

Introduction

If the Earth were a single state, Constantinople would be its capital. – Napoleon



ON THE OUTSKIRTS of Istanbul's Fatih district is a pedestrian underpass that runs underneath a major traffic artery. My son Joe and I follow the steps down into the underpass and we see a large, brightly coloured mural fixed to the tiled wall. In the foreground, a turbaned figure sits astride a white horse. Behind him, a bannered army surges forward. In the centre of the picture a team of oxen hauls the muzzle of a great bronze cannon.

I step up close to inspect the mural, but Joe stands back to take in the whole scene. Joe is fourteen. He's thin, with hair like mine, wavy to the point of curly. Joe wishes it were straight. He likes history and he's always asking questions.

‘So,’ he ventures, ‘the guy with the turban – that would be Mehmed the Conqueror?’

‘That’s him alright.’

I pause for a moment to consult my map, and then I look around.

‘It’s funny, but this painting marks the spot, more or less, where the Roman empire died in 1453. Somewhere above our heads’

‘What’s the story here?’ he asks.

So I tell him.



ON 6 APRIL 1453, the young sultan of the Ottoman Turks came to the walls of this city, which was then known as Constantinople. His name was Mehmed, and he had brought with him an army of 200,000 men and the biggest bronze cannon in the world. Mehmed had longed to possess this city since childhood. Taking it would make his empire whole, and allow him to claim the mantle of the Caesars of Rome.

Mehmed’s soldiers had marched for many days down the old Roman road from their capital of Edirne. They came to a halt a quarter-mile from Constantinople’s formidable land walls, where they assembled thousands of tents and positioned their artillery. A group of workers constructed a palisade fence. An Ottoman observer marvelled at the spreading mass of soldiers that flowed like ‘a river of steel’ and were ‘as numerous as the stars’. Mehmed’s luxurious red-and-gold tent was placed in the front and centre of the Ottoman line, so he might observe the firing of the massive cannon that had been hauled all the way from Edirne.

That night the Turks lit hundreds of bonfires. High up on the walls, the defenders looked on in wonder and terror at the long line

of camps, extending as far as they could see along the entire length of the three-mile land walls.

CONSTANTINOPLE WAS AN OLD and exhausted city. It had served as the capital of the eastern Roman empire for eleven hundred years, but by 1453 this was an empire in name only. The Romans of Constantinople were like threadbare aristocrats eking out a living on a dilapidated estate, surrounded by lands that no longer belonged to them. Even so, something of the glory of the Roman name still clung to this sad and shrunken city founded eleven centuries earlier by Constantine the Great. It was still seen as the seat of world power, the second Rome. The Muslim warriors at the gates were fired by the words of a prophecy, uttered by Muhammad himself: *Surely, Constantinople will be conquered; how blessed the commander who will conquer it, and how blessed his army.*



CONSTANTINOPLE WAS THE CAPITAL of what historians now call 'Byzantium' or 'the Byzantine Empire'. But 'Byzantine' is just a name of convenience, coined after the empire had ceased to exist. The 'Byzantines' themselves never used such a term – they called themselves Romans, and they were the inheritors of the incomparably great civilisation that once had dominion of all the lands from the north of England to the Syrian desert, from the Pillars of Hercules to the Danube River. Emperors of Constantinople were proud to trace the line of their predecessors all the way back to Augustus.

In Augustus's time, the city of Rome was indisputably the heart of the empire it had given its name. But as centuries rolled on, the Eternal City became less and less relevant, too far from the action

and the money. So in 330 ad , the emperor now known as Constantine the Great rebooted the whole imperial project and shifted the Roman capital to the east. Constantine cast about for an ideal site and found it in the small Greek city of Byzantium, at the crossroads of Europe and Asia. The site was on a promontory, surrounded by water on three sides, so its location was both defensible and spectacularly beautiful. Here Constantine could re-found the empire and Christianise it, away from the traditionalists in Rome. The city's first name was simply *Nova Roma* – 'New Rome' – but it soon adopted the name of its founder and became Constantinople, the city of Constantine. In time, the Romans came to build a city so large, powerful and beautiful that people from all over the world would describe it as a mirror of heaven.

THIS LOST WORLD of the eastern Romans was somehow forgotten by the west. I was taught in school that the Roman empire sputtered out in 476, when the boy-emperor Romulus Augustulus was ordered off his throne by a German chieftain and sent into a very early retirement. But as the memory of Roman rule faded in the west, the Roman empire in the east, based in Constantinople, endured for another *thousand years*. The arc of its lifespan is an awesome thing, touching the ancient world at one end and the Age of Discovery at the other. While western Europe struggled through the miseries of the Dark Ages, Constantinople blazed with light as a bastion of Roman law, Greek culture and Christian spiritualism.

The city was protected by the most elaborate defensive fortifications in the world. Constantinople projected into the Sea of Marmara and the Bosphorus Strait like a stubby thumb. Two-thirds of its perimeter was surrounded by water. A hostile land army could therefore attack the city from one direction, and one direction only: the stretch of land on its western side. But here the invaders would be

rebuffed by the legendary land walls of Theodosius: a massive, triple-layered defensive network of thick stone and brick walls and towers that were a wonder of the medieval world.

SAFE BEHIND THEIR IMPREGNABLE walls, the Romans of Constantinople changed beyond recognition, like sea creatures that had evolved to walk on land. By 1453 they bore little resemblance to the Romans of the ancient world. The use of Latin evaporated, replaced by the Greek patois that was much more widely used across the eastern Mediterranean. Worship of the old pagan gods of Jupiter, Diana and Saturn had been long since rooted out and expunged; the Romans were now devout Christians who could be drawn into tiresome infighting over the most intricate points of theology. But the Romans of Constantinople saw no rupture with their glorious ancestors, only a renovation; the strong links of continuity with the Roman past were more meaningful to them than the differences. They called themselves *Romaioi*, and the lands under their dominion 'Romania'.* To their minds, 'Roman-ness' was a shared set of ideas and traditions that had little to do with geography, much the same way that modern Australians consider themselves westerners, while living south of East Asia.

But by the fifteenth century Constantinople had lived too long, seen too much and done too much; its glory and greatness had dissipated, its treasures stolen and scattered across western Europe. The capital of the Roman empire was little more than a broken Christian city-state, with much of its population melted away. Whole neighbourhoods were destroyed and then abandoned; fields and orchards sprung up within the city walls to replace them.

* Not to be confused with the modern eastern European nation of the same name, which the Romans knew as the troublesome province of Dacia.

By the time Mehmed and his army showed up at the gates in 1453, the Ottoman Turks were already in possession of all the lands around the city; Constantinople had become a conspicuously Christian island in an Islamic sea. But, shrivelled as it was, Constantinople glimmered dimly with the aura of the Roman name. It was a truism, still uttered throughout the Christian and the Muslim worlds, that 'he who becomes the emperor of the Romans, becomes the emperor of the whole world'. Mehmed had made his plans to seize that world-throne for himself.

Alone and almost friendless, Constantinople could summon only six thousand men to defend it. Women, children, nuns, priests and the elderly were called to the walls to help.

THE IMPERIAL PALACE OF BLACHERNAE sat high above the north-west corner of the land walls. On that spring day in 1453, the emperor watched from a tower window as the Turkish forces fanned out along the full length of the walls. Then he left the palace with his retinue of advisors and set up a command outpost close to the most vulnerable section of the walls at the Romanus Gate. His name was Constantine XI Palaeologus and it fell to him to be the very last emperor of the Romans. He was forty-eight years old.

Constantine XI and his court were operating under a different cloud of prophecies and predictions. The most famous of these was attributed to Methodius, a church founder who foresaw that the destruction of Constantinople would trigger nothing less than the end of the world. In this apocalypse, the last emperor of the Romans was to play a critical role. As the end of days approached, he said, the armies of Gog and Magog, who had been held behind iron gates for thousands of years at the edge of the world, would be unleashed. The unclean hordes would swarm towards the city, but the last emperor would stand firm and defeat them in a cataclysmic battle. Then the

last emperor would travel to Jerusalem, to the hill of Golgotha. There he would place his crown on the Holy Cross, and then fall down and die, as the cross and crown would be gathered up into heaven.

The prophecy was widely known and accepted among the people of Constantinople. As the Ottoman threat began to loom over the city, monks and priests clustered on street corners to remind the Romans of their long-foretold doom. In these final weeks, with Gog and Magog evidently at the gate, the people of Constantinople believed themselves to be the central actors in a drama in which the fate of the cosmos hung in the balance.

ALTHOUGH THE CITY'S DEFENDERS were badly outnumbered, Constantine had not succumbed to apocalyptic despair; he was busily preparing to fight to the death. Even as reports came to him of the enemy's overwhelming numbers, the emperor had reason to hope he might prevail, as his ancestors had so many times before. Everything depended on keeping the Theodosian Walls intact.

The Theodosian Walls had made Constantinople a standing affront to Islamic supremacy, 'a bone in the throat of Allah'. They confronted any would-be conqueror with three parallel layers of defences: a walled ditch, followed by a high protective outer wall, followed by an even higher inner wall, with a network of platforms, battlements and defensive towers on each level. So long as the walls could be adequately manned, the defenders could protect the city against an invasion force ten times as large. But the emperor's forces were sparse, and Mehmed had arrived at the walls with a new weapon for a new age of warfare: the bronze cannon, hauled by fifty oxen and two hundred men. It was the biggest gun in the world, and it had the power to smash gaping holes in the Theodosian Walls.

By 1453 the conquest of Constantinople seemed both impossible and inevitable.



THE WESTERN ROMAN EMPIRE expired in ignominious circumstances, but the death of Roman civilisation in the east a thousand years later has all the qualities of an epic tragedy. At least, it does to western eyes; from a Turkish point of view the conquest of Constantinople is a moment of triumph and renewal, a victory that allowed a clapped-out city to be reconsecrated to a new faith and a fresh imperial project.

The mural of Mehmed and his army that my son and I stumbled on in that dingy underpass is a work of Turkish propaganda, an invocation of that glorious day in 1453 when their ancestors broke through the walls and took the capital of the world for themselves, the moment when God confirmed their greatness as a people. It's just as well the artist chose lurid colours, because there are fantastic scenes in the story of Constantinople's last days that would be difficult to believe, had they not been separately recorded by historians, priests and a ship's doctor who lived through the city's spectacular downfall.

But the painting only tells half the story; absent are the city's defenders. Unlike Romulus Augustulus, Constantine XI did not resign his throne. Instead he drew on every reserve of courage, resilience and ingenuity he could find, within himself and his people, to make a last stand, and the defenders held out for seven weeks against their doom.

It was all in vain. Mehmed's armies eventually broke through, and Constantinople was remade as Istanbul, the capital of the Ottoman Turks and the new centre of Islamic power in the world. The Ottomans

would go on to create their own distinct civilisation, inspired as much by the example of Roman grandeur as by the faith created by their Prophet. Today, Istanbul is a boomtown, the largest city in Europe, but traces of Constantinople still linger, visibly and invisibly. The local Istanbulis have become accustomed, even indifferent, to living with a ghost in their house, the disembodied spirit of Byzantium.

Once you know the story of this lost empire, you feel the ghost of Byzantium pressing against you at the crumbling land walls. You become suffused with it when you stand under the golden dome of the Hagia Sophia, and you glimpse it within the shadows of the underground cistern of Justinian. The story of how Constantinople flourished into greatness and expired in terrible violence is one of the strangest and most moving stories I know. I wanted my son to have that story too.



Radiant City



Constantinople, from the Nuremburg Chronicle (1493).

A Second Firmament

A THOUSAND YEARS AGO, Constantinople was the greatest and richest city in Europe. It dwarfed its rivals in size, splendour and sophistication. The city contained half a million souls, more than ten times the population of London or Paris. At a time when western Europe was ensnared in a dark age of poverty and illiteracy, the people of Constantinople enjoyed the pleasures of the metropolis: they bought exotic goods in the marketplaces of the city's great marbled squares and cheered for their teams at the Hippodrome, the world's biggest stadium. Students attended universities and law academies. There were schools for female education and hospitals with women doctors. The city's libraries conserved precious manuscripts by Greek and Latin authors, ancient works of philosophy, mathematics and literature that had been lost or destroyed elsewhere.

Constantinople was the greatest wonder of its age. It was an imperial capital, an emporium, a shrine and a fortress. Venetian merchants arriving after a long sea voyage would see the gold and

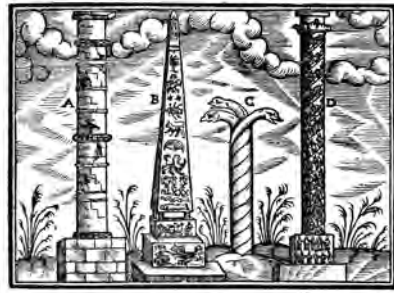
copper domes of the skyline appear out of the Bosphorus fog like a hallucination. First-time visitors were stunned by the monumental scale and beauty of the city. They reacted like European peasants arriving by boat into Manhattan, not quite believing the impossible metropolis looming in front of them.

Traders came to Constantinople from all over Europe, from Asia and Africa. Russian galleys cruised down from the Black Sea, laden with fish, honey, beeswax and caviar. Amber was brought from the shores of the Baltic Sea to be exchanged for gold or silk. Spices from China and India were carried overland into the city and sold on to western Europe.

Constantinople was a holy city; its majestic churches and monasteries housed the most important sacred relics of Christendom – the crown of thorns, fragments of the True Cross, the bones of the apostles and a portrait of Christ believed to have been painted from life by St Luke himself. Pilgrims came to Constantinople by the old Roman road, down through Thrace. Passing through the Charisian Gate in the land walls, the pilgrim would push his way through the crowds on the Mese, the city's broad central avenue, passing shops, colonnaded squares paved with marble, and tenement blocks. Beggars and prostitutes would loiter in doorways while a holy fool, smeared with grime and filth, displayed the scars of his mortification to jeering children. The crowds on the Mese would part for a procession of chanting priests parading a wooden icon, followed by a train of ecstatic believers hoping to catch a glimpse of the icon weeping miraculous tears or dripping blood.

The emperor's procession among his people would bring city traffic to a standstill. Heralds with dragon banners would appear, strewing flowers on the path ahead, followed by an entourage of imperial guardsmen, clerics and ministers. The voices of a choir

would then lift up and sing, ‘Behold the Morning Star! In his eyes, the rays of the sun are reflected!’ Finally the emperor would appear, swathed in crimson and gold silk, his feet clad in the distinctive thigh-high purple boots reserved for the occupant of the throne.



Columns of Constantinople.

THE CITY WAS ALMOST supernaturally beautiful. Visitors from western Europe could find nothing on Earth to compare it to, describing it in their letters as ‘the all-golden city’, ‘a second firmament’.

Constantinople was created to invite such comparisons. Its emperors, bishops and architects were attempting to build nothing less than a mirror of heaven, reaching for something they called *theosis*, union with the divine, a state of ecstatic oneness with the Holy Spirit. In this way, the magnificence of their city became an expression of their moral virtue.

This longing for *theosis* reached a kind of perfection in the Hagia Sophia, the Church of Holy Wisdom, constructed with astonishing speed in fewer than six years. When completed, the Hagia Sophia became the supreme expression of Byzantine genius, blending art and technology into a seamless whole in order to flood the senses with wonder and pleasure.

Court and church ritual in Constantinople was extraordinarily complex and correct. A Russian pilgrim who witnessed an imperial coronation described the painstakingly slow procession of the uncrowned emperor to the throne:

During this time, the cantors intoned a most beautiful and astonishing chant, surpassing understanding. The imperial cortege advanced so slowly that it took three hours from the great door to the platform bearing the throne ... Ascending the platform, the Emperor put on the imperial purple and the imperial diadem and the crenated crown ... Who can describe the beauty of it all?

OUTSIDE THE HAGIA SOPHIA, under a domed shelter, stood the Milion, the golden milestone that measured the distances from Constantinople to the faraway cities claimed by the empire. All roads, it seemed, led to this New Rome, to this singular place, the heart of God's empire on Earth.

The city's glittering reputation extended in all directions for as far as it was possible for any one person to travel in a lifetime. Serbs, Bulgarians and Russians called it Tsarigrad, 'The City of the Caesars'. In medieval China it was known as Fu-Lin, a city of fantastical creatures and enormous granite walls. Viking warriors who had served as mercenaries in the emperor's Varangian Guard returned to their little villages in Iceland and Norway with tales of the distant, golden city they called Miklagard, 'The Big City'. Their stories of Constantinople became the dream architecture of the mythical realm of Asgard, the heavenly walled city where Odin, the king of the gods, dwelt. Stories of Constantinople invaded the dreams of people who would never live to see it. Its sacred rites and

architecture were so heavenly, they could dazzle whole nations into the faith.

‘We cannot forget that beauty’

PRINCE VLADIMIR OF KIEV was the ruler of a Slavic people who worshipped many gods. One day in 987 ad, he told his court that he and his people should no longer be pagan. But, he wondered, should they adopt Judaism, Christianity or Islam? Vladimir sent his best men to distant parts of the world to determine the one true religion of God.

Envoys were sent to the Muslims. When they returned, they told Prince Vladimir that there was no gladness among these people.

‘Drinking alcohol is prohibited to them,’ they told him. ‘This might be too burdensome for our people.’

Vladimir had heard enough: ‘Drinking is the joy of all Russia. We cannot exist without that pleasure.’

Next Vladimir called in representatives of the Jews and asked them where their homeland was.

‘Jerusalem,’ they replied.

‘If God were truly with the Jews,’ he replied, ‘He wouldn’t have scattered them from their homeland. Would you wish the same fate for us?’ he asked. And with a wave of his hand he dismissed them.

Then Vladimir received a message from the envoys he’d sent to the Christians of Constantinople. In their letter they struggled to express how moved they were by what they’d seen in the Hagia Sophia:

We knew not whether we were in heaven, or on earth. For on earth there is no such splendour or such beauty, and we are

at a loss how to describe it to you, only this we know: that God dwells there among humans, and that their service surpasses the worship of all other places. For we cannot forget that beauty.

And so Vladimir was baptised into the Christian faith, and in return he was given the Emperor's sister as a bride. Which is how the Russian people came to be Orthodox Christians.

Another version of the story claims it was Emperor Basil II who approached Vladimir first, asking for military aid against a rival to the throne. Vladimir agreed, but demanded in return the hand of Anna, Basil's sister. Vladimir's conversion therefore was simply a necessary pre-condition for the marriage. In the first story the Russians arrive at Christianity through the eerie beauty of the Orthodox rite; in the other version it's a simple matter of political expediency. But in Constantinople, the spiritual, the aesthetic and the political were often fused together. The city was a showcase of both Orthodox Christianity and Roman power, designed to enthrall people into the faith, and to cement their allegiance to the empire at the same time.

WITHIN THE IMPERIAL PALACE lived the most enigmatic figure in the city, the emperor himself, who sat at the summit of church and state. In Constantinople, the emperor assumed the title *totius orbis imperator*, 'Commander of the Whole World'. In ancient times, Roman emperors had styled themselves as the first among equals. But with the passing of the centuries, they began to bolster their authority by swathing themselves in mystery. Court ceremonies became more formal and elaborate. Emperors wore make-up and donned robes embroidered with precious jewels, and required visitors to prostrate themselves in their presence.

The Diplomat and the Singing Tree

IN 949, A VENETIAN GALLEY pulled into the Golden Horn, carrying an Italian diplomat, Liutprand of Cremona, the representative of King Berengar of Italy. Liutprand stepped ashore, presented his credentials and requested an audience with the emperor.

Liutprand was admitted to the palace through the Chalke Gate near the Hippodrome, and led through a marbled vestibule into the palace complex. Soon he was brought to the Chrysotriklinos, the 'golden reception hall', where two eunuchs hoisted him onto their shoulders and carried him into the throne room.

As he entered the glittering octagonal room, Liutprand was amazed to see a gilded bronze tree, its branches filled with mechanical singing birds, each emitting birdsong according to its species. Liutprand was carried closer to the massive throne and saw another mechanical wonder: at the base of the throne were two gilded lions with automated tails that struck the ground, and mouths that roared as they opened and closed. He looked up and there on the throne was the emperor, Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, adorned in brocaded purple vestments, glittering with jewels. Liutprand dropped to the ground and prostrated himself three times, as required by protocol.

When Liutprand raised his head he saw Constantine's throne had somehow shot up some nine metres from the floor, raising the emperor almost as high as the palace ceiling. The emperor had also, somehow, changed his robe.

Conversation over such a great distance was awkward. After a short while a courtier indicated it was time to leave and Liutprand respectfully withdrew. He was quartered within the palace and his belongings were brought up from his ship. Liutprand was somewhat embarrassed that Berengar had given him no gifts to present to the emperor, only a letter

that he knew was ‘full of lies’. So he thought it best to hand over his personal gifts to the emperor as though they had come from Berengar, including nine armoured breastplates, seven embossed gilded shields, several precious cups and four child-eunuch slaves.

The emperor was well pleased with these gifts and invited Liutprand to join him at a feast in the Palace of the Nineteen Couches, adjacent to the Hippodrome, where the imperial family could eat and drink with their guests while reclining on couches in the style of the ancient Romans. Liutprand witnessed more automated wonders at the feast, as golden trays of food and wine were lowered mechanically from the ceiling to the table.



Coin of Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus.

IN ALL, THERE WERE NINETY-NINE emperors in Constantinople from the city’s founding in 330 to the final siege of 1453, as well as several empresses who ruled in partnership with their husbands or governed as regents over their young sons. A very small number of empresses ruled alone, straining against every convention in a male-dominated society that would otherwise have relegated them to the women’s quarters of the palace or a convent cell. In this long chain of rulers we see every human variation of what happens when an individual and great power intersect.

An emperor was much more than a political leader – he was a spiritual figurehead, God’s regent on Earth. Imperial princes were taught in their lessons that Jesus came into the world during the reign of the first emperor, Augustus, and that surely this was no coincidence. Clearly it was the will of God that Roman emperors should serve as Christ’s representative on Earth, in the interregnum between the crucifixion and the Second Coming.

And yet, for all that, something of the soul of the old Roman republic still remained in Constantinople. As in ancient times, emperors had to be mindful they governed on behalf of the senate and the people. An emperor who strayed too far from public opinion might end up torn to pieces in the Hippodrome.

The Flickering Lamp

HEAVENLY CITIES, doomed emperors, robotic trees, Crusaders, saints, floating nuns and the ever-looming apocalypse – it was this rich stew of stories that had brought me to Istanbul with Joe. Our common enjoyment of history was a source of quiet and deep joy to me. It wasn’t hard to infect him with the history bug. Even as a small boy Joe was looking to place himself in the great long stream of events and people, needing to understand what had taken place before his entry into the world. The long, long story of the ancient Romans appealed to him as much as me.

For some reason, men and boys tend to talk more freely side by side, rather than face to face, so when Joe was little, I often took him on long walks with me. On these walks, he would pepper me with questions about the Nazis and the Industrial Revolution. By the time he was twelve we’d moved on to the Russo–Japanese War and the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Knowing the shape of these stories gave him a confidence that was hard for him to find in the classroom. Despite his evident brightness, Joe struggled in his first years of school. He was oddly reluctant to learn how to write. When required to do so in class he would often scrawl out his letters in mirror form, from right to left. He flipped letters, words and phrases around on the page, and he started to fall behind. A mild form of dyslexia was identified and overcome.

While he was alienated from the written word, Joe developed the compensatory interrogative skills that are common in dyslexic children and adults – he set about drawing down everything I knew from my reading. I was stronger on the history than the science, but I took all of Joe's questions seriously. In doing so I was trying to emulate my own dad, who had patiently absorbed my own boyish inquiries and always tried to give me his best answer.

A love of history can sometimes come across as a distraction from the more urgent business of the here and now. But without a grasp of the flow of events that have carried us to the present day, we are all a bit untethered from our place in time and space, condemned to live in an eternal present. A child's interest in history is a particularly lovely thing because it arises from some larger philosophical questions pertaining to life's deepest mysteries: how did we come to be here? History also offers us a defence against the sickly sweet temptations of nostalgia, the conviction that in times past things were simpler, people nobler and children more obedient.

Edward Gibbon, author of *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, joked that the discipline of history was 'little more than the register of the crimes, follies and misfortunes of mankind'. For me, history has always seemed like a trove of riches, an everlasting storehouse of stories that will never, ever be depleted. This thought has been my shield against boredom and melancholy.

Winston Churchill absorbed and wrote history to fend off his black dog, the depressive episodes that sapped his energy and robbed him of his usual *joie de vivre*. Churchill understood the value of placing yourself in the timeline of world events, noting that ‘the longer you can look back, the farther you can look forward’. History offered him ballast for his restless soul, even if its insights were imprecise. In his eulogy for Neville Chamberlain to the House of Commons, he likened it to a lantern: ‘History with its flickering lamp stumbles along the trail of the past, trying to reconstruct its scenes, to revive its echoes, and kindle with pale gleams the passion of former days.’

For anyone wanting to follow the trail of the Romans, the flickering lamp must travel a long way through time and space. And as we trace their path through the centuries, they evolve beyond recognition several times over.

The History of the Romans in Five Paragraphs

WE GLIMPSE THEM FIRST in their tribal origins as farmers, squatting on Palatine Hill, muttering prayers in the rain to Jupiter. There are seven legendary kings. Then the monarchy is overthrown for a republic and the lamp starts to gleam. The battle-ready Romans defeat the other tribes of Latium. Then they conquer the Etruscans to their north and the Greek colonies in the south, and the whole of the Italian peninsula is under their dominion.

As they become more powerful and prosperous they adopt the sophisticated clothes, habits and culture of the Greeks. The conquest of Sicily is the opening round of a fight to the death with Carthage, a rival power on the North African coast. In revenge, the Carthaginian general Hannibal crosses the Alps with soldiers and elephants and the Romans are almost finished. But they hang on, regroup and push back. Carthage is completely annihilated and Roman dominion

expands across the Mediterranean, creating tensions over land and power that fracture the republic. Civil wars break out repeatedly but resolve nothing.

The lamp now casts a dazzling light on a generation of famous Romans: the dictator Julius Caesar, the general Pompey Magnus, the lawyer and orator Cicero, and the doomed lovers Marc Antony and Cleopatra. All of them are overshadowed by the towering figure of Octavian, who keeps the outward forms of the republic but kills its spirit, gathering up its most important offices for himself and assuming the title of 'Imperator' – commander. Octavian brings decades of civil war to an end and is awarded the title 'Augustus' or 'Revered One' by a grateful senate. Augustus is followed by a string of degenerate emperors: Tiberius, Caligula, Nero. Then the empire reaches a dizzying apogee under the rule of the Five Good Emperors, and Roman dominion extends ever further, from Yorkshire to Mesopotamia.

Then come fifty years of war and chaos. Twenty-six emperors take the throne and almost all are murdered or die in battle. We see the empire break into two, then three, pieces. The Emperor Diocletian puts it back together but in a different shape. Christianity emerges as a persecuted minority cult within the empire, first among slaves, then soldiers and senior officials. An emperor named Constantine adopts Christianity and shifts the capital east to Byzantium, which is remade as Constantinople.

The city of Rome declines, and is sacked by barbarians. Twice. The last western emperor resigns in humiliation, but the Roman name and legacy is conserved in the east. The lamplight slowly changes colour, as the Romans evolve into Greek-speaking Christians in Constantinople. The empire flourishes, and then falters, as the insurgent Muslim armies arrive at the gate. After several cycles of conquest, plague and defeat, the empire recovers its strength for

another three glorious centuries, until Constantinople is wrecked by the western Crusaders. In 1453, the lamp draws deeply on the last of its fuel, for one last burst of light, and then it is extinguished forever.

HERE, SURELY, was a story big enough to fill the imagination of a history-besotted fourteen-year-old and his father. In Jewish and Aboriginal culture there are longstanding coming-of-age ceremonies to mark a child's entry into incipient adulthood. No such traditions exist for Anglo-Irish Australians, so I hatched a plan: Joe and I would go on a history road-trip from Rome to the New Rome in Istanbul, and we would conclude this father-son adventure at the site of the epic death of the eastern Roman empire by walking the full length of the legendary land walls, from the Sea of Marmara to the Golden Horn.

It has since been explained to me that the bar mitzvah is not so much for the benefit of the kid, but for the parents, to ease them into accepting that their child is no longer a helpless infant and will, in due course, be leaving the nest. This went some way to explain the zeal with which I planned this coming-of-age adventure with Joe. It would be as much for my benefit as for his.

Joe has a curious mind, an eye for the big picture, and an even temperament; I knew he'd make a good travelling companion. I selfishly wanted to enjoy a month imagining the ancient and medieval world with him before he was old enough to go out into the world on his own, without me.

This plan for a father-son escapade took some explaining to my wife Khym and my daughter Emma, who wanted to know, quite rightly, why they weren't invited. I explained that fathers and sons should have at least one adventure together on their own, and that I was fully supportive of a similar mother-daughter adventure should

they care to undertake one. I thereby managed to assuage their misgivings, if not my own guilt, for getting on a plane without them.



THREE GREAT emperors dominate the story of early Byzantium: Constantine, Justinian and Heraclius. Each knew what it was like to stand at the summit of world power. All three had controversial marriages marked by murder, incest and unmistakable passion. And all of them lived long enough to suffer terrible loss. But it is the first of the three emperors who looms largest, who shifted the direction of the whole world decisively and forever.

To tell the story of Constantine and the birth of New Rome, Joe and I began in old Rome, in a courtyard designed by Michelangelo, to find the man who gave his name to the Queen of Cities.

