

NESTOR-İSKENDER

(b. ca. 1438)

LIFE

What we know about the N.-İ.'s¹ life is derived from the internal evidence found in the diary portion² of his work entitled *The Tale of Constantinople* and the autobiographical *vita*³ appended to the text. Nestor, most probably of White Russian stock,⁴ had been dedicated to an unidentified Russian monastery while still quite young. As a novice he appears to have received instruction, although we cannot establish the extent of his education. His learning, however, appears to have been sufficient to prepare him for his later task of producing a work on the siege and fall of Constantinople in 1453. The novice Nestor accompanied Russian monks on their pilgrimage to the imperial city to visit the countless religious centers and to view the holy relics housed in them. While traveling through Moldavia, perhaps around 1450 or 1451, Nestor's company encountered an Ottoman artillery unit carving stone balls for their cannons and arquebuses in preparation for the siege of Constantinople. The monastic party was attacked and Nestor was taken captive along with other young boys. Soon thereafter he was converted to Islam and given the Turkish name of İskender, a variation of Alexander.⁵

N.-İ. was trained neither as a soldier nor as an artilleryman,⁶ but was employed in the Ottoman military administration by a Turkish commander who recognized his learning. The fact that he acquired a substantial knowledge of and familiarity with Ottoman artillery and its deployment is evident in his vivid descriptions of the usage of artillery, artillery barrages, and assaults along the Theodosian Walls. N.-İ. accompanied the Ottoman unit from Moldavia, arrived at their encampment west of the city walls some weeks before the onset of the siege on 4 April 1453,⁷ managed to escape from his unit, and entered Constantinople where he remained until its fall on 29 May 1453.

For the first fourteen days of his stay within the city, the youthful N.-İ. wandered about the urban center. Neither the *Tale* nor the *vita* show any evidence of factual content, unlike the substantially detailed descriptions for the subsequent weeks leading to the fall. The Venetian physician Nicolò Barbaro (b. ca. 1400), who also maintained a diary of the siege⁸ from his vantage point upon a Venetian ship in the harbor of the Golden Horn, records that Mehmed II (r. 1444-1446, 1451-1481) ordered the deployment of his artillery units along the Theodosian Walls on 11 April 1453. N.-İ. appears to have no knowledge of this deployment. In all probability, he was then within the city, but not in close proximity to the walls where he could have observed and recorded this event. Only after this date did he apparently encounter monks, perhaps Russian, resident in the Byzantine capital and was befriended by them. The monks at once recognized the youth's knowledge of Ottoman forces and his value to the Byzantine defenders. He was placed on the inner walls from the

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heights of which he could observe, identify, and report to the defenders the movement of various Ottoman units assigned to launch attacks and conduct bombardments in the sector of the Mesoteikhion,⁹ between the civil Gate of Saint Romanos and the Pempton, the Fifth Military Gate. This sector was the weakest link and the most vulnerable area along the Theodosian Walls. In addition to providing Byzantine defenders with valuable intelligence on Ottoman movements, N.-İ. also served to identify specific individuals engaged in combat and to count the dead on both sides. Thus, he records that the morning following the major fighting that took place on 18 April 1453 the Byzantine emperor Constantine XI (r. 1449-1453) ordered “the clergy and deacons to gather the dead and bury them.” N.-İ. then states that the Ottomans lost 18,000 soldiers, the Greeks 1,740, and the Armenians and the Franks (that is the Genoese and the Venetians among others) 700.¹⁰ He counts the dead on both sides again for the mornings of 25 April 1453 and 8 May 1453. But by 27 May 1453 or 28 May 1453, he simply laments: “The fallen on both sides (and above all the wounded) who can count [them]?”¹¹

N.-İ.’s *vita* furnishes precious little information about his life after the fall of Constantinople. The author speaks of being “hunted down and caught,” but then elaborates that “through maturity and great diligence I wrote of the age.”¹² In the aftermath of the occupation of the city, Mehmed II ordered his troops to seek out deserters, Byzantine officials, and high churchmen, and permitted a number of monks to exit the city to take up residence within the monastic communities on Mount Athos. N.-İ. appears to have sought safety within these monastic groups, for we have no evidence that he ever returned to his native Russia or that he sought residence within the few surviving monasteries in the Balkans.

WORK

① *Повѣсь о Царьградѣ* (*The Tale of Constantinople*)

The diary portion of the *Tale* is a valuable source for a prosopography of Byzantine defenders and Ottoman aggressors and includes accounts of individuals and their participation in the defense of, and the assaults upon, the imperial city. The work provides names as well as vivid and oftentimes gruesome descriptions not found in other sources. The first part of the *Tale*, the foundation account relating the role of Constantine I (r. 324-337) in the establishment of “The City [ἡ πόλις]” at the site of the ancient Greek village of Byzantium¹³ is drawn from the Old Slavonic rendition with some emendation of the chronicle of Georgios Hamartolos, a ninth-century Byzantine annalist.¹⁴ The main body of the *Tale*, however, is devoted to the personal account of N.-İ. The concluding pages of the *Tale* address the then popular prognostications foretelling the fall of the imperial city and its recovery by Christians from the Ottoman Turks.¹⁵

N.-İ. elaborates on Constantine XI’s role during the fighting along the walls with exceptional clarity and illustrates the emperor’s presence at the walls, his continued encouragement of the defenders, and his overall defensive posture to save the city.

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Although we have no precise information on how Constantine XI met his end on the fateful day of 29 May 1453, N.-İ. draws upon hearsay to record how the emperor entered the Gate of Saint Romanos and died there in battle.¹⁶

Caught up in the substantial mythology of the age, N.-İ., like other authors, believed that Constantine XI had a wife, who remains nameless in historical accounts including his. At that particular moment during the siege, the emperor was a widower. Although he was considering marriage to an Iberian princess, circumstances prevented the union from taking place. The woman N.-İ. observed in the company of the emperor, therefore, must have been his consort,¹⁷ whose popularity even entered Ottoman mythology. According to one account,¹⁸ when the city fell to Mehmed II, she was taken captive by the sultan. Realizing that she was pregnant, the sultan then prophesized that she would bear a son whom he would adopt and make his heir. This myth solidified the notion of the legitimacy of imperial rulership as well as its descent from the Romans, through the Byzantines, to the Ottoman sultans.

N.-İ. has also contributed to a controversy which in all probability did not originate with him, but continues to the present, namely the question whether there was a sitting patriarch in Constantinople at the time of the siege. N.-İ. believes there was and makes numerous entries to record his presence about the emperor as well as his participation in the defense of the city. He does not identify by name the highest ranking churchmen in the city, namely Cardinal Isidore (d. 1463), who was a Greek by birth who became metropolitan of Kiev, was deposed for his adherence to the agreement concluded at the Council of Florence in 1438-1439, and returned to Rome where he was elevated to his rank by the Papacy. Prior to the onset of the siege, he was dispatched by the Pope as a legate to the emperor to ensure that the Byzantines adhered to the notion of church union. N.-İ. identifies him as Athanasios (also Anastasios), whose name is not mentioned in the patriarchal records as the sitting patriarch in Constantinople.¹⁹

The list of Byzantine defenders provided by N.-İ. is substantial. These are figures whom N.-İ. knew personally or about whom he had obtained knowledge through the few survivors among the defenders, adding credibility to his work. For example, N.-İ. emphasizes the major role played by the Genoese *condottiere* Giovanni Longo Giustiniani, who became commander of forces and was assigned the defense of the Pemp-ton. Among the major and lesser defenders, he notes and relates about Andrew (the son of a *protostrator*), the Bembo and Bocchiardi brothers, Maurizio Cataneo, Catarino Contarini, Fabruzzi Corner, Bartolomeo da Soligo, Nikolaos Goudeles, Ioannes Kantakouzenos (perhaps a grand domestic), John Grant (a mining expert), Theodoros Karystenos, Giovanni Loredan, the lord and grand duke Loukas Notaras, Girolamo Minotto (the Venetian *bailo* at Constantinople), Nicolo Mocenigo, six defenders bearing the patronymic of Palaiologos including Singkoulas (also Senkroula) the *strategos*, Philanthropenos, Rhangabes the *strategos*, and the *chiliarch* Theodoros.

Among the Ottoman commanders, aside from numerous references to Mehmed II, N.-İ. lists Amerbeg (°Ömer Beg, the standard-bearer of Rumelia), Süleymān Baltaoğ-

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lı (a former admiral of the sultan's navy who suffered an ignoble defeat in the Golden Horn, was removed, and reemerged as a commander of land forces), the grand vizier Hâlîl Çandarlı, Maḥmūd (who is only identified as a commander of Asiatic forces), Muṣṭafā (the standard-bearer of the East), Tursun Beg, and Zaganos Pasha. Of the lesser figures, N.-İ. cites and comments upon the fighting abilities of the janissary Amurat and a combatant Flaburar. Not all of these individuals, Byzantine or Ottoman, have been fully identified and much work needs to be devoted to a prosopography of the defenders and aggressors.²⁰

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The Troitse-Sergieva Lavra bears the autograph of N.-İ., whereas the Hilandar Monastery has appended the autograph of its copyist Gregory/Vasily, who rendered the text that he had obtained from Muscovite Russia into Serbian Old Slavonic. The Bucharest manuscript contains no information indicating a transcriber.

Editions and Translations: The following renditions and translations, including abbreviated texts, are significant: 1) *Царственной лѣтописецъ* (St. Petersburg, 1772), 306-358. 2) *Лѣтопись по Никонскому списку* (St. Petersburg, 1789), 222-277. 3) Izmail I. Sreznevsky (ed.). *Повѣсмь о Царьградѣ* (St. Petersburg, 1855). 4) Vladimir A. Iakolev (ed.). *Сказание о Царьградѣ по древнимъ Рукописиамъ* (St. Petersburg, 1859), 56-116. 5) *Вослресенская Лѣтопись, Полное Собрание Русских Летописей* 8 (St. Petersburg, 1859), 128-144. 6) Philipp A. Déthier (ed.). *Anonymus Moscovita. Monumenta Hungariae Historica*, 21.1 (n.p. [Budapest?], n.d. [1871-1872?]), 1047-1122. An advance copy; withdrawn from publication by the press. 7) *Памятники Древней Письменности и Искусства* (St. Petersburg, 1886). 8) Archimandrite Leonid (ed.). *Повѣсмь о Царьградѣ (его основаніи и взятіи Турками въ 1453 году) Нестора-Искандера XV вѣка (По рукописи Троице-Сергиевой лавры нач. XVI вѣка, No. 733)*. (St. Petersburg, 1886) 9) *Патріарская или Никоновская Лѣтопись, Полное Собрание Русских Летописей* 12 (St. Petersburg, 1901), 78-83 and 83-108. 10) *Хронографъ Редакции 1512 года, Полное Собрание Русских Летописей* 22/1 (St. Petersburg, 1911), 445-460. 11) *Книга Степенная Царского Родословия, Полное Собрание Русских Летописей* 21/2 (St. Petersburg, 1913), 495-504. 12) *Хронографъ Западно-Русской Редакціа, Полное Собрание Русских Летописей* 22/1 (Petrograd, 1914), 82 and 204-207. 13) Maximilian Braun and Alfons Maria Schneider (eds.). *Bericht über die Eroberung Konstantinopels nach der Nikon-Chronik übersetzt und erläutert* (Leipzig, 1943). 14) Vasile Grecu. "La chute de Constantinople dans la literature Roumaine."

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¹ Alternatively Nestor-Iskinder and Nestor-Iskander. Cf. Ivan Dujčev, “La conquête turque et la prise de Constantinople dans la littérature slave d’époque,” in Ivan Dujčev, *Medioevo Bizantinoslavo*, 3 (Rome, 1971), 412, 415. Elsewhere, G.P. Bel’chenko (“К вопросы о составе исторической повести о взятии Царьграда.” *Сборник статей к сороклетию академика А. С. Орлова* (Leningrad, 1934), 507 f.) employs as equivalents “Iskender” and “Iskinder” with no apparent distinction. Both authors accept that Nestor had been given the Turkish name upon conversion to Islam.

² *The Tale of Constantinople (Of Its Origin and Capture by the Turks in the Year 1453)* by Nestor-Iskander. (From the Early Sixteenth-Century Manuscripts of the Troitse-Sergieva Lavra, No. 773), translated and annotated by Walter K. Hanak and Marios Philippides (New Rochelle, New York, Athens, and Moscow, 1998), 30-95.

³ A facsimile of his *vita* appears in *Повѣсь о Царьградѣ (его основаніи и взятіи Турками въ 1453 году) Нестора-Искандера XV вѣка (По рукописи Троице-Сергиевой лавры нач. XVI вѣка, No. 733)*, Archimandrite Leonid (ed.), Памятники древней письменности и искусства (St. Petersburg, 1886), 43. For a transcription and English translation of the facsimile, cf. *The Tale of Constantinople. Hilandar Slavic Ms. 280, folia 257^r-289^v*, transcription, translation, and commentary by W.K. Hanak and M. Philippides (forthcoming), “Notes to the Introduction,” n. 9.

⁴ The *Tale* contains a number of medieval Slavic dialectical variations. On the basis of these variations, Leonid first conjectured (ibid., iii-iv) that N.-Ī. was from the region of Great Russia or Lithuanian Rus’ (that is, White Russia). A more intensive study of the internal philological evidence led Boris O. Unbegaun (“Les relations vieux-russes de la prise de Constantinople,” *Revue des études slaves* 9 (1929), 20) to conclude that N.-Ī. came from the area of Pskov in northern Byelorussia (modern Belarus).

⁵ He attests to being given this name in his *vita*. Iskinder appears to be a Hellenized corruption of the Turkish name and is rendered in medieval Russian as Iskander.

⁶ There is no consensus among scholars on the specific role N.-Ī. played in the Turkish military unit. Bel’chenko (“К вопросы о составе исторической повести о взятии Царьграда,” 507) and Aleksy I. Sobolevsky (*Переводная литература Московской Руси XIV-XVII веков. Библиографические материалы* (St. Petersburg, 1903), 13) are in agreement that he served as a soldier without specifying his role. P.D. Rogodin (“Обзор источников по истории осады и взятия Византии Турками в 1453 году,” *Журнал Министерства народного просвещения* 264.8 (1889), 250) and Mikhail O. Skripil (“История о взятии Царьграда Турками Нестора Искандера,” *Труды отдела древнерусской литературы* 10 (1954), 174) believe that N.-Ī. was a professionally trained soldier.

⁷ He relates of this march quite tersely: “By suffering for a long time on a military march...” W.K. Hanak and M. Philippides, *The Tale of Constantinople*, 96-97.

⁸ His diary should be used with caution. Much of the information it contains was derived from wounded defenders and not through personal observation and is not always credible. For the diary, cf. Enrico Cornet (ed.), *Giornale dell’ assedio di Costantinopoli 1453 di Nicolò Barbaro P. V. correddato di note e documenti* (Vienna, 1856); Agostino Pertusi (ed.), *La Caduta di Costantinopoli, 1: Le Testimonianze dei Contemporanei* (Verona, 1976), 8-38; Nicolò Barbaro: *Diary of the Siege of Constantinople*, translated by John R. [Melville] Jones (Jericho, 1969); and Vanessa A. Lappa (ed.), *Η Πόλις Εάλω· Το Χρονικό Πολιορκίας και της Άλωσης Πόλης*, (Athens, 1991), 93-213.

⁹ W.K. Hanak, “The Constantinopolitan *Mesoteikhion* in 1453: Its Topography, Adjacent Structures and Gates,” *Byzantine Studies/Etudes Byzantines*, n.s., 4 (1999), 69-98. See cited literature for alternate interpretations. Also of value is the recent study of Neslihan Asutay-Effenberger (*Die Landmauer von Konstantinopel-Istanbul. Historisch-topographische und baugeschichtliche Untersuchungen*. (Berlin and New York, 2007), passim).

¹⁰ W.K. Hanak and M. Philippides, *The Tale of Constantinople*, 38-39.

¹¹ W.K. Hanak and M. Philippides, *The Tale of Constantinople*, 74-75.

¹² W.K. Hanak and M. Philippides, *The Tale of Constantinople*, 96-97.

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¹³ W.K. Hanak and M. Philippides, *The Tale of Constantinople*, 22-31.

¹⁴ Georgios Hamartolos, *Chronicon*, vol. 2 (Carl de Boor (ed.), (Leipzig, 1904), esp. Ch. 3); and Viktor M. Istrin (ed.), *Хроника Георгия Амартола въ древнемъ славянорусскомъ переводѣ. Текстъ, исследование и словарь* (Petrograd, 1920). For an analysis of the foundation account, cf. W.K. Hanak, "Some historiographical observations on the sources of Nestor-Iskander's *The Tale of Constantinople*," in Roderick Beaton and Charlotte Roueché (eds.), *The Making of Byzantine History: Studies Dedicated to Donald M. Nicol*, (London, 1993), esp. 36-45.

¹⁵ W.K. Hanak and M. Philippides, *The Tale of Constantinople*, 94-97, and nn. 59 and 103-106.

¹⁶ W.K. Hanak and M. Philippides, *The Tale of Constantinople*, esp. 86-87 and 92-93.

¹⁷ For the considerable mythology on her as Constantine XI's wife, cf. M. Philippides and W.K. Hanak, *The Siege and the Fall of Constantinople in 1453: The Historiography, Topography and Military Studies*, vol. 1, Ch. IV (forthcoming).

¹⁸ The popular tale relates: "But the empress was six months pregnant with the emperor's child ... the empress gave birth and baptized the child who received the name Panages ... and in time he became sultan ..." Cf. Nicholas G. Polites, *Μελέται περὶ τοῦ Βίου καὶ τοῖς Γλοσσις τοῦ Ἑλληνικοῦ Λαοῦ, Παραδόσεις* (Athens, 1904), 26-27. Also Spyridon P. Lampros, "Ὁ Κωνσταντῖνος Παλαιολόγος ὡς Σύζυγος ἐν τῇ Ἱστορίᾳ καὶ τοῖς Θρύλοις," *Νέος Ἑλληνομνήμων* 4 (1907), 451; and W.K. Hanak and M. Philippides, *The Tale of Constantinople*, vol. 1, ch. 4.

¹⁹ For a plausible resolution of the question, cf. W.K. Hanak, "Pope Nicholas V and the Aborted Crusade of 1452-1453 to Rescue Constantinople from the Turks," *Byzantinoslavica* 65 (2007), 347-353.

²⁰ We have attempted to identify and cite sources that make reference to them in M. Philippides and W.K. Hanak, *The Siege and Fall of Constantinople in 1453*, vol. 2, App. IV.

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