

THE CITY AND ITS HERITAGE (Excerpt from a book of the British historian Mr. Edwin Pears)

It was early June 1453, in Constantinople. The city was made a desolation. The followers of Mohamet, soldiers and sailors, left nothing of value except the buildings. Constantinople, says writer Critoboulos, was as if it had been visited by a hurricane or had been burnt. It was as silent as a tomb. The Turkish sailors especially were active in destruction. The churches, crypts, coffins, cellars, every place and every thing was ransacked or broken into in search of plunder. Mohamet, according to the same writer, wept as he saw the ravages his soldiers had wrought, and expressed his amazement at the ruins of the city which had been given over to plunder and had been made a desert.

All the Turks who first entered the city became rich. The population that survived the indiscriminate slaughter, were bound together preparatory to their final distribution. Captives were sent in great numbers to Asia Minor either for sale or to the homes of the armed population who had taken part in the siege. Only a miserable remnant remained in Constantinople.

The reader of the accounts of the siege, and indeed of its history generally before 1453, cannot but be struck with the attachment shown by its inhabitants towards their city. For them it is the Queen of Cities, the most beautiful, the most wealthy, the most orderly, and the most civilized of the world. There the merchant could find all the produce of the East, and could trade with buyers from all countries. There the student had access to the great libraries of philosophy, law, and theology, the rich storehouse of the writings of the Christian Fathers, and of the great classics of ancient Greece. In quietness and security, generations of Orthodox monks had copied the manuscripts of earlier days free from the alarms which in Western and Eastern countries alike disturbed the scholar. The Church, the lawyers and scholars had kept alive a knowledge of the ancient Greek language in a form in all its essential features, like that which existed in the days of Pericles. Priests and laymen were proud to be inheritors and guardians of the writings of classical times and to consider themselves of the same blood as their authors. Though often almost as intolerant towards heretics as the great sister Church of the West, they did not and could not regard Plato and Aristotle, Leonidas and Pericles, and the rest of their glorious predecessors as eternally lost because they had not known Christ, and their sense of relationship with them helped to develop a conviction of the continuity of their history, not only with Constantine and the Roman Empire, but with the more remote peoples of Greece who had given them their language. The Church takes the credit for having aided the growth of the population in the Christian virtues, for having given them an inspiration enabling them to suffer and to hope, for having preserved learning, developed national intelligence, cultivating exact thought and in various ways guarded the treasures

of classic Greek times until the rest of Europe was ready to receive them and to fuel with them the fire of Renaissance.

The New Rome had for a thousand years been towards all Eastern Christians all that the Elder Rome was to those of the West, and their pride in its stability and security was great. Once, and once alone, had it been captured. But the unfortunate attack made by the West with the Fourth Crusade in 1204, the results of which had been so correctly foreseen and foretold by Innocent the Third, had been in part overcome. This new capture was infinitely more serious. The essential difference between the two is commented on by Critoboulos. By the first the city sustained a foreign domination for sixty years and lost much of its wealth. A great number of beautiful statues and other works of art, coveted by the whole world, were taken away and many more destroyed. But there the mischief stopped. The city did not lose all its inhabitants. Wives and children were not taken away. When the tyranny was past, the city recovered and once more it figured as the renewed capital of an empire, though only an image of what it had once been. It was still in the eyes of all Greek-speaking people the leader and example of all that was good, the home of philosophy and of every kind of learning, of science, of virtue, and in truth of all that is best. Now, all was changed: the new conquerors were Asiatics. A false religion replaced Christianity. The capital was a desert.

The city's situation of picturesque beauty, as well as its Christian and historical associations, increased the love for it and its inhabitants and made them as proud of Constantinople as ever were the Italian citizens of Florence or Venice. It is therefore not surprising to find that, on its conquest, the grief and the rage of those who had lived in it are almost too great for words. She, who had formerly reigned over many people with honor, glory, and renown, is now ruled by others and has sunk into poverty, ignominy, dishonor, and shameful slavery. The lamentations of Doucas are as sincere as those of Jeremiah. Its inhabitants gone; its womanhood destined to dishonorable servitude; its nobles massacred; the very babes at the breast butchered; the temples of God defiled; all present a spectacle on which he enlarges with the expression of a hope that the anger of God will be appeased and that His people will yet find favour.

Unhappily, the Greek race had entered upon the darkness of the blackest of nights, and nearly four centuries had to pass before the dawn of their new day was at hand.

This dawn is celebrated on March 25. On this day that commemorates the Annunciation of Virgin Mary, inside the chapel of Agia Laura under the flag of the cross, the enslaved Greek people took the oath in commencing the struggle for the rebirth of their nation; alike the Angel that brought to the Virgin Mary the good news.