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The Date of the Conquest of Constantinople: May 29, 1453?

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It is generally accepted that Mehmed II and his Ottoman armies conquered Constantinople on the morning of May 29, 1453, as it is stated in the *quattrocento* texts of many numerous eyewitnesses. Modern scholarship is in agreement and further emphasizes the monumental nature of the event. Thus, to cite one modern example, Steven Runciman begins his popular account of the siege with the following statement: "In the days when historians were simple folk the Fall of Constantinople, 1453, was held to mark the close of the Middle Ages."[1] Among the testimonies as to the actual date in the vast literature of the narratives of the siege, we may cite the following three reliable authors: Nicolò Barbaro, the Venetian physician: "in questo zorno de vinti nuove de mazo"[2]; Angelo Giovanni Lomellino, the Genoese *podestà* of Pera: "29 elapsi [May]"[3]; Archbishop Leonardo Giustiniani: "quarto Kalendis Maii [Iunii] die videlicet Martis [Tuesday]."[4] In addition, the most important testimonies were given by Cardinal Isidore, who was perhaps a relative of the last Byzantine emperor, the papal legate, and the highest cleric in Constantinople.[5] He was wounded in the sack but survived; he was briefly a prisoner but was ransomed and concealed himself among the Genoese in Pera as the sultan's agents were searching for him; perhaps, it may be speculated, the sultan had been aware of Isidore's imperial connection and wished to ensure that he would not escape and place a claim on the throne of Constantinople. Finally, from Pera, Isidore made his escape to Crete and the West. From the safety of Venetian Crete, he wrote to Cardinal Bessarion in Italy and to the pope; his letters[6] state the date of the fall. To Bessarion he supplies specifics:

> After fifty-three days of siege had passed, the Turk [Mehmed II] had achieved nothing [...] on the twenty-ninth of May, a little after the break of dawn, while the sun's rays were blinding our side, the Turks moved in and attacked the city by land and by sea.[7]

He repeats the same date in his letter to Pope Nicholas V: "we resisted for fifty-four days [...] on the fifty-fifth day[...] the city of Constantinople [...] was taken [...] on May 29."[8]

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I would like to thank Mr. Emir Alışık, who invited me to write this note. Mr. Alışık noted in our publication, Marios Philippides and Walter K. Hanak, *The Siege and Fall of Constantinople in 1453: Historiography, Topography, and Military Studies* (Farnham: Ashgate 2011), 266, no. 208, that we alluded in passing to the problem addressed here and asked me to expand on our brief comments in the footnote of *SFC*.

1 Steven Runciman, *The Fall of Constantinople 1453* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), xi. The siege has been masterfully portrayed in the six episodes of the recent Karga Production of the Netflix series *Rise of Empires: Ottoman*, under the skilled direction of Mr. Emre Şahin.

2 Agostino Pertusi, *La Caduta di Costantinopoli, vol. 1: Le Testimonianze dei Contemporanei* (Verona: Fondazione Lorenzo Valla, 1976), 30.

3 Pertusi, *La Caduta di Costantinopoli,* 42.

4 Pertusi, *La Caduta di Costantinopoli*, 156 (with the note in the *apparatus criticus*: "Maii codd. edd., sed legendum Iunii, id est 29 Maii").

5 For the recent biography of this fascinating personality, see Marios Philippides and Walter K. Hanak, *Cardinal Isidore, c. 1390-1462: A Late Byzantine Scholar, Warlord, and Prelate* (London: Routledge, 2018).

6 For a discussion and analysis of Isidore's letters, see Philippides and Hanak, *Cardinal Isidore*, 189–212.

7 Philippides and Hanak, *Cardinal Isidore*, 201 (Latin text), 205 (translation). "inter haec quinquaginta et tres dies Turcus [...] obsidens nec quicquam perfecit [...] vigessimo itaque nono die mensis Maii proxime peracti aurora illuscente, solis etiam radiis nostros oppugnantibus, mari ac terra urbem invadentes Turci."

8 Philippides and Hanak, *Cardinal Isidore*, 209 (Latin text), 211–212 (translation). "instabamus usque ad quiqunquagesimum diem. In quanquagesimo vero <quinto> die [...] urbs Constantinopolitana [...] capta est, die 29 Maii"

If one should take a careful look at the context of the date in Isidore's letter to Cardinal Bessarion, one would realize why Isidore is so careful about that date. A follower of the occult, Isidore was a great believer in astrology, as were many other individuals in the fifteenth century.[9] Isidore includes the following observation about the date of May 29 in this letter composed soon after his arrival in Crete: "in Crete, the sixth of July, 1453 AD"[10]; "[...] he [Mehmed II] launched the most strenuous attack, as he had consulted expert astrologers from Persia. He relied on their advice and judgment to achieve his greatest goal."[11]

Isidore must have received sound information on this detail, as we know from Ottoman sources that indeed the sultan had consulted astrologers. A Sufi, Sheikh Akşemseddin,[12] had become a spiritual guide, a *murşid*, to Mehmed, and evidence from the correspondence of the Sufi reveals that the sultan had asked him to calculate the propitious astrological date on which the conquest of Constantinople would occur.[13] Given this interest of Isidore, it is not surprising to realize that dates had a certain significance for him and for many others in the *quattrocento*. Yet Isidore's testimony is the earliest to associate "unlucky" dimensions to Tuesday, May 29. Thus, in this letter, he calls May 29, in an accusative of exclamation, "infestum" and "execrabilem diem." In another letter, written on the same day as the letter to Bessarion, dated July 6, 1453 ("ex Candida insulae Cretae pridie nonas Julii MCCCCLIII"), in a more extended passage, he gives further details as to the "quality" of May 29:

> O that unhappy day, if it is religiously correct, to describe, with such a term, that day of the birth and festival of Santa Theodosia, the martyr, which will be forever untoward and will thus be remembered as the day of the greatest disaster suffered by Christians: May 29.[14]

The letter contains the terms *infelix*, *festus*, and *infestus*–by implication, which suggest that Cardinal Isidore must have used in his Greek account the term *ἀποφρὰς ἡμέρα*, which a humanist notary-translator rendered correctly in line as *infestus dies*—following the ancient Roman custom of citing "lucky" and "unlucky" days. This citation is the earliest we have on record. Was Cardinal Isidore the first to invent the inauspicious dimensions of the day, or was it already in circulation on the popular level? The fact remains, nevertheless, that to our day Greeks consider Tuesdays, in general, and May as ill-omened days on which any business transactions and other enterprises are best avoided.

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9 Cardinal Isidore had a deep interest in astrology, prophecies, and matters of the occult, in general. Thus certain manuscripts of ancient works copied by his own hand survive and illustrate his interests; notable among them, in connection with astrology, is Pseudo-Ptolemy in Vat.gr.1698. For his activities in this field, see Christos G. Patrinelis, "Ἕλληνες Κωδικογράφοι τῶν Χρόνων τῆς Ἀναγεννήσεως," *Ἐπετηρὶς τοῦ Μεσαιωνικοῦ Ἀρχείου* 8/9 (1958/1959): 63–124; see also Philippides and Hanak, *Cardinal Isidore*, 11–12.

10 Philippides and Hanak, *Cardinal Isidore*, 202 (Latin text), 208 (translation). "in Creta die sexta Iulii anno Domini M°CCCC°LIII°"

11 Philippides and Hanak, *Cardinal Isidore*, 201 (Latin text), 205 (translation). Isidore omits any mention of astrology in his letter to the pope, which was written originally in Greek but translated by a humanist into Latin (as Isidore never achieved fluency in Latin) nine days after he had written his letter to Cardinal Bessarion; see Philippides and Hanak, *Cardinal Isidore*, 210: "datum Candiae, die XV Iulii LIII°." "[...] ut Martem potentissium ac diem et horam eius accuratissime observavit [sc. Mehmed II]; habet enim diligentissimos astrologos Persas, quorum consiliis ac iudicio fretus summa qu<a>eque ac maxima sese consecuturum sperat."

12 On the Sufi, see: H.-J. Kissling, "Aq Şems ed-Din, ein türkischer Heiliger aus der Endzeit von Byzanz," *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 44 (1951): 322–333; Philippides and Hanak, *The Siege and Fall of Constantinople*, 88–89.

13 This letter survives in one manuscript, *Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi Arşivi 5584* and published by Halil Inalcık, *Fatih Devri Üzerinde Tetkikler ve Vesikalar* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1954); İnalcık, "Istanbul: An Islamic City," in *Essays in Ottoman History* (Istanbul: Eren, 1998), 249–271. In an earlier period, Murad II had also consulted astrologers and occultists to discover a favorable date for launching his general assault upon Constantinople; see the narrative of the eyewitness John Kananos in Andrea Massimo Cuomo, *Ioannis Canani de Constantinopolitana Obsidione Relatio: A Critical Edition, with English Translation, Introduction, and Notes of John Kananos' Account of the Siege of Constantinople in 1422* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2016), 21–23.

14 Agostino Pertusi, *La Caduta di Costantinopoli*, 60. This letter was probably dictated in Greek and translated into Latin, as the *incipit* indicates: "epistola composita per ser pasium Bertipalia [Pasio Bertipaglia] notarium ad instantiam reverendisimi domini domini Isidori cardinali Sabinensis." "O diem infelicem, si fas est infelicem dici diem qua natalitia Santae Theodosiae virginis et martiris colerentur, festus quidem haut quaquam dies, verum infesta semper et christiano nomini perpetuo memoranda tantae cladis acceptae memoria praeteriti mensis Junii quarto Kalendas." My translation, for clarity's sake, is *ad sensum* and not *ad verbum*. Santa Theodosia's cult was celebrated in a large church, which still survives in its modern form as the beautiful Gül Camii near the Aya Kapı in the modern district of Fatih in Istanbul. For this mosque and the legends and folktales attached to it, see Philippides and Hanak, *The Siege and Fall of Constantinople*, 265–288.

Yet the historian may ask how valid "Tuesday, May 29" is. The careful observer will reflect that this date in the fifteenth century is based on the calendar that had been used in the *quattrocento*, which was different from the calendar in use nowadays. Throughout the Middle Ages the Julian calendar was in use, named after Julius Caesar, which was established in 46 BC with the aid of Greek astronomers. By contrast, we now employ the calendar generally known as the Gregorian calendar, which was put into use by Pope Gregory XIII in October 1582. In this new calendar, Thursday, October 4, 1582 was followed by Friday, October 15, 1582, and in the new calendar the old Julian dates are no longer valid.[15] A simple calculation reveals that the Julian date of Tuesday, May 29, 1453 corresponds to the Gregorian date of Thursday, June 6, 1453. Yet this change is reflected in neither scholarship nor in popular attitudes, and the conquest of Constantinople is still celebrated and commemorated as if the Julian date were still in effect. Evidently, by 1582 the Julian date had been etched in stone, and all the negative connotations concerning an *infestus dies* (ἀποφρὰς ἡμέρα) continued, despite the calendar change, to the present day.

Keeping with this overlooked change of our calendars in regard to the siege of 1453, there is another corollary that must be taken into account. There is one astronomical event that provides a firm date for the siege. Nicolò Barbaro describes an event that elated the Ottoman army, as it predicted the fall of the city, while it lowered considerably the morale of the defenders: a lunar eclipse, which he describes accurately.[16] Barbaro states that the eclipse took place on May 22 but is mistaken, as the moon has to be full for a lunar eclipse to occur; the moon was full on May 24 (Julian date).[17] This lunar eclipse seems to be described also in the Slavonic narrative of the eyewitness Nestor-Iskander, which correctly emphasizes the red hues that are associated with all lunar eclipses.[18] Nestor-Iskander further associates the lunar eclipse with the departure of the Holy Spirit from the city.[19] The Julian date of May 24 corresponds to the Gregorian date of June 1, 1453.

What also seems to have contributed to the retention of the Julian date of May 29, 1453, with its "unlucky/inauspicious" connotations, was the fact that the Gregorian reforms were adopted late in the eastern Mediterranean. Thus, Greece adopted the reforms and the Gregorian calendar on in 1923, [20] while the Republic of Turkey was one of the last countries to do so on January 1, 1926.[21] Given these traditional extensions, it is very unlikely that the celebrations in Istanbul[22] to commemorate the conquest on the Julian date of May 29 will ever change.

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15 George V. Coyne, Michael A. Hoskin, and Olef Pedersen, eds., *Gregorian Reform of the Calendar: Proceedings of the Vatican Conference to Commemorate its 400th Anniversary, 1582–1982* (Vatican City: Pontificia Academia Scientiarum, 1983).

16 Barbaro's important passage is cited, with English translation and brief comment, in Philippides and Hanak, *The Siege and Fall of Constantinople*, 226–227. For a discussion of all the "omens" that predicted the fall of the city during the siege, see 214–231. This lunar eclipse is hauntingly portrayed in the fifth episode of the aforementioned Netflix series, entitled "Ancient Prophecies."

17 Steven Runciman had seen this error in Barbaro: "[...] the eclipse of the moon [...] is two days out"; see Runciman, *Fall of Constantinople*, 196; elsewhere he correctly states that the moon was full on May 24 (Julian date); ibid., 121. See the catalogue of lunar eclipses compiled by NASA, *eclipse.gsfc.nasa.gov*.

18 For Nestor-Iskander's Slavonic text, with English translation, see Walter K. Hanak and Marios Philippides, *Nestor-Iskander: The Tale of Constantinople (of its Origin and Capture by the Turks in the Year 1453)* (New Rochelle, NY: Aristide D. Caratzas, 1998), 80–81.

19 Nestor-Iskander, 80: "тако и отшествіе Святаго Духа видѣ."

20 Previously the Greco-Byzantine version of the Julian calendar was used. This calendar was even more complicated in the Byzantine era, which cited September 1 as the beginning of the New Year and further counted years from the creation of the world, which had been calculated to have occurred in 5508 BC. This Julian "old style" calendar is still used in conservative religious circles, such as the monasteries of Mount Athos.

21 Previously the Islamic lunar calendar based on Hegira was used.

22 On the festivities and parades, see G. D. Brockett, "When Ottomans Become Turks: Commemorating the Conquest of Constantinople and Its Contribution to World History," *American Historical Review* 119 (April 2014): 399–433.