



Rumeli Hisar Fortress

Summary :

Rumeli Hisar ("Rumelian Castle" or "Castle on the Roman side") was constructed in 1452 by the Ottoman Turkish Sultan Mehmet II Fatih (the Conqueror), to control passage of the Bosphorus, as the first step to his conquest of Constantinople the following year.

Date

Middle of March 1452

Geographical Location

Constantinople, on the western or European side

1. Topography

One-third northward up the Bosphorus straits, on the western or European side, the castle stands to the north of Bebek (ancient Asomaton) and just below the site of the old Robert College, now Boğaziçi Üniversitesi (University of the Bosphorus). It was built on a north-south axis, shaped as a distended isosceles triangle, following the terrain it embraces, from shore up the hillside.¹ Its curtain walls, fifteen meters high and over a meter thick, incorporate small towers and bastions, but its anchors are three major towers: at a central water entrance, and at north (Black Tower) and south corners (Rose Tower) on the hilltop. The fortress is 250 meters in north-south length, and from 50 to 100 meters in width, its highest (south) tower rising over 70 meters above water level. Interior structures included a large cistern and a mosque.

2. Historic Role

The castle overlooks an outcropping into Bebek Bay where the Bosphorus contracts to its narrowest point (700 meters)--a logical place for crossing the straits. Persian King Darius made a famous passage, on a campaign against the Scythians in 512 B.C., building his legendary bridge of boats to accommodate some 700,000 troops. Darius watched it all from a throne on the European side, cut in the rocks of the hill about where the present castle's north tower is situated. Another bridge of boats was created here for the Emperor [Herakleios](#) to cross to Constantinople in A.D. 636. [Mehmet II](#)'s own father, Murad II (1421-1451), had crossed his army from Asia, on [Genoese](#) ships, en route to the [Battle of Varna](#) in 1444.

Mehmet himself noted the location at the beginning of his reign, in 1451, when, after campaigning in Anatolia, he wished to cross the Hellespont (Dardanelles) to his then-capital, Adrianople (Edirne) on the European side. Christian shipping blocked his passage at the time, and so, marching to the Bosphorus, he made his crossing without opposition at this narrow point. The young Sultan apparently recognized the locale as a choke-point, from which the Bosphorus could be controlled. Already, in the 1390's, in the first [Turkish siege of Constantinople](#), Mehmet's great-grandfather, Sultan Beyazıt I (1389-1403), had constructed a small fortress on the Asian side, known today as Anadolu Hisar (Eastern or Anatolian Castle), but then called by the Turks *Akçe* or *Güzel Hisar* ("White" or "Beautiful" Castle). Mehmet identified a site on the European side, exactly opposite, as the place for a corresponding, if more ambitious, fortress of his own. Through their control of the straits, he could threaten Constantinople's supply routes, clearly as a stage in his vision of making the old Byzantine city the Ottoman capital at last.

Planning intensively over the winter, Mehmet was ready by mid-March 1452. At Gallipoli, he mustered a flotilla of twenty-four war galleys and galliots plus sixteen supply boats, and sailed them to his chosen position. Local Christian buildings, including an old church of St. Michael on the site itself, were demolished for structural materials, augmented by shipments from elsewhere. A crew of some 5,000 laborers began work on April 15, and the Sultan introduced a competitive spirit, assigning the financing and construction of the fortress's great towers to his viziers, while he himself oversaw building of the connecting walls. The project's menace was clearly understood by the Emperor [Constantine XI](#) and his terrified citizens. There were ugly onsite scuffles between locals and the Turkish soldiers. Failing at diplomatic remonstrances, the Emperor was reduced to sending food and gifts to the workmen, only to have his final emissaries beheaded.

The construction was completed with astounding speed, by August 31, 1452. Before returning to Edirne, Mehmet installed a garrison of 400, and had mounted on the sea side three great cannon of unprecedented size, capable, it was said, of firing projectiles of up to 600 pounds. These weapons had been built by the renegade gun-maker Urban--who would design the cannon used soon after against the [walls of Constantinople](#) itself. With them in place, the Sultan proclaimed his control of the straits. He ordered all shipping subject to inspection and toll, on pain of destruction. Now, passage between the Aegean and Black Sea was crucial to the lucrative shipping of Italian merchants, especially the [Genoese](#) and [Venetians](#), while vital for [Constantinople's grain supply](#). Three Venetian ships defied the threat in early November. Two escaped the cannonade, but a third was sunk by direct hit. Its surviving crewmen were beheaded, and the captain, one Antonio Rizzo, was executed by impaling; the public exposure of their mangled bodies emphasized the Sultan's message. Rumeli Hisar thus confirmed its original Turkish name of Bogaz Kesen (Greek *Laimokopia*), translatable as either "Straits-cutter" or "Throat-cutter". The Sultan now turned his attention to organizing the epic [siege of Constantinople](#) itself, to begin the following spring.²

3. Later History

Rumeli Hisar was essentially a one-purpose monument. It placed a chokehold on Constantinople in its final Byzantine months, and served as one base for Turkish operations in the siege of 1453. Thereafter, domination of the Bosphorus was assumed by Turkish warships. Since Anadolu Hisar was seen as of no further use, it was allowed to fall into decay. Rumeli Hisar did serve for some time as a local garrison and as a prison, especially for foreign captives. But eventually it also fell into neglect, a village developing inside it. In 1953, for celebrations of the 500th anniversary of the capture of Constantinople, the old castle restored and made an accessible historic monument. The minaret's stump survives and the site of the old [cistern](#) has become an open-air theater where performances of the Istanbul Festival have been given. Meanwhile, the second (1988) of the two modern bridges crossing the Bosphorus has been built to the north, and named after the Conqueror.

1. The tradition that its design suggests the name of the Prophet, and of the Sultan himself, is unfounded.

2. Philipides M., Hanak W. *The Siege and the Fall of Constantinople in 1453. Historiography, Topography, and Military Studies*. Farnham, Ashgate, 2011, Chapter 7. A Castle and a Bombard. I. Rumeli Hisar: The Fortress of Doom, pp. 397-413

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Glossary :

	cistern A receptacle for holding rainwater, but also water transported from elsewhere, in order to keep it stored. The cisterns were either covered eiter open, and they could have more than one compartments.
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Sources

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Reinsch, D.R. (ed.), *Critobuli Imbriotae Historiae* (Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae 22, Berlin – New York 1983), I. 6-11.

Quotations

The castle Baskesen and Mehmet II

And he [Mehmed] occupied a cliff below Sosthenion, which had been long ago named "Phoneas." There he ordered the foundations to be arranged in the shape of a triangle. After this was done he named the castle Baskesen, which can be rendered into Greek as "Head-cutter." Across from it was the fortress [Anadolu Hisar] built by his grandfather.

Greco, V. (ed.), *Ducae Historia turco-byzantina (1341-1462)* (Bucarest 1958), ch. 34.7.

The reaction of the people in Constantinople to the news of Mehmet II's plans to build Rumeli Hisar

Μετά δὲ τοῦτο τὸ ἔργον ἑτέρου ἤψατο λίαν ἐπιζήμιου καὶ θανασιῶμο κατὰ Ῥωμαίων. Χειμῶνος γὰρ ἀρξαμένου προστάγματα καὶ διαλαλιάς ἐν τε δύσει ἐν τε ἀνατολῇ ἐν ἐκάστη ἐπαρχίᾳ τοῦ ἐπομάσαι οἰκοδόμου τεχνίτας χιλίους καὶ ἐργάτας κατὰ ἀναλογίαν τῶν τεχνιτῶν καὶ ἀσβεστοκαύστας καὶ ἀπλῶς εἰπεῖν πάσαν ἐργασίαν καὶ παρακομιδὴν τοῦ εἶναι ἐτόιμους ἐν ἑαρι εἰς κατασκευὴν κάστρου ἐν τῷ Στομίῳ τοῦ Ἱεροῦ ὑπεράνω τῆς Πόλεως. Τότε οἱ Ῥωμαῖοι ἀκούσαντες τὴν πικρὰν ταύτην ἀγγελίαν καὶ οἱ ἐν Κωνσταντίνου καὶ οἱ ἐν πάσῃ τῇ Ἀσίᾳ τε καὶ Θρακίᾳ καὶ οἱ ἐν ταῖς νήσοις οἰκούντες χριστιανοὶ ὑπερήλγησαν, ἐξηράνθησαν. Οὐκ ἦν ἐν ἀλλήλοισι γλώσσα ἢ διαλαλιά πλὴν· «Νῦν τὸ τέλος ἤγγισε τῆς Πόλεως· νῦν τὰ σήμαντρα τῆς φθορᾶς τοῦ ἡμετέρου γένους· νῦν αἱ ἡμέραι τοῦ ἀντιχριστοῦ· καὶ τί γένομεν ἢ τί ποιήσωμεν; Ἀρθῆτω ἀφ' ἡμῶν ἡ ζωὴ ἡμῶν, Κύριε· καὶ μὴ ἴδωσαν οἱ ὀφθαλμοὶ τῶν δούλων σου τὴν φθορὰν τῆς πόλεως· μὴδὲ εἴπῃσαν οἱ ἐχθροὶ σου· Δέσποτα, ποῦ εἰσιν οἱ φυλάσσοντες ταύτην ἀγίον;» -Ταύτην γὰρ τὴν φωνὴν σὺν κλαυθμῷ οὐ μόνον οἱ τῆς πόλεως, ἀλλὰ καὶ οἱ τῆς ἀνατολῆς σποράδην οἰκούντες χριστιανοὶ καὶ οἱ ἐν ταῖς νήσοις καὶ οἱ ἐν τῇ δύσει τὸ αὐτὸ μετὰ κλαυθμοῦ βέβωον.

Greco, V. (ed.), *Ducae Historia turco-byzantina (1341-1462)* (Bucarest 1958), ch. 34.5.1-16

The erection of Rumeli Hisar

τειχισμός τοῦ φρουρίου

ταῦτα οὖν ἅπαντα καλῶς ἀναθεωρήσας τε καὶ κατασκευάσας τῷ τε λογισμῷ ἄριστα διαγνοῦς, ἐπεὶ οἱ κατεφάνετο τὸ χωρίον ἐπικαιρότατον, ἐνταῦθα τευχίζειν ἐγνω τὸ φρούριον· καὶ διαλαμβάνει δὴ σημείους τὸν χώρον, ὃν ἐμελλε τευχίζειν. σχεδιάσας δὲ τοῦ φρουρίου τὴν θέσιν τε καὶ τὸ μέγεθος τῶν τε πύργων καὶ μεταπυργίων τὰς βάσεις καὶ ἀποστάσεις ἐτι τε προπύργια καὶ ἐπάλξεις καὶ πύλας καὶ ὅσα ἄλλα καλῶς τε καὶ ὡς ἦν αὐτῷ κατὰ νοῦν, κατακερματίζει τοῖς ἐν τέλει κελύεσας ὅτι τάχιστα ἀνύτειν τὸ ἔργον καὶ ἄθλα προὔθηκε κάλλιστα τοῖς ἀριστα καὶ τάχιστα τοῦτο ἐξεργασμένοις· καὶ αὐτὸς δὲ τὸ παρὰ τὴν θάλασσαν μέρος τοῦ φρουρίου λαμβάνει.

σημείωσαι τὴν συντομίαν τοῦ τευχισμοῦ τοῦ φρουρίου καὶ ὡς ἦν ἐχυρώτατον

ἀρξάμενος δὲ τῆς οἰκοδομῆς μεσοῦντος ἔαρος ἤδη χειρὶ τε πολλῇ καὶ δαπάνῃ καὶ σπουδῇ καὶ ἀντιφιλοτιμῆσει πάντων πρὸς τὸ ἔργον κερημένον πρὶν ὅλον τὸ θέρος ἐξήκειν τευχίζειν τὸ φρούριον ἐρμυντότατον πάντῃ καὶ ἀσφαλέστατον καὶ τῶν πώποτε φρουρίων ὀνομαστότατον λίθοις τε μεγίστοις λογάδην ζυνηθεμένοις ἐξεργασμένον σιδήρῳ τε πολλῷ καὶ μολύβδῳ τοῖς γόμοφισ ἐνισχημένοις καὶ πολλοῖς ἄλλοις κατωχυρωμένον τε καὶ κτηροφλισμένον πύργων τε πικνότητι καὶ μεγέθει καὶ ἀσφαλείᾳ ἐς ὑψος ἡρμένον μεταπυργίων τε καὶ ἐπάλξεων καρτερότητι ὑψηλῆ τε καὶ τευχῶν παχύτητι.

Reinsch, D.R. (ed.), *Critobuli Imbriotae Historiae* (Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae 22, Berlin – New York 1983), I.11.1-3