

On the Fall of Constantinople

From the Diaries Nicolo Barbo, <https://deremilitari.org/2016/08/the-siege-of-constantinople-in-1453-according-to-nicolo-barbaro/> accessed 17 November 2017.

On the twenty-ninth of May, the last day of the siege, our Lord God decided, to the sorrow of the Greeks, that He was willing for the city to fall on this day into the hands of Mahomet Bey the Turk son of Murat, after the fashion and in the manner described below; and also our eternal God was willing to make this decision in order to fulfill all the ancient prophecies, particularly the first prophecy made by Saint Constantine, who is on horseback on a column by the Church of Saint Sophia of this city, prophesying with his hand and saying, "From this direction will come the one who will undo me," pointing to Anatolia, that is Turkey. Another prophecy which he made was that when there should be an Emperor called Constantine son of Helen, under his rule Constantinople would be lost, and there was another prophecy that when the moon should give a sign in the sky, within a few days the Turks would have Constantinople. All these three prophecies had come to pass, seeing that the Turks had passed into Greece, there was an Emperor called Constantine son of Helen, and the moon had given a sign in the sky, so that God had determined to come to this decision against the Christians and particularly against the Empire of Constantinople, as you shall hear.

On the twenty-ninth of May, 1453, three hours before daybreak, Mahomet Bey son of Murat the Turk came himself to the walls of Constantinople to begin the general assault which gained him the city. The Sultan divided his troops into three groups of fifty thousand men each: one group was of Christians who were kept in his camp against his will, the second group was of men of a low condition, peasants and the like, and the third group was of janissaries in their white turbans, these being all soldiers of the Sultan and paid every day, all well-armed men strong in battle, and behind these janissaries were all the officers, and behind these the Turkish Sultan. The first group, which was the Christians, had the task of carrying the ladders to the walls, and they tried to raise the ladders up, and at once we threw them to the ground with the men who were raising them, and they were all killed at once, and we threw big stones down on them from the battlements, so that few escaped alive; in fact, anyone who approached beneath the walls was killed. When those who were raising up the ladders saw so many dead, they tried to retreat towards their camp, so as not to be killed by the stones, and when the rest of the Turks who were behind saw that they were running away, at once they cut them to pieces with their scimitars and made them turn back

towards the walls, so that they had the choice of dying on one side or the other; and when this first group was killed and cut to pieces, the second group began to attack vigorously. The first group was sent forward for two reasons, firstly because they preferred that Christians should die rather than Turks, and secondly to wear us out in the city; and as I have said, when the first group was dead or wounded, the second group came on like lions unchained against the walls on the side of San Romano; and when we saw this fearful thing, at once the tocsin was sounded through the whole city and at every post on the walls, and every man ran crying out to help; and the Eternal God showed us His mercy against these Turkish dogs, so that every man ran to ward off the attack of the pagans, and they began to fall back outside the barbicans. But this second group was made up of brave men, who came to the walls and wearied those in the city greatly by their attack. They also made a great attempt to raise ladders up to the walls, but the men on the walls bravely threw them down to the ground again, and many Turks were killed. Also, our crossbows and cannon kept on firing into their camp at this time and killed an incredible number of Turks.

When the second group had come forward and attempted unsuccessfully to get into the city, there then approached the third group, their paid soldiers the janissaries, and their officers and their other principal commanders, all very brave men, and the Turkish Sultan behind them all. This third group attacked the walls of the poor city, not like Turks but like lions, with such shouting and sounding of castanets that it seemed a thing not of this world, and the shouting was heard as far away as Anatolia, twelve miles away from their camp. This third group of Turks, all fine fighters, found those on the walls very weary after having fought with the first and second groups, while the pagans were eager and fresh for the battle; and with the loud cries which they uttered on the field, they spread fear through the city and took away our courage with their shouting and noise. The wretched people in the city felt themselves to have been taken already, and decided to sound the tocsin through the whole city, and sounded it at all the posts on the walls, all crying at the top of their voices, "Mercy! Mercy! God send help from Heaven to this Empire of Constantine, so that a pagan people may not rule over the Empire!" All through the city all the women were on their knees, and all the men too, praying most earnestly and devotedly to our omnipotent God and His Mother

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Madonna Saint Mary, with all the sainted men and women of the celestial hierarchy, to grant us victory over this pagan race, these wicked Turks, enemies of the Christian faith. While these supplications were being made, the Turks were attacking fiercely on the landward side by San Romano, by the headquarters of the Most Serene Emperor and all his nobles, and his principal knights and his bravest men, who all stayed by him fighting bravely. The Turks were attacking, as I have said, like men determined to enter the city, by San Romano on the landward side, firing their cannon again and again, with so many other guns and arrows without number and shouting from these pagans, that the very air seemed to be split apart; and they kept on firing their great cannon which fired a ball weighing twelve hundred pounds, and their arrows, all along the length of the walls on the side where their camp was, a distance of six miles, so that inside the barbicans at least eighty camel-loads of them were picked up, and as many as twenty camel-loads of those which were in the ditch. This fierce battle lasted until daybreak.

Our men of Venice did marvels of defence in the part where the bastion was, where the Turks were concentrating their attack, but it was useless, since our eternal God had already made up His mind that the city should fall into the hands of the Turks; and since God had so determined, nothing further could be done, except that all we Christians who found ourselves at this time in the wretched city should place ourselves in the hands of our merciful Lord Jesus Christ and of His Mother, Madonna Saint Mary, for them to have mercy on the souls of those who had to die in the battle on this day. One hour before daybreak the Sultan had his great cannon fired, and the shot landed in the repairs which we had made and knocked them down to the ground. Nothing could be seen for the smoke made by the cannon, and the Turks came on under cover of the smoke, and about three hundred of them got inside the barbicans. The Greeks and Venetians fought hard and drove them out of the barbicans, and a great number died, including almost all of those who were able to get inside. After the Greeks had fought this fight, they thought that they had indeed won the victory against the pagans, and we Christians were greatly relieved. But after being driven back from the barbicans the Turks again fired their great cannon, and the pagans like hounds came on behind the smoke of the cannon, raging and pressing on each other like wild beasts, so that in the space of a quarter of an hour there were more than thirty thousand Turks inside the barbicans, with such cries that it seemed a very inferno, and the shouting was heard as far away as Anatolia. When the Turks got inside the barbicans, they quickly captured the first row of them, but before they

managed this, a great number of them died at the hands of those who were above them on the walls, who killed them with stones at their pleasure. After having captured the first row, the Turks together with the axapi made themselves strong there, and then there came inside the barbicans a good seventy thousand Turks with such force that it seemed a very inferno, and soon the barbicans from one end to the other, a full six miles, were full of Turks. As I have said before, those on the walls killed great numbers of Turks with stones, casting them down from above without stopping, and so many were killed that forty carts could not have carried away the dead Turks who had died before getting into the city. We Christians now were very frightened, and the Emperor had the tocsin sounded through the whole city, and at the posts on the walls, with every man crying, "Mercy, Eternal God!" Men cried out, and women too, and the nuns and the young women most loudly of all, and there was such lamentation that even the most cruel Jew would have felt pity. Seeing this, Zuan Zustignan, that Genoese of Genoa, decided to abandon his post, and fled to his ship, which was lying at the boom. The Emperor had made this Zuan Zustignan captain of his forces, and as he fled, he went through the city crying, "The Turks have got into the city!" But he lied in his teeth, because the Turks were not yet inside. When the people heard their captain's words, that the Turks had got into the city, they all began to take flight, and all abandoned their posts at once and went rushing towards the harbour in the hope of escaping in the ships and the galleys. At this moment of confusion, which happened at sunrise, our omnipotent God came to His most bitter decision and decided to fulfill all the prophecies, as I have said, and at sunrise the Turks entered the city near San Romano, where the walls had been razed to the ground by their cannon. But before they entered, there was such a fierce struggle between the Turks and the Christians in the city who opposed them, and so many of them died, that a good twenty carts could have been filled with the corpses of the first Turks. Then the second wave followed the first and went rushing about the city, and anyone they found they put to the scimitar, women and men, old and young, of any condition. This butchery lasted from sunrise, when the Turks entered the city, until midday, and anyone whom they found was put to the scimitar in their rage. Those of our merchants who escaped hid themselves in underground places, and when the first mad slaughter was over, they were found by the Turks and were all taken and sold as slaves.

The Turks made eagerly for the piazza, five miles from the point where they made their entrance at San Romano, and when they reached it, at once some of them climbed up a

tower where the flags of Saint Mark and the Most Serene Emperor were flying, and they cut down the flag of Saint Mark and took away the flag of the Most Serene Emperor, and then on the same tower they raised the flag of the Sultan. When they had taken away these two flags, those of Saint Mark and of the Emperor, and raised the flag of the Turkish dog, then all we Christians who were in the city were full of sorrow because it had been captured by the Turks. When their flag was raised and ours cut down, we saw that the whole city was taken, and that there was no further hope of recovering from this.

Now I shall tell of the events at sea, since I have told of what happened on land. One hour before dawn the fleet got under way from the Columns where it was anchored, and it took up a position by the harbour boom ready to give battle there. But their admiral saw that our harbour was well defended with ships and galleys, particularly at the boom where there were ten large ships of eight hundred botte and upwards, and since he was afraid of our fleet, he decided to go and fight behind the city on the side of the Dardanelles and leave the harbour without fighting, and so they went on land there, part of them disembarking by the Giudecca, so as to have better opportunity of getting booty, there being great riches in the houses of the Jews, principally jewels. The seventy fuste inside the harbour which had been dragged over the hill of Pera, commanded by Zagan Pasha, all went together and attacked the city at a place called Fanari, and the Christians on this part of the walls bravely drove them back.

But when the men in these ships saw that the Christians had lost Constantinople, and that the standard of Mahomet Bey the Turk was raised over the principal tower of the city, and that the standards of Saint Mark and of the Emperor had been cut down and lowered, then they all disembarked. And at the same time all those in the fleet on the Dardanelles side disembarked and left their ships by the shore without anyone in them, because they were all running furiously like dogs into the city to seek out gold, jewels and other treasure, and to take merchants prisoner. They sought out the monasteries, and all the nuns to the fleet and ravished and abused by the Turks, and then sold at auction for slaves throughout Turkey, and all the young women also were ravished and then sold for whatever they would fetch, although some of them preferred to cast themselves into the wells and drown rather than fall into the hands of the Turks, as did a number of married women also. The Turks loaded all their ships with prisoners and with an enormous quantity of booty. Their practice was,

that when they went into a house, at once they raised up a flag with their emblem on it, and when other Turks saw this flag flying, they left this house alone, and went in search of another house without a flag, and so they put their flags everywhere, even on the monasteries and churches. As far as I can estimate, there would have been two hundred thousand of these flags flying on the houses all over Constantinople: some houses had as many as ten, because of the excitement which the Turks felt at having won such a great victory. For the rest of the day these flags were kept flying on the houses, and all through the day the Turks made a great slaughter of Christians through the city. The blood flowed in the city like rainwater in the gutters after a sudden storm, and the corpses of Turks and Christians were thrown into the Dardanelles, where they floated out to sea like melons along a canal. No one could hear any news of the Emperor, what he had been doing, or whether he was dead or alive, but some said that his body had been seen among the corpses, and it was said that he had hanged himself at the moment when the Turks broke in at the San Romano gate.

Now that Constantinople had fallen, and since there was nothing further to be hoped for, our own people prepared to save themselves and our fleet, all the galleys and ships, and get them out of the harbour, breaking the boom across the entrance. So Aluvixe Diedo, officer in command of the harbour and captain of the galleys from Tana, seeing that the whole of Constantinople had been captured, at once disembarked at Pera, and went to the Podesta of Pera, and discussed with him what should be done with our fleet, whether it should make its escape, or prepare itself to do battle with all its ships and galleys. And when Aluvixe Diedo asked the advice of the Podesta of Pera, the Podesta said, "Master captain, wait here in Pera, and I shall send an ambassador to the Sultan, and we shall see whether we Genoese and Venetians shall have war or peace with him." But while this discussion was taking place, the Podesta had the gates of his town shut, and shut the captain inside, with Bartolo Fiurian the armourer of the galleys of Tana, and Nicold Barbaro the surgeon of the galleys. We who were shut up there realised that we were in a serious position: the Genoese had done this, in order to put our galleys and our property into the hands of the Turks, and no ambassador was sent.

Now that we were shut up in their town, the galleys at once began to set up their sails and spread them out, and bring their oars inboard, with the intention of going away without their captain. But the captain, who realised that he was in danger of being imprisoned, was able by dint of

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fair words to persuade the Podesta to release them, and they got out of the town and boarded their galleys quickly; and as soon as they had done this, they began to kedge themselves up to the boom which was across the harbour. When we reached the boom, we could not get past it, because it stretched all the way between the two cities of Constantinople and Pera. But two brave men leaped down on to one of the wooden sections of the boom, and with a couple of axes cut through it and we quickly hauled ourselves outside it, and sailed to a place called the Columns behind Pera, where the Turkish fleet had been anchored. Here in this place we waited until midday, to see if any of our merchants could reach the galleys, but none of them were able to do so, because they had all been captured. So at midday with the help of our Lord God, Aluvixe Diedo, the captain of the galleys from Tana, made sail on his galley, and then the galley of Jeruolemo Morexini and the galley of Trebizond with its vice-master Dolfin Dolfin did the same. This galley of Trebizond had great difficulty in getting its sails up because a hundred and sixty-four of its crew were missing, some of them drowned, some dead in the bombardment or killed in other ways during the fighting, so that they could only just manage to raise their sails. Then the light galley of Cabriel Trivixan set sail, although he himself was still in the city in the hands of the Turks. The galley of Candia with Zacaria Grioni, the knight, as master, was captured. Then behind these galleys there sailed three ships of Candia, under Zuan Venier and Antonio Filamati, "The Hen," and we all sailed safely together, ships and galleys, out through the straits, with a north wind blowing at more than twelve miles an

hour. Had there been a calm or a very light breeze, we would all have been captured. When we set sail for Constantinople, the whole of the Turkis fleet was unarmed and all the captains and crews had gone into the city to sack it. You can be sure that if their fleet had been in action, no a single vessel could have escaped, but the Turks would have had them as prizes of war, because we were shut up inside the boom, but they abandoned their fleet. Fifteen ships stayed inside the harbour, belonging to the Genoese, to the Emperor and to the people of Ancona; also all the Emperor's galleys, numbering five, which had been disarmed, and also there stayed all the other vessels which were in the harbour, and the ships and galleys which could not escape were all captured by the Turks. But apart from these fifteen ships, seven belonging to the Genoese which were by the boom escaped, and one which was off Pera, belonging to Zorzi Doria of Genoa, of about two thousand four hundred botte, escaped with the other seven towards evening.

The fighting lasted from dawn until noon, and while the massacre went on in the city, everyone was killed; but after that time they were all taken prisoner. Our Bailo, Jeruolemo Minoto, had his head cut off by order of the Sultan; and this was the end of the capture of Constantinople, which took place in the year one thousand four hundred and fifty-three, on the twenty-ninth of May, which was a Tuesday.

[The text continues, with Nicolo adding a list of those killed and taken prisoner during the siege.]

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