

DIANE MOCZAR

# Islam at the Gates

How Christendom  
Defeated the Ottoman Turks

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## Dedication

*To Brother Bruno Bonnet-Eymard,  
whose pioneering critical edition of the Qur'an  
and original essays on Muslim religion and history  
first aroused my interest in Islam.*



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## Three

### *The City Falls and the Heroes Die*

The mid-fifteenth century brought a breathing space to the embattled Turkish targets in Eastern Europe and the Aegean Sea, but it was very brief. By the dawn of the year 1453, everyone knew that Byzantium's final agony, one of the most tragic scenes in the drama of the Ottomans, was about to begin.

#### Byzantine Anti-Catholicism Isolates the East

The ruler of the Turks in 1453 was twenty-one-year-old Mehmed II, who had succeeded to the throne on the death of his father Murad II in 1451. Having disposed of an infant rival by having him killed — the usual method employed by new sultans for dealing with the many candidates that harems tended to produce — he turned his attention to the main task of his reign: the taking of the Byzantine capital.

At this point the Ottoman Empire consisted of two parts: one was the original Anatolian heartland of the Ottomans with its capital at Brusa in Anatolia, strongly linked to the Islamic Middle East and traditional Sunni Muslim ways, and the other was the European area of Rumelia, with its capital at Adrianople. Rumelia was a land of the frontier and of Muslim adventurers. Their new mentality and way of life distanced them somewhat

from their Anatolian relatives; Rumelia was also the land of the dervishes, with their unorthodox mysticism and theology. The sultans considered a Turkish Constantinople desirable for many reasons, not least of which was that it might bring both regions of the Ottoman Empire into greater unity and harmony.

Mehemmed thus started work on the final siege of Constantinople as soon as he became sultan. He began by building two large fortresses on either side of the Bosphorus to the northeast of the city, to cut it off from the Black Sea. Emperor Constantine XI sent urgent requests for help to Rome, promising recognition of the Union of Florence. At the papal court, opinion was somewhat divided, with some hardliners arguing that the Greeks remained on the whole heretics and schismatics and were therefore undeserving of aid.

The more charitable view prevailed, however, and in May 1452 Cardinal Isidore, formerly a Greek delegate to the Council of Florence who had there accepted Catholicism, was sent to Constantinople as papal legate. With him went two hundred troops, perhaps a token of what the pope hoped to raise from the European powers. The pope also sent funds to help fortify the walls of Galata, on the north shore of the city's harbor known as the Golden Horn. Cardinal Isidore found the majority of the Byzantines as fanatically opposed to union as ever, which made a mockery of the ceremony in celebration of the Union that was held in Hagia Sophia in December 1452 and included prayers for the pope.

This extreme hostility on the part of the Byzantines and (as we shall see) the masses of Orthodox in the Balkans and Greece, is somewhat puzzling. Time and time again we are told in accounts of the period that it was "the people" who were so attached to their leavened bread for Communion, the doctrine that the

Holy Spirit proceeds only from the Father, and the authority of their patriarchs over that of the pope. I find it hard to believe that, on their own, ordinary people would become so exercised over what goes on in the Trinity. I can better understand their attachment to the more tangible issue of leavened bread, but that was permitted under the terms of the Union and should have been a non-issue after the Council of Florence. As for the authority of the Roman pontiffs, ordinary people had little direct experience of any kind with it, since their local religious authorities remained the same.

The only historical comparison I can think of for this inveterate hostility to Rome is the implacable antagonism of the post-Reformation English to the Catholic Church. And the only way I can account — on the natural level at least — for the seemingly spontaneous popular hatred of Catholicism in England is by referring to the clever use, on the part of the Protestant political elite, of constant propaganda that appealed to base passions: ambitious and opportunistic leaders appealed to cultural differences, national autonomy, and old historical grudges to promote English antagonism to Rome. Similar methods were used to encourage Orthodox hostility to Catholicism; besides theological grievances, much was made of resentment against the Latin conquest of Constantinople in 1204 (Byzantine atrocities against Latins were ignored) and of the temporary Western rule over much of the empire that had resulted.<sup>3</sup> Atrocities are hard to erase from local memory, and that was certainly the case with the citizens of Constantinople whose ancestors and possessions had perished in 1204.

<sup>3</sup> On this point, there may be a historical parallel with the attitude of the Irish to Cromwell's conquest of Ireland, particularly the city of Drogheda.

Opponents of union played upon such historical grievances from the pulpit, Sunday after Sunday, and frequently during the week by other means. In this perspective, “the people” screaming, “Better the turban than the tiara!” would be far less culpable, at least in the majority of cases, than the unreconciled preachers who fed them their lines. Whether this is the true interpretation of Orthodox hostility I don’t know, but it would seem to be at least a partial explanation. Like any prejudice, a close-minded bias against Catholicism promoted among the populace for generations enters deeply into the psyche and becomes second nature — an automatic reaction upon which those who profess it rarely reflect. They “know” what they have always been told.

Despite the rancor of his religious establishment, Emperor Constantine XI firmly proclaimed the Union of the Churches. His clergy, on the other hand, condemned those who favored union and are said to have refused absolution to those who had been present at the celebration in Hagia Sophia, and instructed the sick to die without the sacraments if the only choice was to receive them from a “uniate” priest. When incidents such as this — and there were many — became known in Europe, it is understandable that they tended to prejudice Catholic nations against sending men to die for people who seemed to have nothing but contempt for them. And so, once again, attempts by Constantine and the papacy to rally support were largely in vain. There was no charismatic Marshal Boucicaut around to raise an army and save the city. Besides the papacy, only the Kingdom of Naples, Venice, and Genoa prepared to send aid, and with most of the Italians it was out of vested commercial interests rather than religious or political commitment.

## The Great Siege of Constantinople

Mehemmed did not attack Constantinople as soon as he had built those fortresses. A careful planner, he wanted to be sure that no help could come from the Byzantine possessions in Greece still ruled by members of the imperial family. He therefore, in 1452, attacked the Morea — the Peloponnese (southern peninsula of Greece). Ottoman troops engaged in large-scale plundering and once again reduced the population and its rulers to acknowledging Ottoman suzerainty, though the Greek defenders achieved some local victories. It was not the last time the Morea would suffer Turkish oppression, but its spirit was not broken. It would be from there that the final — and finally successful — revolt of the Greeks against the Turks would begin in 1821.

Mopping up a few more pockets of uncooperative or untrustworthy citizens, Mehemmed proceeded to attack Constantinople in earnest on April 6 or 7, 1453. The Turkish army was eighty thousand strong according to some sources; however many of them there were, it was a lot. The defenders, on the other hand, had only about two thousand soldiers and perhaps an equal number of other citizens capable of bearing arms. There were also seven hundred Genoese soldiers, Venetians, and other resident foreigners, but it all added up to a pitifully small number. As for the promised ships from the West, most of them never arrived or came too late. The strength of the city was in the great chain and walls that protected the harbor and the even more massive walls on the west side that had never, in the thousand years of its history, been breached. They would be this time.

Unbeknown to the defenders, Mehemmed had acquired a super weapon in the form of a cannon nearly thirty feet long, capable of blowing holes in anything with its half-ton shot.

For six weeks, the great cannon fired at the great walls. Seven shots a day seems to have been its limit; hundreds of men and dozens of oxen were required to move it, and even then it sometimes slipped in the mud or rolled off its carriage. Still, the devastation it produced was unlike anything previously seen in siege warfare. Walls that had stood for a thousand years crumbled into dust where the shots struck, their defenders pulverized with them.

The Turks did not have it all their own way, though, especially in the early days of the assault. The three galleys Pope Nicholas had hired from Genoa made it through the Straits and nearly reached the city, along with a Byzantine supply ship. They were seen by both Turks and defenders, and an all-day battle resulted between the tiny group of Christian vessels and the Turkish fleet — such as it was. Fortunately the Turks were still not very good at seamanship or shipbuilding, and the wind was against them in the beginning. The Christian ships were better built, better manned, and gaining the upper hand when the wind suddenly dropped and the current began to pull them toward the other side of the Bosphorus, where Mehemmed himself was on the shore loudly urging his sailors on. Each of the Christian ships found itself surrounded by numerous Turkish vessels, and still they held out. The sailors on the Byzantine supply ship were able to make good use of their incendiary arsenal, the “Greek fire” that had so astonished Westerners in the days of the Crusades. Genoese sailors, in better armor than the Turks, hurled missiles down on the enemy from their taller ships, and surrounded the supply ship to protect it as it ran low on ammunition. The sun was setting and fresh Ottoman ships had been sent into the fray when the wind shifted again, and the Christian ships made it to safety.

The sultan was beside himself with fury. One of his advisors

reported that his judgment was already being questioned. Not daring to execute his chief admiral, as he probably would have dearly loved to do, Mehemmed had him beaten and publicly humiliated as a coward and traitor, confiscated his property, and sent him into exile somewhere or other. It was now the end of May, and still the city held. One Turkish stratagem after another was countered by the defenders: attempts to tunnel under the walls were foiled by the defenders' flooding of some of the tunnels and the capture of a number of tunnel-makers who revealed the location of the rest of them. A Venetian vessel that had been sent out to seek help some time earlier slipped back into the city. The news it brought was that there was no help to be had, but the Turks didn't know that. Rumors spread among them that a major Christian fleet was on the way, and the Hungarians informed the sultan, ominously, that a change in their regency had nullified the armistice they'd had with him. There was more murmuring against the Ottoman ruler, and his grand vizier advised abandoning the assault. On May 25, Mehemmed actually offered to raise the siege in return for a sum that proved too large for the Byzantine treasury; surrender was out of the question, so the siege continued.

Within the city, supplies were low, food limited, and the defenders exhausted; even the emperor fainted once during a council meeting. Reports of unexplained phenomena, witnessed by both Christians and Turks, abounded: mysterious lights in the distance that misled the Turks into thinking another Christian force had arrived; other lights playing about the spire of Hagia Sophia, witnessed by both Turks and Greeks. Mehemmed was too confident of success, or perhaps too unwilling to face the consequences of failure, to give up the siege, and decided to make a final assault with everything he had. The Byzantines, seeing the signs of Turkish preparation and probably receiving

accurate intelligence reports, knew it was coming. On the night before the city's fall, both Catholic and Orthodox clergy, Cardinal Isidore and all who could be spared from the defense, flooded into the great cathedral. People confessed and received Communion from the priests of both Churches.

### The City Finally Falls

The end began shortly before dawn on May 29; there was no stopping the flood of Janissaries and other troops pouring through the great holes their cannon had made in the walls, though the defenders died trying to do so. Emperor Constantine fought in the imperial purple until he realized the last moments of the Christian life of his city were at hand. Then he tore off the royal robe and plunged into battle as an ordinary foot soldier. As emperor, his life would have been spared; as an anonymous soldier, he could die for his people and his Faith — which is what he did.

Most accounts state that the city was given over to looting by the army for three days before the commander was to enter, as stipulated in Islamic law; a few say Mehemmed entered the city on the first day and restored order. Whether it was three days or one, the civilian population endured pillage, destruction, and slaughter by the Ottoman troops that were nothing short of infernal. Turkish soldiers destroyed cultural treasures, tore up or sold off valuable books both sacred and secular books, and burned holy images in fires to cook their food. A crucifix was carried about topped with a janissary cap while the Turks jeered, "Behold the God of the Christians."

Thousands had flocked into Hagia Sophia to implore a miracle of protection from God and Our Lady, and Mass was being said

when the troops broke in. By the time they reached the church, the idea of how much more profitable slaves were than corpses seems to have occurred to many of the soldiers; the result was that most of the people were tied together and taken to the soldiers' barracks. Their unenviable fate — the harem, the beds of soldiers, or the slave market — was that of countless thousands of others in the course of the Turkish jihad. Cardinal Isidore was among those sold as slaves, but was fortunately soon recognized by a Westerner, purchased, and liberated. Hagia Sophia itself was turned into a mosque, as were other churches. One of them eventually became an Ottoman historical museum, something the Communists also liked to do with churches.

Over the centuries, more and more places of worship were lost to the Orthodox until finally they were left with only one church in the city. In the sixteenth century, an Ottoman historian exulted,

Through the noble efforts of the Mohammedan sultan, for the evil-voiced clash of the bells of the shameless misbelievers was substituted the Moslem call to prayer . . . and the ears of the people of the *Djihad* were filled with the melody. . . . The churches which were within the city were emptied of their vile idols, and cleansed from their filthy and idolatrous impurities; and by the defacement of their images and the erection of the Islamic *mibrabs* and pulpits, many monasteries and chapels became the envy of the Gardens of Paradise. The temples of the misbelievers were turned into the mosques of the pious, and the rays of the light of Islam drove away the hosts of darkness from the place so long the abode of the despicable infidels, and the streaks of the dawn of the Faith dispelled the lurid darkness of oppression, for the word, irresistible as destiny, of the fortunate sultan became supreme in the governance of this new dominion. . . .

Soon after the fall of the city, with the Latin patriarch captured, the clergy elected the learned Gennadius Scolarius, who

had accompanied his emperor to the Council of Florence and supported the Union. He had subsequently gone over to the anti-Unionist side and now strongly opposed what he had earlier favored. The sultan approved of his election, invested him with the patriarchal insignia, and made him the head of the national churches elsewhere in the former Byzantine Empire as well. Those churches thus ceased to have an independent existence for a considerable period, and were under the control of a man who could almost be called a Turkish sympathizer. At all costs, the Ottomans wanted to prevent any rapprochement with Catholicism, identified as it was with the enemy West, and therefore they greatly increased the power of the patriarch as a counterweight to Rome. The Ottomans thus appeared as the patrons and protectors of Orthodoxy, and those who had clamored for the turban instead of the tiara felt vindicated. Gennadius was wont to have cozy chats with the sultan about religion, and together they drew up statements of common principles and comparisons of Islam and Christianity as a sort of academic exercise.

The huge number of captives taken — the figures of fifty to sixty thousand are mentioned in the sources, most slated for deportation or slavery — must be understood to include primarily the fit, the useful, the attractive. A contemporary historian, Ducas, who visited Constantinople and interviewed eyewitnesses soon after its fall, has described what happened to those who did not make the grade:

They [the Turks] slew mercilessly all the elderly, both men and women, in [their] homes, who were not able to leave their homes because of illness or old age. The newborn infants were thrown into the streets. . . . And as many of the aristocrats and nobles of the officials of the palace that he [the sultan] ransomed . . . he executed them. He selected their wives and children, the beautiful

daughters and shapely youths and turned them over to the head eunuch to guard them. . . . And the entire city was to be seen in the tents of the army, and the city lay deserted, naked, mute, having neither form nor beauty.

We have already seen, in chapter one, this cruel practice of slaying the unfit or “useless” in the earlier period of Muslim history.

A legend says that the priest saying Mass in Hagia Sophia was holding the Blessed Sacrament in his hands at the time of the Turks’ entrance into the church. Miraculously, the wall before him opened and he passed through; when the great structure is again a Christian church, he will emerge and finish his Mass.

### Aftermath of the Fall

Mehemmed II was one for settling scores. He had already dealt with the under-performing admiral, and now his grand vizier, who had been critical of the whole enterprise and whose loyalty the sultan had long suspected, was beheaded. The Grand Duke Lukas Notaras, Constantine’s prime minister, had been the source of the much-quoted statement to the effect that he would prefer to see the Turkish turban in the city rather than the Roman tiara. Following the Ottoman victory, the sultan seems to have been well disposed to him at first, and may have seen him as a go-between in dealing with his new Greek subjects. He certainly needed such a highly placed intermediary, since the emperor was dead and the Patriarch had left for Rome.

What eventually soured their relations is unclear; perhaps Notaras was kindly invited to welcome the turban by converting to Islam, and declined the invitation. Another story implies that the depraved sultan wanted Notaras to turn over his fourteen-year-old son for his pleasure and that the father refused. In any

case, he, his son and son-in-law were beheaded by order of the sultan. Poor Notaras certainly got the wish he had expressed, though no doubt not precisely in the way he meant it.

During this time many saved themselves, as well as their possessions and their status, by converting to Islam, even though their families often remained Christian. With their connections in both worlds, these renegades became essential to Ottoman governance, as they had earlier been to Arab regimes. Bat Ye'or, in *The Decline of Eastern Christianity Under Islam*, describes the workings of the system:

The retention of power by the Islamized Christian nobility . . . provided continuity, guaranteed the transition from the Christian state to the Muslim state, and ensured the transfer of technology and administrative skills. . . . In fact, without these relationships, the Arabs and Turks could not have ruled the conquered Christian peoples or remained on their territory.

Possibly some of the collaborators salvaged their consciences with the thought that they were able to moderate, to a certain extent, the measures taken against their people by the government. The fact remains that they were of vital assistance to the government as it consolidated power over the Christians: just as collaborators with Communism would be in twentieth-century Eastern Europe.

The Turks put the Greek Orthodox patriarch in charge of all the Orthodox in the empire, and as I have mentioned, the Slavic national churches were suppressed. Here again there was collaboration; here again it would be interesting to compare the situation of the Greek Church under the Turks with that of the Russian Orthodox Church under Communism. Religious schismatics were often more opposed to their fellow Christians than to the Turks, and only too willing to cooperate with the

Ottoman masters against their ecclesiastical enemies; the Turks were happy to oblige them (divide and conquer has ever been a useful principle for rulers.) Thus several varieties of traitors and collaborators began to surface as the noise of battle ceased within the city, and the transition from the ancient empire of Constantine the Great to the Ottoman Empire of Mehemmed II — something of a comedown, to say the least — was already underway. Combined with the usual mass deportations of Christians and the settlement of Turks and Muslim converts in their place, as well as the possibility for Muslim men of possessing four wives, any number of concubines, and therefore numerous children, the spiritual, demographic, and psychological situation of the tattered Christian remnants of Byzantium was eroded, and the surviving Christians were gradually reduced to the beleaguered minority they are now.

### The Turks Move on to Belgrade

The fall of Constantinople into their hands galvanized the Ottomans with new zeal and energy; their Jihad had so far succeeded spectacularly — surely a sign of the favor of Allah. And Allah did not intend them to stop with Constantinople, did he? Mehemmed saw himself as a world conqueror; he was the grand heir to the Roman and Greek emperors, not to mention the great rulers of Asia, and of course he was a *ghazi* — one of those now legendary warriors for Islam — and Allah's instrument. If New Rome was now his, why not old Rome? The dust had hardly settled in the half-ruined city when the next stage in the invasion of the West began. We shall be following the Ottoman army's progress through the Balkans and Greece in more detail in the

following chapter, but one Balkan battle belongs here — at this point we can certainly use a Christian victory to fortify us for the next grimness.

The shock of the catastrophe rippled through the West, causing consternation as far as England, where it may have played a role in bringing on the mysterious illness, perhaps a nervous breakdown, of the holy King Henry VI in 1453. According to the memoirs of the humanist scholar Aeneas Sylvius, who would ascend the papal throne as Pope Pius II in 1458, Pope Nicholas V and the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick III were both widely blamed for not having done more to prevent the cataclysm. In 1454, the emperor called a meeting at which Aeneas spoke persuasively about the need for a new crusade and the assembly voted unanimously in favor of it. Arrangements were being made by the various states about the numbers and types of forces to be provided, when Pope Nicholas suddenly died in March of the following year and the project came to nothing. The next pope, Callistus III, tried to revive support for the crusade, with mixed results.

The country in greatest danger from the Turkish advance into the Balkans was Hungary, which at that time was much larger than it is today and extended as far south as Belgrade, at the junction of the Sava and the Danube rivers. Apparently out of rivalry with the Hungarian king and unwilling to see him benefit from German help, the emperor did nothing to protect Hungary, while German bishops and others grumbled about the tax the pope tried to collect to finance the war effort. Once again international squabbles interfered with support for the crusade from other states. England and France were still at war; maritime powers distrusted each other too much to send many ships away from home; Portugal seems to have sent out a fleet and then called it back. The usual.

Meanwhile Mehemmed II was on the move, and once more things were going his way. In the very year of the fall of Constantinople, two rebellions in the Morea threw the area into turmoil. One involved Albanian immigrants who were unhappy with their Greek ruler, and the other a would-be usurper and his supporters. Incredibly, both groups of rebels appealed to Mehemmed. After his nasty experiences in Albania with the forces of Skanderbeg, Mehemmed was anxious to put down the Morean Albanians, and his troops were already on the spot by the end of 1453. The rebellions were easily crushed, and the rulers restored, saddled with heavy bills for tribute. The rulers of other parts of the Morea also asked to become the sultan's vassals — they knew the winning side when they saw it. The Morea was not yet completely pacified but it was sufficiently subdued for the sultan to move on.

Mehemmed's next target was Serbia, even though his Serb vassals had compliantly furnished troops for the attack on Constantinople. The sultan nevertheless refused to renew his treaty with them and began to raid the country; as usual, it was the ordinary people who suffered most from the Turkish attacks. Large numbers of the enslaved were taken east and settled in the ruins of the depopulated Byzantine capital. By 1455, a major Turkish assault was sweeping most of the rest of Serbia into Ottoman hands, and the army continued north to take over Belgrade — at least that was the plan.

If Belgrade fell, the great Hungarian Plain and all of south-eastern Europe would be open to the Muslim armies, but consultations among the Christians about what to do showed once again that they could agree on very little. Hungarian lords were divided on whether to fight or fall back and make a stand someplace else. The feudal magnates were reluctant to commit troops to a common effort, and the Hungarian king seemed to be of

two minds. He had sense enough, however, to appoint Janos Hunyadi commander-in-chief of the Hungarian army. Since we last met Hunyadi fighting at Varna, Kosovo, and elsewhere in chapter three, he had been multi-tasking with amazing energy. For a time he was in charge of the royal revenues, mediator of dynastic disputes, and regent of Hungary — as well as a fighter against domestic enemies of the throne and, of course, the Turks. Like Skanderbeg, this great warrior must have seemed to the Turks to be everywhere at once. He recaptured fortresses that had fallen to them, relieved besieged towns, and repelled several Turkish attacks — in one instance the enemy simply fled in panic at his coming. Then he went to the aid of Belgrade.

The historian J. B. Bury has written, “The siege lasted for three weeks in July, 1456, and hardly has a more brilliant feat been achieved in the course of the struggles between Europe and the Ottoman Turks than the relief of Belgrade by John Hunyadi and his Magyar army.” The army that Hunyadi managed to scrape together was pitifully small and untrained. Pope Callistus had sent a papal legate to try to rally support for the cause, and issued a bull calling Christendom to prayer, penance, and fasting. Plague had struck Rome but he refused to flee; as he told an ambassador, the Turks had lost thousands to the plague but that did not cause the sultan to stop his campaign.

The sultan saw no reason why Belgrade should not easily fall, Hunyadi or no Hunyadi. There was, however, someone else besides Hunyadi to reckon with, and he was a saint. The combination of St. John Capistrano and Janos Hunyadi turned out to be unbeatable, even by Allah’s instrument in person. Traveling round Hungary, the great Italian preacher galvanized into action those who heard him speak. St. John himself had been at first discouraged by the response to his impassioned

appeals, but one day at Mass he saw in a vision an arrow with the words, "Fear not, John. Go down quickly. In the power of my name and of the Holy Cross thou wilt conquer the Turks." He spoke of this vision in his sermons, and his new confidence was infectious. Thousands of peasants and townsmen rushed to join the crusade, both from Hungary and from neighboring countries.

Turkish ships had blockaded Belgrade to prevent relief forces from reaching it. With his fleet strategically disposed, his cannons trained on the city's walls, and his army — as many as 150,000 strong — encamped before the target, Mehemmed was understandably complacent. After all, he had just taken the most impregnable city in Christendom; Belgrade should be a walkover. It was June of 1456. The bombardment was to begin in July, and the Turks were meanwhile raiding the surrounding country. Once the shelling of the city began, it would go on for two weeks. Before it started in earnest, however, the first crusading army was still able to break through the line of ships that attempted to bar their way, and enter the city to the sound of music.

When it became clear that the Turks were about to cut the city off more completely from all outside contact, St. John slipped out of Belgrade, promising to return with an army that would astonish both Turks and Christians. Meanwhile, the defenders were appalled at the sheer number of men and especially of artillery mustered by the Turks, which Hunyadi said was four times as much as the Turks had ever previously assembled. The bombardment was in full swing by the time St. John returned. When Hunyadi saw the motley crowd that the priest was bringing him, he declared he could not fight with such an untrained force. According to some reports, he had begun to think that

a truce with the sultan was the only way to save at least some lives in this terrible extremity. The saint disagreed, arguing vehemently and promising victory, and the hero at last yielded to his friend's entreaties.

The whole story of the siege and of the inspired tactics of the defenders, both on land and water, is too much to tell in detail here. During the battles, Capistrano would stand on a high point of the shore, within sight of both Turks and Christians, waving a banner of the cross and calling out the name of Jesus. He spent much time at an inland camp receiving each group of new volunteers as it came in and knelt for his blessing. He also evacuated the sick and wounded from the fortress to upstream villages. He hardly ate or slept, though food was plentiful, for now crusaders were coming from Germany, Poland, Bohemia, and elsewhere — thousands of them. They were not professional soldiers but they venerated St. John so highly that they would follow him anywhere. Priests and religious came with the new contingents, celebrating Mass, chanting their office, and hearing confessions. One soldier is said to have remarked, "We have a holy captain. We must avoid all sin." The battle cry St. John gave them was "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus!"

The one weak point in the Turkish forces was soon revealed, and as usual it was their seamanship. Particularly in the case of Belgrade, a fortress-city situated at the confluence of two rivers, naval strategy was essential to blockading and bombarding it. The Turkish vessels were clumsy, their sailors inexperienced, and the Hungarian ships had little trouble with them. Still, in the last two days of the battle, hope alternated with despair, as the Turks broke into the city and some defenders began to escape, fearing all was lost. The tide turned again, however, and when the Christians finally repelled the Turks' offensive, it appeared that the battle was won. The remnants of the Turkish army were

still large enough to make the defenders wary, and it was forbidden to attack them in case they were laying ambushes instead of preparing to retreat.

Then it was that a small group of crusaders began firing on some Turks, who fled, and a large number of other Christians began to leave cover and attack, disobeying orders. St. John attempted to call them back, but his voice went unheard. He went outside the walls to bring them back, but when defenders inside the fortress saw him, they rushed out to join him. Seeing such a throng approaching, the Turks began to flee and the Christians rushed forward, capturing the Turkish siege guns without a fight. St. John began to see God's will in this spontaneous attack, and shaking off those who would have restrained him, he followed the crowd and climbed onto a heap of dirt with his standard-bearer next to him. There he cheered the Christians on as they battled the Turkish reserves, waving his cross and shouting prayers. The sultan himself, furious and incredulous, charged into the battle and managed to cut off the head of one crusader before receiving an arrow in his thigh and being forced into ignominious retreat. He cursed the panicky flight of the Janissaries so fiercely that their leader turned back into the fray and was cut down before the sultan's eyes. At dusk, the crusaders returned to the fortress; the Turks had withdrawn to their camp, anxious to leave the place as soon as possible; they had lost about 50,000 men, 300 guns, and 27 boats. Belgrade was saved.

Now was the time, thought Hunyadi, to drive the Turks completely out of Europe. In a letter to the pope, he argued that it could be done "if Christendom were to rise." But Christendom did not rise, and Hunyadi himself died of a plague that struck the region a few days after the battle. St. John did not long survive him. He too fell ill, and by the end of October he was

dead. In December, the Serb leader George Brankovic, who had fought at Varna, also died. Of the great Christian crusaders who had battled the enemy for the last decades, only Skanderbeg was left — but Skanderbeg was by no means finished with the Turks.

#### MAIN WORKS CONSULTED

All the works cited in the previous chapter, as well as the following:

Held, Joseph. *Hunyadi: Legend and Reality*.

Hofer, John, Rev. *St. John Capistran, Reformer*.

[Ducas quotation translated by Speros Vryonis, Jr., quoted in Boston, *The Legacy of Jihad*.]

Vryonis, Speros, Jr. *The Decline of Medieval Hellenism in Asia Minor*. Quotation from the Ottoman historian is found on p. 357.