

a battle and the very face of history. Mahomet uttered a cry of triumph. Victory at last was in his grasp! He leapt forward from the moat and shouted to his Janissaries. 'The city is ours! It is ours already! See, there is no one left to defend it! Fear not! Follow me! The city is ours!' The reply was a frenzied howling, and a furious wave struck the wall. It flowed over the emergency wall and the debris of the ramparts.

Now the Byzantines fled in disorder. Some were flung into the moat and killed, others were chased and cut down from behind. There was nothing to stop the incoming tide. The last gates were swept down and a turbulent wave, cascading and roaring, spilled over the city. Yes, this was the end. On this May 29, 1453, fell the empire which had endured for more than a thousand years. And on this day Christianity disappeared from the Eastern sky. What can the thoughts of the last Basileus have been? Why should he live? He dismounted and slowly divested himself of the Imperial insignia, retaining of it only the red campagia—those famous boots ornamented with two-headed eagles—and plunged into the hand to hand fighting. He thrust to right and to left, and then suddenly vanished. Much later they found his body and Mahomet caused it to be decapitated. Then for many months to come, accompanied by forty captive young men and forty captive virgins, it was displayed throughout Asia to announce the triumph of the Crescent to the remotest corners.

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And this is how this precious city was destroyed. . . .

The first picture which history offers us of this Dantesque hell is one of breathtaking violence. This was the feast day of St Theodosia. Slowly a procession of women, children and old men moved out of the rose-covered church dedicated to her. Everyone was wearing his or her best clothes and white-bearded priests held on high the comforting images of Christ and his gentle Mother, the Theotokos. Suddenly there burst on the scene a disordered mass of shouting monsters, their faces streaked with sweat, half-naked and blood-bespattered. What followed may be imagined. The procession broke up, but they

were caught almost immediately and a few minutes later thousands of hacked and disembowelled and decapitated bodies reddened the slabs and the gutters.

Such scenes were to be seen everywhere. Drunk with slaughter, the Turks massacred throughout the morning. Nothing, and certainly not pity, stayed their hands. Like madmen the unhappy Christians ran about the streets, shouting, weeping, pleading, until lance, scimitar or knife stretched them on the pavement in their blood. Inside the houses women were dragged by the hair to windows and pushed through, old men were cut down, children were stabbed with pikes under the very beds where they hid.

When the orgy of killing had spent itself, rape took its place. Here is an extract from Critobulus, the Christian renegade who had entered the Sultan's service.

'Nothing will ever equal the horror of this harrowing and terrible spectacle. People frightened by the shouting ran out of their houses and were cut down by the sword before they knew what was happening. And some were massacred in their houses where they tried to hide, and some in churches where they sought refuge. The enraged Turkish soldiers . . . gave no quarter. When they had massacred and there was no longer any resistance they were intent on pillage and roamed through the town stealing, disrobing, pillaging, killing, raping, taking captive men, women, children, old men, young men, monks, priests, people of all sorts and conditions . . . there were virgins who awoke from troubled sleep to find those brigands standing over them with bloody hands and faces full of abject fury. This medley of all nations, these frantic brutes stormed into their houses, seized them, dragged them, tore them, forced them, dishonoured them, raped them at the crossroads and made them submit to the most terrible outrages. It is even said that at the mere sight of those savages many girls were so stupefied that they almost gave up the ghost. Old men of venerable appearance were dragged by their white hair and piteously beaten, and beautiful children of noble family were carried off. Priests were led into captivity in batches as well as reverend virgins, hermits and recluses who were dedicated to God alone and lived only for

Him to whom they sacrificed themselves, who were dragged from their cells and others from the churches in which they had sought refuge, in spite of their weeping and sobs and their emaciated cheeks, to be made objects of scorn before being struck down. Tender children were brutally snatched from their mothers' breasts and girls were pitilessly given up to strange and horrible unions and a thousand other terrible things happened.'

With senses satisfied the Turks gave themselves up to pillage. Shops, houses, palaces, churches—nothing was spared. Let us turn again to Critobulus.

'Temples were desecrated, ransacked and pillaged . . . sacred objects were scornfully flung aside, the holy icons and the holy vessels were desecrated. Ornaments were burned, broken in pieces or simply thrown into the streets. Saints' shrines were brutally violated in order to get out the remains which were then thrown to the wind. Chalices and cups for the celebration of the mass were set aside for their orgies or broken or melted down or sold. Priests' garments embroidered with gold and set with pearls and gems were sold to the highest bidder and thrown into the fire to extract the gold. Immense numbers of sacred and profane books were flung on to the fire or torn up and trampled underfoot. However, the majority were sold at derisory prices, for a few pence. Saints' altars, torn from their foundations were overturned. All the most holy hiding places were violated and broken in order to get out the holy treasures which they contained.'

Amongst all these outrages the profanation of Saint Sophia stood out. In the great church an immense crowd was assembled, praying despairingly. The famous bronze doors had been closed, and full of anguish all awaited the imminent arrival of the conquerors. Suddenly violent blows shook and broke down the doors, and a tide of blood-covered brutes swept into the holy place. To make room for themselves they began by using the pike and scimitar a little; but they were in the grip of covetousness, not sadism. Here, they said to themselves as they looked

about, fortune awaits us. In an instant, all who were young, good-looking and healthy were stripped, despoiled and herded. High-born women, young and gentle girls of noble family, now naked under their long hair, fell thus into slavery. Their masters bound them with whatever was at hand: sashes, belts, kerchiefs, stoles, tent ropes, camel and horse reins. With blows and kicks they were herded outside into long columns, to be led to a shameful fate and to all the extremities of the Islamic world.

Then came the turn of the Church where generations of the pious had added to the store of sacred treasures. There were vases of gold and silver studded with pearls and precious stones, sacerdotal garments of prodigious richness, reliquaries, icons and luminaries. All were broken open, pillaged and destroyed. To amuse their comrades some capered about in priests' robes, holding up a crucifix surmounted by a turban. The famous relics which had protected the town—the bodies of the most illustrious martyrs, the most glorious champions of orthodoxy, and the most celebrated icons—were wrenched from their settings of precious metal and thrown out amongst the dead bodies and wandering dogs. In all history only the sack of Jerusalem can compare with this! To make their attitude quite clear the Turks stabled their camels there and installed their public women; and the Church of the Holy Wisdom became a stable and a brothel.

The orthodox still recount a legend which has come down to them from this tragic time. At the very moment that the great church was attacked the wall behind the altar opened and the priest who was officiating disappeared into it, bearing the holy chalice, and the wall closed up again. When at last an orthodox ruler returns to Constantinople, that priest will emerge from the wall and complete the mass which was so tragically interrupted many centuries ago.

As for the Sultan, he was sensual rather than acquisitive, and more interested in people than in goods. Phrantzes, the faithful servant of the Basileus, has recounted the fate of his young and good-looking family. His three daughters were consigned to the Imperial harem, even the youngest, a girl of fourteen who died there in despair. His only son, John, a fifteen-year-old boy, was killed by the Sultan himself for having repelled his advances. The Basileus was survived by his brother, the Grand Duke

Lukas Notaras, the second personage of the Empire and a man of great intelligence and ability. At first the Sultan covered him with honours and discussed with him the possibility of his becoming governor of the town, with responsibility for clearing up and repopulation. One night, having been told of the graces of Notaras' youngest son, he sent a eunuch to fetch him. When Notaras told the Sultan that his religion did not permit him to consent to so ignominious a proposal, the Sultan was seized with anger and caused both the boy and his brother and father to be brought before him. Then he summoned the executioner. Notaras asked to be put to death last in order, says Critobulus, 'that his children perhaps fearing death, might not be tempted to renounce their faith to purchase their lives'. Standing there pale-faced, but without lowering his eyes, Notaras saw his two sons decapitated. He prayed and in his turn bowed his head to the blade. As for the Sultan, it pleased him to stare for some time at the faces of his three victims.

Critobulus has assessed the impact on Byzantium of the events of those few days in spring 1453.

'Constantinople seemed to have been visited by a hurricane or to have been burnt in some fire. It became suddenly silent. . . . The Turkish sailors were extremely active in bringing about this destruction for they upset, undermined and turned upside down everything more thoroughly than the Persian Datis at Eritrea. They broke temples, chapels, ancient shrines, tombs, crypts, vaults and all the most secret hiding places. They examined everything. They pulled everybody and everything out of their hiding places. . . . The whole army, both of land and sea, flooded through the town from break of day till night-fall, pillaging and wrecking and carrying booty back to camp and ship. Nevertheless there were some like hawks who took hold of things, crept away stealthily and returned straight home. In this manner was the whole city emptied and depopulated and destroyed as though by a fire and changed into a tomb. Seeing it thus one would have found it hard to believe that it ever contained men's homes, wealth, abundance or any goods or ornaments, and that in a city which had been so brilliant and great. Now there were only deserted dwellings, which by their tomb-

like appearance instilled terror in the minds of those who contemplated them.

The same author tells an interesting story about the Sultan. 'When he saw the ravages, the destruction and the deserted houses and all that had perished and become ruins, then a great sadness took possession of him and he repented the pillage and all the destruction. Tears came to his eyes and sobbing he expressed his sadness. "What a town this was! And we have allowed it to be destroyed!" His soul was full of sorrow. And in truth it was natural, so much did the horror of the situation exceed all limits.'

It was, we said at the beginning of this chapter, over a simple question of winds that Byzantium fell. The Christian fleet bearing reinforcements had been off Chios for a month, waiting for a wind. The little brigantine had passed nearby without seeing it. During a whole month it would have sufficed if the weather had been favourable for just one day; then would the Turks have raised the siege and hastily withdrawn. One windy day—on such things hang the fate of empires and the course of history.