

The Good Word

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THE OTTOMAN SIDE: THE CANNONS OF MEHMED II

BY ROGER CROWLEY (HISTORIAN)

Early in 1452, a Hungarian cannon founder by the name of Orban [also known as “Urban”] arrived in Constantinople, seeking his fortune at the imperial court. One of a growing band of technical mercenaries who plied their trade across the Balkans, he offered Emperor Constantine XI one of the most highly prized skills of the age: the ability to cast large bronze guns.

For Constantine and the Christian empire of Byzantium that he ruled, these were dark days. For 150 years the Byzantine frontier had been crumbling before the advance of the Ottoman Turks. By the time Constantine assumed the throne in 1449, his impoverished kingdom had shrunk to little more than the footprint of the city, surrounded on all sides by Ottoman land. The new sultan, Mehmed II—young, ambitious and hungry for conquest—was making ominous military preparations in his European capital, Edirne, 140 miles to the west. It was clear he was intent on capturing the prize that had eluded previous Ottoman rulers: Constantinople.

Constantine was extremely interested in Orban’s offer and authorized a small stipend to detain him in the city. But Constantine had few funds available for the construction of new weapons. Bronze cannons were ruinously expensive, well beyond the means of the cash-strapped emperor. Orban’s tiny allowance was not even paid regularly, and as the year wore on, the master craftsman became destitute. So later that same year he decided to try his luck elsewhere. He made his way to Edirne to seek an audience with the young sultan.

At the time, Mehmed was racked by indecision over Constantinople. The city was the ultimate prize; it would provide a fitting capital for the Ottoman Empire, and its capture was the subject of ancient Muslim prophecies, attributed to Muhammad himself, that predicted great honor for its eventual conqueror. However, Constantinople had repulsed repeated


Muslim assaults from the 7th century onward. Its triangular site made it all but impregnable: Two sides were surrounded by sea, and the third landward side was commanded by the great *Walls of Theodosius*, a defensive line four miles long, the greatest bastion in the medieval world. In a thousand years the city had been besieged some 23 times, but no army had found a way to crack open those land walls.

Accordingly, Orban’s arrival at Edirne must have seemed providential. The sultan welcomed the master founder and questioned him closely. Mehmed asked if he could cast a cannon to project a stone ball large enough to smash the walls at Constantinople. Orban’s reply was emphatic: “I can cast a cannon of bronze with the capacity of the stone you want. I have examined the walls of the city in great detail. I can shatter to dust not only these walls with the stones from my gun, but the very walls of Babylon itself.” Mehmed ordered him to make the gun.

During the autumn of 1452, Orban set to work at Edirne, casting one of the largest cannons ever built, while Mehmed stockpiled substantial quantities of materials for guns and gunpowder: copper and tin, saltpeter, sulfur and charcoal. Workers excavated an enormous casting pit and melted scrap bronze in the brick-lined furnaces, superheating it with bellows and pouring it into the mold.

What finally emerged from Orban’s foundry once the molds had been knocked off was “a horrifying and extraordinary monster.” It was 27 feet long. The barrel, walled with 8 inches of solid bronze to absorb the force





of the blast, had a diameter of 30 inches, enough for a man to enter on his hands and knees, and designed to accommodate a stone shot weighing something over half a ton. In January 1453, Mehmed ordered a test firing of the gun outside his royal palace. The mighty *bombard*¹ was hauled into position near the gate and primed with powder. Laborers lugged a giant stone ball to the mouth of the barrel and rolled it back to sit snugly against the gunpowder chamber. A lighted taper was put to the touchhole. With a shattering roar and a cloud of smoke, the mighty projectile hurled across the countryside for a mile before burying itself six feet into the soft earth.

Mehmed now addressed the challenge of transporting the gun the 140 miles to Constantinople. Two hundred men and 60 oxen were detailed for the task. The immense barrel was loaded onto several wagons chained together and yoked to the ox teams. The great gun rumbled toward the city at a speed of two and a half miles a day, while another team of engineers worked ahead, leveling roads and building wooden bridges over rivers and gullies. Orban's foundry continued to turn out barrels of different sizes; none was as large as the first supergun, though some measured more than 14 feet.

It took six weeks for the guns to lurch and jolt their way to Constantinople. By the time they arrived, in early April, Mehmed's army—a huge force of 80,000 men—was dug in along the length of the land walls. *Sappers*² had cut down orchards and vineyards outside the Walls of Theodosius to provide a clear field of fire. Others dug a ditch the length of the walls and 250 yards from them, with an earth rampart to shield the guns. Within the city walls, a mere 8,000 men awaited the inevitable assault.

Mehmed grouped the cannons into 14 or 15 batteries along the walls at key vulnerable points. Orban's supergun, which the Greeks called the *Basilica cannon*—“the royal gun”—was positioned in front of the sultan's tent so he could critically appraise its performance. Each large cannon was supported by a cluster of smaller ones in a battery [which] the Ottoman gunners named “the bear with its cubs.” They could fire stone balls ranging from 200 pounds up to a colossal 1,500 pounds, in the case of Orban's monster gun. Though eyewitnesses spoke of “innumerable machines,” Mehmed probably had about 69 cannons, a huge artillery force by the standards of the day. They were augmented by more traditional technologies for

hurling stones, such as the *trebuchet*. The latter had been effective in the Muslim capture of crusader castles 300 years earlier, but now it looked like a device from another age.

Installing and readying the cannons was a laborious process. Workers had to erect a massive block-and-tackle system to lower the barrels into position on a sloping wooden platform. Shielding the cannons from enemy fire were a wooden palisade and a hinged door that could be opened at the moment of firing.

The logistical support for this operation was immense. Ships transported loads of black stone balls mined and shaped on the north coast of the Black Sea. The cannons also required substantial quantities of saltpeter. Foundries who worked with Orban at Edirne doubled as gun crews, positioning, loading and firing the cannons—even repairing them on site.

Preparing the big cannon to fire required time and attention to detail. Crews would load gunpowder, backed by a wooden or sheepskin wad pounded tight into the barrel. Next they manhandled a stone ball to the muzzle and eased it down the barrel. Each ball was designed to be a good fit, though an exact caliber match was often elusive. Crews set their aim by “certain techniques and calculations” about the target—i.e., trial and error—and adjusted the angle of fire by chocking the platform with wooden wedges. Great timber beams weighted down with stones acted as shock absorbers. Crews then poured priming powder into the touchhole.

On April 12, 1453, lighted tapers were put to the touchholes of the sultan's guns along a four-mile sector of the front line, and the world's first concerted artillery barrage exploded to life.


If there is any single moment in the history of warfare at which an authentic sense of awe at the exponential power of gunpowder could be palpably felt, it is here in the accounts of those firing these great guns in 1453. The taper ignited the powder:

And when it had caught fire, faster than you can say it, there was first a terrifying roar and a violent shaking of the ground beneath and for a great distance around, and a din such as has never been heard. Then, with a monstrous thundering and an awful explosion and a flame that illuminated everything round about and scorched it, the wooden wad was forced out by the hot blast of dry air and propelled the stone ball powerfully out. Projected with incredible force and power, the stone struck the wall, which it immediately shook and demolished, and it was itself shattered into many fragments, and the pieces were hurled everywhere, dealing death to those standing nearby.

When the huge stone balls struck the walls at an

1. A cannon of the earliest type, which originally fired a stone ball.

2. A soldier responsible for tasks such as building and repairing roads and bridges, laying and clearing mines, etc.



advantageous spot, the effects were devastating. “Sometimes it destroyed a complete portion of wall,” an eyewitness reported, “sometimes half a portion, sometimes a greater or smaller part of a tower, or a turret, or a parapet, and nowhere was the wall strong enough or sturdy enough or thick enough to withstand it, or to hold out totally against such a force or the velocity of the stone ball.” It must have seemed to the defenders that the whole history of siege warfare was unraveling in front of their eyes. The Walls of Theodosius, the product of two millennia of defensive evolution, crumbled wherever it was hit. The defenders were amazed and horrified by what they saw.

Balls from the superguns that cleared the walls traveled up to a mile into the heart of the city, shattering with devastating force against houses or churches, mowing down civilians or burying themselves in orchards and fields within the walls. According to eyewitnesses, the ground was shaken for two miles around, and even the galleys tied up in the harbors felt the explosions through their wooden hulls.

The psychological effects of the artillery bombardment on the defenders were even more severe than its material consequences. The noise and vibration of the massed guns, the clouds of smoke, the shattering impact of stone on stone dismayed seasoned defenders. To the civilian population, it seemed a glimpse of the coming apocalypse. It sounded, according to one Ottoman chronicler, “like the awful resurrection blast.” People ran out of their houses, beating their chests and crossing themselves. Women fainted in the streets. Churches were thronged with people voicing petitions and prayers.

The defenders tried different methods to mitigate the shock of the stone balls. Some poured a mortar of chalk and brick dust down the walls’ outer face as a hardened coating; others padded the walls with suspended bales of wool, leather sheets and even precious tapestries. These measures made little difference. The defenders also tried to knock out the big guns with their own few cannons, but they were short of saltpeter, and the palisades effectively screened the Ottoman cannons. Worse, the walls and towers proved unsuitable as gun platforms—neither wide enough to accommodate the recoil nor strong enough to withstand the vibrations, which “shook the walls, and did more damage to them than to the enemy.” Their largest cannon soon exploded, enraging the harassed defenders so much that they threatened to put the gun master to death for being in the pay of the sultan. Regardless, it was clear that in this new age of warfare, the Walls of Theodosius were inadequate.

Mehmed’s strategy was attritional—and impatient. He decided to breach the walls with artillery fire and launch unpredictable skirmishes to wear down the defenders prior to a final attack. “The assault continued night and day, with no relief from the clashes and explosions, crashing of stones and cannonballs on the walls,” reported a defender, “for the sultan hoped in this way to take the city easily, since we were few against many, by pounding us to death and exhaustion, and so he allowed us no rest from attack.”

Managing the great cannon remained difficult work. Loading and aiming were such laborious operations that the Basilica could only be fired seven times a day. The guns could be unpredictable and deadly to their teams. In the spring rain, they proved hard to keep in position, recoiling with the slam of a charging rhino and frequently slipping from their cradles into the mud. The possibility of being crushed to death was only exceeded by the risk of being blown to pieces by the shrapnel of disintegrating gun barrels. The Basilica quickly became a cause for concern to Orban; casting on this scale was extremely demanding, and the intense heat of the explosions started to exploit hairline fractures in the impure metal. After each shot, crews soaked the barrel in warm oil to prevent cold air from penetrating and enlarging the fissures.

Their stopgap measure failed. The Basilica soon “cracked as it was being fired and split into many pieces, killing and wounding many nearby.” Strengthened with iron hoops and pressed back into service, it soon cracked again, to Mehmed’s intense anger. The supergun simply exceeded the tolerances of contemporary metallurgy.

In the end, it didn’t matter. Though the supergun inflicted great psychological trauma, the slightly smaller yet still formidable bombards would do the real damage.

In the early days of the bombardment, a deputation of Hungarians visited the sultan’s camp. One observed the firing of the great cannons with interest. Watching a shot strike the walls at a certain point, he laughed to himself as the gunners aimed a second shot at the same point. He advised them to aim their second shot “about 30 to 36 feet from the first shot, but at the same height” and to position a third shot between the two “so that the shots form a triangular shape. Then you will see that portion of wall collapse.” Soon the “bear and cubs” were working as coordinated teams. Smaller guns would make the two outer hits, then one of Orban’s great guns would complete the triangle in the now weakened central section, “the shot being carried by such devilish force and irresistible impetus that it



caused irreparable damage.”

The bombardment continued unabated for six days. Despite aiming difficulties and a slow rate of fire, gunners managed to launch about 120 shots a day at the city, concentrating their heaviest fire on the central section of wall. Inexorably, the walls began to crumble. Within the week a section of the outer wall had fallen, as had two towers and a turret on the inner wall.

However, after their initial terror at the bombardment, the defenders had regained heart and now worked unceasingly to repair the damage. They devised an effective ad hoc solution to shore up the outer wall, constructing a makeshift replacement of stakes reinforced with any material that came to hand, including stones, timber, brushwood, bushes and large quantities of earth. The defenders placed barrels full of soil at regular intervals to create firing positions that would absorb Ottoman arrows and bullets. At dusk men and women came up from the city to work all night, carrying timber, stones and earth to rebuild smashed defenses. The resulting earthworks provided a surprisingly effective counter to the devastating impact of the stone balls. Like stones thrown into mud, the cannonballs were smothered, their force neutralized.

As their own artillery was poorly situated for firing heavy balls, the defenders reinvented the pieces as huge shotguns, packing each cannon with five or 10 lead balls the size of walnuts. Fired at close range, the effect was appalling:

[They had] immense power in penetrating and perforating, so that if one hit a soldier in armor, it went straight through both his shield and body, then through another behind who was in the line of fire, and then another, until the force of the powder was dissipated. With one shot, two or three men could be killed at the same time.

Hit by this withering fire, the Ottomans suffered terrible casualties. But to Mehmed, men were a cheap and expendable resource.

On April 18, the sultan judged that his gunners had punched enough holes in the walls to launch a major assault. It failed, with a huge loss of life, but there was no respite; his big guns went on firing. Cannons had been used in siege warfare before, but what was unprecedented about Mehmed's bombardment was its intensity and duration. No other army in the world possessed the materials required to mount a continuous artillery bombardment on this scale. The guns blasted away day and night, and chunks of wall continued to collapse.

For the defenders, the unceasing cycles of bombardment, attack and repair began to blur. Like

later diaries of trench warfare, the chroniclers' accounts become repetitive and monotonous. “On the 11th of May,” recorded a defender, “nothing happened either by land or at sea except a considerable bombardment of the walls from the landward side ... On the 13th of May, there came some Turks to the walls skirmishing, but nothing significant happened during the whole day and night, except for continuous bombardment of the unfortunate walls.” This pattern gradually drained the defenders of energy and morale. By May 28, the guns had been firing continuously for 47 days, expending 55,000 pounds of gunpowder and delivering an estimated 5,000 shots. Gunners had blasted nine substantial holes in the outer wall, only to be replaced piecemeal by the earth stockade. Both sides were exhausted.

Mehmed knew the time had come: On May 29, 1453, he ordered a climactic full-scale assault. At 1:30 in the morning, to the beating of drums and clashing of cymbals, the Ottoman army rolled forward along the whole four-mile sector. Behind them the cannons put up a withering fire. Volleys of stone shot sprayed the walls, peppering the defenders and felling Ottoman troops from behind. The extraordinary noise of the battle was so deafening that, according to one defender, “the very air seemed to split apart....It seemed like something from another world.”

After several hours of confused fighting, one of the big cannons landed a direct hit on the stockade and opened a hole. Dust and cannon smoke obscured the front line, but Ottoman troops moved quickly into the breach ... ³



THE ORTHODOX SIDE: THE FALL OF CONSTANTINOPLE



By Sir Steven Runciman (Historian)

But on the 24 May the moon would be at the full; and under the waning moon peril would come. On the night of the full moon there was an eclipse and three hours of darkness. It was probably on the following day, when the citizens all knew of the hopeless message brought by the brigantine, and when the eclipse had lowered their spirits still deeper, that a last appeal was made to the Mother of God. Her holiest icon⁴ was carried on the shoulders of the faithful round the streets of the city, and everyone who could be spared from the

3. Roger Crowley, *The Guns of Constantinople*, *Military History*, Sep. 2007, <http://www.historynet.com/the-guns-of-constantinople.htm>

4. *Our Lady of Blachernae* Παναγία η Βλαχερνίτισσα, a 7th century encaustic icon made of wax and the ashes of 6th century martyrs deemed responsible for the protection of Constantinople in AD 626 from the Persians, Avars, and Scythians, in AD 670 from the Hagarenes (Muslims), as well as several other would-be marauders.

walls joined in the procession. As it moved slowly and solemnly the icon suddenly slipped off the platform on which it was borne. When men rushed to raise it it seemed as though it were made of lead; only the greatest effort could replace it. Then, as the procession wound on, a thunder-storm burst on the city. It was almost impossible to stand up against the hail, and the rain came down in such torrents that whole streets were flooded and children nearly swept away. The procession had to be abandoned. Next day, as if such omens had not been enough, the whole city was blotted out by a thick fog, a phenomenon unknown in those lands in the month of May. The Divine Presence was veiling itself in cloud, to conceal its departure from the city. That night, when the fog had lifted, it was noticed that a strange light played about the dome of the great Church of Holy Wisdom. It was seen from the Turkish camp as well as by the citizens; and the Turks, too, were disquieted. The Sultan himself had to be reassured by his wise men who interpreted the sign as showing that the light of the "True Faith" would soon illumine the sacred building. For the Greeks and their Italian allies there was no such comforting interpretation ...

Now once again the Emperor's ministers went to him to beg him to escape while still it might be possible and organize the defense of Christendom from some safer spot where he might find support. He was so weary that while they talked to him he fainted. When he revived he told them once more that he could not desert his people; he would die with them ...




MAP OF ANCIENT CONSTANTINOPLE SHOWING ITS LAND AND SEA WALLS MEHMED'S ARMY ATTACKED FROM THE WEST (TOP OF MAP). HIS NAVY FAILED TO BREACH CONSTANTINOPLE'S SEA DEFENSES.

On this Monday, [May 28] with the knowledge that the crisis was upon them, the soldiers and citizens forgot their quarrels. While the men at the walls worked on to repair the shattered defenses a great procession was formed. In contrast to the silence in the Turkish camp, in the city the bells of the churches rang

and their wooden gongs sounded as icons and relics were brought out upon the shoulders of the faithful and carried round through the streets and along the length of the walls, pausing to bless with their holy presence the spots where the damage was greatest and the danger most pressing; and the throng that followed behind them, Greeks and Italians, Orthodox and Catholic, sang hymns and repeated the Kyrie Eleison. The Emperor himself came to join in the procession; and when it was ended he summoned his notables and commanders, Greek and Italian, and spoke to them. His speech was recorded by two men present, his secretary Phrantzes and the Archbishop of Mitylene. Each of them wrote down the Emperor's speech in his own way, adding pedantic allusions and pious aphorisms, to give it a rhetorical form that in all probability it lacked. But their accounts agree sufficiently for us to know its substance. Constantine told his hearers that the great assault was about to begin. To his Greek subjects he said that a man should always be ready to die either for his faith or for his country or for his family or for his sovereign. Now his people must be prepared for all four causes. He spoke of the glories and the high traditions of the great Imperial city. He spoke of the perfidy of the infidel Sultan [Mehmet II] who had provoked the war in order to destroy the True Faith and to put his false prophet in the seat of Christ. He urged them to remember that they were the descendants of the heroes of ancient Greece and Rome and to be worthy of their ancestors. For his part, he said, he was ready to die for his faith, his city, his people. He then turned to the Italians, thanking them for the great services that they had rendered and telling of his trust in them for the fighting that was to come. He begged them all, Greeks and Italians alike, not to fear the vast numbers of the enemy and the barbarous devices of fires and noise designed to alarm them. Let their spirits be high; let them be brave and steadfast. With the help of God they would be victorious.

All that were present rose to assure the Emperor that they were ready to sacrifice their lives and their homes for him. He then walked slowly round the chamber, asking each one of them to forgive him if ever he had caused offense. They followed his example, embracing one another, as men do who expect to die.

The day was nearly over. Already crowds were moving towards the great Church of the Holy Wisdom. **For the past five months no pious Greeks had stepped through its portals to hear the Sacred Liturgy defiled by Latins and by renegades. But on that evening the bitterness was ended. Barely a citizen, except for the soldiers on the walls stayed**



away from this desperate service of intercession. Priests who held union with Rome to be a mortal sin now came to the altar to serve with their Unionist brothers. The Cardinal was there, and beside him bishops who would never acknowledge his authority; and all the people came to make confession and take communion, not caring whether Orthodox or Catholic administered it. There were Italians and Catalans along with the Greeks. The golden mosaics, studded with the images of Christ and His Saints and the Emperors and Empresses of Byzantium, glimmered in the light of a thousand lamps and candles; and beneath them for the last time the priests in their splendid vestments moved in the solemn rhythm of the Liturgy. At this moment there was union in the Church of Constantinople ...⁵

The afternoon of Monday, 28 May, had been clear and bright. As the sun began to sink towards the western horizon it shone straight into the faces of the defenders on the walls, almost blinding them. It was then that the Turkish camp had sprung into activity. Men came forward in thousands to complete the filling of the foss⁶, while others brought up cannons and war-machines. The sky clouded over soon after sunset, and there was a heavy shower of rain; but the work went on uninterrupted, and the Christians could do nothing to hinder it. About half-past one in the morning the Sultan judged that everything was ready and gave the order for the assault ...

There was no time for prayer at the walls. The Sultan had made his plans with care. Despite his arrogant words to his army experience had taught him to respect the enemy. On this occasion he would wear them down before risking his best troops in the battle. It was his irregulars, the *Bashi-bazouks*, whom he first sent forward. There were many thousands of them, adventurers from every country and race, many of them Turks but many more from Christian countries, Slavs, Hungarians, Germans, Italians and even Greeks, all of them ready enough to fight against their fellow-Christians in view of the pay that the Sultan gave them and the booty that he had promised. Most of them provided their own arms, which were an odd assortment of scimitars and slings, bows and a few arquebuses; but a large number of scaling-ladders had been distributed among them. They were unreliable troops, excellent at their first onrush but easily discouraged if they were not at once successful. Knowing this weakness Mehmet placed behind them a line of military police, armed with

thongs and maces, whose orders were to urge them on and to strike and chastise any who showed signs of wavering. Behind the military police were the Sultan's own *Janissaries*⁷. If any frightened irregular made his way through the police they were to cut him down with their scimitars ...

After nearly two hours of fighting Mehmet ordered the *Bashi-bazouks* to retire. They had been checked and repulsed, but they had served their purpose in wearing the enemy ...

... [The defenders] scarcely had time to reform their lines and replace beams and barrels of earth on the stockade before a second attack was launched. Regiments of Anatolian Turks from Ishak's army easily recognized by their special uniforms and breastplates, came pouring down the hill ... Once more the bells of the churches near the walls rang out to give the alarm. But the sound was drowned by the booming of Urban's great cannon and its fellows as they began afresh to pound the walls. Within a few minutes the Anatolians had rushed into the assault. Unlike the irregulars they were well armed and well disciplined, and all of them devout Moslems eager for the glory of being the first to enter the Christian city. With the wild music of their trumpeters and pipers to encourage them they hurled themselves at the stockade, climbing over each other's shoulders in their efforts to fix their ladders on to the barrier and hack their way over the top. In the faint light of flares, with clouds continually veiling the moon it was hard to see what was happening. The Anatolians like the irregulars before them, were at a disadvantage on that narrow front because of their numbers. Their discipline and their tenacity only made their losses the heavier as the defenders flung stones down on them and pushed back their ladders or fought with them hand to hand. About an hour before dawn, when this second attack was beginning to falter, a ball from Urban's cannon landed fully upon the stockade, bringing it down for many yards of its length. There was a cloud of dust as the rubble and earth were flung into the air; and the black smoke of the gunpowder blinded the defense. A band of three hundred Anatolians rushed forward through the gap that had been made, shouting that the city was theirs. But, with the Emperor at their head, the Christians closed around them, slaughtering the greater part and forcing the others back to the foss. The check discomfited the Anatolians. The attack was called off, and they retired to their lines. With cries of

5. Brazen ecumenism and concelebration at the 11th hour!

6. *foss* = a moat or defensive ditch in a fortification, usually filled with water; any ditch, trench, or canal

7. At this time (AD 1453) the ranks of the *Janissaries* were filled with the children of Christians forcibly taken from them by the Ottomans in very early childhood and raised to be an elite corps of soldiers of the Sultan himself. They were often used in battle against Christians.

triumph the defense once more set about repairing the stockade.

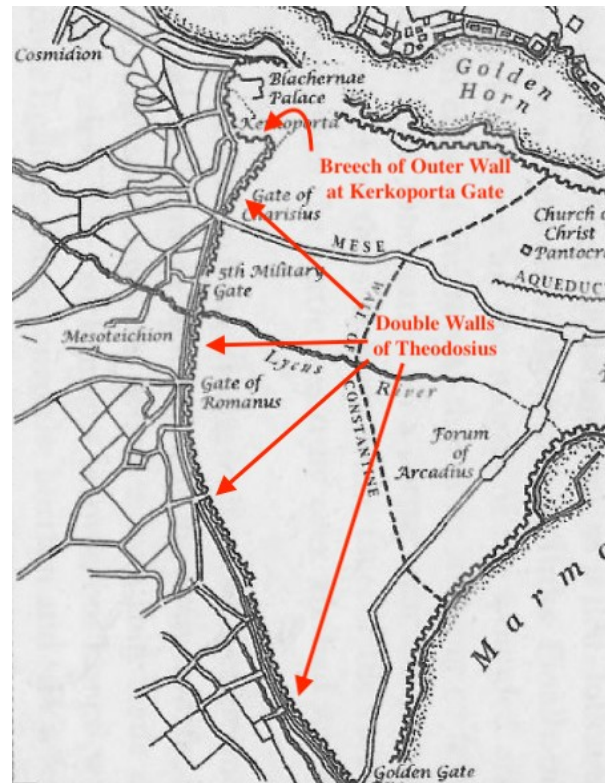
The Turks had not been more successful on other sectors ...

The Sultan was said to be indignant at the failure of his Anatolians ... He had promised a great prize to the first soldier who should successfully break through the stockade; and he wished the privilege to go to some member of his own favorite regiment, his Janissaries. The time had now come for them to enter the battle. He was anxious; for if they failed him it would scarcely be possible to continue the siege. He gave his orders quickly. Before the Christians had time to refresh themselves and do more than a few rough repairs to the stockade, a rain of missiles, arrows, javelins, stones and bullets, fell upon them, and behind the rain, the Janissaries advanced at the double, not rushing in wildly as the Bashi-bazouks and the Anatolians had done, but keeping their ranks in perfect order, unbroken by missiles of the enemy. The martial music that urged them on was so loud that the sound could be heard between the roar of the guns from right across the Bosphorus. Mehmet himself led them as far as the foss and stood there shouting encouragement as they passed him. Wave after wave of these fresh, magnificent and stoutly armored men rushed up to the stockade, to tear at the barrels of earth that surmounted it, to hack at the beams that supported it, and to place their ladders against it where it could not be brought down, each wave making way without panic for its successor. The Christians were exhausted. They had fought with only a few minutes' respite for more than four hours; but they fought with desperation, knowing that if they gave way it would be the end. Behind them in the city the church bells were clanging again, and a great murmur of prayer rose to heaven.

The fighting along the stockade was hand-to-hand now. For an hour or so the Janissaries could make no headway. The Christians began to think that the onslaught was weakening a little. But fate was against them. At the corner of the Blachernae wall [in the northwest corner of the city, i.e., in upper left of the map in the next column], just before it joined the double Theodosian wall, there was, half-hidden by a tower, a small sally port known as the Kerkopoporta [located at the end of the upper arrow in the figure below]. It had been closed up many years earlier; but old men remembered it. Just before the siege began, it had been reopened, to allow sorties into the enemy's flank. During the fighting the Bocciardis [3 Tuscan brothers] and their men had made effective use of it against Karadja Pasha's troops. But now someone

returning from a sortie forgot to bar the little gate after him.⁸

Some Turks noticed the opening and rushed through it into the courtyard behind it and began to climb up a stairway leading to the top of the wall. The Christians who were just outside the gate saw what was happening and crowded back to retake control of it and to prevent other Turks from following. In the confusion some fifty Turks were left inside the wall, where they could have been surrounded and eliminated if at that moment a worse disaster had not occurred.



It was just before sunrise that a shot fired at close range from a *culverin*⁹ struck Guistiniani and pierced his breastplate. Bleeding copiously and obviously in great pain, he begged his men to take him off the battlefield. One of them went to the Emperor who was fighting near by to ask for the key of a little gate that led through the inner wall. Constantine hurried to his side to plead with him not to desert his post. But Guistiniani's nerve was broken; he insisted on flight. The gate was opened, and his bodyguard carried him into the city, through the streets down to the harbour where they placed him on a Genoese ship. His troops noticed his going. Some of them may have thought that he had retreated to defend the inner wall; but most of them concluded that the battle was lost. Someone shouted out in terror that the Turks had crossed the

8. A monumental oversight responsible for the fall of Constantinople.

9. A *culverin* was a relatively simple ancestor of the musket.

THE GOOD WORD

c/o St. Seraphim of Sarov & St. John of Kronstadt Orthodox Church
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wall. Before the little gate [in the inner wall] could be shut again the Genoese streamed headlong through it. The Emperor and his Greeks were left on the field alone.

From across the foss the Sultan noticed the panic. Crying, "The city is ours," he ordered the Janissaries to charge again and beckoned on a company led by a giant called Hasan. Hasan hacked his way over the top of the broken stockade and was deemed to have won the promised prize. Some thirty Janissaries followed him. The Greeks fought back. Hasan himself was forced to his knees by a blow from a stone and slain. But the remainder held their positions on the stockade; and many more Janissaries crowded to join them. The Greeks resisted tenaciously. But the weight of numbers forced them back to the inner wall. In front of it was another ditch which had been deepened in places to provide earth for reinforcing the stockade. Many of the Greeks were forced back into these holes and could not easily clamber out, with the great inner wall rising behind them. The Turks who were now on top of the stockade fired down on them and massacred them. Soon many of the Janissaries reached the inner wall and climbed up it unopposed. Suddenly someone looked up and saw Turkish flags flying from the tower above the Kerkopoporta. The cry went up: "The city is taken." The defense was broken now. The gate was jammed with Christian soldiers trying to make their escape, as more and more Janissaries fell on them. Theophilus shouted

that he would rather die than live and disappeared into the oncoming hordes. Constantine himself knew now that the Empire was lost, and he had no wish to survive it. He flung off his imperial insignia and, with Don Franciso and John Dalmata still at his side, he followed Theophilus. He was never seen again.¹⁰

[The night before the final siege of Constantinople earnest prayer had been undertaken by the Emperor, the clergy, monastics, and the people -- but also concelebrations of prayer, confession, and communion with the Catholics in Agia Sophia. Was that the last straw? Was that the reason the Kerkopoporta gate was left unbolted? -- and the gate of the inner wall? The Lord's chastisement now fell fully upon them. With the fall of Constantinople, the scepter now passed to Moscow!]



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10. Steven Runciman, *Chapter IX: The Last Days of Byzantium*, in *The Fall of Constantinople 1453*, Cambridge University Press, London, England, 1963, pp. 121-122, 129-141.