



Summary :

On the 29th of May 1453, the Ottoman sultan Muhammad II captured Constantinople, after a siege that lasted about two months. During the siege the last emperor Constantine XI Palaiologos died. Although the Byzantine State had long ceased to be a power to be reckoned with, the symbolic and the emotional appeal of the fall was important, since it formally marked the end of the Eastern Christian Roman Empire as well.

Date

29th of May, 1453

Geographical Location

Constantinople

1. Historical framework

The Fall of 1453 was the result of a long process of disintegration of the Byzantine State and at the same time of the rise of the Ottomans as the dominant ruling power of the region. The Byzantine Empire never recovered to its old splendor after the fall of Constantinople to the [Crusaders](#) in [1204](#). Nevertheless, until the civil war among the members of the [Palaiologan dynasty](#) in the middle of the 14th century (1341-1354) it remained a viable political entity with considerable territory and resources. Later on, during the last century of its existence, the Byzantine empire became a loose union of independent lordships ([Constantinople](#), Thessalonica, Moreas etc.) which were governed by members of the imperial family. The dominion of the emperor was confined in Constantinople, the surrounding region, some cities in Propontis and the Thracian seashore of the Black Sea, as well as certain islands. The economic base of the empire was from now on mainly urban, and from many aspects Constantinople during its last century was compared to the Italian city-states. The state revenues were considerably limited and derived mainly from taxes, such as on the selling of wine, from monopolies, as of the salt, and from custom duties.

During the same period the rapid expansion of the Ottoman state took place, as well as its transformation from a little state with tribal base to a multinational empire. Osman's emirate had been created on the northwestern [Asia Minor](#) around 1300, and until 1330 it had enrolled Byzantine [Bithynia](#). The Ottomans came across to Europe for the first time in 1345 as allies of the pretender of the Byzantine throne John Kantakouzenos. After the capture of Kallipolis in 1354, they obtained a firm base in Thrace, from where they could get ferried across and plunder European regions. This possibility gave the Ottomans a huge advantage against all other Turkish emirates of Asia Minor, since they attracted nomad warriors from the Turkish region of the Middle East, which were enchanted by the perspective of the combination of wealthy booty (mainly under the shape of Christian prisoners slaves) and of the holy war against the infidels.

Within a few decades the Ottomans had captured a large part of the Balkans and from 1394 until 1402 they made a first attempt to force Constantinople into surrendering by blockading the city. The defeat of the Turks by Timur (Tamerlane) in the battle of Ancyra (1402) and the subsequent conflicts between the members of the Ottoman dynasty was a relief to Byzantium, but after the rise in power of the sultan Murad II (1421), the Ottoman State recovered and the dominion of the Byzantine emperor was limited again to Constantinople and some maritime cities of Thrace. However, after an unsuccessful attempt in 1422 there was not any other direct assault against Constantinople until 1453. The main restraining factors for the Ottomans were the [strong fortifications](#) of the city, the supremacy of the [Venetians](#) and the [Genoese](#) on the sea and the fear that the engagement of great powers to a siege would encourage attacks from the powers of the Western Christendom (the Crusade of 1444, which ended in the Turkish "Pyrrhic" victory at [Varna](#), had troubled the Ottomans a lot) or uprisings by the various pretenders to the throne.

As far as the Byzantines are concerned, the only perspective of a survival in the long term presupposed the active military aid by the Christian powers. However, the necessary condition for this to happen was the union of the Byzantine Church with the Church of Rome, which deeply divided the Byzantine society. The union was finally agreed during the synod of Ferrara-Florence (1438-1439), but stumbled on the reaction of a large part of the Orthodox flock. The attempt of avoiding an internal crisis probably explains why the



[patriarchal throne](#) of Constantinople was vacant in 1453,¹ as well as why Emperor [Constantine XI](#) was not crowned after his arrival at Constantinople in 1449.

2. Forces and leadership of the opponents

The testimonies on the size of the Ottoman army during the siege are considerably divergent (from 160.000 to 700.000) and, as happens usually with the medieval sources, most of them probably exaggerate with the numbers. Although in the ranks of the tactical Ottoman army and the subsidiary forces were certainly added many irregulars with the hope of booty, the total amount must not have surpassed by far that of 200.000 men, and it is highly possible that it was inferior to this number.

There is also divergence regarding the forces of the defenders; however, for them we have the most reliable testimony of Sphrantzes, who had proceeded in counting the troops by order of the Emperor. He reports 4.773 Romans and some 200 foreigners, but the number of the latter ones surely did not include the organized Italian military corps, for which we know from other sources that surpassed the number of 1.000 men and maybe they were around 3.000. In any case, the total number must not have surpassed that of 8.000 men. The besiegers' superiority in numbers was undoubtedly overwhelming.² Likewise uncertain is the number of the ships of the Ottoman fleet, with a number of 100-150 ships of various types probably being closest to the truth. The ships of the defenders on the Golden Horn were much less, mainly converted merchant ships of the Venetians and the Genoese. Finally, important role in the siege played the canons of the besiegers, of unprecedented size and range. The defenders had also firearms at their disposal, but they were smaller and the defenders were not able to use them properly due to the damages that the vibrations were causing on the walls.

The leadership of the attackers was at the hands of the sultan [Mehmed II](#). Among his inferiors it is worth mentioning the commanders in chief of the European provinces (Rumeli) and of Anatolia, Karadja and Ishak respectively, Zaganos Pasha, Mehmet, Saruja Pasha and Halil, as well as admiral Baltoglu, who was replaced during the siege by Hamza.³

From the defenders' side, under the general commandment of the emperor Constantine XI Dragases,⁴ the military order had the Genoese Giovanni Giustiniani Longo, whereas various Byzantines and Italians commanded various parts of the walls where they had been appointed, including the papal [legate](#) Isidore and [megas doux](#) Loukas Notaras.

3. The course of the events

The capture of Constantinople was Mehmed II's main purpose right after his rise in power, at the end of 1451. During 1452, he built the fortress Boğaz kesen (modern Rumeli Hisarı) on the European shore of Bosphorus, in order to control the passage of the Straits, whereas at the same time he began preparations for the siege and the construction of the canons. Already from the fall of 1452 he started seizing Byzantine fortresses outside Constantinople.

Early in April 1453 (gradually from the 4th until the 7th of April 1453) the Ottoman troops were gathered outside Constantinople and on the 12th of April the bombardment of the [land walls](#) commenced, as well as the efforts of undermining them. By the time of the final assault, a large part of the walls, especially their middle parts, had suffered heavy damages. On April 18 a first assault against the walls failed. On April 20, after a successful effort of four ships to break the iron ring of the Ottoman fleet and to enter the [Golden Horn](#), the sultan replaced the admiral Baltoglu and, on April 22, he managed to transfer by land part of his fleet in the Golden Horn. The besieged had until then protected the entrance to the Gulf with a chain and with ships arrayed. The entering of the Turkish ships exposed the vulnerable north wall of the city to attacks and forced the defenders to spread even more their already weak forces. Other initiatives of the besieger that impressed his contemporaries was the construction of an armored tower of siege and a floating bridge made with barrels at the creek of the Golden Horn. In spite of the harassment of the walls, two more general charges, one on the 7th and another on the 12th of May, failed. On May 21 the Byzantines turned over the sultan's proposal to surrender the city on favorable terms. Besides ideological aspects, the emperor's and his council's refusal might conceal the hope of the siege being lifted. Rumour of arrival of help from the West was spread in the besiegers' camp, whereas a group within the sultan's court from the beginning opposed to the prospect of capturing Constantinople, and they probably passed information to the defenders.



During the final assault, the early hours before the sunrise of the 29th of May, Turkish troops succeeded in penetrating through the walls of the Gate of Saint Romanos area, which had suffered the most serious damages. It can not be estimated if and what role did the alleged penetration of army through the unguarded Kerkoporta play. The resistance of the defenders collapsed when the heavily wounded Giustiniani abandoned the battlefiled, causing panic. A frightful crush between the outer and the inner wall followed, and then the Turks entered the city, exterminating whoever was still resisting. During the phase of the collapse of the resistance at the walls the emperor Constantine was killed as well, although all the details about his last moments do not come from eyewitnesses and they are probably imaginary.

To the conquerors was given the right to sack the city and capture the inhabitants, and most of them were occupied with zeal to this task, allowing a part of the defenders to take refuge to the ships, which afterwards broke the chain of the Golden Horn and escaped. The rest of them were killed or captured; captivity was the fate of the largest part of the people as well. On the 29th of May the Genoese colony of Galata, which until then had kept a neutral position, surrendered to the sultan, whereas Mehmed made a triumphal entrance to Constantinople.

4. The day after the Fall

The main general dilemma that the conqueror sultan faced after the Fall was that of the break with- or the continuation of the Byzantine legacy of Constantinople. His attitude toward some members of the old ruling class is characteristic, such as with megas doux Loukas Notaras, whom the sultan faced favorably in the beginning, but right after he changed his mind and ordered his execution.⁵ On the contrary, he appeared tolerant with the Orthodox Christian religion, and six months after the Fall he took the initiative of reestablishing the Ecumenical Patriarchate by choosing as patriarch the anti-Unionist leader Gennadios Scholarios. His most important long term decision was the transfer of the capital to the captured Constantinople, which seems to have been announced in 1458. This decision was followed by an extensive program of resettlement and building, which laid the foundations for the transformation of the ruined city to an ecumenical [imperial capital](#), with a different character and appearance, however, compared to the respective Byzantine one.⁶

5. The importance of the event

Because of its symbolic aspect, the fall of Constantinople has for a long time been regarded as a hallmark between Middle Ages and Modern era. To estimate its actual wider historical meaning is hard enough, since for the most part this event completed developments that had already taken their course. In the middle term, it considerably contributed to the transformation of the Ottoman state to a powerful imperial power with a clear expansionist orientation and, thus, to a major threat for the European states. In addition, it marked the end of the supremacy of the Italian commercial cities on the trade of the Balkans and the Black Sea. As far as the Christians of the East are concerned, the fall defined the failure of the union of the Churches and the survival of the Orthodox Church as a special entity. At the same time, the church partially took the symbolic place of the Empire as a point of political reference for the Christians, taking simultaneously administrative, financial and juridical responsibilities within the framework of the Ottoman system.

1. The patriarch Gregory III Mammas was alive, but he abstained from his duties, without being officially disordained or resigned, whereas from 1451 he settled in Rome. For these conditions see Πιτσάκης, Κ.Γ., «Και πάλι για την "Στέψη" του Κωνσταντίνου ΙΑ΄ Παλαιολόγου», in Μπαλόγλου, Χ.Π. (ed.), *Η συμβολή του στην ανάδειξη του Βυζαντινού Πολιτισμού* (Athens – Mystras 2005), p. 145-165.

2. For the numbers see Pertusi, A. (ed.), *La Caduta di Costantinopoli I. Le testimonianze dei contemporanei* (Milano 1976), no. LXXII-LXXIII· Κουταβά-Δεληβοριά, Β., «Χρονογραφική» και χαρτογραφική αποτύπωση της Αλώσεως (Athens 2003), p.95 f.· Bartusis, M., *The late Byzantine Army. Arms and Society, 1204-1453* (Philadelphia 1992), p. 129-132.

3. For the various types of names see Κουταβά-Δεληβοριά, Β., «Χρονογραφική» και χαρτογραφική αποτύπωση της Αλώσεως (Athens 2003), pp. 54 f.

4. Some of the historians enumerate him as Constantine XII, by counting –mistakenly– Constantine Laskaris, who was proclaimed emperor during the



entering of the Crusaders into Constantinople in 1204. By following the trend of those times, Constantine used more often the family name of his maternal grandfather, after which he was named. Naturally, he also carried the family name of the Palaiologan dynasty.

5. For this event see Ζαχαριάδου, Ε., «Τα λόγια και ο θάνατος του Λουκά Νοταρά», *Ροδωνιά. Τιμή στον Μ.Ι. Μανούσακα Α΄* (Rethymno 1994), pp.135-146; Ganchou, T., "Le rachat des Notaras après la chute de Constantinople ou les relations 'étrangères' de l'élite Byzantine au XVe siècle", in Balard, M. – Ducellier, A. (ed.), *Migrations et Diasporas Méditerranéennes (Xe-XVIe siècles)* (Paris 2002), pp.149-229 · Κιουσοπούλου, Τ., «Λουκάς Νοταράς: Ψήγματα μιας βιογραφίας», in Ευαγγελάτου-Νοταρά, Φ.– Μανιάτη-Κοκκίνη, Τ. (ed.), *Κλητόριον εις μνήμην Νίκου Οικονομίδη* (Athens – Thessaloniki 2005), pp. 161-176.

6. Γερασίμου, Σ., «Η επανοίκηση της Κωνσταντινούπολης μετά την Άλωση», in Κιουσοπούλου, Τ. (ed.), *1453: Η Άλωση της Κωνσταντινούπολης και η μετάβαση από τους μεσαιωνικούς στους νεότερους χρόνους* (Heraklion 2005), pp. 3-21· Kafescioglu, C., "Reckoning with an Imperial Legacy: Ottomans and Byzantine Constantinople", in Κιουσοπούλου, Τ. (ed.), *1453: Η Άλωση της Κωνσταντινούπολης και η μετάβαση από τους μεσαιωνικούς στους νεότερους χρόνους* (Heraklion 2005), pp. 23-46· Ζαχαριάδου, Ε., "Constantinople se repeuple", in Κιουσοπούλου, Τ. (ed.), *1453: Η Άλωση της Κωνσταντινούπολης και η μετάβαση από τους μεσαιωνικούς στους νεότερους χρόνους* (Heraklion 2005), pp. 47-59.

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Glossary :

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| | legate (lat. <i>legatus</i>). The senatorial ambassador a) to foreign nations or b) to military commanders, in which case he assumed command. He was considered a functionary, since he was under the commands of the Senate; he was also a sacred person. In later periods, legate was named the representative sent to a foreign land, and such was the title of the head of the Italian communities in Byzantine Constantinople. The representatives of the Pope empowered for the settlement of ecclesiastical matters were also called legates. |
| | megas doukas The commander of the Byzantine fleet. In the Late Byzantine period, the title of the megas doukas was assigned to the highest officials of the imperial administration. |

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Quotations

The Ottoman troops are being gathered outside Constantinople:

ἦσαν δ' αἱ πᾶσαι τὸν ἀριθμὸν, ὡς ἐλέγοντο, τριακόσιοι καὶ πενήκοντα ἄνευ μέντοι γε τῶν σκευαγωγῶν καὶ τῶν κατ' ἄλλην τινὰ χρεῖαν ἢ ἐμπορίαν ἀφικνουμένων· αἱ δ' ἀνήγοντο τάχει πολλῶ σὺν βοῇ καὶ θορύβῳ καὶ ἀλαλαγμῶ εἰρεσία τε χρώμεναι καὶ παρακλειουσῶ καὶ πατάγῳ καὶ ἀντιφιλοτιμήσει πρὸς ἀλλήλας ὑπερηχοῦσαι μὲν τὸν Ἑλλησποντον, ἐκπληξιν δὲ καὶ φόβον ὅτι πλεῖστον παρέχουσαι τοῖς ὄρωσι. (3.) διὰ πολλοῦ γὰρ χρόνου οὐδαμοῦ τοσοῦτος στόλος νεῶν καὶ παρασκευῆ τοσῆδε κατὰ θάλατταν ἐγεγόνει· ὁ δὲ καὶ μᾶλλον τοὺς ταιλαιπῶρους Ῥωμαίους ἐξέπληξε παρ' ἐλπίδα φανέν καὶ εἰς ἀπόγνωσιν καὶ ἀθυμίαν μεγίστην ἐνέβαλε καὶ πᾶσαν ἄλλην ἐλπίδα χρηστὴν αὐτῶν παρήρηται. (4.) πρότερον μὲν γὰρ ἠνίκα προσέβαλλον αὐτοῖς οἱ



πολέμιοι, κατὰ γῆν ἐπολιορκοῦντο καὶ μόνον, τῆς δὲ θαλάσσης ἐκράτουν, καὶ εἶχον τὰ τε ἐπιτήδεια ἄφθονα τῆ κατὰ θάλατταν ἐμπορία χρώμενοι τὸν τε πόλεμον ῥαδίως ἀνέφερον καὶ τὰς προσβολὰς οὐ χαλεπῶς ἀπεκρούοντο διὰ πολυχειρίαν τῶν πολεμίων ἐνὶ μέρει καὶ μόνῳ τῷ κατὰ γῆν μαχομένων· νῦν δὲ κατὰ τε γῆν καὶ θάλασσαν ἐπιόντα ὀρῶντες τὸν πόλεμον εἰκότως ἐξεπλήττοντο καὶ εἰς ἀπορίαν μεγίστην καὶ φόβον δεινὸν ἐνέπιπτον. καὶ ὁ μὲν κατὰ θάλασσαν στόλος τῷ βασιλεῖ οὕτως ἀνήγετο.

1.23. (1.) αὐτὸς δὲ ἄρας ἐκ τῆς Ἀδριανοῦ παντὶ τῷ στρατῷ ἱππικῷ τε καὶ πεζικῷ διὰ τῆς μεσογείας ἐχώρει ἅπαντα συγκυκῶν τε καὶ συνταράττων καὶ φόβον καὶ ἀγωνίαν καὶ φρίκην μεγίστην ἐμποίων, καθ' οὓς ἂν γένοιτο, συνεπαγόμενος ἅμα οἱ καὶ τὰς μηχανάς· καὶ ἀφικνεῖται δεκαταῖος ἐς τὸ Βυζάντιον καὶ στρατοπεδεύεται πρὸς τῆ πόλει ἐγγύς που τοῦ τείχους ὅσα ἀπὸ σταδίων τεττάρων πρὸς ταῖς καλουμέναις Πύλαις τοῦ Ῥωμανοῦ. (2.) αἱ δὲ νῆες ὀρμίζονται ἄλλη καὶ ἄλλη τῆς ἠπείρου καταντικρῶ τῆς πόλεως πληρώσασαι πᾶσαν τὴν ταύτη παραλίαν.

Μιχαήλ Κριτόβουλος, *Ιστορία*, 1.22-23 (CFHB 22, Berlin – New York 1983).

The Byzantines struggle to fortify the city:

Ῥωμαῖοι δὲ στρατὸν τοσοῦτον πεζὸν τε καὶ ναυτικὸν καὶ παρασκευὴν τοσήνδε κατὰ γῆν καὶ θάλασσαν ἐπιούσαν ὀρῶντες ἐξεπλήττοντο μὲν τῷ τε παραλόγῳ τῆς θέας τῷ τε ἀθρόῳ τῆς ἐπιθέσεως, οὐ μὴν ἡμέλουν γε καὶ αὐτοὶ τῶν ἐς τὸν πόλεμον καὶ τὴν ἐναντίαν ἀντιπαρασκευὴν, ἀλλὰ πάντα ἐποίουν μηδὲν ὑφιέντες. (2.) καὶ πρῶτον μὲν ὀλκάδας μεγάλας περὶ τε τὴν ἄλυσιν καὶ τὸ στόμα τοῦ μεγάλου λιμένος ἀντιπρώρους βύζην ὠρμιζον καὶ τρηῆρεις μακράς περὶ αὐτὰς ὡς ταύτη τὸν ἔσπλον τῶν πολεμίων κωλύσοντες.

Μιχαήλ Κριτόβουλος, *Ιστορία*, 1.24, (CFHB 22, Berlin – New York 1983).

The arrival of Giustiniani reinforce the defense of Constantinople:

Ὅμοίως καὶ ἐκ τῆς Γενούας ἐλθὼν εἰς ὄνοματι Ἰωάννης Λόγγος ἐκ τῶν Ἰουστινιάνων σὺν δυσὶ νῆαις ὑπερμεγέθοις, ἔχων καὶ πολεμικὰς παρασκευὰς πολλὰς καὶ καλὰς σὺν ἐνόπλοις νέοις Γενουταῖς, ἀρεῖκόν πνέοντα θυμὸν· καὶ ὁ αὐτὸς Ἰωάννης ἐπιδέξιος ἀνὴρ καὶ εἰς παραταγὰς καὶ συνασπισμοὺς πολέμων δοκιμώτατος, ἐδεξιώσατο τοῦτον ὁ βασιλεὺς καὶ ὄργας ἐμέτρησε τοὺς στρατιώτας αὐτοῦ καὶ εὐεργεσίας ἐνεῖμε καὶ πρωτοστράτορα τοῦτον ἐτίμησε· καὶ αὐτὸς τὴν φύλαξιν τῶν πρὸς τὸ παλάτιον κειμένων τειχέων ἀνελάβετο. Καὶ γὰρ ἦσαν ὀρῶντες τὸν τύραννον ἐκεῖ τὰς σκευὰς τὰς πετροβόλους πηγνύοντα καὶ τὴν ἄλλην πᾶσαν ἀντίμαχον ἐν τοῖς τοίχοις παρὰ ταξιν. Εὐεργέτησε δὲ τούτῳ καὶ διὰ χρυσοβούλλου γραμματος τὴν νῆσον Λήμνον, εἰ ἀποκρουσθήσεται ὁ Μεχέμετ καὶ ὑποστραφήσεται ἀπρακτος, ἐξ ὧν θαρῶεῖ κερδᾶναι τῆς Πόλεως. Ἐκτοτε οὖν ἐμάχοντο ἡρωϊκῶς οἱ Λατινοὶ σὺν τῷ Ἰωάννῃ ἐξερχόμενοι ἐκ τῶν πυλῶν τῆς πόλεως καὶ ἰστάμενοι ἐν τῷ ἐξωκίστρῳ καὶ ἐν τῇ τάφρῳ.

Δούκας, *Ιστορία*, Grecu, V. (ed.), *Ducae Historia turco-byzantina (1341-1462)* (Bucarest 1958), 38.2.

The fall of Constantinople and the death of Constantine XI:

Καὶ τῆ καθ-ῆ Μαΐου, ἡμέρα γ-ῆ, ὥρα τῆς ἡμέρας ἀρχῆ ἀπῆρε τὴν Πόλιν ὁ ἀμνηρᾶς, ἐν ἣ ὥρα καὶ ἀλώσει τῆς πόλεως καὶ ὁ μακαρίτης αὐθέντης μου καὶ βασιλεὺς κύρ Κωνσταντῖνος σκοτωθεὶς ἀπέθανεν, ἐμοῦ πλησίον αὐτοῦ οὐχ εὐρεθέντος τῆ ὥρα ἐκείνη, ἀλλὰ προστάξει ἐκείνου εἰς ἐπίσκεψιν δῆθεν ἄλλου μέρους τῆς πόλεως, ἰού, ἰού κάμοι, τῆς προνοίας οὐκ εἶδ' εἰς τίνα με καιρὸν φυλαττούσης. (10.) Ἦν δὲ ἡ πᾶσα ζωὴ αὐτοῦ δὴ τοῦ μακαρίτου βασιλέως καὶ μάρτυρος χρόνοι μθ' καὶ μῆνες γ' καὶ ἡμέραι κ', ὧν ἦν βασιλεὺς χρόνους δ', μῆνας δ' καὶ ἡμέρας κδ', ὄγδοος βασιλεὺς τοῦ γένους αὐτοῦ τῶν Παλαιολόγων ὑπάρχων.

Γεώργιος Σφραντζής, *Χρονικόν*, Grecu, V. (ed.), *Georgios Sphrantzes. Memorii 1401-1477* (Scriptores Byzantini 5, Bucharest 1966), p. 49-50.

Chronological Table

1452: Building of Boğaz kesen by Mehmed II on the European shore of Bosphoros

4-7 April 1453: Gathering of the Ottoman troops in front of the walls of Constantinople



12 April: Bombarding against the walls of Constantinople

18 April: First unsuccessful assault of the Ottoman troops

20 April: 4 ships break the iron ring of the Ottoman fleet and enter the Golden Horn, in order to join with the besieged ones.
Replacement of the admiral of the Ottomans

22 April: Part of the Ottoman fleet is transported by land into the Golden Horn

7 and 12 May: Assaults of the Ottoman troops

21 May: Rejection by the Byzantines of Mehmed's proposal to surrender the city on favorable terms

29 May: Fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman troops