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**CONQUERING THE CONQUEROR AT BELGRADE (1456)
AND RHODES (1480): IRREGULAR SOLDIERS FOR
AN UNCOMMON DEFENSE⁽¹⁾**

Describing Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II's military goals in the mid-fifteenth century, contemporary Ibn Kemal writes:

"Like the world-illuminating sun he succumbed to the desire for world conquest and it was his plan to burn with overpowering fire the agricultural lands of the rebellious rulers who were in the provinces of the land of *Rûm* [the Byzantine Empire]. He took with the hand of power and the grip of conquest one by one the cities and lands of the princes who were on the sea shores and it was his plan to flow over them in turn like a wave.⁽²⁾

No military leader was more feared in the middle of the fifteenth century than Mehmed II (the Conqueror), and no army was more feared *¹²

* Loyola University Maryland (U.S.A.).

⁽¹⁾ This article builds on ideas presented in "Standing Up to the Ottoman Empire: Civilian Resistance to Turkish Expansionism during the Fifteenth, Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries", at *Military Conflicts and Civil Population: Total Wars, Limited Wars, Asymmetrical Wars*, the XXXIVth International Congress of Military History held in Trieste, Italy, on 2 September 2008.

⁽²⁾ Ibn Kemal, *Tevârih-i Âl-i Osman VII. Defter*, 2 vols., Ankara, 1954-1957, 11:180. The translation used is that of Andrew C. Hess, "The Evolution of the Ottoman Seaborne Empire in the Age of the Oceanic Discoveries, 1453-1525", *American Historical Review*, vol. 75, 1970, p. 1902.

than his Ottoman Turks. His conquest of Constantinople, for which he received his sobriquet, was truly a marvelous military feat. While there were not many defenders - Steven Runciman calculates no more than 7.000, including 2.000 foreign mercenaries and adventurers⁽³⁾ - the walls surrounding the city, despite their old age in places, were still some of the finest fortifications in the world⁽⁴⁾. Any besieger of Constantinople would be required to go through them. Mehmed II did so by combining his own tenacious generalship, a seemingly endless supply of men - all of whom he was willing to sacrifice for victory, and the substantial use of gunpowder weapons of all sizes, from the largest bombards to handheld guns⁽⁵⁾.

There seemed to be no stopping Mehmed; as Ibn Kemal asserted above, the Ottoman Turkish Sultan desired world conquest. Yet he was stopped from achieving this, and not by another army composed primarily of regular soldiers - not by the various Spanish kingdoms, or the Imperial Habsburgs, or the French, or any of the Italian states, or coalitions of any of these states under the Papacy, or the Mamluks - but by armies composed of both regular soldiers and non-military combatants, the most irregular of irregular soldiers. It is the latter of these who were especially influential in defeating the Conqueror at Belgrade in 1456 and Rhodes in 1480, thwarting this "world-illuminating sun" from completing his military goals.

⁽³⁾ Steven Runciman, *The Fall of Constantinople, 1453*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1965, p. 85. Runciman's work is still the standard for this siege; Roger Crowley's *Constantinople: The Last Great Siege, 1453*, London, Faber and Faber, 2005, is good, but does not advance the *status questionis* beyond Runciman nor replace it.

⁽⁴⁾ Stephen Turnbull, *The Walls of Constantinople, AD 324-1453*, London, Osprey, 2004.

⁽⁵⁾ I have investigated Mehmed's use of gunpowder weapons in Kelly DeVries, "Gunpowder Weaponry at the Siege of Constantinople, 1453", in *War, Army and Society in the Eastern Mediterranean, 7th-16th Centuries*, ed. Y. Lev, Leiden, Brill, 1996, pp. 343-362.

Belgrade, 1456

Belgrade was extremely valuable to the Ottoman Turks, for both economic and military purposes. Located at the confluence of the Danube and Sava Rivers, the city controlled all paths into northeastern and central Europe. But its capture had been difficult to achieve. By the mid-fifteenth century, the Turks had gone far beyond Belgrade in their previous conquests of the Balkan peninsula, but they had not conquered it, despite several attempts to do so. This had effectively halted further military expansion to the west or north, while raiders sent from the city constantly harassed nearby imperial fortifications and communication and supply lines. More importantly, Belgrade stood as a symbol that the Turks were not invincible. In 1396, following the impressive Turkish victory of Bayezid I over Central and Western European troops at the Battle of Nicopolis, Belgrade had been threatened but had not fallen⁽⁶⁾. In 1440 it had withstood a siege of six months until the Ottoman Sultan, Murad II, was forced to withdraw because of deprivation and dissension in his own ranks⁽⁷⁾. From then until 1456 the city had flaunted its resistance, being used for pro-Crusade propaganda, most especially by a "living saint," the Franciscan friar John of Capistrano (Giovanni da Capistrano).

But Mehmed II was not Bayezid, his grandfather, nor Murad, his father. After all, in 1453 he had planned and executed a most brilliant and successful siege against one of the best protected cities in the world, Constantinople. Three years later he had decided to do the same to Belgrade. Throughout the winter of 1455-56 Mehmed planned his campaign, assembled his funds, arms, ammunition, and victuals - including portable mills and ovens, gathered and increased his gunpowder artillery train, accumulated the animals needed to load with supplies and pull carts loaded with supplies - camels, oxen,

⁽⁶⁾ The scholarly literature on the battle of Nicopolis has increased lately, but a good place to start remains Aziz Suryal Atiya, *The Crusade of Nicopolis*, London, Methuen and Co., Ltd., 1934.

⁽⁷⁾ Colin Imber, *The Ottoman Empire, 1300-1650*, Houndmills, Paigrove Macmillan, 2002, pp. 24-25, and Kenneth Setton, *The Papacy and the Levant (1204-1571)*, Philadelphia, The American Philosophical Society, 1978, vol. II, p. 58.

and buffaloes, and mustered his army⁽⁸⁾. By Spring he had amassed a huge army - although contemporary sources claim it was 150.000-400.000 strong, modern historians have justifiably lowered this figure to a still impressive 60.000⁽⁹⁾ - gathered a fleet of numerous riverine vessels for transportation of supplies and artillery; again contemporary figures are probably exaggerated at 200 with modern historians reducing these to 21⁽¹⁰⁾ 11 - and at least 300 gunpowder artillery pieces, including 27 large bombards and 7 "mortars" and not counting handheld guns. Some of these cannons were of enormous size and had been used at Constantinople, while newer ones according to contemporary Graeco-Turkish biographer, Kritovoulos, were even more powerful than these⁽¹¹⁾. Mehmed hoped a combination of men and technology could also defeat Belgrade.

What seems to have been different at Belgrade from Constantinople was the tenacity of the citizens of Belgrade, or of the ability of the then seventy-year-old John of Capistrano to arouse a sizeable number of men willing to go to the defense of the threatened city. Giovanni da Tagliacozzo remembers one of his recruiting sermons:

"Whoever will take their stand with us against the Turks are our friends! Serbs, schismatics, Vlachs, Jews, heretics, and whatever infidels will side with us in this storm, these let us embrace in friendship. Now it is against the Turks, against the Turks that we must fight"⁽¹²⁾!

⁽⁸⁾ Kritovoulos, *History of Mehmed the Conqueror*, trans. Charles T. Riggs, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1954, pp. 111-112.

⁽⁹⁾ Franz Babinger, *Mehmed the Conqueror and His Time*, trans. Ralph Manheim, ed. William C. Hickman, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1978, p. 140; and R. Nisbet Bain, "The Siege of Belgrade by Muhammed II, July 1-23,1456", *English Historical Review*, vol. 7,1892, p. 240.

⁽¹⁰⁾ Setton, vol. II, p. 173. Such a drastic reduction is prompted by the tally given in a contemporary German account of the siege.

⁽¹¹⁾ Kritovoulos, p. 111. The number of gunpowder weapons can be found in Giovanni da Tagliacozzo, in *Annales minorum seu trium ordinum a S. Francisco institutorum*, ed. Luke Wadding, 3rd ed., Florence, Quaracchi, 1932, pp. 755-780, who is especially impressed by their size - claiming the largest to be 9 meters long. For modern assessments see Babinger, p. 139, and Bain, p. 240.

⁽¹²⁾ Tagliacozzo, pp. 755-757. See also Bain, p. 239.

Few had come to the relief of Constantinople, but 40.000-60.000 would "take the cross," as John of Capistrano insisted this was to be a Crusade, and come to the aid of Belgrade. Only about 2.500 of these were able to enter the city before the Ottomans arrived and cut off their access, but they were still a sizeable and very welcome addition to the garrison. Professional soldiers and knights had been slow to answer the call of the Belgradians or John of Capistrano. Instead, most of these Crusaders were peasants and villagers, contemporary poetic chronicler Michael Behaim calls them "poor and naked"; few were armed or armored. They were, however, enthusiastic and zealous, and they mixed well with the equally irregular militia they joined in Belgrade⁽¹³⁾.

On 13 June 1456 the Turkish forces arrived at Belgrade. Immediately they began an intensive gunpowder artillery bombardment of the walls, and for more than a month they patiently sat back and let their guns assault and pulverize the walls⁽¹⁴⁾. The city was well fortified, surrounded by a wall on all sides, including those facing the rivers, and two walls and a deep moat on the landward side. Kritovoulos calls the city impregnable, although he does claim the landward side was "more vulnerable" to gunpowder artillery, and it is there where the Ottoman guns were primarily aimed⁽¹⁵⁾. The besieged seemed to have had few gunpowder artillery pieces of their own, although they did as much as they could to rebuild the walls with stone, earth, and wood, as well as digging a deep ditch next to the walls inside the city⁽¹⁶⁾.

After a month the destruction was impressive: walls had been breached and towers had been destroyed. John Hunyadi, the famous Hungarian prince who arrived too late and with too small an army to

⁽¹³⁾ Michael Behaim, *Zehn Gedichte Michael Behaim's zur Geschichte Oesterreichs und Ungerns*, ed. Th. G. von Karajan, in *Quellen und Forschungen zur vaterländischen Geschichte, Literatur und Kunst*, Vienna, Wilhelm Braumüller, 1849, pp. 54-55; Setton, vol. II, pp. 174, 177; Babinger, p. 140; and Bain, pp. 239-240, 242-243. See also the letter from Pope Calixtus III to an unnamed Burgundian bishop in A. Theiner, ed., *Vetera monumenta historica Hungariam sacram illustantia*, Rome, Vatican Press, 1860, II, pp. 280-281.

⁽¹⁴⁾ Konstantin Mihailovic, *Memoirs of a Janissary*, trans. Benjamin Stolz, Ann Arbor, Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, University of Michigan, 1975, pp. 106-107.

⁽¹⁵⁾Kritovoulos, p. 112.

⁽¹⁶⁾Kritovoulos, p. 113.

intervene in the siege, described Belgrade as "not a castle but a field" (*non est castrum sed campus*)⁽¹⁷⁾. But few of the besieged inhabitants had been killed, as most of them kept out of range of the gunshot, and no one seems to have become discouraged⁽¹⁸⁾. So far, at least, the Ottoman Turks had been kept from entering the city.

By this time both Hunyadi's army and a Hungarian fleet had arrived at Belgrade. Hunyadi felt the numbers in his army were too small and that an attempt at relieving the siege by them would be futile - although a few were able to sneak into the city⁽¹⁹⁾, but the Hungarian fleet did attack and fight a prolonged and fierce battle on the Danube against the Turkish fleet. Although the Ottoman ships were not warships, by strict definition, they put up a strong fight, with contemporary sources reporting a five hour battle⁽²⁰⁾. More importantly, the arrival of both the army and the navy, and the combat on the river, pressured Mehmed to rush his plans, worrying that more soldiers and ships might arrive, and on 21 July he decided to attack the walls. Konstantin Mihailovic, a janissary who may have been present, claims that this was not the Sultan's desire, but that he was convinced by the leader of the janissaries to trust them to break into the walls and take Belgrade; Tursun Beg, however, accredits

⁽¹⁷⁾John Hunyadi, as quoted in Stephen Turnbull, *The Art of Renaissance Warfare: From the Fall of Constantinople to the Thirty Years War*, London, Greenhill, 2006, p. 37. Hunyadi wrote three letters concerning the siege of Belgrade. They can be found in Janos Hofer, "Der Sieger von Belgrad 1456", *Historische Jahrbuch*, vol. 51, 1931, pp. 172-174. See also Konstantin Mihailovic, pp. 106-107; Setton, vol. II, p. 179; Bain, pp. 244-245; and Stanko Andric, *The Miracles of St. John Capistran*, Budapest, Central European University Press, 2000, p. 27.

⁽¹⁸⁾ Babinger, p. 140, and Turnbull, p. 37. The primary European accounts of this siege are from two Italian Franciscan friars with Capistrano, Giovanni da Tagliacozzo and Niccolò da Fara, in *Annales minorum seu trium ordinum a S. Francisco institutorum*, ed. Luke Wadding, 3rd ed., Florence, Quaracchi, 1932, vol. XII, p. 420 and vol. XII, pp. 755-57.

⁽¹⁹⁾ Babinger, p. 141.

⁽²⁰⁾ According to contemporary Turkish chronicler, Tursun Beg (*The History of Mehmed the Conqueror*, trans. Halil Inalcik and Rhoads Murphey, Minneapolis, Bibliotheca Islamica, 1978, p. 39), the Ottoman fleet was able to capture four or five of the Hungarian ships but then was forced to withdraw away from the siege, which was clearly the plan of Hunyadi. See also Babinger, pp. 140-141; Setton, vol. II, p. 178; Bain, pp. 245-246; and Andric, p. 27.

this to Mehmed alone⁽²¹⁾. Led by their crack troops, the janissaries, the Turks were able to fill the moat and then break through the outer walls in several places but they could not enter the city proper. Standing in their way were the citizens of Belgrade and their motley Crusader allies. Fighting raged for several hours throughout the night⁽²²⁾. Finally, at dawn it looked as if the janissaries were on the verge of gaining entry, and thus victory, until they were stopped by a desperate countercharge led by John of Capistrano himself - quite a feat at his advanced age. The Turks broke, running out through their breaches in the wall only to meet John Hunyadi's cavalry, which, finally seeing where they might be useful, rushed against them, chasing the fleeing besiegers all the way into their camp. Kritovoulos, writing from the Turkish perspective, still gives a stirring, trustworthy account of the fighting:

"Just then John [of Capistrano] suddenly appeared there, rushing with his men. With a great shout he quickly frightened and greatly perplexed the Ottomans, repelling the advance. There was a sharp fight, with anger and wrath and great slaughter, both of the heavy infantry [the Turks] and the Paeonians [Belgradians]. Both sides fought well, and excelled each other in determination, acting heroically, the attackers believing they nearly had the city and that its loss would be a disgrace, while the Paeonians were ashamed to be beaten or to lose such a city out of their hands. But the Sultan's troops at this point suffered heavily. They were hit in front and from above from the battlements, and from the houses on the wall they were attacked on the flank. Indeed, on every side the Paeonians attacked them. So, unable to hold out any longer, they gave way, and the Paeonians fell on them immediately with fresh courage and more vigorously drove them back foot by foot.. ."⁽²³⁾ ²⁴.

Turkish chronicler Saadeddin is more grief-stricken: "[The Turkish warriors] poured out their life's blood like water in the place of death, and countless heroes tasted the pure honey of a martyr's death and were caught up into the arms of the houris of paradise'⁽²⁴⁾.

⁽²¹⁾Mihailovic, pp. 106-107, and Beg, p. 39.

⁽²²⁾ Kritovoulos, pp. 113-114; Beg, p. 39; Setton, vol. II, p. 179; and Bain, pp. 246-247.

⁽²³⁾Kritovoulos, p. 114. See also Mihailovic, pp. 106-107, and Beg, p. 39.

⁽²⁴⁾Saadeddin, as quoted in Bain, p. 248.

To this point the sources from both sides are largely in agreement, although the European reports have more detail, but on what happened in the fighting outside of the walls they differ. Turkish sources claim that Mehmed II and other Ottomans not originally included in the attack of the city quickly joined in the battle, and were able to keep the Belgradians, Hungarians, and Crusaders from their tents and supplies for sufficient time to celebrate victory over them in this battle, although not in the city itself. Although Turkish sources claim that he could still have taken Belgrade easily, Mehmed, who may have been wounded in the fighting, worried about what his army had suffered and the arrival of further European reinforcements and decided to withdraw from Belgrade, which was accomplished without further problems⁽²⁵⁾. European sources also have Mehmed and his other troops join the fray, but that they made no appreciable difference in the fighting. Instead, Mehmed and his personal guard only had time to spike their cannons before they also were swept up in the rout. The exhausted citizens and Crusaders who chased after the fleeing Ottomans pillaged the camp and supplies that were left behind. John of Capistrano's shout was echoed by everyone who had followed him looking for a miracle: "This is the day of victory for we have waited! [...] Don't fear the Turks; we can eat them up like bread!"⁽²⁶⁾. Most modern historians accept the European version, although they recognize a slower Turkish retreat than that claimed by the European sources⁽²⁷⁾.

⁽²⁵⁾ Kritovoulos, p. 115; Mihailovic, pp. 106-109; and Beg, p. 39. Mihailovic claims that few janissaries were killed and only 400 were wounded in the initial fighting, but he does not give a casualty figure for the entire conflict. On the other hand, Kritovoulos and Beg claim that many Turks were killed during the retreat. Kritovoulos has Mehmed hit in the thigh with a javelin, although he says "the wound was not severe, merely superficial".

⁽²⁶⁾ This is according to the accounts given by Giovanni da Tagliacozzo and John Hunyadi. The quote is from Tagliacozzo.

⁽²⁷⁾ Babinger, pp. 141-143; Setton, vol. II, pp. 179-180; Bain, pp. 248-252; Andric, p. 27; and Turnbull, pp. 38-39.

Rhodes, 1480

As one astute modern historian, Norman Housley, has concluded, the siege of Belgrade in 1456 was "the greatest crusading victory over the Turks in the fifteenth century [...] [it was] one of the most extraordinary episodes in military history"⁽²⁸⁾.

While it is difficult to take issue with Housley's conclusion, one might also say the same about the siege of Rhodes in 1480. By that date Mehmed II had rebuilt his army and gunpowder artillery arsenal from the losses suffered at Belgrade. Although he would not take on that city again, he was prepared to advance against another, closer foe, the Knights Hospitaller who were headquartered on the island of Rhodes in the walled town that was called the same. The Knights had first come to Rhodes in 1308, having failed to hold onto their Crusading holdings in the Holy Land. Almost since that time, and certainly since the fall of Constantinople, they had improved the city's defenses, replacing the Byzantine walls which provided little protection for a city which had long outgrown them with their own much larger circuit of strong stone walls and numerous towers⁽²⁹⁾.

The long awaited invasion of the Ottoman Turks came in May 1480. While the Knights Hospitallers for many years had anticipated an attack of their island headquarter - so close to Turkey that the mainland can be seen unless the sun's glare off the Eastern Mediterranean obscures the view - but the invasion became imminent early in 1480. The Hospitallers' leader, Grand Master Pierre d'Aubusson, who had held that position for less than a year, did not panic but quickly began making repairs to the city walls - like Belgrade, Rhodes was girded by strong city walls, along both the sea and landward sides - and gathering supplies

⁽²⁸⁾ Norman Housley, *The Later Crusades, 1274-1580: From Lyons to Alcazar*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992, pp. 103-104. See also Andric, p. 27.

⁽²⁹⁾ The largest building of fortifications had taken place under the leadership of Grand Master Antonio Fluvian de Rivière (1421-1437). The best study of the walls is Albert Gabriel, *La cité de Rhodes*, 2 vols., Paris, E. de Boccard, 1921-1923, but see the forthcoming study by Robert Douglas Smith and Kelly DeVries, *Rhodes Besieged: A Story of Cannon, Stone and Men, 1480-1522*.

gunpowder, arms, and victuals. One eyewitness, d'Aubusson's secretary, Guillaume Caoursin, writes that the Grand Master ordered "that all the ripe and some of the unripe crops (for the harvest had not yet been gathered) be collected and the people to pick everything and take it into their homes so that there be nothing left around the town"⁽³⁰⁾. By this time the people of the city had already begun to respond to the Ottoman threat. Although the Hospitallers' initial acquisition of Rhodes had not been peaceful⁽³¹⁾, in the ensuing 170 years they had proven to be pretty benevolent governors, bringing prosperity and protection to the citizens - mostly Greek Christians and Jews. It was their wish that they remain their governors. They pitched in to help with the rebuilding of the walls and the stocking of the stores. Giacomo de Curti, another eyewitness, was clearly impressed with what had been accomplished, reporting that Rhodes was filled with "grain, wine, oil, cheese, salted meat and other food stuffs in great quantity" by the time of the Ottoman attack⁽³²⁾.

On 20 May the Turkish fleet was sighted. Curti notes that "the sea was covered with sails as far as the eye could see"⁽³³⁾. In a letter written eight days later by d'Aubusson he numbers the Turkish fleet at 109 ships, claiming that they carried 70.000 soldiers as well as "a great many cannon, bombards and wooden towers with other engines of war"⁽³⁴⁾. These forces were not led by Sultan Mehmed II, as he was ailing in Constantinople, but by his chief general, Mesih Pascha, interestingly not a Turk but from the Byzantine imperial house of Palaeologos. The siege began a short time later⁽³⁵⁾.

⁽³⁰⁾Guillaume Caoursin, *Obsidionis Rhodiae urbis description*, Venice, 1480, p. 4.

⁽³¹⁾Anthony Luttrell, "The Hospitallers at Rhodes, 1306-1421", in *A History of the Crusades*, vol. III: *The Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries*, ed. Harry W. Hazard, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1975, pp. 283-286; Anthony Luttrell, *The Town of Rhodes, 1306-1356*, Rhodes, City of Rhodes Office of the Medieval Town, 2003, pp. 76-81; and J. Delaville de Roulx, *Les Hospitaliers à Rhodes jusqu'à la mort de Philibert de Naillac, 1310-1421*, Paris, E. Leroux, 1913, pp. 272-283.

⁽³²⁾Giacomo de Curti, *Ad magnificum spectabilemque*, Venice, Erhardus Radtolt de Augusta, c. 1510, f. lr.

⁽³³⁾Curti, f. lr.

⁽³⁴⁾Setton, vol. I, p. 351, n. 18.

⁽³⁵⁾For the details of the 1480 siege of Rhodes see Robert Douglas Smith and Kelly DeVries, *Rhodes Besieged: A Story of Cannon, Stone and Men, 1480-1522*.

From the end of May to the end of July the fighting went on. This was no siege where the attackers established lines and sat back to wait for hunger to take its toll. Every day Ottoman cannons fired into the walls and fortresses, Ottoman soldiers rushed through the moat and at the walls, and Hospitallers and townspeople fought back for their very survival. The Fort of St. Nicholas, which stood on a mole stretching into the harbor, its guns and garrison protecting both the military harbor on one side and the commercial harbor on the other, was the primary target of early Turkish attack. Heavy gunpowder artillery fire destroyed much of the fort, turning it into rubble, but the Hospitallers fought back, from the rubble. The Turks had mounted a battery of artillery around 250 meters across the water from the fort which d'Aubusson later recalled held "Three huge bronze bombards to batter down the town, whose size and power were incredible, and which fired balls of stone of nine palms."⁽³⁶⁾ Mery Dupuis, a Hospitaller Knight present at the siege, describes the destruction:

"about three hundred shots from the bombards battered the tower in such a way that the side facing the land where the bombards were firing seemed to be a large pile of stones, all of the tower there battered and broken, and the stones fallen one onto another. But the other side of the tower, that which faced the sea, stood whole and entire in such a way that it seemed that it had never been hit by any bombard shot, so not only the top of the tower but also the crenellations were all clear and visible from the sea. And in fact that part of the tower which could be seen from the landward side where the bombards were firing seemed indefensible and that nobody dared to be inside it"⁽³⁷⁾.

⁽³⁶⁾ Pierre d'Aubusson, *Letter to Emperor Frederick III in Scriptorum rerum germanicarum*, ed. M. Freher, Berlin, 1602, p. 306. Other eyewitnesses, Dupuis (in *The History of the Knights Hospitallers of St. John of Jerusalem, styled afterwards, the Knights of Rhodes, and at present, the Knights of Malta*, ed. Abbé de Vertot, Edinburgh, R. Fleming, 1757, vol. III, p. 93), Caoursin (p. 6), and Curti (f. 2r) also mention the placement of these bombards at St. Anthony's church, although Curti has four placed in the battery instead of three.

⁽³⁷⁾Dupuis, p. 94.

The Turks even tried to bridge the gap between their battery and the Fort, but hand-to-hand fighting foiled this as well. Mesîh Pascha was forced to select a new target.

This was on the eastern side of Rhodes, against a part of the city known as the "Jews' Quarter" because a large Jewish community lived there. Enormous gunpowder weapons - "eight of the great bombards", is Dupuis' description - attacked the wall fired from a mole in the harbor known as Scaffold Mole because it was the site of Rhodes' executions. Dupuis continues:

The Turks also were not hindered by the fact that the wall to the right of the Jewish Quarter was more than twenty-eight feet in height; they hit and battered the wall so hard and so sharply and for so long that there was no one in the city who was not very frightened of the fury of these bombards"⁽³⁸⁾.

The damage was significant: breaches in the wall began to appear in several places. To try and repair these everyone in Rhodes responded: "neither the Master, nor the stewards, nor the priors, nor the knights, nor the citizens, nor the merchants, nor the women, nor the brides, nor the girls avoided work. They carried stones and earth"⁽³⁹⁾. At night they would sneak out of the city and bring back stones that the Ottomans had cast in the moat to fill it. Pierre d'Aubusson estimated that the townspeople carried more than 3.500 stones out of the moat and into the city⁽⁴⁰⁾.

But the Rhodians could not keep up with the rate of destruction and, finally, on 28 July, the Turkish assault went forth. The initial onslaught of the Ottomans completely overwhelmed those guarding the walls of the Jewish Quarter. Without too much difficulty they defeated the defenders and planted their standards and banners⁽⁴¹⁾. The besieged responded quickly. D'Aubusson describes the effort to regain the walls:

⁽³⁸⁾Dupuis, p. 95. See also Caoursin, p. 9, and d'Aubusson, p. 307.

⁽³⁹⁾Caoursin, p. 9.

⁽⁴⁰⁾D'Aubusson, p. 308. See also Dupuis, p. 96.

⁽⁴¹⁾D'Aubusson, p. 308.

"Suddenly, our men opposing themselves to the enemy, on the right and left of the walls, fought them in the highest places, causing great confusion and preventing them from advancing any further [...] we climbed up to the enemy, opposed them and protected and defended the place. There were 2.000 very well armed Turks on top of the walls, crowded together with us and fighting hand to hand struggled by force of arms to drive us away. But by the persistence and constant valor of our fighters we held on. Following those Turks who were already on the walls, was a huge number of Turks from their camp who filled the breach, the wall and the moat, so that it was impossible to see the ground. Deserters stated that 4.000 Turks had made the assault. Our men drove about 300 of the enemy who were on the walls into the Jewish quarter, where they were killed to a man [...] The battle was fought with great ferocity for two hours. Finally the Turks, pressed, fatigued and terrified, and wounded, turned their backs, and took to flight with such great haste that they became an impediment to one another, and added to their destruction. In the fight there fell about 3.500 Turks, whose corpses were found inside the city and upon the walls, in the moat, in the enemy's positions and in the sea, and which afterwards were burnt to prevent disease. The spoils of their corpses were taken by our men, who, following the fleeing Turks all the way to their camp on the plain, killed them vigorously and afterwards returned unharmed"⁽⁴²⁾ ⁴³.

The Grand Master was twice wounded in the struggle. He had led the attack on the Turks personally and had fought marvelously, as had his Hospitaller brethren. Less well publicized is the participation in this fight of the citizens of Rhodes. The townspeople had supported those defending their town not only in the carrying and hauling of supplies or even by the rebuilding of the walls or the clearing of stones from the moat, but also by fighting beside the Hospitallers. The victory was as much theirs as it was the more professional soldiers.

Konstantin Mihailovic, the Balkan janissary, was despondent at the end the siege of Belgrade: "But the greatest sorrow of all was that the Lord God did not grant that Belgrade be captured by the Turks."⁽⁴³⁾.

⁽⁴²⁾Dupuis, p. 101.

⁽⁴³⁾Mihailovic, pp. 108-09.

The Turkish feeling after the failure at Rhodes was the same. Mery Dupuis had the opposite view:

"And the victory came by the Grace of God, who fought for the city and defended those within. For which victory the Grand Master and all the noble knights and valiant people of the city, men, women and children, gave thanks to God, to Our Lady and to Saint John the Baptist"⁽⁴⁴⁾.

And in this he was echoing the victors after Belgrade. In historical hindsight it would not be long before the reactions had switched around. Belgrade and Rhodes had held out against Mehmed II, but they could not hold out against Mehmed's great-grandson, Suleyman I. In the first year of his reign, 1521, he conquered Belgrade and in the second, 1522, Rhodes. By then those who had fought against the Turks in both sieges were gone. Hunyadi and Capistrano died within a year of their fighting at Belgrade; Pierre d'Aubusson lasted quite a bit longer after Rhodes, until 1503, but by Suleyman's reign he too was gone. Their participation in these sieges made them justly famous. But they should share that fame with the irregular troops - peasants, townspeople, Jews, even "heretics" - those who really made the difference in conquering the Conqueror.

⁽⁴⁴⁾Dupuis, p. 102.