

**BYZANTINE ISTANBUL  
(330-1453): FALL OF  
CONSTANTINOPLE 1453**



# BYZANTINE ISTANBUL (330-1453): FALL OF CONSTANTINOPLE 1453

## Description

Through the investigation of selected primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to compare and contrast in detail how different Christian and Muslim accounts saw the Fall of Constantinople in 1453, and then by judging the historical and cultural context of the sources, students will be able to assess the validity of the different versions of the story. As a follow-up, students should be able to use the knowledge gained from this lesson plan to assess and explain Winston Churchill's assertion that history is written by the victors.

## Subjects

World History

## Grade Level

11-12

## Duration

90 minutes

## Tour Links

- Istanbul Archaeological Museum
- Hagia Sophia, Istanbul

## Essential Questions

- Why did Constantinople fall to the Ottoman Turks in 1453?
- How did Byzantine Christians see the Fall of Constantinople?
- How did Ottoman Muslims see the Fall of Constantinople?

## Academic Summary

“History is written by the victors.” -Quotation attributed to Winston Churchill

### **Letter of the Knights of St. John on Rhodes sent to Jerusalem to the Margrave of Brandenburg, 30 Jun 1453**

... It is with great heartfelt sorrow that we have decided to make known to your illustrious lordship what follows.

After the great Turk had besieged Constantinople by land and sea, on the twenty-ninth of the May just passed he seized the city by force of arms, killed the emperor of Constantinople, cut off the heads of many nobles, gave the entire city over to plunder, and cruelly tortured many. He then obtained the city of Pera, which the Genoese held, without force of arms, made it a tributary, and tore down its walls. This also happened to the walls of Constantinople.

It is believed that he is preparing a new fleet from scratch, since he intends to make all the islands of the Aegean archipelago subject to him or to destroy them if he can. For his heart swells with pride and he boasts that he has equaled or surpassed the deeds of Alexander of Macedon. He also threatens that he will attempt to do what Alexander never did ... push into Italy and the regions of the West with his arms and might and see whether fortune shall favor him there as it has throughout the East. This is why all Christian kings and princes should turn their minds to some sort of pact so that they may resist the ferocious power of this tyrant who has been roused to destroy Christians, unless God provides otherwise, and turn all their powers to the destruction of the Turk himself. For this would happen easily if they ever met together in peace and unity, came together, or agreed for the sake of the honor of the Catholic faith and protection of Christianity that the sect of Mohammed should no longer rage against the worshippers of Christ and at the same time entreated almighty God that His Grace make provision when human powers are not enough, that God who keeps you to your vow and happily leads your company to our city of Rhodes.

### **The Liberation of Constantinople**

#### **Abdullah Bin Bashir Al Khath**

##### ***The Battle***

After the sultan divided and placed his army, he sent his messenger to the king of Bizantia asking him to hand over the city giving him a full guarantee of safety for its residents, their wealth, their lives, their beliefs, and their honor. The refusal of the king to do this and his declaration of war against the Muslims led to the bombardment of the city for 48 days leading to the demolishing of some of the outer walls, without reaching the inner walls.

##### ***The Military Prowess***

With the new morn, the sultan ordered the setting up of his secret weapon which he had invented himself, which is a giant mobile tower, higher than the walls of the city accommodating hundreds of soldiers. This struck fear amongst the Byzantines leading them to believe that the Muslims were using demons in their battles. After the Muslims broke the middle walls, the defenders were able to destroy the moving towers by throwing chemicals at them. However, the resistance of the city began to weaken, while nightfall had left the Byzantines filled with fear leading them to spend their night in their churches praying their Lord to send to their aid the blue angels to save

Constantinople from the Muslims. Whilst the sultan spent his night motivating his armies reminding them of the hadith of the messenger and praying for victory from Allah.

### ***Entering The City***

As soon as the new morn came, the soldiers began their general attack. The Muslims began to erect towers and ladders and to cast projectiles at the inner walls of the city. However, the forts of the city and the desperate defense of its army delayed its liberation, and thousands of Muslim soldiers fell martyrs. When the sultan saw the size of his loss, he ordered the foot soldiers to withdraw. He also ordered a continuation of the bombardment until midday, when he ordered a complete attack and stirred them to this. The Muslim army attacked and some of the Mujahedeen were able to enter the city, the first to enter it was the Mujahid Hasan Ulu Badi with thirty of his brothers, however, the arrows rained on them from every side, and they were all martyred, the Muslims then began to retreat, and they almost began to flee.

### ***The Importance of the Leader in the Battle***

At this came the essential role of the leader in the battle as the sultan stood and spoke to his soldiers taking example from the messenger of Allah during the battle of Uhud giving an example of bravery in a few words, saying: "my sons, here I am ready for death in the path of Allah, so whoever desires martyrdom, let him follow me. Then the Muslims followed their leader like the flood from the dam tearing down the obstacles of Kufr until they entered the city and raised therein the word of monotheism... In this manner fell the city of Heracle which stood stubbornly in front of the Muslims for eight centuries... So they entered it erasing the Byzantine government opening the doors of Europe for the call of Islam. They recorded a white page in our history, realizing the promise of the messenger of Allah as when he was asked which of the two cities would be liberated first, Constantinople or Rome, he said: "The city of Heracle (i.e. Constantinople) would be liberated first."

On 29 May 1453, after over four centuries of standing as a bulwark for Christianity against Islamic armies coming up from Arabia, Constantinople fell to the Ottomans under Sultan Mehmed II. Western European Christians were stunned at the news. After over 1000 years as a Christian bulwark in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Byzantine Empire was gone. The last outpost of the Roman Empire with its link to the days of antiquity was gone. Rumors swirled around Constantine XI, last emperor of the Byzantines. Some "credible" sources said he had escaped to Christian Europe and was building a new army to retake the city. Others said he had been carried away by God's angels as the city fell. Centuries later, "his" sword was presented to Tsar Nicholas in St. Petersburg. It was even said that God was protecting him in a cave under the city, waiting for the day that Christians retook the city. Today the emperor is a Greek national hero.

Islamic forces were now on Europe's doorstep. Over the next few weeks after the fall of Constantinople, reports of Muslim atrocities started trickling into Europe. The ancient city had been ransacked. Muslim troops had massacred Christians, raped women and pillaged the city's wealth. The great Christian church Hagia Sophia had been converted into a mosque and its holy mosaics had been destroyed or covered in plaster. Constantinople, a city founded by Constantine the Great, the first Christian emperor and the man who under God's guidance had legalized the faith in the Roman

Empire, was now in the hands of the infidels.

Muslim accounts circulating through the Islamic world, of course, saw the “liberating” of Constantinople somewhat differently. After a great siege against the non-believers, warriors in the service of Allah had been granted a great victory under the leadership and sacrifice of Sultan Mehmed II. Arab tradition allowed Allah’s soldiers three days to take what they wanted from the city, but when that period was over, Mehmed ordered peace and stability throughout the ancient city. He then went directly to Hagia Sofia, which under Byzantine rule had deteriorated to a point where it was in terrible shape, and ordered the church changed to a mosque for the glory of Allah. He then appointed men to the work of reconstructing the city.

Since 1453, Constantinople, officially called “Istanbul” since the establishment of the Republic of Turkey after the Great War, has remained in Muslim hands. The city’s Topkapi Palace has relics from the Prophet Mohammed, including his cloak (brought in 1611), his battle standard (brought in 1595), an article of the Prophet’s clothing (brought in 1595), the Prophet’s beard, and a tooth from the Prophet. As of the 2000 census, there were almost 3000 active mosques serving the city. Over 98% of the population belongs to one Muslim community or another. Since 1924, Turkey has officially been a secular country with no official state religion, but 99% of the country’s population is Muslim.

Christians in the ancient city still exist. While many Byzantine Christians abandoned the ancient city after Hagia Sophia was converted to a mosque in 1453, other Orthodox churches were allowed to remain open and a small Christian community thrived in what became a Muslim stronghold. To solidify his position and to quell any potential issues with the remaining Christians, Mehmed II appointed a new Patriarch in 1454 and declared him to be the leader of all Christians living in the Ottoman Empire. The Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople is still headed by the Archbishop of Constantinople and his church still serves as the mother church and is generally considered to be the spiritual leader for all Orthodox churches and Orthodox Christians, both in Eastern Europe and around the world.

Through the investigation of selected primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to compare and contrast in detail how different Christian and Muslim accounts saw the Fall of Constantinople in 1453, and then by judging the historical and cultural context of the sources, students will be able to assess the validity of the different versions of the story. As a follow-up, students should be able to use the knowledge gained from this lesson plan to assess and explain Winston Churchill’s assertion that history is written by the victors.

## Objectives

1. Students will identify, understand and be able to compare and contrast in detail how different Christian and Muslim accounts saw the Fall of Constantinople in 1453.
2. Students will identify, understand and be able to judge the historical and cultural context of the sources to assess the validity of how each side saw the Fall of Constantinople in 1453.
3. Using knowledge and skills gained in this lesson, students will understand and be able to assess Winston Churchill’s assertion that history is written by the victors.

# Procedures

## I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: Can perspective change one's view of history and events of the past? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of documents and readings from the websites listed. (5 min)

## II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – Fall of Constantinople 1543 (20 min)
- Video – Fall of Constantinople (20 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the articles and sources on the Fall of Constantinople, taking notes as appropriate. (20 min)
- Suggestion: All students should focus on primary sources from both sides.
- Group Activity – Socratic Seminar: Discussion on the Fall of Constantinople. (15 min)

## III. Closure

- Assessment / DBQ – Essay: Compare and contrast in detail how different Christian and Muslim accounts saw the Fall of Constantinople in 1453, and then by judging the historical and cultural context of the sources, students will be able to assess the validity of the different versions of the story. As a follow-up, students should be able to use the knowledge gained from this lesson plan to assess and explain Winston Churchill's assertion that history is written by the victors.

## Extension

### **On tour: Hagia Sophia (Church of the Holy Wisdom), Istanbul**

While on tour, students in Istanbul can visit Hagia Sophia (Church of the Holy Wisdom – Ayasofya in Turkish), where they can see for themselves the building that served as the central cathedral for Eastern Christianity for almost 1000 years. Built in the 6th century under orders from Emperor Justinian, it has some of the greatest Christian mosaics surviving from the period. When the Ottomans took the city in 1453, Hagia Sophia was converted into a mosque and the mosaics were covered or painted over under Islamic law (this action may have actually preserved them). Some of the priceless works of art remain covered today as the Turkish government tries to find a balance between religious and secular needs. Christian and secular tourists, of course, would like to see everything uncovered. Muslims, however, point out that the Quran prohibits idol worship. It is a difficult and delicate issue. In 1930, the mosque was decommissioned and the Turkish government turned the building into a museum, and it is now one of the most visited attractions in the ancient city. Another problem is that Hagia Sophia is almost 1500 years old and badly needs conservation and restoration. Istanbul sits on top of a section of the North Anatolian Fault, one of the most tectonically active fault lines in the world (often compared to the San Andreas Fault in California) and earthquakes occasionally rock the city of 15 million people as the Eurasian and Arabian plates rub together. Hagia Sophia's structure today shows cracks that only get worse with every tremor. Turkey's financial troubles over the last 20 years, however, have made it difficult for the government to find funds. Hagia Sophia is a UNESCO world site and is considered one of the world's great wonders, and international private organizations have stepped in to help fill the void, but more work needs to be done. Students should be reminded that Hagia Sophia is one of the few places on the globe today that Muslims and Christians can both claim and where people of both faiths can visit. Perhaps Hagia Sophia itself can teach us how to live together? Tickets are 25 Turkish Lira (about US\$11.50).

# Web Links

## Lesson Plan Websites

- [www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/paulsilent-hagsoph1.asp](http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/paulsilent-hagsoph1.asp)  
Paul the Silentary: the Magnificence of Hagia Sophia (primary source) – from the Ancient History Sourcebook at Fordham University
- [www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/constantinople.htm](http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/constantinople.htm)  
The Sack of Constantinople, 1453 (primary source: Christian)
- [www.greece.org/romiosini/fall.html](http://www.greece.org/romiosini/fall.html)  
The Fall of Constantinople (primary source: Christian)
- [https://apps.carleton.edu/curricular/mars/Translations/primary\\_sources/Byzantine\\_History](https://apps.carleton.edu/curricular/mars/Translations/primary_sources/Byzantine_History) (primary sources: Christian) – from Carleton College (MN)
- <http://militaryrevolution.s3.amazonaws.com/Primary%20sources/Barbaro.pdf>  
Siege of Constantinople according to Nicolo Barbaro (primary source: Christian) – This 27 page PDF file contains excerpts from perhaps the most famous Christian source on the Fall of Constantinople. Highly recommended for all AP/Advanced students.
- [www.artsrn.ualberta.ca/amcdouga/Hist349/readings/tursun%20beg.pdf](http://www.artsrn.ualberta.ca/amcdouga/Hist349/readings/tursun%20beg.pdf)  
Tursun Beg: Historian of Mehmed the Conqueror (primary source: Muslim) – from E. Ann McDougall, Professor of History at the University of Alberta (Canada)
- <http://portfolio.columbus.edu.co/blogs/18033/wp-content/uploads/sites/49/2013/05/The-Fall-of-Constantinople.pptx>  
Fall of Constantinople (PowerPoint) – from the Columbus School (Medellin, Columbia)
- [www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1](http://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1)  
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video). Great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvoor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA. Highly recommended for teachers.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gw66\\_DkulyM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gw66_DkulyM)  
History's Turning Points – AD 1453 Siege of Constantinople (video) – This 25 minute video, produced by the History Channel, is appropriate and recommended for all classes.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=aWljhb1DEQ8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aWljhb1DEQ8)  
Byzantium: The Lost Empire (video) -- This 3 ½ hour video by The Learning Channel is far too long for any in-class showings, but is highly recommended for students and teachers who want to gain a full understanding of the Byzantine Empire. The video is in 3 parts, each approximately 1 hour in length.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=MpPGxJT9qQI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MpPGxJT9qQI)  
Ottoman Empire Documentary (video) – this 90 minute video by the History Channel is far too long for any in-class showings, but is highly recommended for students and teachers who want to gain a full understanding of the Ottomans.

## Background Information

- [www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fall\\_of\\_Constantinople](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fall_of_Constantinople)  
Fall of Constantinople – Wikipedia article
- [www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Byzantine\\_Empire](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Byzantine_Empire)  
Byzantine Empire– Wikipedia article
- [www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ottoman\\_Empire](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ottoman_Empire)



- Ottoman Empire – Wikipedia article
- [www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mehmed\\_II](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mehmed_II)  
Mehmed the Conqueror – Wikipedia article

### **Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans**

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/turkey/byzantine-istanbul-constantinople](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/turkey/byzantine-istanbul-constantinople)  
Byzantine Istanbul – Constantinople: The New Rome
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/turkey/byzantine-istanbul-constantinople-hagia-sophia](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/turkey/byzantine-istanbul-constantinople-hagia-sophia)  
Byzantine Istanbul – Constantinople: Hagia Sophia
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/turkey/byzantine-istanbul-fall-of-constantinople-1453](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/turkey/byzantine-istanbul-fall-of-constantinople-1453)  
Byzantine Istanbul – Fall of Constantinople 1453
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/turkey/byzantine-istanbul-great-schism-of-1054](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/turkey/byzantine-istanbul-great-schism-of-1054)  
Great Schism of 1054 – Catholic vs. Orthodox

### **Key Terms**

- Byzantine Empire
- Byzantium
- Constantine XI
- Constantinople
- Hagia Sophia
- Islam
- Mehmed the Conqueror
- Ottoman Empire

