

Topic: Comparative Analysis of two sieges of Constantinople in 1204 and 1453

Research Question: How could the sieges of Constantinople in 1204 and 1453 become successful while the city could not be conquered in the whole middle age except 1204 even though the city was besieged several times by several kingdoms?

Word Count: 3973

1. Introduction

Constantinople is one of the most important cities in history. It was one of the centers of Europe like Belgrade, Vienna and Rome in the middle age and new age. The city also was captured by many great empires throughout history. Macedonia, The Roman Empire, The Byzantium Empire and The Ottoman Empire are just a few examples. The city was the capital of the Byzantium Empire and Ottoman Empire which clearly shows the importance of the city. Even though Constantinople was such an important city, there were only two successful sieges during the middle age. Many kingdoms attempt to capture the city but failed. The only successful sieges were made by the Crusaders in 1204 and The Ottoman Empire in 1453. The point is, this city could not be captured for at least thousand years until 1204 but after 1200, the city actually was captured three times. (The conquest of Constantinople in 1261 from Latin Empire was not a siege so I did not include it in my essay) In two century, enemies pass through the walls of Constantinople twice. This topic includes why the city could not be captured for thousands years but then what makes it possible to conquer Constantinople twice in 250 years.

2. The Short History of the City

2.a. The Names of City

Istanbul had many names throughout history associated with different cultures. Augusta Antonina, New Rome, Queen of Cities, Kostantiniyye, The City, Stamboul, Islambol, Miklagard, Tsarigrad are just a few examples. Actually the city has 3 main names. The city was named Byzantium by the Greek colonists who were from the city-state of

Megara in 667 BC. The city gained in importance thereafter. The city was known as Byzantium until the death of the Roman Constantine I who died in 330 AD. After his death the city was named Constantinople. The city's name was remained as Constantinople during Byzantium Empire's age. The Ottoman Empire conquered the city in 1453 and it started being known as Istanbul. It is also known as Istanbul in today's world.

2.b. The Sieges of Constantinople before 1204 and 1453

The first settlements in the city were founded on the Anatolian side and estimated between the years 5500 – 3500 BC. The city always had an importance because of the Bosphorus and being able to connect Black Sea and Sea of Marmara. The city gained its real importance in 667. Greek colonists founded the city and decided to colonize it. The city was established on the European side of the Bosphorus and named as Byzantium. Later on the city was developed by Thracian tribes, Macedonian and the Greek cities until the Roman Empire's invasion.

The city was besieged by Romans in 196 AD after siding with Pescennius Niger against the victorious Roman emperor Septimius Severus. The city suffered extensive damage during the siege and it was captured by Romans. The Roman Empire's power was so great that none of the countries even besieged the city during sovereign of the Roman Empire except a few Gothic sieges. Constantine, The Roman Emperor; was impressed by the city and its location during his victory at the Battle of Chrysopolis in 324 AD. City became the capital of the Roman Empire in 330 AD. Constantine's name was used to rename the city after his death, "Constantinople".

After the division in the Roman Empire, the city became the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire which is also known as the Byzantine Empire. The city had been besieged several times. During 4th and 5th century the city was besieged by Goth and Vizigoth warriors. Attila the Hun besieged the city in 440 but could not conquer.

Sieges of Muslims started in 7th century. The Muslims conducted the first Constantinople siege in 668 but they failed. In the 7th century, Constantinople was attacked by both Persian and Avars. Later, in the 8th century, Hungarian and Muslim Arabs besieged the city. The Abbasid Caliphate tried to conquer the city several times; 782, 854, 869. Russian and Hungarian forces, in the 9th century, also tried to conquer this desirable metropolis but none of these attacks were successful. The city remained as the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire until 1204.

3. The Siege of Constantinople in 1204

3.a. Statistics for the Attackers in 1204

The siege of Constantinople in 1204 was made by the Crusaders against the Byzantium Empire. The attackers were crusaders and were commanded by a Venetian leader, Enrico Dandolo. The crusader army was composed of 10.000 Venetians¹ and 20.000 foot-soldiers² with 200 Venetian ships³. Enrico Dandolo was a Venetian noble and the Doge of the city-state of Venice. He was known with his long life and his commandership during the 4th Crusade.

¹ J. Phillips, *The Fourth Crusade and the Sack of Constantinople*, 269

² J.J.Norwich, *A Short History of Byzantium*, 299

³ J. Phillips, *The Fourth Crusade and the Sack of Constantinople*, 159

2.b. Statistics for the Defenders in 1204

The Byzantium Empire formed defence side. Their army was composed of 30.000 men⁴ including 5.000 Varangians and some Englishmen with 20 Byzantium galleys.⁵ Even the Byzantium Empire had an advantage in numbers; their army could not be compared with the Crusader's army in quality. The first conflict between them easily showed the quality difference. Before the siege of Constantinople, the Crusaders sacked small cities near Constantinople. These cities were Chalcedon and Chrysopolis⁶ which were established at the other side of Bosphorus and controlled by Byzantium Empire. After the sack of these cities, 500 Byzantium cavalry came to defend the border but they were defeated by only 80 Frankish Knights⁷. This example clearly shows the quality difference between two armies.

2.c. The Facts during the 4th Crusade in 1204

Pope Innocent III; called for a new Crusade in 1198. The 4th Crusade was different from the other crusades because the Crusaders would travel Jerusalem by using seaway and an invasion through Egypt. When the Pope called for the 4th Crusade, none of the kingdoms joined the Crusade except the Republic of Venice and Île-de-France. As the Crusaders would use seaway, the sail was organized by Venetian Republic. Venetian Republic demanded 84.000 silver marks⁸ but the Crusaders could not afford it. They needed 34.000 marks⁹ to sail Jerusalem so the commander of the Crusaders Enrico Dandolo proposed to attack Zara which

⁴ J. Phillips, The Fourth Crusade and the Sack of Constantinople, 159

⁵ J. Phillips, The Fourth Crusade and the Sack of Constantinople, 157

⁶ Appendix 1

⁷ J. Phillips, The Fourth Crusade and the Sack of Constantinople, 162

⁸ J.J.Norwich, A Short History of Byzantium, 299

⁹ J.J.Norwich, A Short History of Byzantium, 300

was a Catholic city and recently rebelled against the Republic of Venice. Zara was sacked by the Crusaders so they founded the money for Venetian sailors.

Then, overthrown king of the Byzantium Empire, Alexius IV came with a proposal. He asked the crusaders to help him to take throne and he proposed to supply the crusade with 10.000 soldiers and 500 knights¹⁰. Enrico Dandolo agreed with Alexius IV and the crusaders sailed to Constantinople rather than Holy Lands.

The Crusades arrived to Constantinople on 24 June 1203. They immediately sacked Chalcedon and Chrysopolis, and then landed at Galata. Alexius III didn't make any preparations for the cities defense so Enrico Dandolo ordered his army to attack to the sea frontage of the Palace of Blachernae¹¹ which was the weakest point in Constantinople's defense. Alexius III run away from Constantinople and the overthrown king selected as Emperor. Crusaders withdrew to Galata and started to wait for Alexius IV to make his promises but the economical situation of Byzantium Empire was not enough for him to make his promises so the war again began.

In January 1204, Alexius Murzuphlus took out the thrown by the help of populace in Constantinople. He strengthened and heightened the walls. He declined all the negotiation with the crusaders. The Crusaders had no choose but to attack.

The attack began on 9 April. After several attempts, the Crusaders broke up one of the gates. Alexius Murzuphlus did the best he could and commanded the defenders with courage and determination. His attempts failed and he run away.

¹⁰ J.J.Norwich, A Short History of Byzantium, 301

¹¹ Appendix 1

4. The Siege of Constantinople in 1453

4.a. Statistics for the Attackers in 1453

The second successful siege was made by Ottoman Empire against the Byzantium Empire in 14. The Ottoman Empire's army was commanded by Mehmed II, The number of Ottoman Empire's army wasn't known exactly but it was between 80.000¹² and 200.000¹³ with 126 ships¹⁴. The Ottoman had naval superiority for the first time against the Byzantium Empire. Mehmed II didn't want any failure and he did everything he could do. He also deal with a Hungarian engineer called Urban and asked him to built powerful cannons.¹⁵

4.b. Statistics for the Defenders in 1453

The Byzantium Empire was again in the defence side. According to sources, Byzantium Empire's army was composed of 4000-7000¹⁶ men. A claim states that the Byzantium Empire's army had 4773 men with 200 foreigners who were counted by a servant of the Emperor called Georgios Sfrantzes.¹⁷ The Byzantium Empire's navy power was composed of 26 ships. The Emperor of Byzantium Empire was Constantine XI Palaologus. The Emperor gave the commandership of land defenses to Giovanni Giustiniani Longo¹⁸. He came to Constantinople with 700 men that he gathered from Genoa, Rhodes and Crete. He was known as his commandership under the sieges.

¹²Sir Steven Runciman, Fall of Constantinople, 77-85

¹³D.M.Nicol, Bizans'ın Son Yüzyılları, 407

¹⁴Nicolle 2000, 44

¹⁵J.J.Norwich, A Short History of Byzantium, 374

¹⁶Sir Steven Runciman, The Fall of Constantinople

¹⁷J.J.Norwich, A Short History of Byzantium, 375

¹⁸J.J.Norwich, A Short History of Byzantium, 375

4.c. Attempts and Preparations

Ottoman Empire besieged the city three times in 1391, 1412 and 1422 but none of them became successful. Even Mehmed II was very young; he knew what to do to conquer the city. A powerful navy was built with the order of Mehmed II. In 1452, he ordered to attack Peloponnese in order to prevent a help from Venice. He also built a fortress on the Bosphorus to prevent helps from the Black Sea. He arranged powerful cannons which could destroy the huge walls of Constantinople. He also recruited 28,000 mercenaries¹⁹ for the siege. On the other hand, Constantine XI Palaologus tried every solution to save the city from a Turkish invasion. He requested help from Europe but his attempts failed. Constantine XI Palaologus ordered workers to repair the walls and to close the entrance of Golden Horn with a chain. The Emperor's only hope was the huge, impassable walls which protected the city successfully for 1200 years expect the siege in 1204.

4.d. The Facts in 1453 during the Last Siege of Constantinople

The siege started with cannon fires on the 6th of April in 1453 after propose of Mehmed II for a voluntary surrender rejected by Constantine XI Palaologus.

Mehmed II knew that Turkish navy must enter the Golden Horn. He knew how important it was but the chain prevented his plans. He made a plan that was never seen throughout history. The Turkish engineers started to build a road from the Marmara shore to the Horn so the Turkish navy could enter the Golden Horn. On the morning of 22 April, the Genoese colony in Galata watched seventy Turkish ships which were slowly hauled through

¹⁹ J.J.Norwich, A Short History of Byzantium, 374

the Golden Horn. Emperor was shocked when he saw the Turkish navy in the Golden Horn. Now, the Byzantium Empire must defend three and a half more miles of walls.²⁰

On 29 May, the war began with the signal of Mehmed II. First, Mehmed II sent the bashi-bazouks and Anatolian Turks. The defenders hold the gates bravely for five hours against the bashi-bazouks and several regiments of Anatolian Turks while Janissaries were waiting the order for attack. Janissaries were the elite forces of the Ottoman Empire. If the Ottoman Empire wanted to conquer Constantinople, Janissaries were needed more than everything.

The expected order of Sultan came after six hours when the battle began. Janissaries attacked the city with an enormous courage and power. At this time the commander of land defenses, Giovanni Giustiniani was wounded. Sultan immediately sent another wave of Janissaries and the Byzantium army started to retreat. The Turks entered the city. The Emperor didn't run away from the city and choose to fight with his men. He was killed like a Byzantium soldier in the streets of Constantinople. The city was captured by the Ottoman Empire.

5. Reason of Unsuccessful Sieges of Constantinople in the Middle Age

There were many reasons why Constantinople could not be conquered in the middle age. The geopolitical location of the city, the defensive structure of the city, the power of the Byzantium Empire and the condition of Europe are the major reasons which protected the city from several sieges in the middle age.

²⁰ J.J.Norwich, A Short History of Byzantium, 377

5.a. The Geopolitical Location of the City

The geopolitical location of Constantinople is a very important advantage for the defense of the city. First of all, Constantinople was established in a peninsula so the defenses needed to defend only one side of the city because the other sides were protected by water. This geopolitical location makes the conquest of the city as difficult as to conquest of islands. To conquest islands needs strong sieges because of the geopolitical location and geographical structure. There are many examples in history like the conquest Crete, the siege of Rhodes. The Ottoman Empire conquered Crete in 1669 after a 21 year siege. Also, the times when Mehmed II was the Sultan of Ottoman Empire, Ottoman Empire was one the most powerful kingdoms in the world. Even the Ottoman Empire was very strong; Mehmed II could not conquer Rhodes because of its geopolitical location and its being an island.

Because of geopolitical location of Constantinople, just a siege from the land is not enough to conquer the city. The attackers also needed a strong navy so the city could be besieged from the sea. The shore was covered with the huge walls of the city which is also known as Walls of Theodosius. These walls were 820 meter length, 13 meter height and protected by 18 meter height towers.²¹ As Constantinople was established in a peninsula, it was always possible to get help from the sea. Even the city was besieged with a powerful armies and navies; the city could get help, so city would not lose its power under the siege and resist the siege longer.

²¹ D.M.Nicol, Bizans'ın Son Yüzyılları, 408

5.b. The Defensive Structure of the City

The defensive structure of the city is one the most important reasons. The walls of Constantinople were composed of three sections: Walls of Theodosius, Walls of Constantine and the Wall of Septimus Severus. These walls were covering the city and had 6492 meter length²². Walls of Theodosius were the outer, Walls of Constantinople were the middle and Wall of Septimus Severus was the inner walls in the city. These walls had a major effect on the defenses of the city. Even the attackers could pass Walls of Theodosius; they had to pass two more walls. By the way, the walls of the city were not simple. These walls were huge. Walls of Theodosius also composed of three sections. The first section was 2 meters height, then the second section came. Second section was 7 meters height and was defended by 18 meter towers which were established 45-90 meters spaces.²³

The last defense line of the city was the real part of the Wall of Theodosius which was 13 meter high and was defended by 96 towers with 18 meter high. Also there was ditch in front of the first section which was 10 meter deep and 20 meter length²⁴. This defensive structure had a major effect for protecting the city. Because of the city walls were divided in many sections, the siege equipments of the attacker side could not reach the Walls of Septimus Severus or even they could, the defenders founded the time recover and to be ready for the battle.

²² D.M.Nicol, Bizans'ın Son Yüzyılları, 408

²³ D.M.Nicol, Bizans'ın Son Yüzyılları, 408

²⁴ D.M.Nicol, Bizans'ın Son Yüzyılları, 408

5.c. The Power of the Byzantium Empire in the Middle Age

The power of the Byzantium Empire had an effect in defending the city. The Byzantium Empire was a continuum of Roman Empire so the Byzantium Empire got his power by combining the West and the East culture. With this combination a powerful empire was born. Roman Empire was one of the greatest empires in the first age. The Romans conquer all the Mediterranean but then divided into to West Roman Empire and East Roman Empire which also called as Byzantium Empire. This means, The Byzantium Empire had the same military superiority and advanced justice system. Also the Byzantium Empire developed in technology. The Greek fire was an example for the development of Byzantium Empire in technology.

The Greek fire was a mystery throughout history and associated with Byzantium Empire. It was a fire in sea and had a great effect on enemies' ships. The Greek fire prevented the enemy ships to get near to the shore and had a powerful damage. Even the greatest navies could not fight against Greek fire in the middle age's conditions.

The Byzantium Empire was not just strong in military. It had a great economical situation related with its geopolitical location. The Byzantium Empire located at the end of Silk Road²⁵ which provides a great economical situation. In Constantinople, the goods which come from Asia were exchanged with the traders came from Europe. Because of this reason, the Byzantium Empire gained a great profit and became the richest kingdoms in the middle age.

²⁵ Appendix 2

5.d. The Condition of Europe in the Middle Age

The middle age was the darkest age of Europe. After division of the Roman Empire and Barbarian Invasion, the Catholic Church gained the power. Later on, all the populace in Europe, even the kings become faithful to the Pope and Catholic Church. Because of this reasons, neither kingdoms nor technology developed in Europe. The unsuccessful crusades are an example for the undeveloped Europe. People hardly live and they had no power to go and conquer the Constantinople.

Also, in the middle age, the system in Europe was feudalism. There were hundreds of little kingdoms in Europe so they didn't have enough power to conquer and even besiege the Constantinople. Only Hungarians besieged the city in the 8th century and this example proves the weakness of Europe in the middle age. This means, there was no threat in the west for a siege of Constantinople so the Byzantium Empire should only face with eastern kingdoms.

6. Reasons of Successful Sieges of Constantinople in 1204 and 1453

The key of the successful sieges of Constantinople in 1204 and 1453 were in the reasons above. The armies were selected carefully; all the equipments and conditions were suitable for the siege of the city.

6.a. Reasons of Successful Sieges of Constantinople in 1204

In 1204, Constantinople was besieged by Crusaders who were mainly Venetians. Venice had the most powerful navy in the middle age, even more powerful than Byzantium Empire. Their strength in the navy power and experiences in the sea battles were an advantage for the Crusaders. Also, Byzantium Empire was not as powerful as it was in the past. In East, Byzantium Empire was in a war against Turks and inside there was a disorder in the kingdom. The emperor of the Byzantium Empire was a weak man and had no experience in war. So the overthrown emperor of the Byzantium Empire called help from the Crusaders and besieged the city. The Emperor didn't make any preparations for the war which shows his inexperience in war. After the siege started, he run away from Constantinople which shows the weakness of his leadership. The commander crusaders affect the siege too. Enrico Dandolo commanded many battles and many sieges so he had many experiences. Crusaders entered the city in the first day of the siege which shows the success of the commander. Lastly, people in Europe needed to conquer the city. They were very poor and it had motivated them. The sack of Constantinople in 1204 proves this statement. By the help of these factors, the Crusaders became successful in the siege. Especially the inexperienced emperor the Byzantium Empire had a major effect because in the first day, the attackers entered the city.

6.b. Reasons of Successful Sieges of Constantinople in 1453

In 1453, the city was besieged by a rising power, the Ottoman Empire. Mehmed II ordered his men to build a strong navy for the siege of Constantinople. He was only 21 years old but he knew a strong navy was needed in order to conquer Constantinople. The Ottoman Empire's army was very powerful because of Janissaries, the elite forces of the Empire. The

Ottoman Empire's army was more powerful and had the advantage in numbers. The Ottoman Empire besieged the city three times before so they had experiences and information for a new siege. Also technology was the most important factor in 1453. The conditions were different from the middle age. Kingdoms were using gun power which was especially a real threat against the castles defended by huge walls. Constantinople was a city but the walls of the city had very important role in the sieges. Without the walls of Constantinople, the city was desperate. In fact the walls of Constantinople were the last hope of the Byzantium Empire. Large, powerful cannons were just an example of the technology in this period.

“It is said to have been nearly twenty-seven feet long and eight inches thick, with a muzzle two and a half feet across, capable of firing a ball weighing some thirteen hundredweight well over a mile. Two hundred men were sent to organize the journey of this fearsome machine to Constantinople, smoothing the road and the reinforcing the bridges; it was drawn by thirty pairs of oxen, with another two hundred men holding it steady.” (J.J.Norwich, 374)²⁶

Also unbelievable tactics of Mehmed II gave the Byzantium Empire no chance for a victory. None of people were expecting to use the ships walking in the land. With this tactic, the Ottoman Empire took the control of the Golden Horn. Lastly, The Byzantium Empire was in the darkest period of his life. The Byzantium Empire was the vassal of the Ottoman Empire and actually trapped in the Constantinople. The power of the Empire was very weak. The Byzantium Empire was alone against the Ottoman Empire.

²⁶ J.J.Norwich, A Short History of Byzantium, 374

7. Conclusion

To sum up, the huge walls of Constantinople, the state of the city, experienced Byzantium sailors, the power of Constantinople, the Greek fire, military power of Byzantium Empire were some reasons that defend the city against several sieges. In 1204 and 1453, the attackers both had strong navies to siege the city also from the sea and prevent helps. Also the power of the Byzantium Empire was very weak in both sieges. The Turks and political problems inside were weakening the Byzantium Empire in 1204 while The Turks was the only reason that weakens the Byzantium Empire in 1453. In 1204 and 1453 the Byzantium Empire did not have the reasons which defended the city from 396 to 1204 without a defeat so the city fell. In 1204 the siege ended after 10 months while in 1453 the siege continued for only 48 days. This time difference shows the importance of technology and gun power in the sieges of castles or cities with huge walls.

Bibliography

A Short History of Byzantium, John Julius Norwich; First Vintage Books Edition, 1999;

Bizans'ın Son Yüzyılları, Donald M. Nicol;

J. Phillips, The Fourth Crusade and the Sack of Constantinople;

1453, Roger Crowley; April Yayıncılık;

Haçlı Seferleri I, Steven Runciman; Nokta Kitap, 2005;

Fall of Constantinople, Sir Steven Runciman;

2000, Steven Nicolle;

Appendix 1

**THERE İS THE MAP OF CONSTANTINOPLE NORMALLY BUT AS IT WAS A
PHOTOGRAPY I CAN NOT PUT IN THIS DOCUMENT**

Appendix 2

