

The Siege and the Fall of Constantinople in 1453. Historiography, Topography, and Military Studies

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This is a monster of a book. It must be the most detailed assessment of the fall of Constantinople in 1453 that there has ever been. It subjects the scholarly literature devoted to the subject over the last century-and-a-half to a searching scrutiny. It is the work of two authors, who between them have a profound knowledge of the written sources, the bibliography, the topography and the material remains relating to the fall of Constantinople. Marios Philippides has been working on the fall of Constantinople for more than 30 years and has produced a string of distinguished studies on different authors and texts, as well as a series of translations and new editions of texts. Walter K. Hanak, who is a generation older, is a specialist in the history of medieval Russia. They cooperated on an annotated translation of *The Tale of Constantinople* by Nestor-Iskander, which is the main narrative in Russian of the fall of Constantinople.⁽¹⁾ They rescued the text from comparative obscurity and demonstrated that it contained an eyewitness account of the fall of Constantinople, which was worth taking seriously. Their new book is divided into two parts, 'The pen' and 'The sword', which to all intents and purposes are separate books. The first deals with historiographical aspects of the fall of Constantinople and the second with military matters. Far from complementing each other they pull in different directions, which is a reflection of an uncomfortable fact confronting anybody writing about the fall of Constantinople: there are so many sources, yet so few which are of much value when it comes to reconstructing the event.

The first part covers what Agostino Pertusi called 'L'eco nel mondo' and concerns itself with the after-life of the fall of Constantinople rather than the event itself. The second part provides an examination of the fall of Constantinople in purely military terms. This section divides into a detailed investigation of the walls of Constantinople and a careful study of the main features of the siege. It is based on painstaking examination of the sources and the material remains with the aim of providing a partial reconstruction. It rests on a few 'reliable' – the authors' word – sources: Nicolò Barbaro's *Journal of the Siege*, Leonardo of Chios's *Letter to Pope Nicholas V*, various letters of Cardinal Isidore, the histories of Doukas and Khalkokondyles and Kritoboulos's *Life of Mehmed II*. To these must be added Ubertino Puscolo's *Constantinopolis* – a long known but somewhat neglected source, whose full importance the authors bring out, and Tetaldi's *Informations*, of which there is now a reliable text of the French version thanks to Philippides. The second part concentrates on the details of the siege, while the first part looks forward to the 16th century and even to

the 19th century. Since it would have made more sense, certainly in chronological terms, to deal with the siege first, that is where I shall begin.

Vital to any understanding of the course of the siege are the walls themselves. The authors provide a painstaking inspection of the walls, which is backed up by excellent photographs and plans. As always there is much discussion of the St Romanos Gate, which was the key point of the defence in 1453. They maintain its traditional identification with the Topkapi Gate and are wary of the recent discovery of an inscription by Neslihan Asutay, which points to the St Romanos Gate being identical with the Fourth Military Gate.⁽²⁾ Asutay has also put forward strong grounds for believing that from the mid 14th century the imperial residence was no longer the Blakhernai Palace, but was the adjoining palace of the Porphyrogenitos (now known as the Tekfur Saray), which occupies an exposed point at the juncture of the Blakhernai and the Theodosian walls.⁽³⁾ The authors have nothing to say about this and therefore miss its important implications. It is well known that on 6 April 1453 Constantine XI handed over the defence of the imperial palace to the Venetian *bailò*. But, following Asutay this was the Tekfur Saray and not the Blakhernai Palace, which is the traditional (and the authors') assumption. In her favour is the large number of commanders attested for the Blakhernai sector, which would have made the presence of the Venetian *bailò* there more or less superfluous. The emperor's decision to entrust the defence of the imperial palace to the Venetians means that his whereabouts during the siege are mysterious, whence Michel Balard's *bon mot*: 'il est partout et nulle part dans la ville'. His elusiveness supports Balard's conviction that the emperor played little active part in the defence of the city, which he left in the hands of western commanders.⁽⁴⁾ Balard's stylish and perceptive essay does not impress Philippides and Hanak (p. 5, n. 10). However, they fail to challenge his dismissive treatment of Constantine XI. They are apparently unaware that the emperor's role in the defence of the city is a historical problem. Tucked away at the very end of the book in an appendix on the death of Loukas Notaras (p. 599), they note that Ubertino Puscolo talks of the emperor establishing his headquarters in tents set up between the inner and the outer walls, but fail to provide a correct reference. The passage in question (iv. 309–14) makes it quite clear that the emperor commanded the exposed stretch of walls around the St Romanos Gate in conjunction with the Genoese condottiere Giovanni Longo Giustiniani. Far from doing next to nothing, it would seem that the emperor was at the heart of the defence.

On the whole, the book confirms traditional views about the conduct of the defence and offers little new in the way of interpretation. It is not new to suggest that the contribution of artillery to the Ottoman success was largely psychological, though the authors appear to believe that it is. They are hardly breaking new ground with their emphasis on the relative ineffectiveness of the Ottoman artillery. They grudgingly credit Kelly DeVries with anticipating them (p. 552, n. 18), but then criticize him on the grounds that he doesn't know the sources as well as they do and has failed to appreciate Mehmed II's 'elastic' approach to siege warfare. This may seem a minor point, but they have failed to understand his line of argument, to which a lack of intimate knowledge of the sources is irrelevant. DeVries is suggesting that the Ottoman artillery was effective, but not in the ways usually supposed.⁽⁵⁾ He draws attention to passages in Kritoboulos's *Life of Mehmed II*, from which we learn that Mehmed II designed mortars, which were a real threat once set up close to the Golden Horn. DeVries's point is that the large cannon may not have done decisive damage to the land-walls, but the mortars operating in the port area stretched the defence to breaking point. The supervision of these mortars offers a reasonable explanation for Mehmed II's despatch of his cannon-maker Urban to the Golden Horn sector. It is certainly more plausible than the authors' assumption that it was a form of demotion because his great bombard had not achieved the anticipated success against the land-walls (p. 456). DeVries's suggestion that Ottoman artillery was more effective than is usually supposed is in line with recent work, which has pointed to the Ottoman ability to exploit advances in artillery warfare. E. C. Antoche underlines the speed with which the Ottomans created an artillery train.⁽⁶⁾ They had virtually no artillery at the battle in Varna in 1444, but four years later they won a victory over the Hungarians at Kosovo thanks in large measure to their field artillery. It should not be forgotten that this was the battle where Mehmed II, so to speak, won his 'spurs'. It would have alerted him to the value of different kinds of artillery. Mehmed II was a man of great curiosity and intelligence, as becomes immediately apparent from a perusal of his one schoolbook to survive. It makes more plausible Kritoboulos's information about the

conqueror's contribution to the development of artillery at the time of the siege.

Philippides and Hanak are undoubtedly correct that the defenders had until the very end the better of the struggle. They saw off the artillery attack on the land-walls; they dealt with the mining of the walls; they burnt the great siege tower. It all came down to the last assault on the evening of 28 May 1453. The defenders drove off two waves of attack, but were unable to resist the final onslaught by the Janissaries, even if, as always, it was a close run thing. In the end, the decisive moment was the departure from the field of battle of the mortally wounded *condottiere* Giustiniani. But it has usually been assumed that it was only decisive because the Turks had already penetrated the outer-wall through a postern gate known as the Kerkoporta. Philippides and Hanak devote an appendix to this (pp. 619–23), but avoid coming to any conclusions. The problem is that Doukas is the only historian of the siege, who retails this episode. There can be no corroboration. There are also problems of identification of the gate in question. Doukas places it at the lower end of the imperial palace, which following Asutay is likely to have been the Tekfur Saray rather than the Blakhernai. In which case it was situated at one of the weak points of the defences, where the Blakhernai and Theodosian walls met. On this reading the Kerkoporta allowed access to the area between the inner and outer lines of the Theodosian walls. This was critical because the defenders only held the outer walls. Philippides and Hanak have their doubts about Doukas's evidence, because he was not an eyewitness, but against this he is known to have interviewed some of the janissaries, who were among the first to get into the city. The balance of probability suggests that Doukas's information is correct. It is difficult otherwise to explain the suddenness of the defence's collapse.

If by and large 'The sword' leaves the traditional picture intact, its value is that it has subjected it to an intense scrutiny. At another level, it offers a clear and well-organised narrative of the defence of the city. 'The pen' is more diffuse, but this is a reflection of the task in hand, which is to follow the historiography and mythology of the fall of Constantinople from the 15th to the 19th centuries. There is little emphasis on eyewitness accounts and other contemporary sources beyond tabulating them very efficiently. The real focus of attention is on the development of a historiographical tradition. In the West interest in the fall of Constantinople soon faltered and shifted to the Ottomans themselves. It was different for the Greeks under Ottoman rule, for whom the fall of Constantinople still cast a shadow over their sense of identity in the late 16th century. This was a comparatively neglected topic, when Philippides began working on it some 30 years ago. He now brings his work to a very satisfying conclusion in two chapters: the first deals with the chronicle of the last centuries of Byzantium usually referred to as the Pseudo-Sphrantzes, while the second breaks new ground by examining the myths, legends, and tales, which grew up around the fall of Constantinople. It is a reminder of the different levels at which memory works. The chronicle of the Pseudo-Sphrantzes was a work of the late 16th century by a well-known forger, Makarios Melissourgos, one time bishop of Monemvasia. Despite the high regard he accords it Philippides demonstrates beyond doubt that the section devoted to the siege and fall of Constantinople has no independent value, but derives almost entirely from Leonardo of Chios. Any additional details stem from Melissourgos's own agenda of family aggrandisement. It is ironic that we still have to rely very largely on the original edition of 1578 for Leonardo of Chios's eyewitness account of the fall of Constantinople despite its enormous importance for the later development of the historiography of the event, which Philippides has traced so assiduously over the years.

The chapter on myths, legends and tales is subtitled 'A folk history'. It is a topic, which really deserves a book to itself. The authors have opted for a selective approach. So, they include the humanist interpretation of the fall of Constantinople, which was predicated on the parallels with the fall of Troy. These allowed the introduction of quite unhistorical elements, such as the rape of a virgin on the altar of St Sophia by the conqueror in revenge for the Trojan virgin raped at the time of the fall of Troy. Against this, the *Visions of Daniel* are left out, despite being one of the key texts used to predict *post eventum* the fall of Constantinople. This means that Agostino Pertusi's posthumous work *Fine di Bisanzio e fine del mondo* – an important contribution to the subject – is not even cited in the vast bibliography.⁽⁷⁾ There is a connection, which is missed, in the shape of the aspiring humanist Ubertino Puscolo, who has left one of the most interesting eyewitness accounts of the fall of Constantinople in his poem *Constantinopolis*. He recounts his experience

of the fall of Constantinople in a surprisingly down to earth fashion. He sought explanation for the terrible outcome not in the classical past but, in the same way as so many others, in portents and prophecies. One of the first things that he did when he was released from captivity in 1454 was to translate into Latin a Greek version of the *Visions of Daniel*. Philippides and Hanak single out a quite different topic: the traditions that grew up about the death of the last Byzantine emperor and the site of his tomb. Again they are selective. They only consider in passing the well-known legend of the 'Marble Emperor' entombed at the Golden Gate. They concentrate instead on the traditions, which surfaced in the early 19th century, to the effect that the burial place of the last Byzantine emperor was either at an inn on Vefa Meydan or at Gul Camii. While there is a fairly obvious connection to be made between the Gul Camii and the death of the last Byzantine emperor, this is not the case with the Vefa Meydan. Was it, the authors wonder, perhaps the place of execution of the many Byzantine aristocrats put to death after the Ottoman triumph on Mehmed II's orders? It has been usual to identify the Gul Camii with the church of St Theodosia, whose feast-day falls on the fateful 29 May, whence the connection to the death of the emperor. Philippides and Hanak give good reasons for supposing that this traditional identification should stand. They offer a fascinating glimpse of the Greek community of Istanbul in the early 19th century, but fail to explain why it was at this point that it became interested in traditions about the burial place of the last Byzantine emperor? I was surprised that nothing was made of the sword of the last Byzantine emperor, which became a *cause célèbre* in the late 19th century. In 1886 on the coming of age of Prince Constantine, the heir-apparent to the throne of the kingdom of the Hellenes, the Greek community of Istanbul presented him with a sword, on the understanding that it had belonged to his namesake, the last Byzantine emperor. There is a political agenda here, which would have been well worth exploring.

These traditions about the last Byzantine emperor alerted members of the expatriate communities of mid to late 19th-century Istanbul to the importance of the fall of Constantinople in 1453. The foundations of the modern historiography of the event go back to the work of a small group of cosmopolitan scholars resident in Istanbul, who interested themselves in the antiquities and history of Byzantine Constantinople, men, such as the Belgian Philipp Anton Déthier, the German A. K. Mordtmann and his son J. H. Mordtmann, the English Sir Edwin Pears, the Greek, but American-educated A. G. Paspates and the American Alexander Van Millingen, whose *Byzantine Constantinople*, originally published in 1899, was incidentally republished last year in paperback by Cambridge University Press. Philippides and Hanak acknowledge their achievement, but are more interested in revealing its limitations. As they say, 'if this [i.e. our] study had been compiled at the end of the nineteenth century or in the course of the twentieth, our understanding of the siege of 1453 would have been on a more solid foundation.' (p. xvii) There is no false modesty here about standing on the shoulders of giants! The authors are rightly concerned that too often studies of the fall of Constantinople have been a matter of recycling the work of the pioneers, despite its faults. They believe that the subject needs to be revitalized by looking at the evidence afresh and by scrutinizing uncritical restatement of accepted ideas and conclusions. They ignore recent popular work on the fall of Constantinople. The two scholars who they have in their sights are Sir Steven Runciman (8) and Agostino Pertusi.(9) In their different ways both men were significant figures in the world of scholarship of their day. They would never have thought of themselves as giants, but they cast their shadow over this book, even if Philippides and Hanak offer only the most grudging recognition of their contribution to the study of the fall of Constantinople. Runciman is dismissed as a popular or a very popular historian. In the authors' opinion his approach has severe limitations, 'and his narrative does not differ substantially in outlook or interpretations from the earlier studies of numerous worthy predecessors' (p. xvi). To do Runciman justice he understood this only too well. Over the siege he did not think that there was a great deal he could add to Sir Edwin Pears's study of the fall of Constantinople. He even wondered whether the story of 1453 merited another book. He also realised that the study of events was out of fashion. Even when he was writing in the 1960s few historians believed that events had any significant bearing on the shaping of history. Runciman justified his study of the fall of Constantinople on quite different grounds. He was writing as 'a tribute to the unquenchable vitality of the Greek spirit', in which 'the Greek people is the tragic hero'. This is a literary rather than strictly speaking an historical approach to the subject. At least, Runciman recognised the epistemological problems involved in writing about an event, which is more than can be said for Philippides

and Hanak. His choice of a literary theme not only gives unity to his book, but it also forces the reader to think of the meaning of an event in different, not strictly speaking historical, terms. Pertusi understood equally well the difficulties presented by the study of an event. He sought to counter the subjectivity implicit in any assessment of the significance of an event by assembling an anthology of texts. He supported this with a detailed chronology, a brief evaluation of the authors selected, and a commentary on the individual texts. This approach the authors of the book under review find wanting on the grounds that ‘in certain cases important information was omitted for inexplicable reasons’. It is indeed true that important information has been omitted, but scarcely for inexplicable reasons. It was just that Pertusi’s publishers were less generous to him in terms of space than Ashgate has been to Philippides and Hanak. Here a word of thanks is in order to Ashgate and before it Variorum for their support of Byzantine studies. On a very rough reckoning about one-sixth of an enormously long book is taken up by extracts from the sources followed by translation into English. On occasion the same extracts are repeated within a few pages. A criticism might be that at times this methodology takes over the book. The detailed rehearsal of the sources has of course its value and often reveals that others have not been as scrupulous as Philippides and Hanak in their weighing of the evidence. But it makes for a nose-to-the-grindstone piece of work, which often misses or is simply not interested in the larger picture.

Notes

1. Nestor-Iskander, *The Tale of Constantinople (Of its Origin and Capture by the Turks in the Year 1453 (From the early Sixteenth-Century Manuscript of the Troitse-Sergieva Lavra, No.773) (New Rochelle, NY, 1998).*[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. N. Asutay, ‘Die Entdeckung des Romanos-Tores an den Landmauern von Konstantinopel’, *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, 96 (2003), 1–4.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. N. Asutay-Effenberger, *Die Landmauer von Konstantinopel-Istanbul. Historisch-topographische und baugeschichtliche Untersuchungen* (Berlin/New York, 2007), 134–42.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. M. Balard, ‘Constantinople vue par les témoins du siège de 1453’, in *Constantinople and its Hinterland*, ed. C. Mango and G. Dagron (Aldershot, 1995), 169–77.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. K. DeVries, ‘Gunpowder Weapons at the Siege of Constantinople, 1453’, in *War and Society in the Eastern Mediterranean, 7th–15th Centuries*, ed. Y. Lev (Leiden/New York/Cologne, 1997), 343–62.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. E. C. Antoche, ‘Du *tabur* de Jan Žižka et Jean Hunyadi au *tâbur çengi* des armées ottomanes’, *Turcica*, 36 (2004), 91–124.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. A. Pertusi, *Fine di Bisanzio e fine del mondo. Significato e ruolo storico delle profezie sulla caduta di Costantinopoli in Oriente e in Occidente* (Rome, 1988).[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. S. Runciman, *The Fall of Constantinople 1453* (Cambridge, 1965).[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. A. Pertusi, *La Caduta di Costantinopoli* (2 vols., Milan, 1976); A. Pertusi, *Testi inediti e poco noti sulla Caduta di Costantinopoli* (Bologna, 1983).[Back to \(9\)](#)

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