

## **Zamanın Sonu ve Bir İmparatorluğun Başlangıcı: Hicri Bininci Yılın Eşiğinde Bir İstanbul Efsanesi**

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### **Özet**

Sultan II. Mehmet Konstantinapol'ü fethettiğinde tarihin bilinen en büyük imparatorluğuna son vermiş, yıkılan imparatorluğun üzerine kendi imparatorluğunu inşa etmeyi planlamıştır. Fakat bu imparatorluk ideali çok kültürlü, çok dinli ve çok dilli yeni bir düzeni gerekli kılmıştır. Fatih, bu düzenin başkenti yaklaşık yüzyıl boyunca düşmanın da başkentliğini yapan Konstantinapol olsun ister. Bu bahsi geçen ideallerini hayata geçirmeye çalıştığı sırada Osmanlı toplumundan sayısız muhalefete maruz kalır. Bunların temelinde kendi atalarının düzenini terk etmek istemeyen, Konstantinapol'e yerleşmekle asimile olmaktan korkan beylerin korkuları yatar. Bu korkuların temelinde beylerin Konstantinapol'ü sayısız şeytanlıklar ve İslam düşmanlığının kaynağı olarak görmesi yatar. Dolayısıyla bu şehre yerleşim Fatih'in idealleri ve beylerinin tutuculuğunun bir nevi çatışma alanına dönüşür. Bu dönem aynı zamanda tüm dünyanın emsalsiz yeniliklere şahit olmasıyla kıyamet gününün yaklaştığına dair gelenekten ve dini anlatılardan beslenen yorumları da doğurmuştur. Bu çalışmada 15. Yüzyılının sonunda üretildiği tahmin edilen anonim bir İstanbul tarihi eseri olan 'Fi Beyan-ı Tarih-i Konstantiniyye min Evvela ila Ahire' incelenmiştir. Anlatının efsanevi yapısı ve dolaylı benzetmeleri sebebiyle, eserin bahsi geçen imparatorluk idealine karşı duruşu ve kıyamet gününün yaklaştığı inancı üzerinden incelemesi yapılmıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** II. Mehmet, Konstantiniyye, Hicri 1000. yıl, İstanbul Efsaneleri, Ayasofya, eskatoloji.

**Jel Kodlar:** Z00, Z10, Z11, Z12, Z19

## **End of the Time and Rise of an Empire: an Istanbul Myth at the Dawn of Muslim Millennium**

### **Abstract**

When Sultan Mehmet II conquered the Constantinople, he ended the biggest known empire in history and planned to build his own empire over the ruins of the former. But this imperial ideal required a new multicultural, multi-religious and multilingual order. Mehmed II wanted the capital of this order to be Constantinople, which has been the capital of the enemy for nearly a century. While trying to realize these mentioned ideals, he was exposed to countless opposition from his own people. The basis of these lies on the fears of the begs who did not want to abandon their ancestors' lifestyle and were afraid of being assimilated by settling in Constantinople. The settlement of this city, which is the source of countless demons and hostility to Islam according to the begs, turns into a kind of conflict zone for the ideals of the Sultan and the conservatism of the begs. This period also gave rise to interpretations fed by traditional and religious narratives that the apocalyptic day is approaching, with the world witnessing unprecedented developments. In this study, 'Fi Beyan-ı Tarih-i Konstantiniyye min Evvela ila Ahire', which is an anonymous historical work estimated to be produced at the end of the 15th century, was examined. Due to the mythical structure and indirect analogy of the narrative, the study was made on the stance of the opposition towards imperial ideal of Mehmed II and the belief that the Day of Judgment is approaching.

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## 1. Introduction

In 1453, Sultan Mehmed II brought an end to the Roman Empire that lasted for centuries and conquered the city of Constantinople which was also one of the greatest aims of his predecessors and Muslim commanders. This unprecedented victory initiated a series of changes in the course of the history. Almost around the entire old world the impacts of this victory that led to the fall of the Roman Empire and rise of the Muslims interpreted from different perspectives but within the same concept. That is a teleological concept which became prominent in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. During these centuries the Muslim conquest of the Constantinople was interpreted as a sign of the apocalypse, culminating the idea that the end of time which we can regard as the *telos* was imminent. The reason for this common perception in different cultures emerged from the sources that developed by cumulatively from different traditions which encountered and influenced each other through time. In the case of Ottoman apocalyptic sources regarding with the conquest of Constantinople, the construction of the stories can be traced from the footsteps of Byzantium and Arab traditions. A considerable amount of narrative was written during the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century with eschatological significance in Ottoman lands and a post-mythological reading of these sources may helps us to capture glimpses of the conservative ethos of 15<sup>th</sup> century's Ottoman people.

One important source of the era containing eschatological substance and notions of mentality of the age is '*Fi Beyan-ı Tarih-i Konstantiniyye min Evvela ila Ahire*'. The text can be regarded as the grand-narrative of Istanbul in which the narrative follows a cyclical pattern. The anonymous text starts from the story of Suleyman and moves towards the history of Constantinople's and Hagia Sophia's foundation in which both mythical and historical concepts intertwine. There is an emphasis on the ambitions of the rulers for constructing cities with monumental buildings, cities that were doomed to be destructed. Such an emphasis can be explained as the reflection of the mentality of the time when the Ottomans began to undergo unprecedented changes by Mehmed II's imperial projects. Based on the aforementioned anonymous source, this research dedicates itself to investigate the two major themes of the narrative and briefly reveal some of their contradictions with its other themes. First, the eschatological significance on the eve of the Muslim millennium and second, its reactionary position towards the political conjuncture of the 15th century.

## 2. Background

To begin with the apocalyptic feature of the text, it is important to stress the same oft-used themes in contemporaneous sources; in order to dwell upon the fact that this feature did not emerge from the fantasies of the author. The reason for this common interpretation in different sources lies on the fact that most of the sources were created from the same roots that had the goal of either conquering or destructing the Constantinople. Since, until they leave their pagan beliefs behind the Romans were the main enemy of the Abrahamic religions and therefore, their cities were considered to be the capital of infidels. This concept can be summarized as such: when the apocalyptic tradition of Christianity replaced Judaism, Constantinople had its position together with Rome and Babylon which were needed to be destroyed as the condition for the ultimate purification (Yerasimos, 1993:196). It was inevitable for the Muslims to be influenced by this Near Eastern apocalyptic tradition and to think that the

fall of the Constantinople, which they also saw as the capital of infidels, as a sign of the Last Hour. For instance, "... the destruction of the *Yesrib* is the emergence of the great war, the emergence of the great war is the conquest of Constantinople; conquest of the Constantinople is the arrival of dajjal" (Yerasimos, 1993:201) is a saying of the prophet Muhammed which depicts the fall of the Constantinople as a condition for the emergence of the biggest enemy of the religion who is expected to appear in the last hour. On the other hand, constant Arab-Byzantium wars urged Byzantines to develop their own narrative to give people hope on the fight with Muslims, who intended to destroy their empire and religion, in which the destruction of the fall of the empire was associated with the end of time (Şahin, 2010:322).

The works that will be used in this research in which the authors discussed the apocalyptic dimension of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century are the '*Durr-i Meknun*' of Yazıcıoğlu Ahmed Bican and '*Miftah al-jafr al-jami*' written by Abd al-Rahman al-Bistami and the aforementioned anonymous history of Constantinople from the creation to the end. It is important to note that such interpretations of these texts particularly offered by scholars like Stefanos Yerasimos and Cornell Fleischer initially and followed by others.

### 3. Cyclical Narrative of Imminent Last Hour

Going back to the '*Fi Beyan-i Tarih-i Konstantiniyye min Evvela ila Ahire*' which contains an apocalyptic story and prophecies fed from the traditions above, reveals its cyclical pattern. The story of Constantinople was narrated with a constant construction and destruction, in other words a continuity of failure, in different rulers' reign. One of the biggest destructions is described in the time of fictional ruler Yanko bin Madyan, when the city was struck by an earthquake that led to the death of Yanko bin Madyan and most of the notables and priests; that resulted in complete evacuation of the city (Giese, 1992:89). A long time after Yanko bin Madyan, Byzas starts to construct the city again but this time the city was stroke by a plague that kills Byzas and most of the population and therefore, the city becomes vacant again (Giese, 1992:93). The city of Constantinople undergoes several times of construction and demolition through the narrative which seems like it was inspired by the belief that the creation of earth happened through 7 times in which humans emerged at the last phase. Therefore, it is possible to argue that the city of Constantinople symbolizes the earth which had different times of creation and will certainly have an ultimate end. Seeing that Mehmed II destroyed the city again by the conquest and started a project of re-construction of the city; the text interprets this project within the apocalyptic frame. Hence, presents the idea that the ultimate devastation might be close and efforts of building the city of no avail, and it might have an intention of warning people about the imminent end of time.

#### 3.1. Contemporary Sources with Eschatological Expectation

As it was discussed above, this eschatological theme is not a production of the anonym author's imagination rather it is a product of the common interpretation of the age. The approaching Muslim millennia, conquest of Constantinople and some of the sayings of the prophet Muhammed regarding with the two events were the main sources of such apocalyptic analysis. One major source including the theme is *Miftah al-jafr al-jami* written by Abd al-Rahman al-Bistami who studied in Egypt like another contemporary apocalyptic figure Şeyh Bedreddin, in early 15<sup>th</sup> century and "enjoyed such prestige as a text that foretold the events of the Last Days" (Fleischer, 2018:24) and influenced a lot of works like *Dürr-i Meknun* written by Yazıcıoğlu Ahmed Bican. In the *Dürr-i Meknun* Ahmed quotes a saying of Mohammed that is the "Muslims will not stay on Earth for more than one day. He then explains that one day here corresponds to a thousand years, thus implying that the Last Hour may be scheduled for

1000 AH/1590-1 CE” (Şahin, 2010:342). Giving a specific date and evaluation of portents in a comprehensive work, *Dürr-i Meknun* might influenced *Fi Beyan-i Tarih-i Konstantiniyye min Evvela ila Ahire* about the coming of the Last Day, seeing that the former was written shortly after the conquest.

Muslims were not the only ones interpreting the fall of Constantinople as a sign of the end of time, the Orthodox patriarch Gennadios Scholarios “provided the readers of his *Chronographia* with this crucial information; he consoled himself and his flock with the thought that they did not have long to suffer” (Şahin, 2010:323). Meaning that the eternal salvation was near for the Christians which was one of the main message of the *Chronographia* with different references.

#### **4. A Reactionary Position Towards the Sultan’s Policies**

The second important theme of the source characterizes itself in the stories about Constantinople through defining it as a cursed city, and more importantly in the criticisms of Mehmed the II. After the conquest Ottomans started to transform into a centralized, imperial entity. The Sultan himself was the creator and most important supporter of this idea as it is evident in his administrative and cultural revolutionary policies. His agency as a patron of the arts led to a blend of indigenous and foreign artistic style for creating a multifaceted imperial identity (Necipoğlu, 2012:1). In the administrative position he was in favor of foreign descendants like Has Murad Pasha, and *devşirme* system for palace service. As it is noted in the article of Gülru Necipoğlu an Italian observer thought that the Sultan was in tend to produce a new people (Necipoğlu, 2012:2). But particularly his efforts to construct Constantinople was of great importance.

He regarded the re-construction of the city as the ‘the greater jihad’ meaning that he connected it to spreading of Islam. His desire to construct a mosque that could compete with Hagia Sophia should be read according to this imperial vision and Islamic concern. However, the text does not agree with the imperial vision and the possibility of a building which can compete with Hagia Sophia. An important amount of the narrative attributed to this useless struggle of the Sultan as it is noted “is it really possible to construct a building like Hagia Sophia for someone of this age” (Giese, 1992:100) and later the author starts his resentments for the Sultan about the killing of the architect of the New Mosque and the cruelty he showed during the construction. Also, the author’s resentment to policies of Sultan might be evident in a more hidden way in the story of the Yanko bin Madyan in which a lot of people from different lands were brought to settle in Constantinople and those people cursed the city due to the oppression they lived. This can be associated with the Ottoman policy of settlement that accelerated to raise the Muslim inhabitants of the new capital. Another important criticism of the Sultan that might be associated, or speculated, with Yanko bin Madyan’s story is the emphasis on Madyan’s interest in making his own icon. The word choice of the author leads us to this deduction because he uses the word ‘*suret*’ which means image or picture while he can use a more precise word ‘*put*’ or ‘*sanem*’ that means icon. Seeing that the Mehmed II was the first Sultan who had had someone draw his portrait, the criticism might be due to this action’s opposite nature against Islam.

##### **4.1.1 Contemporary Reactionary Sources**

Other than our text, there are important contemporary sources revealing Mehmed II’s imperial vision and resentments of the people towards this aim. Kritovoulos for example, defines the Sultan’s campaigns and victories no way inferior than Alexander the Great’s (Riggs, 1954:3). He mentions the Sultan’s name together with great kings and emperors and probably

he was aware that Alexander the Great was his role model behind his strive of integrating east and west and Julius Caesar was the role model for his military campaigns. As well as Kritovoulos, his begs were aware of these desires of the Sultan. Knowing that the Sultan's intention about the Constantinople was more than conquering it, *Saltukname* includes his begs' views as follows:

It is also a place of the plague, which resides underneath this city. A tradition of the prophet says that famine and drought never leave this city; it is not a place of serenity and joy. If you see [conquer] it, build a wall around Ayasofya and destroy the rest. If you rebuild this city, it will destroy the world, and you will be the cause of this destruction. It will never flourish. However many times you build it, it will fall back into ruin again (Kafesçioğlu, 2009:174).

## **5. Conclusion**

Considering all of these notions in our mythological and historical text together with different contemporary narratives; apocalypticism and anti-imperial position seem to be important elements of the age. But it was a real difficulty for someone to write such an opponent work, therefore; some elements regarding with praising the Sultan, his imperial projects or Constantinople should be read accordingly. One could argue that the author very likely kept his text anonymous intentionally due to the difficulty he might have possibly had. For a historian reading a work of apocalyptic text from the actual place that we stand in the flow of time cause to see them as the histories of the future. Therefore, '*Fi Beyan-ı Tarih-i Konstantiniyye min Evvela ila Ahire*' is a good research area of the past in order to the broaden the frame of historical studies.

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