

## The History of Mehmed the Conqueror (1453 C.E.)

KRITOVOULOS

*Mehmed II (1432–1481) was one of the great military geniuses of world history. He consolidated the expansion of the Ottoman Empire in Asia Minor, and in 1453 organized the siege of Constantinople. He personally directed the combined land and naval assault and brilliantly improvised the tactics that led to the fall of the city. The fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans was a watershed. No longer could the West assume military superiority over the East. Ottoman dominance of Asia Minor and its threat to the lands of the Holy Roman Empire continued for nearly two centuries.*

*Kritovoulos was a Greek who entered the service of Mehmed II, probably after the siege. Nothing is known of his personal life. Although he was not an eyewitness of the fall of Constantinople, he gathered numerous accounts together in composing his history. He was a servant and admirer of the Ottoman Sultan; however, he was also a Greek who mourned the collapse of the center of the Greek Orthodox Church and the inheritor of the Eastern Empire.*

To the Supreme Emperor, King of Kings, Mehmed, the fortunate, the victor, the winner of trophies, the triumphant, the invincible, Lord of land and sea, by the will of God, Kritovoulos the Islander, servant of thy servants.

Seeing that you are the author of many great deeds, O most mighty Emperor, and in the belief that the many great achievements of generals and kings of old, nor merely of Persians and Greeks, are not worthy to be compared in glory and bravery and martial valor with yours, I do not think it just that they and their deeds and accomplishments, as set forth in the Greek historians and their writings from contemporary times and up to the present, should be celebrated and admired by all, and that these should enjoy everlasting remembrance, while you, so great and powerful a man, possessing almost all the lands under the sun, and glorious in your great and brilliant exploits, should have no witness, for the future, of your valor and the greatest and best of your deeds, like one of the unknown and inglorious ones who are till now unworthy of any memorial or record in Greek; or that the deeds of others, petty as they are in comparison to yours, should be better known and more famed before men because done by Greeks and in Greek history, while your accomplishments, vast as they are, and in no way inferior to those of Alexander the Macedonian, or of the generals and kings of his rank, should not be set forth in Greek to the Greeks, nor passed on to posterity for the undying praise and glory of your deeds.

Sultan Mehmed considered it necessary in preparation for his next move to get possession of the harbor and open the Horn for his own ships to sail in. So, since every effort and device of his had failed to force the entrance, he made a wise decision, and one worthy of his intellect and power. It succeeded in accomplishing his purpose and in putting an end to all uncertainties.

He ordered the commanders of the vessels to construct as quickly as possible glideways leading from the outer sea to the inner sea, that is, from the harbor to the Horn, near the place called Diplo-kion, and to cover them with beams. This road, measured from sea to sea, is just about eight stadia. It is very steep for more than half the way, until you reach the summit of the hill, and from there again it

descends to the inner sea of the Horn. And as the glideways were completed sooner than expected, because of the large number of workers, he brought up the ships and placed large cradles under them, with stays against each of their sides to hold them up. And having under-girded them well with ropes, he fastened long cables to the corners and gave them to the soldiers to drag, some of them by hand, and others by certain machines and capstans.

So the ships were dragged along very swiftly. And their crews, as they followed them, rejoiced at the event and boasted of it. Then they manned the ships on the land as if they were on the sea. Some of them hoisted the sails with a shout, as if they were setting sail, and the breeze caught the sails and bellied them out. Others seated themselves on the benches, holding the oars in their hands and moving them as if rowing. And the commanders, running along by the sockets of the masts with whistlings and shouting, and with their whips beating the oarsmen on the benches, ordered them to row. The ships, borne along over the land as if on the sea, were some of them being pulled up the ascent to the top of the hill while others were being hauled down the slope into the harbor, lowering the sails with shouting and great noise.

It was a strange spectacle, and unbelievable in the telling except to those who actually did see it—the sight of ships borne along on the mainland as if sailing on the sea, with their crews and their sails and all their equipment. I believe this was a much greater feat than the cutting of a canal across at Athos by Xerxes, and much stranger to see and to hear about. . . .

Thus, then, there assembled in the bay called Cold Waters, a little beyond Galata, a respectable fleet of some sixty-seven vessels. They were moored there.

The Romans, when they saw such an unheard-of thing actually happen, and warships lying at anchor in the Horn—which they never would have suspected—were astounded at the impossibility of the spectacle, and were overcome by the greatest consternation and perplexity. They did not know what to do now, but were in despair. In fact they had left unguarded the walls along the Horn for a distance of about thirty stadia, and even

so they did not have enough men for the rest of the walls, either for defense or for attack, whether citizens or men from elsewhere. Instead, two or even three battlements had but a single defender.

And now, when this sea-wall also became open to attack and had to be guarded, they were compelled to strip the other battlements and bring men there. This constituted a manifest danger, since the defenders were taken away from the rest of the wall while those remaining were not enough to guard it, being so few.

Then, with fine insight, the Sultan summoned the shield-bearers, heavy infantry and other troops and said: "Go to it, friends and children mine! It is time now to show yourselves good fighters!" They immediately crossed the moat, with shouts and fearful yells, and attacked the outer wall. All of it, however, had been demolished by the cannon. There were only stockades of great beams instead of a wall, and bundles of vine-branches, and jars full of earth. At that point a fierce battle ensued close in and with the weapons of hand-to-hand fighting. The heavy infantry and shield-bearers fought to overcome the defenders and get over the stockade, while the Romans and Italians tried to fight these off and to guard the stockade. At times the infantry did get over the wall and the stockade, pressing forward bravely and unhesitatingly. And at times they were stoutly forced back and driven off.

The Sultan followed them up, as they struggled bravely, and encouraged them. He ordered those in charge of the cannon to put the match to the cannon. And these, being set off, fired their stone balls against the defenders and worked no little destruction on both sides, among those in the near vicinity.

So, then, the two sides struggled and fought bravely and vigorously. Most of the night passed, and the Romans were successful and prevailed not a little. Also, Giustinianni and his men kept their positions stubbornly, and guarded the stockade and defended themselves bravely against the aggressors. . . .

Sultan Mehmed saw that the attacking divisions were very much worn out by the battle and had not made any progress worth mentioning, and that the Romans and Italians were not only fighting

stoutly but were prevailing in the battle. He was very indignant at this, considering that it ought not to be endured any longer. Immediately he brought up the divisions which he had been reserving for later on, men who were extremely well armed, daring and brave, and far in advance of the rest in experience and valor. They were the elite of the army: heavy infantry, bowmen, and lancers, and his own bodyguard, and along with them those of the division called Janissaries.

Calling to them and urging them to prove themselves now as heroes, he led the attack against the wall, himself at the head until they reached the moat. There he ordered the bowmen, stingers, and musketeers to stand at a distance and fire to the right, against the defenders on the palisade and on the battered wall. They were to keep up so heavy a fire that those defenders would be unable to fight, or to expose themselves because of the cloud of arrows and other projectiles falling like snowflakes.

To all the rest, the heavy infantry and the shieldbearers, the Sultan gave orders to cross the moat swiftly and attack the palisade. With a loud and terrifying war-cry and with fierce impetuosity and wrath, they advanced as if mad. Being young and strong and full of daring, and especially because they were fighting in the Sultan's presence, their valor exceeded every expectation. They attacked the palisade and fought bravely without any hesitation.

Needing no further orders, they knocked down the turrets which had been built out in front, broke the yardarms, scattered the materials that had been gathered, and forced the defenders back inside the palisade.

. . . The Romans in that section fought bravely with lances, axes, pikes, javelins, and other weapons of offense. It was a hand-to-hand encounter, and they stopped the attackers and prevented them from getting inside the palisade. There was much shouting on both sides—the mingled sounds of blasphemy, insults, threats, attackers, defenders, shooters, those shot at, killers and dying, of those who in anger and wrath did all sorts of terrible things. And it was a sight to see there: a hard fight going on hand-to-hand with great determination

and for the greatest rewards, heroes fighting valiantly, the one party struggling with all their might to force back the defenders, get possession of the wall, enter the City, and fall upon the children and women and the treasures, the other party bravely agonizing to drive them off and guard their possessions, even if they were not to succeed in prevailing and in keeping them.

Instead, the hapless Romans were destined finally to be brought under the yoke of servitude and to suffer its horrors. For although they battled bravely. . . . They abandoned the palisade and wall where they had been fighting, and thought of only one thing—how they could get away safe themselves.

But the Emperor Constantine besought them earnestly, and made promises to them if they would wait a little while, till the fighting should subside. They would not consent, however, but taking up their leader and all their armor, they boarded the galleons in haste and with all speed, giving no consideration to the other defenders.

The Emperor Constantine forbade the others to follow. Then, though he had no idea what to do next—for he had no other reserves to fill the places thus left vacant, the ranks of those who had so suddenly deserted, and meantime the battle raged fiercely and all had to see to their own ranks and places and fight there—still, with his remaining Romans and his bodyguard, which was so few as to be easily counted, he took his stand in front of the palisade and fought bravely.

Sultan Mehmed, who happened to be fighting quite nearby, saw that the palisade and the other part of the wall that had been destroyed were now empty of men and deserted by the defenders. He noted that men were slipping away secretly and that those who remained were fighting feebly because they were so few. Realizing from this that the defenders had fled and that the wall was deserted, he shouted out: "Friends, we have the City! We have it! They are already fleeing from us! They can't stand it any longer! The wall is bare of defenders! It needs just a little more effort and the City is taken! Don't weaken, but on with the work with all your might, and be men and I am with you!"

So saying, he led them himself. And they, with a shout on the run and with a fearsome yell, went on ahead of the Sultan, pressing on up to the palisade. After a long and bitter struggle they hurled back the Romans from there and climbed by force up the palisade. They dashed some of their foe down into the ditch between the great wall and the palisade, which was deep and hard to get out of, and they killed them there. The rest they drove back to the gate.

He had opened this gate in the great wall, so as to go easily over to the palisade. Now there was a great struggle there and great slaughter among those stationed there, for they were attacked by the heavy infantry and not a few others in irregular formation, who had been attracted from many points by the shouting. There the Emperor Constantine, with all who were with him, fell in gallant combat.

The heavy infantry were already streaming through the little gate into the City, and others had rushed in through the breach in the great wall. Then all the rest of the army, with a rush and a roar, poured in brilliantly and scattered all over the City. And the Sultan stood before the great wall, where the standard also was and the ensigns, and watched the proceedings. The day was already breaking.

Then a great slaughter occurred of those who happened to be there: some of them were on the streets, for they had already left the houses and were running toward the tumult when they fell unexpectedly on the swords of the soldiers; others were in their own homes and fell victims to the violence of the Janissaries and other soldiers, without any rhyme or reason; others were resisting, relying on their own courage; still others were fleeing to the churches and making supplication—men, women, and children, everyone, for there was no quarter given.

The soldiers fell on them with anger and great wrath. For one thing, they were actuated by the hardships of the siege. For another, some foolish people had hurled taunts and curses at them from the battlements all through the siege.

Now, in general they killed so as to frighten all the City, and to terrorize and enslave all by the slaughter.

When they had had enough of murder, and the City was reduced to slavery, some of the troops turned to the mansions of the mighty, by bands and companies and divisions, for plunder and spoil. Others went to the robbing of churches, and others dispersed to the simple homes of the common people, stealing, robbing, plundering, killing, insulting, taking and enslaving men, women, and children, old and young, priests, monks—in short, every age and class.

And the desecrating and plundering and robbing of the churches—how can one describe it in words? Some things they threw in dishonor on the ground—ikons and reliquaries and other objects from the churches. The crowd snatched some of these, and some were given over to the fire while others were torn to shreds and scattered at the crossroads. The last resting places of the blessed men of old were opened, and their remains were taken out and disgracefully torn to pieces, even to shreds, and made the sport of the wind while others were thrown on the streets.

Chalices and goblets and vessels to hold the holy sacrifice, some of them were used for drinking and carousing, and others were broken up or melted down and sold. Holy vessels and costly robes richly embroidered with much gold or brilliant with precious stones and pearls were some of

them given to the most wicked men for no good use, while others were consigned to the fire and melted down for gold.

After this the Sultan entered the City and looked about to see its great size, its situation, its grandeur and beauty, its teeming population, its loveliness, and the costliness of its churches and public buildings and of the private houses and community houses and of those of the officials. He also saw the setting of the harbor and of the arsenals, and how skilfully and ingeniously they had everything arranged in the City—in a word, all the construction and adornment of it. When he saw what a large number had been killed, and the ruin of the buildings, and the wholesale ruin and destruction of the City, he was filled with compassion and repented not a little at the destruction and plundering. Tears fell from his eyes as he groaned deeply and passionately: “What a city we have given over to plunder and destruction!”

Thus he suffered in spirit. And indeed this was a great blow to us, in this one city, a disaster the like of which had occurred in no one of the great renowned cities of history, whether one speaks of the size of the captured City or of the bitterness and harshness of the deed. And no less did it astound all others than it did those who went through it and suffered, through the unreasonable and unusual character of the event and through the overwhelming and unheard-of horror of it.

### FOCUS QUESTIONS

1. What is the author's attitude toward Mehmed?
2. Why should Mehmed be compared to Alexander the Great and other ancients?
3. What was warfare like in the middle of the fifteenth century?
4. Does Kritovoulos glorify it or treat it critically? Why did Kritovoulos write his history? What lessons did he wish to convey?

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## Letters Between Sultan Selîm I and Shah Ismâ'îl (1514 C.E.)

*The Ottoman Empire did not only expand at the expense of the Christian West. By the sixteenth century Ottomans were invading the territory of other Muslim states and taking tribute where they could. In 1502 a conflict began between the Ottomans and the Safavids, a powerful and rival Muslim family that contested the legitimacy of Ottoman rule over their territory. Ismâ'îl, head of the Safavid family, proclaimed himself shah and attempted to drive the Ottomans from his lands. Sultan Selîm I responded with a reign of terror against Safavid communities. Matters came to a head in 1514 when armies of the two Muslim states fought at Chaldirân. The Ottomans won decisively.*

*In the months before the war, the shah and sultan conducted an unusual form of personal diplomacy by sending each other letters setting out their respective positions. They provide a unique glimpse into the attitudes of sixteenth-century Muslim rulers.*

### SELÎM TO ISMÂ'ÎL (UNDATED, CA. 1514)

It is from Solomon and it is: 'In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. Rise not up against me, but come to me in surrender.

[*Qur'ân XXVII: 30-31*]

God's blessings upon the best of his creatures, Muhammad, his family, and his companions all.

This is a Scripture We have sent down, blessed; so follow it, and be godfearing; haply so you will find mercy.

[*Qur'ân VI: 156*]

This missive which is stamped with the seal of victory and which is, like inspiration descending from the heavens, witness to the verse "We never

chastise until We send forth a Messenger" [Qur'ân XVII:15] has been graciously issued by our most glorious majesty—we who are the Caliph of God Most High in this world, far and wide; the proof of the verse "And what profits men abides in the earth" [Qur'ân XIII:17] the Solomon of Splendor, the Alexander of eminence; haloed in victory, Faridûn<sup>1</sup> triumphant; slayer of the wicked and the infidel, guardian of the noble and the pious; the warrior in the Path, the defender of the Faith; the champion, the conqueror; the lion, son and grandson of the lion; standard-bearer of justice and righteousness, Sultân Selîm Shâh, son of Sultân Bayezîd, son of Sultân Muhammad Khân—and is addressed to the ruler of the kingdom of the Persians, the possessor of the land of tyranny and perversion, the captain of the vicious, the chief of the malicious, the usurping Darius of the time, the malevolent Zahhâk of the age, the peer of Cain, Prince Ismâ'îl.

1. An ancient and celebrated king of Persia, who began to reign about 750 B.C.E.

As the Pen of Destiny has drawn up the rescript “Thou givest the kingdom to whom Thou wilt” [Qur’ân III:26] in our sublime name and has signed it with the verse “Whatsoever mercy God opens to men, none can withhold” [Qur’ân XXXV:2], it is manifest in the Court of Glory and the Presence of Deity that we, the instrument of Divine Will, shall hold in force upon the earth both the commandments and prohibitions of Divine Law as well as the provisions of royal proclamations. “That is the bounty of God; he gives it unto whomsoever He will” [Qur’ân LVII:21].

It has been heard repeatedly that you have subjected the upright community of Muhammad (Prayers and salutations upon its founder!) to your devious will, that you have undermined the firm foundation of the Faith, that you have unfurled the banner of oppression in the cause of aggression, that you no longer uphold the commandments and prohibitions of the Divine Law, that you have incited your abominable Shi’î faction to unsanctified sexual union and to the shedding of innocent blood, that like they “Who listen to falsehood and consume the unlawful” [Qur’ân V:42] you have given ear to idle deceitful words and have eaten that which is forbidden:

He has laid waste to mosques, as it is said,  
Constructing idol temples in their stead,

that you have rent the noble stuff of Islâm with the hand of tyranny, and that you have called the Glorious Qur’ân the myths of the Ancients. The rumor of these abominations has caused your name to become like that of Hârith deceived by Satan.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, as both the *fatwas* of distinguished ‘*ulamâ*’<sup>3</sup> who base their opinion on reason and tradition alike and the consensus of the Sunni<sup>4</sup> community agree that the ancient obligation of extirpation, extermination, and expulsion of evil innovation must be the aim of our exalted aspiration,

for “Religious zeal is a victory for the Faith of God the Beneficent”; then, in accordance with the words of the Prophet (Peace upon him!) “Whosoever introduces evil innovation into our order must be expelled” and “Whosoever does aught against our order must be expelled,” action has become necessary and exigent. Thus, when the Divine Decree of Eternal Destiny commended the eradication of the infamously wicked infidels into our capable hands, we set out for their lands like ineluctable fate itself to enforce the order “Leave not upon the earth of the Unbelievers even one” [Qur’ân LXXI:26]. If God almighty wills, the lightning of our conquering sword shall uproot the untamed bramble grown to great heights in the path of the refulgent Divine Law and shall cast them down upon the dust of abjectness to be trampled under the hooves of our legions, for “They make the mightiest of its inhabitants abased. Even so they too will do” [Qur’ân XXVII:34]; the thunder of our avenging mace shall dash out the muddled brains of the enemies of the Faith as rations for the lionhearted *ghâzîs*. “And those who do wrong shall surely know by what overthrowing they will be overthrown” [Qur’ân XXVI:227].

When I the sharp-edged sword draw from its sheath,  
Then shall I raise up doomsday on the earth.  
Then shall I roast the hearts of lion-hearted men,  
And toast the morning with a goblet of their blood.  
My crow-feathered arrow will fix the eagle in his flight;  
My naked blade will make the sun’s heart tremble.  
Inquire of the sun about the dazzle of my rein;  
Seek news of Mars about the brilliance of my arms.

2. *Hârith*: possibly a reference to Hârith ibn Suwayd, who pretended to convert to Islâm in Muhammad’s time, apostasized, and was ordered executed by Muhammad when he tried to rejoin the young Muslim community. Sefim is alluding to parallels between Hârith’s and Ismâ’îl’s career.

3. *Fatwas*: legal opinions, ‘*ulamâ*’: learned men.

4. *Sunni community*: those who follow the practice of Muhammad, i.e., not those like Shi’ites who followed ‘Ali.

Although a Sûfî<sup>5</sup> crown you wear, I bear a  
trenchant sword:  
The owner of the sword will soon possess the  
crown.  
O Mighty Fortune, pray grant this my single wish:  
Pray let me take both crown and power from  
the foe.

But "Religion is Counsel," and should you  
turn the countenance of submission to the *qibla* of  
bliss and the *Ka'ba*<sup>6</sup> of hope—our angelic thresh-  
old, the refuge of the noble moreover, should you  
lift up the hand of oppression from the heads of  
your subjects ruined by tyranny and sedition,  
should you take up a course of repentance, become  
like one blameless and return to the sublime  
straight path of the *Sunna*<sup>7</sup> of Muhammad (Prayers  
and salutations upon him and God's satisfaction  
upon his immaculate family and his rightly-guided  
companions all!). For "My companions are like the  
stars: whomever you choose to follow, you will be  
guided aright" and finally should you consider your  
lands and their people part of the well-protected  
Ottoman state, then shall you be granted our royal  
favor and our imperial patronage.

He whose face touches the dust of my  
threshold in submission  
Will be enveloped in the shadow of my favor  
and my justice.  
How great the happiness of him who complies  
with this!  
On the other hand, if your evil, seditious habits  
have become a part of your nature, that  
which has become essential can never again  
be accidental.  
What avail sermons to the black-hearted?

Then, with the support and assistance of God,  
I will crown the head of every gallows tree with the  
head of a crown-wearing Sûfî and clear that faction  
from the face of the earth—"The party of God,  
they are the victors" [Qur'ân V:56]; I will break the

oppressors' grip with the power of the miraculous  
white hand of Moses, for "God's hand is over their  
hands" [Qur'ân XLVIII:10]. Let them remove the  
cotton of negligence from the ears of their intelli-  
gence and, with their shrouds on their shoulders,  
prepare themselves for "Surely that which you are  
promised will come to pass" [Qur'ân VI:134]. The  
triumphant troops "As though they were a building  
well-compacted" [Qur'ân LXI:4] crying out like  
fate evoked "When their term comes they shall  
not put it back a single hour nor put it forward"  
[Qur'ân VII:34] and maneuvering in accordance  
with "Slay them wherever you find them" [Qur'ân  
IV:89], will wreak ruin upon you and drive you  
from that land. "To God belongs the command  
before and after, and on that day the believers shall  
rejoice" [Qur'ân XX:4]. "So the last roots of the  
people who did evil were cut off. Praise be to God,  
the Lord of the Worlds" [Qur'ân VI:45].

### ISMÂ'İL TO SELİM (UNDATED, CA. 1514)

May his godly majesty, the refuge of Islâm, the might  
of the kingdom, he upon whom God looks with  
favor, the champion of the sultanate and of the state,  
the hero of the faith and of the earth, Sultân Selîm  
Shâh (God grant him immortal state and eternal  
happiness!) accept this affectionate greeting and this  
friendly letter, considering it a token of our good will.

Now to begin: Your honored letters have  
arrived one after another, for "No sooner has a thing  
doubled than it has tripled." Their contents, although  
indicative of hostility, are stated with boldness and  
vigor. The latter gives us much enjoyment and plea-  
sure, but we are ignorant of the reason for the for-  
mer. In the time of your late blessed father (May God  
enlighten his proof!) when our royal troops passed  
through the lands of Rûm to chastise the impudence

5. Allusion to Safavî origins as mystical order. The "crown" was their special headgear.

6. *Qibla*: direction of prayer for Muslims, i.e., the K'ba or holy building in Mecca.

7. *Sunna*: practice, example, custom.



of Alâ' al-Dawla Dhûl) Qadr,<sup>8</sup> complete concord and friendship was shown on both sides. Moreover, when your majesty was governor at Trebizond [i.e., before his accession] there existed perfect mutual understanding. Thus, now, the cause of your resentment and displeasure yet remains unknown. If political necessity has compelled you on this course, then may your problems soon be solved.

Dispute may fire words to such a heat  
That ancient houses be consumed in flames.

The intention of our inaction in this regard is twofold:

1. Most of the inhabitants of the land of Rûm are followers of our forefathers (May God the All-Forgiving King have mercy upon them!).
2. We have always loved the *ghâzî*-titled<sup>9</sup> Ottoman house and we do not wish the outbreak of sedition and turmoil once again as in the time of Tîmûr.

Why should we then take umbrage at these provocations? We shall not.  
The mutual hostility of kings is verily an ancient rite.  
Should one hold the bride of worldly rule too close,  
His lips those of the radiant sword will kiss.

Nevertheless, there is no cause for improper words: indeed, those vain, heretical imputations are

the mere fabrications of the opium-clouded minds of certain secretaries and scribes. We therefore think that our delayed reply was not completely without cause for we have now dispatched our honored personal companion and servant Shâh Qulî Aghâ (May he be sustained!) with a golden casket stamped with the royal seal and filled with a special preparation for their use should they deem it necessary. May he soon arrive so that with assistance from above the mysteries concealed behind the veil of fate might be disclosed. But one should always exercise free judgment not bound solely by the words of others and always keep in view that in the end regrets avail him naught.

At this writing we were engaged upon the hunt near Isfahân; we now prepare provisions and our troops for the coming campaign. In all friendship we say do what you will.

Bitter experience has taught that in this world  
of trial

He who falls upon the house of 'Alî<sup>10</sup> always falls.

Kindly give our ambassador leave to travel unmolested. "No soul laden bears the load of another" [Qur'ân VI:164; LIII:38].

When war becomes inevitable, hesitation and delay must be set aside, and one must think on that which is to come. Farewell.