basis of subsequent Ottoman laws to the seventeenth century.⁴⁶

ENDNOTES

- * This article is a revised version of my paper presented for the Strategic Thinking Seminar, "Lessons From 3 Great Civilisations", organised by Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) at Dewan Lee San Choon, Wisma MCA, Kuala Lumpur, 9 October 1997. For the writing of this paper I wish to thank Puan Siti Rohaini Kassim of English Department for her suggestions and Associate Professor Dr. Hairuddin Harun of Science and Technology Department for his thoughtful comments. Any shortcomings, however, are mine.
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