

The Siege of Otranto

July, 1480 to May, 1481

By

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Toward the bottom of the heel of the Italian peninsula, is a small town called Otranto. In 1480 the Ottoman Turks laid siege to that town as their first attempt to establish a foothold in Europe. Their purpose was to see what kind of resistance the Christians would present in the face of an overwhelming Islamic force. They had already taken the precaution of signing a peace treaty with Venice in 1479, the most powerful sea-going commercial force in the Eastern Mediterranean, and in 1453 they had successfully conquered Byzantium, which had controlled that area since the fall of the Roman Empire. So, without the interference of Venice, they had every reason to believe that their project to invade Europe would be successful.

Earlier, Sultan Mehmet II had been repulsed by the Hungarians when he attempted to conquer Belgrade, and by Vlad III (Dracula) when he moved against Wallachia (Southern Romania). Nevertheless, in conquering Byzantium, he considered himself the new “Caesar of Rome” and therefore decided to send a force of about 100 ships with cannons, 18,000 infantry, and 700 cavalry, to take the port of Brindisi on the Apulian coast. His purpose was to go from there directly to Rome to conquer the capital and rid it of the Papacy,

thereby bringing the heart of Europe to the Muslim faith. Unfortunately for him, the weather did not cooperate, and his ships were blown so far south that his nearest port of entry was that of Otranto.

At that time, Otranto was a part of the Kingdom of Naples ruled by Ferdinand I (Aragon/Spain) and his son Alfonso, who was stationed in the region of Apulia where Otranto was located. But Otranto itself was considered such a small and insignificant town that no one thought it would be attacked instead of Brindisi. So, while the town did have walls, it was never provided with cannons with which to defend itself. Its only claim to fame in the Middle Ages had been the time when some 12,000 Crusaders had gathered just prior to their sailing for the Holy Land in 1095.

When the Turks had conquered Byzantium in 1453, the people who had taken refuge in the Cathedral of Hagia Sophia were either slaughtered (infants and the elderly), sold at the slave markets (men), or left to the soldiers as their booty (women). The citizens of Otranto were aware of this, and in July of 1480, when they were asked by the Sultan's forces if they would surrender the city and convert to Islam in return for their lives, they refused—twice! In fact the leaders responsible for the defense of the castle took the keys to the top of the tower and threw them into the sea.

The following morning the defenders resorted to boiling oil and water to repel the invaders with their siege

engines and cannon balls. After two grueling weeks the cannons breached the walls and the Turks slaughtered as many in the streets as they could find. When they reached the Cathedral of Otranto they treated those who had taken refuge there in the same way that they had in Byzantium a few years earlier. Eight hundred of the still able-bodied men who were left to defend the city, were taken before the Leader of the Turkish forces, Pasha Ahmet, and were once again asked if they would convert to Islam to save their lives. When they refused, the Archbishop was beheaded, a Bishop and the Count of Otranto were slowly sawed in half.

Despite witnessing this, one of the men, a tailor named Antonio Primaldi, stepped forward and announced that he was prepared to die a thousand times for Christ. At this, the rest of the men shouted the same message, and on the following morning they were all taken up the Hill of Minerva overlooking the town and were decapitated one by one. A chronicler of the event reported that when Primaldi was beheaded, his body rose and stood upright until the last man was killed.

By the end of August the Pasha continued his attacks on the surrounding towns but by Fall the weather and the lack of food and other supplies, made it difficult for him to stay. He took the bulk of his forces and left, with the intention of returning in the Spring with an even larger force. Meanwhile, Ferdinand, the King of Naples, had gathered his available troops and sent his son, Duke Alfonso, to lead them to Apulia in the early spring of

1481. Shortly afterward the Sultan, Mehmet II, died (poisoned?) and the Turkish troops who had remained in Otranto were all exterminated. The town itself was practically eradicated in the battle. But the terrible Siege of Otranto was over.

The bones of those eight hundred men who had been beheaded on the Hill of Minerva, were gathered up and preserved by what remained of the town's citizenry. Their skulls were eventually installed into three altar pieces in the chapel dedicated to their memory once the Cathedral had been restored. They are still on view there for all to see.

In October of 1980 Pope John Paul II visited Otranto and said Mass in honor of those martyrs who had prevented Rome itself from being invaded by the Turks. In July of 2006, Pope Benedict XVI gave his formal approval for a decree pronouncing them "Martyrs for the Faith." And in May of 2013, Pope Francis I canonized them as Saints.

NB: Some of the details concerning the Siege of Otranto were taken from the online version of the Catholic Encyclopedia: "Catholic Answers Magazine."



Map of the Heel of Italy, showing Brindisi and Otranto.



**The Chapel of the Skulls at the
Cathedral of Otranto.**