On 29 May 1453, thousands of Ottoman troops streamed into Constantinople, slaughtering the city’s Byzantine inhabitants, looting the city’s antiquities, and sending shockwaves throughout Western Christendom. Like the great historian Edward Gibbon, who would choose the conquest of Constantinople as the endpoint of his famous history of the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, many contemporaries at home in Renaissance Europe greeted the news of the Ottoman victory with fear and disbelief. Was this the beginning of the end of Christian civilization? Of the world? Who were these fearsome Ottoman conquerors, and how had they managed to topple the thousand-year-old Byzantine Empire so swiftly?

Because of the great importance which Christians and Muslims placed on this seminal event, the Fall of Constantinople is the best-documented event of the Renaissance. It survives in dozens of eyewitness accounts—from Muslim, Greek, and Latin perspectives—as well as printed pamphlets, ponderous histories, and vivid woodcuts. These contemporary sources are supplemented by thousands of sources immediately preceding and postdating the event itself. For the Fall was neither as unforeseen nor as decisive as contemporaries believed. In many ways, 1453 was a consequence of geopolitical events dating back to the Crusades; moreover, within months of the conquest, Christians and Muslims were once again engaged in recognizable patterns of trade, diplomacy, and tourism in what was now simply a Muslim rather than a Christian city.

In this course, we will work together using maps, original documents, and modern histories to reconstruct the events leading up to and following the Fall of Constantinople. While your papers will emerge from the common work we do in this collaborative workshop, you will also find hundreds of customizable topics to suit your personal interests. From military history, to the urban history of the Renaissance, to the intellectual history of the Muslim-Christian encounter, to the economic history of Mediterranean commerce—the Fall of Constantinople provides an unparalleled window onto countless dimensions of East and West.

**Schedule of Readings and Course Meetings**

**Unit 1. What Happened in May 1453?**

Sep. 22  Introduction to the Course

**READING:** None.

**ASSIGNMENT:** None.
**IN-CLASS:** Most of this session will focus on the goals and plan for the course. We will also look at some images and sources from the fifteenth century to get acquainted with the topic.

**Sep. 29** Begin at the Beginning: The Most Obvious Primary Sources

**READINGS:** The primary source excerpts from Stephen of Novgorod, Leonard of Chios, Cristoforo Riccherio, Angelo Giovanni Lomellino, Nicolò Barbaro, Pius II, George Sphrantzes, Michael Doukas, and Tursun Beg (in the course reader) and Konstantin Milhailović (distributed separately).

**ASSIGNMENT:** Bring to class (1) a one-paragraph description of each of the five main characters involved in the Fall of Constantinople and (2) a timeline listing the ten most important events in the fall.

**IN-CLASS:** Using a large map of Constantinople and the timelines and biographies you have prepared, we will reconstruct the events of the spring of 1453.

**Oct. 6** Moving Outward, I: Franks vs. Ottomans


**ASSIGNMENT:** Identify two potential paper topics related to the Fall of Constantinople. Bring to class a brief description of each topic, using the “Prospectus Worksheet” provided by Prof. Beaver.

**IN-CLASS:** In the first part of seminar, we will revisit the primary sources to see whether one can describe the Fall of Constantinople as an “East v. West” event. The second portion of today’s seminar will be devoted to workshopping your hypothetical topics.

**Oct. 13** Moving Outward, II: Greeks and Latins


**ASSIGNMENT:** Identify one more potential paper topic related to the Fall of Constantinople. Bring to class a brief description of this topic, again using the “Prospectus Worksheet” provided by Prof. Beaver.

**IN-CLASS:** In the first part of seminar, we will revisit the primary sources to see whether one can describe the Fall of Constantinople as part of a larger story of Greeks and Latins. The second portion of today’s seminar will be devoted to workshopping your hypothetical topics.

**Oct. 20** Moving Outward, III: The Mediterranean

ASSIGNMENT: Identify a final potential paper topic related to the Fall of Constantinople; same routine as above.

IN-CLASS: In the first part of seminar, we will revisit the primary sources to see whether one can describe the Fall of Constantinople as a “Mediterranean” event. The second portion of today’s seminar will be devoted to workshopping your hypothetical topics.

Unit 2. How do I Tell My Own Story?

Oct. 27  Fieldtrip to Firestone

READINGS: None.

ASSIGNMENT: Either choose one of the 48(!) hypothetical topics we generated together, or customize your own. (NB: This is not necessarily the “point of no return” for choosing your final topic, but it is very close to it—so please think carefully about which topic you would like to pursue.) Prepare a “hit list” of ten questions you would need to answer in order to tackle the Big Question at the center of your topic. Using the research resources with which you are already familiar, try to find at least one source with information relevant to each of your ten questions. Bring your results—especially your failures!—with you to the library.

IN-CLASS: Meet History librarian Elizabeth Bennett in Firestone for a session on research resources. Dr. Bennett will challenge you to re-do some or all of your “hit list” with the additional tricks and techniques that she has presented to you.

Nov. 3  Fall Recess

Nov. 10  How to Do A Lot with a Little


ASSIGNMENT: Bring to class a completed version of the “Final Prospectus Form” supplied by Prof. Beaver; this constitutes your firm commitment to your JP topic.

IN-CLASS: We will discuss Wunder’s article—written right here using Firestone!—as a possible model for your JPs. We will also determine which six students will present on Dec. 8, and which six on Dec. 15 (see below). Your rough draft will also be due on the day of your presentation. NB: There are advantages and disadvantages to either date. While presenting earlier gives you less time to complete your rough draft, it also gives you an additional week to revise it based on my comments; and vice versa.
Nov. 17  How to Work With Visual Sources


**ASSIGNMENT:** None.

**IN-CLASS:** We will begin by discussing the ways in which historians can benefit from the incorporation of visual and material evidence in their work. Depending upon the interests of the class, we then either (1) will visit the University Art Museum to explore their relevant collections, or (2) will break out into peer workshops to review Prof. Beaver's comments on your Final Prospectuses.

* Nov. 24  Hey—How do We Really Know Anything About People in the Past?


**ASSIGNMENT:** Bring to class a three-page fragment of your draft in which you discuss an event or character about which you feel less than completely confident. Bring as well the evidence which you are using to build your case.

**IN-CLASS:** After discussing the methodological problems and solutions raised by Lepore and Beard, we will break out into peer workshops to discuss the gaps and confusions in our own sources and interpretations.

Dec. 1  The Opening Gambit


**ASSIGNMENT:** Bring to class a one- or two-page introduction to your paper draft.

**IN-CLASS:** After a general discussion around Gaipa's article, we will break out into peer workshops to discuss our introductions and conclusions.

**Unit 3. Stand and Deliver**

Dec. 8  Student Presentations, I

Dec. 15  Student Presentations, II

**READINGS:** None.

* NB: Thanksgiving Recess begins on Thursday, Nov. 25; nevertheless, please plan to attend class on the 24th—we are already short by one week because we do not meet during the first week of classes.
ASSIGNMENT: Bring to class a draft of your final paper on whichever day you present. It need not be polished, but it should be sufficiently thorough and cogent for me to respond with useful comments.

IN-CLASS: The six students scheduled to present each day will give brief (10-minute) oral reports on their projects, including their main research questions, their sources, and their (current) conclusions. There will be time for group discussion of the presentations where you may ask questions or make suggestions of the presenters.

Jan. 4 The final Junior Paper is due by 5:00 PM to Ms. Etta Recke in 129 Dickinson.

Assignments and Expectations

This course will result in two separate grades: one based on your effort and progress in the seminar, and one based exclusively on the final draft of the junior paper. While it is, therefore, theoretically possible to receive a high mark for the junior paper without participating at a high level in the seminar (and vice versa), in practice the two grades are typically closely related—that is to say, it is very difficult to produce an excellent junior paper without steady and enthusiastic progress through the seminar.

The final grade for the junior paper will be determined in line with the History Department’s grading rubric, available at http://www.princeton.edu/history/undergraduate/grading_practices/. The seminar grade will be determined as follows:

- Attendance and Participation (30%): This course is primarily discussion-based. Therefore, attendance and informed participation are essential to your success in the course, and comprise a large component of the seminar grade. NB: this portion of the grade also recognizes your participation in the in-class peer workshops we will hold late in the term.
- Early Assignments [due weekly 9/29–10/20] (5% each; 20% total): These early assignments are crucial not only to your, but also to your peers’, progress towards selecting a successful paper topic.
- Final Prospectus (15%): While the final prospectus that you submit in class on 10 November is ultimately only a working document, it is crucial that you show yourself to be committed to, and thinking seriously about, your topic by this point in the term.
- Presentation (15%): The oral presentation that you make on your work-in-progress on 8/15 December is important not only as an exercise in public speaking; it is also your primary opportunity to receive peer feedback on your project prior to submission of the final paper in January.
- Rough draft (20%): The rough draft of your final paper, due in class on the day of your presentation, is a crucial step in shaping your final paper, since it is the best opportunity to test your thoughts on Prof. Beaver as an enthusiastic advisor rather than as an objective grader.