PART IC

The Early Modern and Modern periods
The fall of Constantinople on 29 May 1453 marked the effective end of the Byzantine Empire and a period of rapid expansion for the Ottomans. This distant catastrophe quickly became a subject of immediate concern for western Europeans, demonstrated by the many written accounts and responses that circulated within months of it happening. Europeans regarded the news with a mixture of shock, anger, fear and fascination. It unleashed a flood of calls for crusade, religious sermons and a general preoccupation with the ‘Turkish menace’. At the same time, the conquest set in motion a complex range of political responses from military mobilisation to the pursuit of diplomatic ties, trade privileges and accommodations with the new masters of Constantinople.

Nor can individual or state views of the Ottomans be easily separated into positive or negative. While some Europeans called for the Ottomans’ destruction, others sought to learn more about them, to procure their beautiful luxury goods and to visit the diverse lands of their empire; in fact, some later writers called for crusade and praised the Ottomans in the same tract (Bisaha 2004: 179–81). Finally, we must recall that millions of Europeans would come to know the Ottomans directly as rulers, partners and neighbours through the steady expansion of the empire into eastern Europe in the decades before and after 1453. Hence, European reactions to the fall of Constantinople comprised a range of immediate and long-term responses of varying force and subtlety. This chapter will provide an overview of these responses.

By 1453, the empire of Byzantium was a shadow of its former glory, possessing some territory in mainland Greece and the capital of Constantinople – a city still scarred by the damages of Latin conquest and rule in the thirteenth century and civil wars of the fourteenth century (Harris 2007: 173–87). Nonetheless, with its massive walls and position at the eastern tip of Greece, it held immense symbolic value for Christians, who continued to see it as a defender against a full-scale Ottoman invasion of Europe, despite its small population. Indeed, there was some truth to this notion. Although the Ottomans were well established in Europe, controlling Bulgaria, Wallachia, Macedonia, Thrace and eastern Greece, the city was a strategic thorn in their side; the failed Crusades of 1396 and 1444 only increased the Ottomans’ sense that the two halves of their empire would be more secure if the city were in their possession.

Sultan Mehmed II and his advisers executed a brilliant strategy that began with the rapid construction of the fortress Rumeli Hisari just north of the city, closing off aid from the Black Sea. It continued with raids on the Greek mainland to occupy Emperor Constantine XI’s brothers and prevent their aiding him, and concluded with a massive encirclement of the city by some
80,000 troops plus a fleet of ships. The Ottomans’ careful planning and massive resources, including Mehmed’s far-sighted investment in the technology of large-scale cannon, enabled them to capture the large, well-fortified city in a mere seven weeks. The swiftness of his campaign was the most decisive factor in its success, as it prevented Western relief forces from arriving in time to assist the city. The Greeks and their Christian allies inside the city fought valiantly, but they were grossly outnumbered and their resources poor from the start. The last Byzantine Emperor died attempting to defend the city at its walls.¹

Impressive though the siege was from a military standpoint, the sack that ensued was so terrible that some modern treatments downplay or edit it out of the story. In accordance with Muslim practice, a city that did not accept terms of surrender was subject to a three-day pillage; Mehmed II shortened this to one day after the city was taken, but it was still thoroughly looted (Runciman 1965: 148). The invading troops killed many inhabitants after they first breached the walls, some 4,000 by one contemporary account (Kritovoulos 1954: 76). A great number of Greek nobles and Venetians were executed soon thereafter. Some inhabitants were able to escape the horrors of the sack, but most were rounded up and held for ransom or sold into slavery; rape is described as a common occurrence. A portion of the captives were soon freed through charity or ransomed; many more were kept or sold off, living in servitude for weeks, months or the remainder of their lives. One Greek dignitary, George Sphrantzes, was held captive for three months; he managed to gather a ransom for himself and his wife but was too late to save his young son and daughter, who died in Mehmed’s seraglio. The boy was executed for conspiracy to murder the sultan, and the girl died of disease (Runciman 1965: 145–52; Setton 1978: 129–34; Sphrantzes 1980: 70–5).

Ottoman accounts minimise the violence but proudly describe the plunder of precious goods and human capital. As Tursun Beg writes, ‘Every tent was filled with handsome boys and beautiful girls’; AŞikpaŞazade leaves less to the imagination, describing how the soldiers ‘enslaved the people . . . [and] embraced the beauties’ (Tursun Beg 1978: 37; Boyar and Fleet 2010: 11). Even the more balanced account written by the Greek Kritoboulos, which notes the sultan’s grief at the destruction of the city and makes excuses for many of his actions, still describes the sack as worse than Troy, Babylon, Carthage, Rome or Jerusalem for its mistreatment of the inhabitants (Kritovoulos 1954: 76–8).

News of the disaster travelled fast through Christian states, delivered in some cases by refugees or fleeing fighters, first to nearby areas such as Modon, Crete, Rhodes and Cyprus. On 29 June, the news was read to a stunned Venetian Senate. The next day they hastily dispatched letters to Pope Nicholas V and King Alfonso of Naples, and couriers spread the word en route. Word travelled to the court of the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick III by way of Serbia. In these ways rulers and common people learned of the catastrophe – the shock was so great in Rome that many refused to believe it when immediate confirmation did not follow (Schwoebel 1967: 1–4).

The rulers of Serbia, Albania, Greece and several local islands responded immediately by sending embassies to the sultan in Adrianople to congratulate him on his victory and seek truces and terms (Kritovoulos 1954: 85–6). We can read their actions as stalling for time or a quick acceptance of this precipitous change, though their increased vulnerability is clear. Western European states, particularly in Italy and Germany, responded with a flurry of activity. Embassies were immediately exchanged between the pope and key Italian powers; these discussions culminated in an accord in 1454 collectively called the Peace of Lodi, and the formation of the Most Holy League in Italy to combat the Turks. The Emperor Frederick III called three imperial diets to discuss a crusade against the Ottomans in 1454 and 1455. The first diet was attended by Duke Philip of Burgundy, and stirring orations and sermons were delivered by imperial secretary Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini and friar Giovanni Capistrano. But only so much could be achieved when the phlegmatic emperor himself neglected to attend all but the last diet, and princes used
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these occasions to squabble over their own local claims (Schwoebel 1967: 32–3; Mitchell 1962: 101–3). Italian efforts yielded more success, with several small campaigns sponsored by the pope, Venice or Naples, but they resulted in no large group undertaking.

There are many reasons why a united European front against the Ottomans did not immediately materialise. As seen in Italy and Germany, intense rivalries and warfare were realities that could not easily be overcome. England and France had only just ended the Hundred Years War, with neither side eager to undertake a campaign far afield. Another problem for several Italian states was their entrenched trading interests in the East; as will be discussed, this complicated their ability to commit to a crusade. Nonetheless, local Christian resistance against the Ottoman advance in eastern Europe was ongoing. There was even a small crusade against the Ottomans which culminated in a surprise victory at Belgrade in 1456, led by the famous general and governor of Hungary, John Hunyadi (see Housley 1992).

All these developments reveal the conflicting views of governments as they weighed concerns for the defence of Christendom against their own interests. The exact nature of these tensions is epitomised by the international Congress of Mantua (1459), called by Piccolomini, who had become Pope Pius II a year earlier. The determined pope managed to persuade or pressure the reluctant and suspicious delegates of a few states into making commitments to the modest crusade he himself tried to lead in 1464. But the crusade crumbled with his death at the port of Ancona, and the lack of unified action persisted as the Ottomans made advances into eastern Europe. Serbia fell under Ottoman rule in 1459, Bosnia in 1463, Greece in 1460, and half of Hungary in 1526 with the defeat at Mohacs. Nor was western Europe entirely safe: Turkish troops raided the Friuli outside Venice in the 1470s and captured Otranto in Apulia in 1480. However, Christian forces did push them back in later decades: Otranto was recaptured in 1481, Vienna was successfully defended in 1529, and combined Christian forces won the famous Battle of Lepanto in 1571. European military responses to 1453 and continued Ottoman expansion, then, were a mixed bag to say the least; luckily for western Europeans, temporary moments of unity provided a good measure of security.

Turning from political action (and inaction) to intellectual output, we find a much stronger and more unified response in the many written works that survive from the first few decades after 1453. They reveal a universal feeling of outrage and a shared discourse on the dreadful Ottoman conquerors. To quote Norman Housley,

The Ottoman Turks were an Islamic military power whose victories and conquests were too substantial and close at hand to be ignored. This meant that throughout our period, and especially from the mid-fifteenth century onwards, the dominant image of the Turk focused on the Ottomans as a power, and in personal terms, on the ambitions of their sultans.

(Housley 2002: 131)

In short, the fall of Constantinople and the string of successive victories orchestrated by Mehmed ‘the Conqueror’ created fertile ground for propaganda (see Schwoebel 1967; Pippidi 2012: 2). More open-minded views certainly existed and would increase over time, but many scholars agree that in the first few decades, the intellectual backlash was strong (Meserve 2008: 29).

Arguably the most active group of writers on the Ottoman advance were the Renaissance humanists (see Black 1985; Hankins 1995; Bisaha 2004; Meserve 2008). A number of prominent humanists were employed by the ecclesiastical and secular governments; thus, they received early reports from the East and were charged to compose official state responses. Humanists also wrote letters about the event in an unofficial capacity, putting their eloquence to the service of
spreading the word and calling fellow Christians to action. As such, the subject got a second wind from their orations and treatises, which circulated in many hand-written copies and, within two decades, printed versions. The role of the recently introduced printing press in keeping this issue alive and increasing readership (in a variety of genres) cannot be underestimated (Housley 2012: 167–73).

Humanist responses to the fall of Constantinople tended to focus on certain key themes: senseless murder, brutality, rape, captivity, destruction and looting were vividly described and lamented. The similarity of humanist responses reflects their collective shock and grief but also their common cultural context: they were all rigorously trained in classical rhetoric and texts (Hankins 1995: 119–24; Bisaha 2004: 8–9). Cardinal Bessarion, a Greek who had joined the Roman Catholic Church and was living in Bologna, despaired, ‘Men have been butchered like cattle, women abducted, virgins ravished, and children snatched from the arms of their parents. If any survived so great a slaughter, they have been enslaved in chains so that they might be ransomed for a price, or subjected to every kind of torture or reduced to the most humbling servitude.’ Florentine humanist Niccolò Tignosi described the violence of the sack, calling the conquerors butchers (truces) rather than Turks (Teucri). Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini described streams of blood flowing through the streets. Poggio Bracciolini, who became chancellor of the Florentine Republic, wrote in 1455 about ‘the harsh and savage cruelty of the barbarians that raged in the slaughter and blood of the faithful’ (Bisaha 2004: 2, 63).

Poggio’s use of the term ‘barbarians’ to describe the Turks was no random epithet. The majority of humanists frequently used it as a conscious, classical evocation of the Persians, Goths, Vandals and others, with many comparisons being made to the fall of Rome and the ensuing losses to learning. To humanists, the sack represented not only human suffering and loss but an inexcusable attack on culture and civilization. Churches were stripped and desecrated, relics were destroyed, and, most perplexing of all, books by the score were carelessly lost, deliberately destroyed, ripped apart for their costly bindings or cast in heaps and sold for pennies. Piccolomini penned one of the most memorable lines in response to these reports, calling 1453 ‘a second death for Homer and a second destruction of Plato’. The Venetian humanist Lauro Quirini wrote: ‘Consequently, the language and literature of the Greeks, invented, augmented, and perfected over so long a period with such labour and industry will certainly perish!’ Quirini, much like Piccolomini, saw this destruction as wilful; it proved that the Turks were ‘a barbaric, uncultivated race, without established customs, or laws, living a careless, vagrant, arbitrary life’ (Bisaha 2004: 2, 64–9; see also Hankins 1995: 145). What appears to moderns as an unintended casualty of frenzied looting was construed by a generation that idolised books and hunted neglected libraries for lost manuscripts as a wilful abomination.

Such evocations were highly subjective, but they forged a harsh and enduring discourse that competed with and often took precedence over fact-based, straightforward depictions of the Ottomans. As Margaret Meserve has stated, ‘Taken as a whole, these multifarious charges produced a terrible picture: every aspect of the Turks’ character and culture was irredeemably base. Not only heretical, violent, and cruel, they were also lustful, proud, crude, unlettered, and ignorant – despicable in every respect’. Interestingly, Meserve has also shown how this reaction against the Turks did not prevent several humanists from greater openness toward other Muslims. This was a by-product of political efforts to seek out allies against the Turks, though it culminated in more positive, even idealised humanist portrayals of other Muslim states (Meserve 2008: 5, 66).

Looking beyond the humanists, who wrote almost exclusively in Latin, scholars have examined other works that point to a lively written and oral discourse among broader audiences. These include vernacular lamenti, or songs on the fall of Constantinople which were performed in public squares (Schwoebel 1967: 19–22), and, of course, a great number of sermons on the
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matter. Given their reach as oral, vernacular pieces, laments and sermons provide important examples of popular dissemination of news and perceptions of the Ottoman advance. Housley provides compelling analyses of sermons, rightly reminding us that preachers, like humanists, deftly invoked and spread the topoi of Turkish barbarism and their threat to country and law (Housley 2002: 25, 154).

After the initial horror passed, other responses began to be seen as well. Poetry and popular literature sometimes portrayed the Ottoman Turks as descendants of the Trojans. This charged identity positioned them as distant cousins of the Romans and the rightful heirs to Anatolia, who had taken vengeance on the Greeks for the Trojan War. While humanists largely discarded the notion as both lacking a historical foundation and overly sympathetic to a people they sought to delegitimise, it suggests some popular fascination with the Ottomans and a desire to view them in a nobler light (Meserve 2008: 16; Philippides 2007: 4).

The Greeks themselves were also both objects of Western perceptions and purveyors of information on the Turks. Many western Europeans admired the Greeks’ fight to save their dying empire and mourned their defeat; as such, they welcomed Byzantines who arrived in the West before and after 1453 seeking employment and a home. Yet others uncharitably chastised the Byzantines for their losses, citing laziness, greed and stubborn ‘schismatic’ beliefs; of this camp, some took the view that 1453 was the culminating chapter in the Trojan War, as noted; others refused to flatter the Turks and viewed both sides as reprehensible (Meserve 2008: 30–1). Over time, negative views of the Greeks softened in western Europe as refugees became a more familiar part of the landscape and Greek communities arose in several areas. Indeed, the struggle for Greek Independence in the nineteenth century received much support from Western European philhellenists.

As for Greek perceptions of Ottoman conquerors and rulers, these, too, defy easy categorization. Fascinating, nuanced histories by Kritoboulos and Doukas, who wrote in Greek and remained in the East, contain praise as well as blame and reflect curiosity and striking objectivity; it is unlikely, though, that these texts were known to contemporary western Europeans. In western Europe, by contrast, a more propagandistic strain of rhetoric on the Turks prevailed among the Byzantine émigrés who sought to promote crusade. Refugees in the West were, understandably, more focused on redeeming captured loved ones and reconquest than on accommodation and understanding of the Ottomans. The complexity of the Greeks’ views, their access to better information on the Ottomans, and their role as intermediaries deserve further research.\textsuperscript{2}

Thus far, this article has focused mostly on immediate, combative reactions to 1453. It will now turn to long-term efforts to engage the Ottomans more productively. Anyone who cared to scratch the surface of hostile European rhetoric could see that the Ottomans were no barbarians. While Europeans undoubtedly mourned the loss of Constantinople, the extension of Ottoman power and influence changed the way many viewed the region and their place in it. The Ottomans were not the most predictable of partners, given their expansionist designs, but they were very much a part of Europe and adapted to European circumstances with creativity and vigour. Sometimes they sought to conquer, sometimes to control, and many times along the way, to bargain and make accommodations (see Yurdusev 2012).

The trading interests and eastern colonies of Venice and Genoa made negotiations with the Ottoman Porte an immediate necessity. The Genoese, who possessed the town of Galata directly across the harbour from Constantinople, quickly capitulated in 1453. Galata became an Ottoman town subject to the poll tax and the silencing of church bells, but the population was spared the devshirme, or boy tribute, that fed the janissary system through the forced conversion and military training of Christian youths (Setton 1978: 135). Kate Fleet sees continuous good relations between the Genoese and Ottomans before and after 1453, arguing that the former cared not
who possessed the city so long as trade was uninterrupted (Boyar and Fleet 2010: 16–17). Other studies complicate this picture by noting Mehmed's determination to take control of Genoese towns and islands. Within a few years he had seized Old and New Phocaea and forced Chios and Lesbos to pay him tribute. In 1475 his forces took control of the important Black Sea port of Caffa (Veinstein 2013: 134–5). Mehmed's aggressive actions toward the Genoese certainly suggest that they were an inferior and dispensable partner in this trade relationship.

Venice's experience was more complicated. Unlike Genoa, it had the means to wage war against the Ottomans and did so on several occasions, with the first from 1463 to 1479. Thus, the Senate's outcry in 1453 and its willingness to negotiate a peace in Italy seem genuine, but the Republic also took immediate steps to protect its citizens and property in the region by sending gifts to the sultan, seeking to renew the treaty it had made with Mehmed's father. At first, Mehmed punished Venetians for aiding the resistance at Constantinople by making them wait several months, but he finally ratified it on 18 April 1454 (Runciman 1965: 161; Philippides 2007: 2). These Mediterranean entanglements, plus tensions with other Italian powers whom Venice battled for mainland territory, created the impression that it was playing both sides. But which side was more prevalent? Eric Dursteler has emphasised Venice's largely peaceful relations with the Ottomans, at least for the period after 1500, but, as with Genoa, the Ottomans clearly sought to expand their empire at the expense of Venice's; Venetian trade only thrived when it coincided with the 'good will' of the Ottomans and Venetian neutrality as the Ottomans attacked other Christian neighbours (Dursteler 2006: 5–6, 23–4). Gilles Veinstein, in contrast, has described the period after 1499 as one of 'gradual absorption' of the Venetian empire by the Ottomans (Veinstein 2013: 137).

Hence, when studying interactions between Western European states and the Ottoman Empire, one finds a complex mix of accommodations, reciprocity and hostilities that fluctuated with the times. The troubles of Venice and Genoa did not discourage other governments from establishing relations with the Ottomans. Florence was granted trading privileges in the 1460s, and France made the surprising move of allying with Sultan Suleyman in the 1530s against their common enemy, the Habsburgs (Bisaha 2000: 464–6; Isom-Verhaaren 2011). There was, indeed, much to draw diplomats, merchants and travellers to the region.

Some brief mention should be made of how Eastern Europeans fared under Ottoman rule. In many ways, Mehmed II revitalised the region, especially Constantinople. Kritoboulos praises Mehmed for his building projects, in which he employed and paid Christian captives so they could ransom themselves; he also notes Mehmed's repopulation of the city through relocation of Greeks from the Peloponnese (admittedly, after conquering them) along with Jews and Persians (Kritovoulos 1954: 93, 139; Veinstein 2013: 157). Mehmed was so keen to make Constantinople a cosmopolitan city that he became the object of satirical Turkish poems for his preference of foreigners. Early Ottoman architecture reflects this pursuit of universalism in its eclectic combination of styles (Necipoğlu 1991: 250–2). Moreover, under Mehmed the city became more religiously diverse. After appropriating several churches, including Hagia Sophia, which was converted into a mosque, Mehmed left a number of them for Christian use. He cultivated the Greek Orthodox community by appointing the popular religious leader Gennadios Scholarios its new patriarch, thereby establishing Ottoman protection – and indirect control – over the church. Christians and Jews, then, enjoyed religious freedom if not equality – one of the most glaring examples of that inequality being the controversial devshirme system. The Ottomans, as Veinstein puts it, privileged Islam in the religious hierarchy of Ottoman Europe, but the end result was still 'a multifaith Europe' – one with greater diversity than 'Christian Europe' (Veinstein 2013: 152–7).

Finally, regarding long-term cultural perceptions or reactions, here too we see a range of responses. Ottoman Europe was a site of both conflict and exchange. On one extreme we see
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the phenomenon of ‘Turkish chic’ (Housley 2002: 136) and the fascination for Ottoman luxury goods (carpets, turbans, ceramics) among European consumers, although, as Anna Contadini has pointed out, an appreciation of the item itself offers no evidence for how the owner of such objects viewed the culture from which it emanated (Contadini 2013: 26). There is also a sense that as the decades passed after 1453 and the Ottomans became better known to Europeans, hostility receded and respect and curiosity increased – the popularity of sixteenth-century travel narratives by Ögier de Busbecq and Guillaume Postel are well-known examples. Yet, we should also note the immense popularity of accounts by former captives bitterly recalling their experiences with the Ottomans. Hence, perceptions of barbarism and brutality did not disappear as more positive visions emerged; they merely shared the stage with one another (Housley 2002: 137). Perhaps most telling of all is the fact that very few Muslims travelled to Christian Europe, with the exception of destinations such as Venice that catered to Turkish merchants (Veinstein 2013: 241). We do not know the precise reasons for this, but we can safely assume that anxiety about dangers and discomfort played no small part in keeping Muslim travellers away even as we see a sharp increase in Western European travellers – merchants, diplomats, pilgrims, artists and scholars – to the Ottoman East.

In conclusion, while individual studies have tended to focus on evidence that emphasises either positive or negative European reactions to the Ottomans, it should be very clear that one paradigm did not reign at all times and, therefore, exclude the other. Productive exchanges and interactions were very common, especially in the border regions. At the same time, the vast number and popularity of anti-Ottoman works and rhetoric cannot be dismissed as simply ‘official representational needs’, as some have done (Norton 2013: 20). For many Europeans, especially those further removed from the periphery, though not exclusively so, the Ottomans were viewed as a godless or barbarian menace; despite the errors of this perception, these subjective views became realities of their own. They reveal deeply held beliefs which entered into a harmful, lasting discourse about the Turks and, often, Muslims in general (see Pippidi 2012: 1–2; Bisaha 2004; Schwobel 1967). Perhaps Palmira Brummett put it best when she recently cautioned against separating hostile and complimentary evaluations and judging one or the other to be weightier, seeing instead ‘both fear and conversation’ between ‘Europe’ and the Ottomans, and judging the two to be ‘often tightly intertwined’ rather than completely separate experiences (Brummett 2013: 71).

Notes
1 For details of the siege, see Runciman (1965); Setton (1978); Philippides (2007).

References


Philippides, M., ed. and trans. (2007), *Mehmed II the Conqueror and the fall of the Franco-Byzantine Levant to the Ottoman Turks*, Tempe: ACMRS.


Further reading


Philippides, M., ed. and trans. (2007), *Mehmed II the Conqueror and the fall of the Franco-Byzantine Levant to the Ottoman Turks*, Tempe: ACMRS.

