

THE FALL OF
CONSTANTINOPLE
1453

CAMBRIDGE

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Steven Runciman
Frontmatter
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BY
STEVEN RUNCIMAN



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To
MY BROTHER

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PREFACE

In the days when historians were simple folk the Fall of Constantinople, 1453, was held to mark the close of the Middle Ages. Nowadays we know too well that the stream of history flows on relentlessly and there is never a barrier across it. There is no point at which we can say that the medieval world changed itself into the modern world. Long before 1453 the movement that is called the Renaissance was under way in Italy and the Mediterranean world. Long after 1453 medieval ideas lasted on in the north. It was before 1453 that pioneers had begun to explore the ocean routes that were to alter the whole economy of the world; but it was several decades after 1453 before these routes were opened up and before their effect could be felt in Europe. The decline and fall of Byzantium and the triumph of the Ottoman Turks had their effect on these changes; but the effect was not due solely to the events of one year. Byzantine learning played its part in the Renaissance; but already for more than half a century before 1453 Byzantine scholars had left the poverty and uncertainty of their homeland to seek comfortable professorial Chairs in Italy, and the Greek scholars that followed them after 1453 came for the most part not as refugees from a new infidel rule but as students from islands where Venice still was in control. Already for many years the growth of Ottoman power had caused some embarrassment to the merchant cities of Italy, but it did not kill their trade, except in so far as it blocked the routes to the Black Sea. The Ottoman conquest of Egypt was more disastrous to Venice than the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople; and if Genoa was severely struck by the Sultan's control of the Straits, it was her precarious position in Italy rather than the loss of foreign commerce that was her downfall.

Even in the wide political field the fall of Constantinople altered very little. The Turks had already arrived on the banks of the

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Danube and were threatening Central Europe; and anyone could have seen that Constantinople was doomed, that an empire which consisted of little more than one decaying city could not hold out against an empire whose territory covered the greater part of the Balkan peninsula and of Asia Minor, an empire vigorously governed and provided with the best military machine of the age. Christendom was, it is true, profoundly shocked by the fall of Constantinople. Lacking our sage hindsight, the Western powers failed to see how inevitable the Turkish conquest had become. Yet the tragedy in no way changed their policy, or, rather, their lack of policy, towards the Eastern Question. Only the Papacy was genuinely upset and genuinely planned counter-action; and it was soon to have more urgent problems nearer home.

It may seem, therefore, that the story of 1453 scarcely merits another book. But, in fact, for two peoples the events of that year were vitally important. For the Turks the capture of the old imperial city not only gave them a new imperial capital; it also guaranteed the permanence of their European empire. So long as the city, situated as it was in the centre of their dominions, at the crossing between Asia and Europe, was not in their hands, they could not feel secure. They had no reason to fear the Greeks alone; but a grand Christian alliance working from such a base might still unseat them. With Constantinople in their hands they were secure. Today, after all the vicissitudes of their history, the Turks still possess Thrace; they still maintain their foothold in Europe.

For the Greeks the fall of the city was even more momentous. For them it was indeed the final ending of a chapter. The splendid civilization of Byzantium had already played its part in civilizing the world, and it was now dying with the dying city. But it was not yet dead. The dwindling population of Constantinople on the eve of its fall contained many of the finest intellects of the time, belonging to men reared in a high cultured tradition that stretched back to ancient Greece and Rome. And, so long as an

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Emperor, Viceroy of God, lived on the Bosphorus, every Greek, enslaved though he might already be, could proudly feel that he still belonged to the true and orthodox Christian commonwealth. The Emperor might be able to do little to help him on earth, but he was still a focal point and a symbol of the rule of God. With the Emperor fallen with his fallen city the reign of anti-Christ began and Greece was driven underground, to survive as best she could. That Hellenism did not utterly perish is a tribute to the unquenchable vitality and courage of the Greek spirit.

In this story the Greek people is the tragic hero; and I have tried to tell it with that in mind. It has often been told before. It stirred Gibbon almost, but not quite, enough to make him forget his contempt of Byzantium. It was last fully told in English by Sir Edwin Pears, in a work which was published sixty years ago but which is still well worth reading. His account of the actual operations of the siege, based on a full study of the sources and intimate personal knowledge of the terrain, is still fully valid, though in other places modern research has made the book a little out-of-date. I am deeply indebted to his work, which remains the best account of the events of 1453 in any language. Since it was published many scholars have added to our knowledge. In particular the year 1953 saw the publication of many articles and essays in celebration of the quincentenary. But, apart from Gustave Schlumberger's book, published in 1914 and based almost entirely on Pears's, no full-length narrative of the siege has appeared during the last half-century in any Western language.

In this attempt to fill the gap I have made grateful use of the work of many recent scholars, living and dead. My indebtedness will be revealed in my notes. Amongst living Greek scholars I would like specially to mention Professor Zakythinos and Professor Zoras. For Ottoman history everyone must be indebted to Professor Babinger, even though his great book on the Conquering Sultan denies us the aid of references to his sources. For the understanding of earlier Turkish history Professor Wittek's books

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are invaluable; and amongst younger Turkish scholars mention must be made of Professor Inalcık. Father Gill's important work on the Council of Florence and its aftermath has been of the greatest use to me.

I discuss briefly the principal sources for the story in an appendix. Not all of them are easily obtained. The Christian sources were collected together by the late Professor Dethier in two volumes, XXI and XXII, parts 1 and 2, of the *Monumenta Hungariae Historica*, some eighty years ago, but though the volumes were printed they were never published, apparently owing to the number of errors that they contained. Not many of the Moslem sources are readily accessible, particularly for anyone who can only read Ottoman Authors slowly and painfully. I hope that I have been able to extract the essence from them.

This book could never have been written but for the existence of the London Library; and I would like to express my gratitude to the Staff of the Reading Room of the British Museum for their patient help. I should like also to thank Mr S. J. Papastavrou for his help with the proofs, and the Syndics and staff of the Cambridge University Press for their unfailing forbearance and kindness.

Note on the transliteration of names

I cannot claim to any consistency in my transliteration of names from Greek or Turkish. For Greek names I have used whatever seems to me to be the familiar and natural form. For Turkish names I have used a simple phonetic spelling, except when I am citing words in modern Turkish, for which I use modern Turkish spelling. I have called the Conquering Sultan by his Turkish name of Mehmet, not Mahomet or Mohammed. I hope that my Turkish friends will forgive me for calling the city about which I write 'Constantinople' and not 'Istanbul'. It would have been pedantic to do otherwise.

STEVEN RUNCIMAN

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 1964