

Letter of Sheik Aq Šems ed-Dîn to Mehmet II

Trans. by W. L. North from the Italian translation in A. Pertusi, *La Caduta di Constantinopoli I*: Fondazione Lorenzo Valla, Milan: Mondadori 1976, pp. 301-303.

The author of this letter, Mehmet Šems el-Mille ve'd-Din, was born in Damascus in 1389 and, after becoming a teacher of the Quran in 1411, travelled in Persia and Transoxiana founding monasteries and mosques. Between 1447 and 1451, he lived in Adrianople and was an influential figure in arousing the Turks to war against Constantinople.

This letter—striking in both its tone and its content— was written just after the defeat of the Turkish fleet under the command of Balta-oghlu on 20 April 1452 by the defenders of Constantinople. In the wake of this defeat, Mehmet did, in fact, depose Balta-oghlu from his admiralty and appoint Hamza Beg in his place, perhaps indicating that the sheik's advice was taken or it accorded with Mehmet's own approach.

Oh Allah, wellspring of all power and aid.

After my fitting and due greetings, this is what I must tell your majesty. The misfortune that befell us as a consequence of the sailors' actions has caused the deepest sorrow and discouragement in our heart. The fact that they failed to avail themselves of this opportunity has resulted in certain contrary developments in this situation: one such development is that the infidel have been encouraged and have staged a raucous demonstration; a second lies in the claim that your noble majesty demonstrated little discernment or ability in having your own orders carried out. A further result of this defeat was that I was personally accused of having failing to achieve the object of my prayers and that my prophecies are therefore groundless. To this list of unfortunate consequences could be added many others.

Yet I think that this is not the time for negligence and tolerance. A situation like this demands that a thorough inquiry be made to determine who was responsible for this failure to execute orders and to make the necessary efforts. Then, after having clarified this matter, the situation requires severe punishments such as the removal from office of the guilty party and a serious reprimand. If this punishment is not executed now and quickly, right when the trenches must be filled and the final attack on the fortified city [Constantinople] shall be ordered, the troops shall fail to give one-hundred percent.

As you well know, the majority of our forces are, in any case, forced converts, and therefore the number of those who are ready to sacrifice their lives for the love of God is extremely low. But if they saw that they would be able to loot, they would be ready to run up against certain death. I therefore entreat you: Do everything in your power either with actions or orders so that this victory is assured. At a time like this, what is needed is to give the command to someone who is little influenced by his own personal sentiments, be they piety or a gentleness of spirit. He ought fervently to arouse the men to action, as is necessary; and there is also grounds in the laws for this. As all-powerful Allah has said: *They swear by Allah not to have said what they have said, but they have truly said the word of Denial, they have refused the Faith, after they had given themselves to Allah, and they have attempted a plan that has failed; and they account for their failure by saying that it was only because Allah only conferred upon them a little of His grace, Allah and his Messenger. It would be better for them if they converted, and if they turn their backs, Allah shall torment them with cruel punishments, in this world and the next, and they shall find neither allies nor aid on this earth.*¹

When we were struck by the news of this unexpected defeat, we sat down as a sign of mourning and consulted the al-Quran to understand what was the just course to follow. When we opened the book, we were led through the guidance of the Sultan of the Sajjdi Ga'far Sâdiq to the following verse: *Thus did it happen to those who were before you. They were stronger than you and richer in wealth and in sons, and they enjoyed their share. Thus have you enjoyed your share as those before you enjoyed theirs, and you have chattered away as they chattered. Their works were made void in this world and the next. They were the Lost.*² And so those who do not unite with us in battle are not truly Muslims in their hearts. This short verse, in discussing hypocrites, says that hypocrites shall surely be treated in the same manner as unbelievers in the flames of Hell. It therefore became clear that a forceful response was vital to guarantee the progress of our undertaking.

You must take care of this in such a way that in the end we shall not be forced to retreat in shame and disillusionment but shall be victorious, triumphant, and free from worry with the help and support of Allah. Amen. It is a well-known fact that while it is man who does deeds, the strength to bring these plans to completion rests only in Allah. The final decision is in the hands of Allah alone but it is equally important not to hold oneself back from making the greatest possible effort. This is the example that the Prophet and his companions gave us.

And so, saddened and continuing to read a bit from the Al-Quran, I fell asleep. Thanks be to Allah in the height of the heavens, for by His grace very good news was

¹ Al-Quran IX.74.

² Al-Quran IX. 69.

sent to me. Much time has passed since that event happened, after which I found complete relief.

I hope that your majesty shall not consider these words of mine unwelcome and out of place, and that you shall understand that they arise only from my great affection for you.