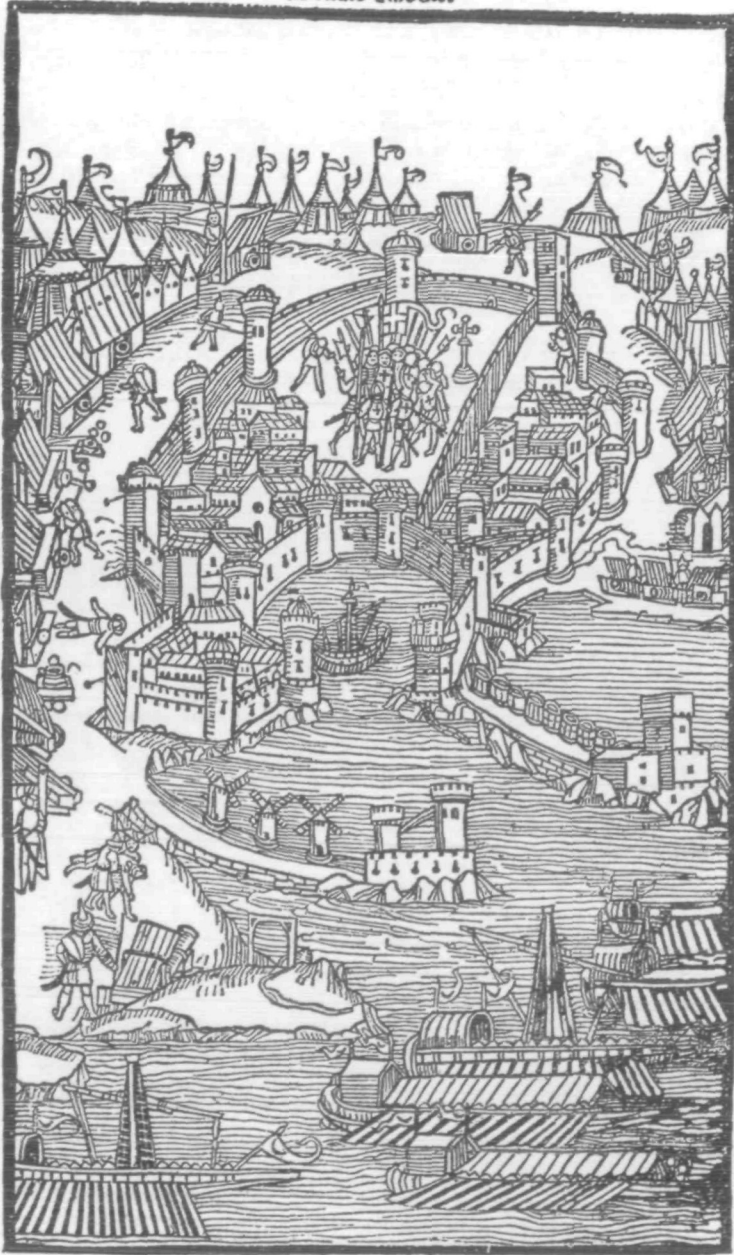


Obsidio Rhodie.



FROM CAOURSIN'S 'OBSIDIO RHODIAE,' ULM, 1496.
NO. I. RHODES DURING THE SIEGE.

THE SIEGE OF RHODES.



IN 1496, Johann Reger printed at Ulm an illustrated edition of an account of the Siege of Rhodes in 1480, written by Gulielmus Caoursin, Vice-Chancellor of the Order of S. John of Jerusalem, by the knights of which the island was defended against the Turks. It happened to me to take down this book while the Siege of Port Arthur was fresh in my memory, and the contrast between the two was so striking that I made a little summary of Caoursin's narrative, which is here offered to the reader accompanied by some reduced copies of illustrations from the Ulm edition. As will be seen this forms part of a volume of miscellaneous writings by Caoursin about the Order, with which is usually found his edition of its Statutes, also printed by Reger, with numerous illustrations. As might be expected, however, the account of the siege itself was written, and several editions of it printed, soon after the defeat of the Turks, and many years before the publication of the Ulm edition a version of it had been printed for English readers.

In its English form Caoursin's book is one of the unsolved puzzles connected with our handful of incunabula, as the type in which it was printed, though apparently identical as to many of its letters with one of Machlinia's, in other letters shows varia-

tions and modifications, which suggest that it had passed into the hands of another printer. The book is a small folio of twenty-four leaves, and begins with a dedication: 'To the moste excellent/ moste redoubted/ and moste crysten kyng: kyng Edward the fourth Johan Kay hys humble poete lawreate, and moste lowly seruante: knelyng vnto the ground sayth salute.' As Edward died in April, 1483, the translation must have been made before that date, and indeed there is every reason for bringing it as close to the events narrated as we can. The same argument applies to some extent to the printed edition, and Mr. Duff points out that 1483, from a typographical point of view, is a very probable date for the book, 'as by that time Machlinia had started by himself at the Flete Bridge with new type, and Lettou had disappeared, so that the type which they had used together in 1482 might have passed into the hands of another printer,' and undergone some slight variations. However this puzzle may be settled, John Kay's translation will serve us very well for our quotations, though we shall take the liberty, as they are only quotations, of rendering them in modern spelling.

Caoursin begins his narrative by telling how 'the cruel tyrant Mahumet, great Turk and insatiable enemy to our Christian faith, when that he had conquered many empires, kingdoms and lordships, was wroth to see the little city of Rhodes, standing so nigh his kingdoms and lordships, not subject nor contributory to him. Therefore four diuers times with ships and men of war he assaulted the castles and places of the Isle of Rhodes, where both by

land and by water through God's grace he was vanquished and overthrown.'

Having failed in these attempts, the Turk tried to persuade the Rhodians to become his tributaries, or at least to send him 'royal gifts,' which in course of time could be represented as tribute. But 'the noble and victorious Prince and renowned lord, the Lord Master of Rhodes and his prudent council, refused of their enemy peace, nor would be of amity with him that was a persecutor of Christ's faith and Christ's religion. And so day and night the most noblest knights of the said religion, according to their order, helped and defended our faith and the said city of Rhodes,' till the wrath of the Turk waxed furious.

In his designs on Rhodes, Mahumet was spurred on by various renegades, more especially by one called Antonio Melagolo, who came from the island, 'a man unkind to God and man, noble of birth and evil of conditions and living, the which through evil guiding and unthriftiness had brought himself to poverty.' Melagolo made drawings of the defences of the island, and so did another traitor, Demetrio Sophiano. They both assured the Turk that the fortifications were decayed, and the city always ill-manned and ill-victualled. This seems to have been true when the attack was first mooted, but the Grand Master, Pierre d'Aubusson, hearing of the likelihood of a siege, spent three years in remedying the defects, so that by the end of this time, the information given by the renegades was quite out of date. Despite some misgivings on this score, the Turks resolved to attack.

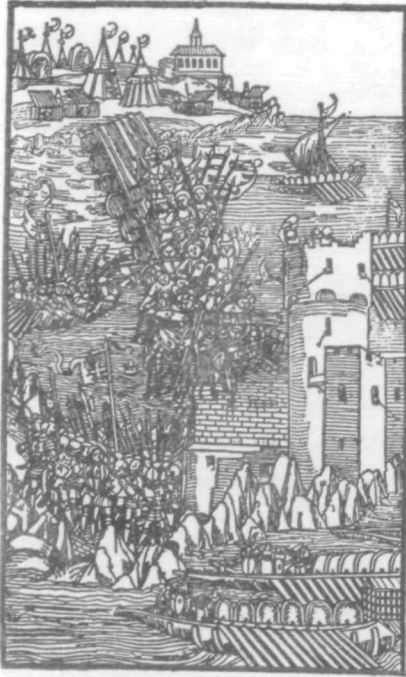
The Turkish forces assembled in Lycia, and tried to deceive the Rhodians as to their intentions. The knights, however, were not to be beguiled, and hurried on their preparations.

‘All the people of the Isle of Rhodes withdrew to their strongholds with their goods and chattels. And the barley that was ripe lightly they gathered it up and took it with them. And because the wheat and other manner of corns were not all ripe, they plucked them up from the ground as they were, and brought them to the towns and holds. And when they were in doing of these works with great haste and fury, the watch that was on the top of the hill beside Saint Stephen, showed a token and a knowledge, that in the west, toward Constantinople, was on the sea sailing a great number of ships.’

These were the hundred transports sent to convey the Turkish host from Lycia, and on ‘the x. kalendre of the moneth of June’ [*i.e.*, May 23], 1480, the disembarkation began. The Turks encamped on the hill of S. Stephen, and the hardiest of them made a dash at the city, running up to the walls ‘with great menacing and cracking (boasting).’ This and a subsequent attack were defeated with the loss of only one man, and then artillery was brought into play. ‘Three bombards of great violence’ were set by the Turks in the churchyard and garden of Saint Anthony, and covered with great logs and trees to enable them the better to attack the tower of Saint Nicholas, while three rival bombards on the side of the Christians, cast ‘great and mighty stones’ through the right side of the Turkish host.

On the morning that followed this artillery duel

thrown and put to death, besides others who were wounded or drowned. 'After this the Lord Master,



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clean armed and riding upon a mighty horse, came again to Rhodes with his fellowship, as an Emperor victorious,' and gave thanks to God and the Blessed Virgin.

The Turks now tried to batter the city walls with their bombards, and after ordaining 'processions general with great devotion,' the Master caused the Jews' quarters to be destroyed, apparently that it should not yield the enemy cover. He also constructed inner walls and ditches in

case the outer ones should be carried.

The noise of the Turkish artillery was so great that (imaginative) people a hundred miles away declared afterwards that they had heard it, and the enemy also annoyed the besieged with constantly slinging upon them great stones, so that shelters had to be constructed for the women and children. On a dark night guns and great bombards were brought up to the very banks of the ditches, and the position of the city might have become critical

there was a dramatic episode. The arch renegade, Antonio Melagolo, had been 'mischievously slain' in Constantinople four days before the Turkish Pasha started. The Pasha had taken with him, however, not only Demetrio Sophiano, but also a Greek named George, who had attracted attention by a plan of the Rhodian defences, and was regarded as a 'great gunner.' This man 'suddenly, as amazed, ran to the ditch of Rhodes, towards the palace of the Lord Master, and saluted and greeted the Rhodians friendly, and meekly cried and prayed that he might come into the city, and so he was received,' though not without a little rough handling. On his declaring that zeal for the Christian faith had led him to desert, he was made much of, and seems to have used the credence given him to spread exaggerated reports of the strength of the Turks. A few days later arrows were shot into the city, bearing letters which professed to come from well-wishers in the Turkish camp. These warned the Rhodians 'to be ware of the treason of George.' Six men were therefore set to guard him, but his opinion was still asked on military matters.

The enemy were attacking the tower of S. Nicholas which defended the entrance to the harbour. The upper part, which was new, was easily overthrown, but the old lower part had been very strongly built. The Master strengthened it with stones and trees, stationed his best fighters to defend it, and prepared bombards and fireboats to repel the expected assault. An attack by fifty Turkish galleys was beaten back, and in a hand-to-hand combat seven hundred Turks were over-

if fifty of the defenders, headed by one of the knights, had not sallied out, killed or routed the artillerymen, and tumbled the bombards into the ditch.

After some time spent by the Turks in preparing a floating bridge and by the Rhodians in digging a new ditch and repairing their walls, on 17th July there was a new attack on the tower. The assault was repulsed and the bridge broken, but the Turks attacked again, and fighting went on from midnight till ten the next day. Again the Rhodians were successful, and according

to the account of prisoners inflicted upon their enemy (a loss of 3,500), including many notable captains, 'so that the basse (pasha) by the space of three days, for sorrow and thought, spake with no man of his company, nor with none other, and anon advised the Great Turk of the mischief that was befallen them.'

Baffled a second time in their attack on the Tower, the Turks turned again to the rampart, approaching it with mines, and filling in a section



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of the ditch where the wall was battered, 'so that lightly they might come for to fight hand to hand with the Rhodians.' The defenders undermined this, so as to be able secretly to draw away the stones and logs over which the Turks had meant to advance. They built also an earthwork behind the broken wall, and by the advice of the renegade, George, brought up a great bombard to annoy the Turks. When this drew a destructive fire from the enemy, George was accused of having worked with this intent. More letters, shot into the city, increased the suspicions against him, and he was put in prison.

'And anon by wise men was examined and found variable in his answers; wherefore with tokens sufficient was put to torment, where he confessed how that the Turk had sent him thither to betray Rhodes, if he might, as he had betrayed many other places in Greece, which confession he confirmed after also without torment. And said how the Turk had bid him, if Rhodes might not then be gotten, to abide nevertheless in Rhodes all the siege time and longer, to espy all the conditions and manners of their defence, and that afterward he should tell it to the Turk for to purvey stronger siege, more to the purpose of victory.'

Such a confession as this might obviously have been manufactured, and we are told of no evidence as to George having in any way helped the Turks after he took refuge in the city. But the nerves of the Rhodians were perhaps by this time a little shaken, and he was hanged (as in the picture, cut 4) much to the delight of the inhabitants.

The Turks now threw letters into the town declaring that their quarrel was only with the knights, not with the citizens. They sent also another Greek by night to the edge of the ditch to ask leave to send an embassy, and the offer being accepted, an ambassador came the next day (cut 5) and exchanged boastful observations with a delegate from the Lord Master with the usual absence of effect. Negotiations proving fruitless, 'the more waxed the Turks furious against Rhodes. And anon after this with great bombards, guns, engines and all



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other such instruments of war they vexed and grieved the Rhodians, and purposed to prove if the deeds of the Rhodians should accord with their great words. Therefore likewise as they had done a great and horrible assault against the tower of Saint Nicholas, xxxvii days past, [they] ordained and dressed all their bombards and guns of war, all their ordonnance and their might against the principal strength and most newest walls of the city of Rhodes.'

Three thousand five hundred bombard shots were used in this new battery, and the damage done both



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to the walls and the buildings of the town was considerable. And so the Turks 'by two or three evenings following came to the ditches with their tabarets and made songs of mirth, hoping that within short days they should get Rhodes. And the Rhodians from the other side of the broken wall answered them as merrily again with trumpets and clarions.' Previous to their assault the Turks 'made a common cry' or proclamation, threatening all

the inhabitants over ten years of age with a barbarous death. Then 'after their false belief they called to their help Mahumet, and washed them all naked in running water in token of purgation of their sins, and after they arrayed them everyone after their quality of war, and brought sacks with them to put in the goods of Rhodes, and tied at their girdles ropes to bind their prisoners, for they hoped in their god Mahumet that they should without fail have victory of Rhodes.' Then there was

another furious bombardment to break down the walls afresh where they had been repaired, and then, about eight o'clock of the morning, in 'the fyfte kalendre of the monethe of August' [July 28] they swarmed over the ditch, and 'climbed lightly' on the wall on the opposite side and set their standards on it.

The Rhodian reinforcements had to climb the wall by means of ladders as if they were themselves the assailants, and one of the four chief ladders was captured by the Turks, who came pelting down it into the city, so that it had to be cut. In regaining the walls the Lord Master himself received five wounds, and the fighting seems to have been desperate, 'for upon the broken



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walls of Rhodes and in the places that we have said were two thousand and five hundred Turks in clean harness,' and behind them, 'following by and by,' were forty thousand more. For two hours victory was in doubt, and then 'the Turks were put utterly to the worse,' and the brother of the Lord Master pursued them to their tents. 'In that

assault for certain were slain three thousand and five hundred Turks, for their carrions and bodies were found and seen and numbered by the Rhodians, and as quickly as possible burnt in a great heap.

According to the Turkish prisoners the total loss



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of the enemy during the siege amounted to nine thousand killed and fifteen thousand seriously wounded. The prisoners also reported that on the day of the great assault the Turks had themselves seen hovering over the city Christ and the Blessed Virgin and St. John Baptist, 'with great number of fair and well beseen men in arms, as if they would have come down to the help of the Rhodians.' It was taken for a great argu-

ment of the truth of this miracle that it was the Turks who reported it, and not the Christians, and Caoursin himself is moved to expatiate on this theme.

Just at this conjunction two great ships arrived from Naples to help the Rhodians. They were unable to enter the haven at once owing to the attacks of the Turks, and a storm arising towards

night, one of them was driven out to sea. In the morning it had returned to within a mile and a half from the port, when the wind suddenly fell, and it lay there in a calm exposed to the attack of twenty Turkish galleys. But victory was again with the Christians, in three hours they slew four times their own number of Turks, and the day following 'with full sail and standards of victory and triumph entered into the port of Rhodes,' bearing letters from the Pope to the besieged promising them ample succours if they would hold out.

'Wherefore the Rhodians all with one voice thanked God and magnified with great praisings our Holy Father the pope Sixtus the fourth,

the which tidings went anon to the host of the Turks and feared them sore. Wherefore the sooner they departed from Rhodes, where they had been at the siege three months save a day, and turned again to the country of Lycia and arrived to the great town Physcum, where they tarried and refreshed them nearhand six days, and afterward



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turned to their country with their great shame, their hurt and great mischief, Deo Gratias.'

So ended this siege of Rhodes, which, save that the engines used for battering the walls were charged with some not very powerful form of gunpowder instead of being worked by pulleys, seems to have differed very little from the siege of Plataea as described by Thucydides nearly nineteen centuries earlier. Yet with the passing of but a fourth of the time more, instead of combatants singing and trumpeting against each other on opposite sides of a ditch, we have all the mysteries of high-angle fire and a city being devastated by assailants hidden from it by lofty hills!

Within a year after the defeat of his armada the Sultan died, and for some time the relations between Rhodes and Constantinople became more friendly. The new Sultan sent his brother Zyzymy as an ambassador to the Knights, and Caoursin's illustrator shows his courteous reception by the Grand Master and entertainment at his table (cuts 6 and 7). For a time the ties of friendship were drawn closer still, for an angel warned the Turk (cut 8) to present to the Knights the most precious relic conceivable, nothing less than the arm of their patron, St. John the Baptist. Naturally it was received with triumphal processions, and it may well have seemed, when the pagans were presenting Christians with such a relic, that a new era had set in. None the less in 1530 the Turks captured Rhodes.

A. W. POLLARD.