



## Muhammad Al-Fatih's Conquest of Constantinople: Strategies and Implications

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### Abstract

This research focuses on the expansionist policies pursued by Sultan Muhammad Al-Fatih and their impact on the regions surrounding Constantinople. The qualitative study aims to delve deeper into the strategies employed by Al-Fatih and contribute to a deeper understanding of his political expansion. The research methodology involves analyzing historical accounts and relevant literature, conducting a comprehensive review of existing scholarly works, and employing a descriptive analytical approach. The study highlights the military preparation, diplomacy and alliances, siege tactics, technological utilization, and post-conquest rule as key factors in Al-Fatih's expansionist endeavors. The conquest of Constantinople had significant ramifications for both Europe and the Islamic world. In Europe, it altered the political landscape, led to changes in trade routes, and resulted in massive migrations. In the Islamic world, it elevated the status and pride of the Muslim community, inspired other leaders, and influenced art, architecture, and literature.

**Keywords:** *Muhammad Al-Fatih, Expansionist Policies, Constantinople*

### Abstrak

Penelitian ini berfokus pada kebijakan ekspansionis yang ditempuh oleh Sultan Muhammad Al-Fatih dan dampaknya terhadap wilayah di sekitar Konstantinopel. Studi kualitatif ini bertujuan untuk menggali lebih dalam strategi yang digunakan oleh Al-Fatih dan berkontribusi pada pemahaman yang lebih mendalam tentang ekspansi politiknya. Metodologi penelitian melibatkan analisis catatan sejarah dan literatur yang relevan, melakukan tinjauan menyeluruh terhadap karya ilmiah yang ada, dan menggunakan pendekatan analitis deskriptif. Studi menunjukkan bahwa persiapan militer, diplomasi dan aliansi, taktik pengepungan, pemanfaatan teknologi, dan pemerintahan pasca-penaklukan sebagai faktor kunci dalam upaya ekspansionis Al-Fatih. Penaklukan Konstantinopel memiliki dampak signifikan baik bagi Eropa maupun dunia Islam. Di Eropa, hal ini mengubah lanskap politik, mengakibatkan perubahan dalam jalur perdagangan, dan menyebabkan migrasi massal. Di dunia Islam, penaklukan ini meningkatkan status dan kebanggaan komunitas Muslim, menginspirasi pemimpin lain, dan mempengaruhi seni, arsitektur, dan sastra.

**Kata Kunci:** *Muhammad Al-Fatih, Kebijakan Ekspansionis, Konstantinopel*

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## A. Introduction

Constantinople became the capital of the Roman Empire in 324 AD when Emperor Constantine the Great relocated the capital from Rome to Byzantium. To commemorate him, the city was named Constantinopolis (the City of Constantine) and later became known as Constantinople (Alatas 2005:7). The city is situated on the Bosphorus Peninsula, between the Balkans and Anatolia, and between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. Geographically, Constantinople's location is highly strategic and advantageous (Lucas 1993:42).

In the 14th and 15th centuries AD, the Byzantine Empire's territorial power diminished as the Ottoman Empire expanded into European territories. This posed challenges to the Eastern Roman Empire as it lacked support from the West. The attempts to unite the Eastern Church (Orthodox) in Constantinople with the Western Church (Catholic) in Rome, which were expected to bring assistance from the Pope to the East, instead resulted in divisions in Constantinople (Ash-Shallabi 2021:38). During the journey to Constantinople, the Crusaders caused unrest, engaged in looting, and even clashed with the people of Hungary and Byzantium. Eventually, these Crusader forces were easily defeated by the Seljuk Dynasty (Supriyadi 2008)

During the spring and summer of 1452, Sultan Al-Fatih ordered the construction of a fortress near the Bosphorus on the Asian side, which is now known as Rumelihisari or Boğazkesen Castle (Dülger 2022; Fortress In Istanbul 2022; Sommer 2022). The main aspect relevant to this fortress was to prevent assistance from Genoese colonies on the Black Sea coast from reaching the city. In history, Sultan Al-Fatih is renowned with the title Al Fatih, meaning "The Conqueror." He enhanced the capabilities of those around him and strengthened them with adequate management and military knowledge, which contributed to the stabilization and advancement of the Ottoman Empire after significant internal improvements were made (Ahmal, Nurdiansyah, and Fendrik 2022; Fischer 2020; Zilivinskaya 2022).

However, despite numerous qualitative studies on Sultan Al-Fatih, most of them only provide a general overview of his history without thoroughly examining the factors that led to the resurgence of Islam through his power. Therefore, this research will focus on the expansionist policies pursued by Sultan Al-Fatih, with the specific object of investigating his expansionist politics and their impact on the regions surrounding Constantinople. It is important to note that the selection of this research object does not imply neglecting other influential figures of that era. This choice is made to obtain a specific focus for the study, particularly regarding the strategies employed by Muhammad Al-Fatih. Hence, the author aims to delve deeper into the study of Sultan Al-Fatih, who is known as the conqueror of Constantinople.

## B. Method

The research method employed in this study is qualitative, focusing on analyzing historical accounts and examining relevant literature. The primary approach is to conduct a comprehensive review of existing scholarly works that discuss the reign of Sultan Al-Fatih and the expansionist policies pursued during his rule. This involves consulting

books, journal articles, and other reliable sources to gather a wide range of perspectives and insights. The research will primarily utilize a descriptive analytical approach to examine the political expansion strategies by Sultan Al-Fatih and their impacts on the surrounding regions of Constantinople. This will involve a detailed analysis of historical events, military campaigns, and diplomatic relations during the time period under study. The aim is to gain a comprehensive understanding of the motives, tactics, and outcomes of Sultan Al-Fatih's expansionist endeavors.

## **C. Result and Discussion**

### **1. Political Expansion by Muhammad Al-Fatih towards Constantinople**

Constantinople is a beautiful and prosperous city that has been a symbol of justice and power for centuries. Located at the crossroads between Asia and Europe, the city was the center of the Byzantine Empire. Even Napoleon Bonaparte, a famous emperor and general from France in the 19th century, could not resist the urge to call Constantinople the capital of the world (Grania 2008:321).

Sultan Muhammad II, also known as Muhammad Al-Fatih. He gathered a large Ottoman army of nearly 250,000 soldiers, which was a significant force at that time (Demirbaş 2015). Additionally, Sultan Al-Fatih prepared various strategies and weapons to conquer the city. He also motivated his troops by reminding them of the praises of the Prophet Muhammad for the conquerors of Constantinople. The scholars also had a significant influence on strengthening the soldiers' fighting spirit, as they saw a war fought in accordance with Allah's command as a just war (Naisiburi 1999:88).

One of Sultan Al-Fatih's efforts was the construction of a fortress known as Roumli Hishar. This fortress was located near the European region, precisely in the Bosphorus Bay, and it faced the fortress built during the reign of Sultan Bayazid. The Byzantine Empire on the Asian mainland attempted to hinder the construction of the fortress by offering various rewards to Sultan Al-Fatih (Saad 2019). However, Al-Fatih insisted on continuing the construction because he realized the military importance of the position. Eventually, a tall and sturdy fortress with a height of 22 meters was successfully built. These two fortresses stood facing each other at a distance of approximately 660 meters. These fortresses monitored the ship passage routes between the eastern side of the Bosphorus and the west, and they were capable of withstanding enemy ships and assisting in protecting Constantinople and the eastern regions (Daulay et al. 2020).

Sultan Al-Fatih also paid special attention to gathering the necessary weapons to conquer Constantinople. One of the most important preparations was the acquisition of cannons. Sultan Al-Fatih brought in a skilled technician named Urban/Orban, who was an expert in cannon manufacturing. Sultan warmly welcomed the technician and provided all the necessary resources to design and create large cannons. One of the famous cannons was the Sultan Cannon, which weighed hundreds of tons and required hundreds of oxen to pull it. Sultan Al-Fatih personally supervised the process of making and testing these cannons (Sarkowi 2016; Shuhari et al. 2019).

Before the attack on Constantinople, Al-Fatih also made various agreements and peace treaties with his conflicting enemies to concentrate his forces against a single enemy. For example, he made a peace agreement with the neighboring Empire of Trebizond, which was adjacent to Constantinople and separated only by the Golden Horn. He also made peace agreements with Genoa and several small European kingdoms that were in proximity (Daulay et al. 2020). However, all these agreements did not hold when the actual attack on Constantinople took place, as all the powers from those cities and others came to protect Constantinople due to their ideological alignment with the Christians and disregarding their agreements and treaties with the Muslims. At that moment, when the Sultan was preparing supplies for the conquest, the Byzantine Emperor made desperate attempts to obstruct the Sultan's intentions by sending money and various gifts. He even bribed some of his advisors to influence the Sultan's decisions. However, the Sultan was determined to proceed with his plan. All those efforts did not deter him from achieving his goal (Risnayanti 2020). When the Byzantine Emperor saw the Sultan's unwavering determination to carry out his plan, he immediately sought assistance from various European countries and cities, especially from the Pope as the highest leader of Catholicism, despite the Byzantine churches, including Constantinople, following the Orthodox branch, and both (Catholic and Orthodox) were engaged in fierce hostility. The Emperor had to engage in diplomacy with the Pope, approaching him and showing his readiness to work on unifying the Eastern Orthodox Church under the Pope's authority (Risnayanti 2020). However, the Orthodox Church never agreed to that. Based on that, the Pope sent his representative to Constantinople. The envoy delivered his sermon at Aya Sophia and called for the unity of the two church branches, a move that angered the Orthodox followers in the city and led to their resistance against the attempts to unify the Eastern Orthodox Church with the united Catholic Empire. Even as the Orthodox Christian leader said, "I prefer to see the turbans of the Turkish people wandering in Byzantium rather than witness the hats of the Latin people!"

From various available sources, it can be understood that the expansion policy pursued by Muhammad Al-Fatih towards the Constantinople fortress indicates an effort to expand the Ottoman Empire's territory and achieve political and military dominance in that region. The conquest of Constantinople would also provide strategic access to the Black Sea and other territories in Europe. The efforts related to the conquest of Constantinople from the available literature are as follows:

*Military Preparation:* Muhammad Al-Fatih meticulously prepared for the military conquest of Constantinople. He built a powerful naval fleet and trained troops. Additionally, he involved siege experts and engineers to design effective attack strategies. Well-prepared military preparations were a crucial factor in the success of this expansion.

*Diplomacy and Alliances:* Muhammad Al-Fatih utilized diplomacy to seek allies who could support the conquest of Constantinople. He established relationships with several Muslim states, such as the Mamluk Sultanate in Egypt, to gain political support and additional troops. This diplomacy helped strengthen the position of the Ottoman Empire and mitigate potential threats from other parties.

*Siege of Constantinople:* Muhammad Al-Fatih launched a famous siege on Constantinople for several months. He employed various tactics, including the use of cannons and intensive ground attacks. This siege demonstrated Al-Fatih's military expertise and his troops' perseverance in the face of obstacles.

*Technological Utilization and Innovation:* One key factor in the conquest of Constantinople was the utilization of technology and innovation by Muhammad Al-Fatih. He used large cannons crafted by Turkish siege experts and European engineers, combining artillery power with ground assaults. This new technology provided significant tactical advantages to Al-Fatih's forces in battle.

*Post-Conquest Rule:* After successfully conquering Constantinople, Muhammad Al-Fatih implemented a wise rule of governance. He ensured the continuity of social, cultural, and economic life within the city. The surviving population was granted protection and allowed to practice their religious beliefs. This effective governance helped maintain stability in the newly acquired territory.

## **2. The impact of the conquest of Constantinople by Muhammad Al-Fatih on Europe and the Islamic world**

The conquest of Constantinople by Muhammad Al-Fatih had significant ramifications in world history. Prior to the conquest, Constantinople posed a major obstacle to the spread of Islam in Europe. However, after the conquest, Constantinople became a wide gateway for Islamic propagation in Europe, with greater strength and peace compared to before (Ash-Shallabi, 2021).

The capture of Constantinople is regarded as the most monumental event in world history, particularly in relation to Islam. European historians and like-minded individuals consider the conquest of Constantinople as the "Middle Ages" and the starting point towards the Modern Era (Ash-Shallabi, 2021). Following the conquest, Sultan Muhammad Al-Fatih brought order to various issues in Constantinople and undertook its fortification, transforming it into the capital of the Ottoman Caliphate. The city was initially called Islambul, meaning "the city of Islam," but over time became better known as Istanbul (Mulyadi 2021).

The impact of the conquest of Constantinople on Europe was palpable. The possibility of Islamic invasions from Istanbul struck fear in Western Christians and cast a shadow over their lives. Western poets and writers sought to ignite hatred and fury within the hearts of every European Christian towards Islam and Muslims. Pope Nicholas V was one of the figures greatly affected by the fall of Constantinople and attempted to unite European nations in a war against Muslims. Although these efforts were not fully realized due to various challenges faced by European countries at the time (Bagaskara 2018).

In the Islamic regions, the conquest of Constantinople brought widespread joy, pride, and gratitude in Asia and Africa. The conquest was a long-awaited dream of previous generations. Sultan Muhammad Al-Fatih sent letters to rulers in Islamic lands, such as Egypt, the Hijaz, Persia, India, and other territories, to announce this magnificent victory. The news of triumph was immediately proclaimed and celebrated with prayers

of gratitude, the embellishment of homes and shops, and the hoisting of colorful banners and fabrics (Bagaskara, 2018).

Overall, the conquest of Constantinople by Muhammad Al-Fatih had extensive effects both in Europe and the Islamic world. In Europe, the conquest triggered significant changes in politics and culture. The city that was once a symbol of the power and glory of the Eastern Roman Empire was transformed into the capital of the Ottoman Caliphate. This conquest expanded Ottoman territorial power into European regions and altered the dynamics of power in the region.

The political impact of the conquest of Constantinople is evident in the changing political landscape of Europe. The conquest provided an impetus for Western European nations to seek alternative routes to Asia, avoiding the growing Ottoman control over the Bosphorus Strait. This drove them to explore new sea routes, eventually leading to the discovery of new trade routes through the Atlantic Ocean and the beginning of the Age of Western Exploration.

Furthermore, the conquest of Constantinople also resulted in massive migrations in Europe. Many inhabitants of Constantinople either fled or were expelled following the conquest. This led to the displacement of people and the spread of cultural and intellectual wealth from Constantinople to Western Europe. Many scholars, artists, and intellectuals from Constantinople sought refuge in European countries, such as Italy, bringing with them knowledge and cultural heritage from the East.

In the context of the Islamic world, the conquest of Constantinople by Muhammad Al-Fatih elevated the status and pride of the Muslim community. The conquest was seen as evidence of the strength and blessings of Islam, serving as inspiration for other leaders and Muslims. Moreover, this conquest paved the way for the expansion of Ottoman power into other regions in Europe, Asia, and Africa. In the field of culture, the conquest of Constantinople had a significant influence on art, architecture, and literature in the Ottoman territories. Byzantine and Eastern Roman architectural styles were evident in the monumental structures built after the conquest, such as the Hagia Sophia Mosque, which was converted from a church. Art and literature flourished with the spread of rich and diverse Eastern cultures and influences.

Overall, the conquest of Constantinople by Muhammad al-Fatih had profound impacts on Europe and the Islamic world. Politically, it influenced the geopolitical landscape of Europe and spurred new explorations. Culturally, it resulted in significant intellectual exchanges and an influential cultural heritage. In general, the conquest enhanced the pride and status of Muslims and expanded the territorial power of the Ottoman Empire.

#### **D. Conclusion**

The conquest of Constantinople by Muhammad Al-Fatih had far-reaching consequences for both Europe and the Islamic world. From a political perspective, the conquest transformed the power dynamics in Europe, as the capital of the Byzantine Empire became the center of the Ottoman Caliphate. This expansionist policy by Al-Fatih

led to changes in European politics and spurred Western European nations to seek alternative trade routes, ultimately leading to the Age of Western Exploration. The impact on Europe was not only political but also cultural. The migration of scholars, artists, and intellectuals from Constantinople to Western Europe brought with them knowledge and cultural heritage from the East. This exchange of ideas and influences enriched European art, architecture, and literature. The conquest also triggered fear and hostility among Western Christians towards Islam, as they perceived the Ottoman Empire as a threat.

In the Islamic world, the conquest of Constantinople was a source of immense joy, pride, and gratitude. It fulfilled a long-awaited dream for many Muslims, and Sultan Al-Fatih's victory was celebrated throughout Asia and Africa. The conquest elevated the status of the Muslim community and served as inspiration for other leaders and Muslims. Culturally, the conquest had a significant impact on the Ottoman territories. Byzantine and Eastern Roman architectural styles were incorporated into the monumental structures built after the conquest. Art and literature flourished with the infusion of diverse Eastern cultures and influences. Overall, the conquest of Constantinople by Muhammad Al-Fatih had profound political, cultural, and historical consequences. It reshaped the geopolitical landscape of Europe, fueled exploration, and brought about cultural exchanges between East and West. For the Islamic world, the conquest was a symbol of Muslim strength and expansion, enhancing the pride and status of Muslims and consolidating the territorial power of the Ottoman Empire.

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