

History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

Constantinople, the Conquest of

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The Battle of Ankara (1402) decimated Ottoman power in Anatolia. Bayazid I, who might very well have been remembered in history as the Napoleon of the era, was captured by Timur and died in captivity. The eruption of Timur had taken place just as Constantinople was negotiating a surrender of the city to Bayazid. The Battle of Ankara postponed the conquest of the Byzantine capital by more than fifty years.

It is a tribute to the resilience of the Turks that the Ottomans were the only ones who survived the Timurid onslaughts and went on to regain their former possessions. Even though the Ottomans had lost their territories in Anatolia, their European holdings were intact, and they were able to move back into Anatolia once the Tatar threat receded. The strong central administration staffed by loyal slaves, set up by Bayazid, survived him. These slaves, *ich oghlans* in Turkish, captured as young boys in eastern Europe during the Balkan campaigns, were brought to the Ottoman courts, trained and freed, eventually rising up to occupy important administrative and military positions. The janissars, elite military corps, were similarly constituted. The *ich oghlans* and the *janissars* remained loyal to the Ottomans and provided the nucleus for reconstruction, and the Turkish spirit de corps built around loyalty to the tribe, provided the cement for a larger communal enterprise, when the threat of Timur receded.

After the Battle of Ankara, the Ottoman territories were divided among the surviving sons of Bayazid I. Sulaiman ruled from Erdirne in Europe, Mehmet from Amasya in eastern Anatolia, and Isa from Bursa near Constantinople. Of these, Erdirne had the advantage in that it lay in Europe, in territories that had not been ravaged by the Tatars. As a result, it was favored by the Turkish Sultans and served for a time as the Ottoman capital. There was the customary contest for power, but by 1411 Mehmet had rallied most of the Ottoman chiefs around him and had consolidated his hold on the empire. His son Murad II (1421-1451) continued the process of recovery and consolidation. After a series of successful campaigns in Anatolia, he laid siege to Constantinople (1422). At this time, the Beys of Anatolia rebelled and installed Murad's brother Mustafa as their leader. Murad lifted the siege of the capital and in a series of campaigns between 1422 and 1425 brought Izmir, Erkeshehir, Alashehir and Akshehir under his control. War broke out with Venice in 1423 over Solonica and lasted until 1440. Meanwhile, the Hungarians crossed the Danube in 1428 and invaded Serbia. The Sultan took the field and forced the Hungarian King Sigismund to retreat. In 1440 Murad made an unsuccessful attempt to capture Belgrade. Encouraged by the Ottoman retreat, the Hungarians crossed the Danube once again, occupied Sophia and advanced as far as the outskirts of Edirne. Murad met the invading armies and defeated them at the Battle of Izladi (1443). Thereafter, he signed a peace agreement with the Hungarians and the Venetians. Turning his attention to the east, he signed a similar peace agreement with the Prince of Karaman.

Having stabilized the Ottoman frontiers and concluding peace treaties with his enemies, Murad felt that his work was done. It was now time for him to retire and he stepped aside in favor of his son Mehmet II. The European powers misunderstood this as a sign of Ottoman weakness. Pope Nicholas V called for a Crusade, and a combined Hungarian-Walachian land force advanced towards Erdirne while the Venetians blockaded the sea.

At the counsel of his senior advisors, Mehmet II called on his father Murad to come back from retirement and reassume the command of the army. A reluctant Murad replied that Mehmet was now the Sultan and it was his responsibility to rule. "If you are the Sultan", wrote Mehmet II to his father, "it is your obligation to lead the armies. If I am the Sultan, I am ordering you to return and assume the leadership." Murad returned, and under his command, the Turks inflicted a crushing defeat on the Latins at the Battle of Varna. This was a major milestone in history. The Battle of Varna in 1444 sealed the fate of Constantinople because all approaches to the capital were now blocked. The Hungarians again attempted to penetrate the Ottoman dominions in 1448 but that incursion was easily beaten back. Having accomplished his mission, Murad went back into retirement.

Mehmet II was a mighty conqueror in the tradition of the earliest Companions of the Prophet. While his vision embraced strategic goals, he had also an inborn instinct for tactical moves. Trained from childhood in the battlefield under his father Sultan Murad, he was also imbued with a deep spirituality under the tutelage of Shaykh Aq Shamsuddin. The great Sufi sage accompanied Mehmet II on his campaigns and provided him with the spiritual inspiration that alone enables men to perform superhuman deeds.

The Ottoman Empire went through a rapid expansion under Mehmet II. Constantinople was a constant source of irritation to the Ottomans. Although it had lost all of its territories, the city still commanded great respect as the seat of the Byzantine Empire. On occasions, the Byzantine capital had given shelter to fleeing Ottoman princes while they were embroiled in wars of succession. It was also a beacon for Crusader armies hurling themselves at the Turks. Lastly, the Ottomans were concerned that the Byzantines might surrender the city to the Latins as they had done with the city of Solonika, and that would make the task of capturing the city immensely more difficult.

The Turks were restless, impelled by the spirit of *ghazza* (struggle in the way of God). Nonetheless, there were differences within the Turkish camp about the advisability of attacking Constantinople. Some of the generals were concerned that an attack on the city would bring a strong reaction from the western powers. Others held that the West would never agree upon a common course of action. The Byzantine Emperor had already sent out appeals for help to Venice and to the Vatican. The Venetian navy was on the move. To the north, the Hungarians and the Wallachians were ready to join an anti-Turkish coalition. Time was of the essence.

Mehmet II made careful preparations. He ordered the construction of a strong castle overlooking the citadel of Constantinople. This imposing fort, which stands to this day, was erected in a record time of three months, and served both defensive and offensive purposes. It provided a staging area for the Turks and a platform for hurling projectiles. Mehmet enlisted the services of Byzantine craftsmen to cast brass cannon that could hurl large cannon balls across the Straits.

Mehmet II surrounded the city in the spring of 1453 and sent terms of surrender to the Byzantine Emperor Constantine XI who rejected them. The great chain that blocked the entrance to the Straits frustrated repeated Turkish attempts at a naval assault. Mehmet II ordered the Turkish galleys to be hauled by land from the southern entrance of the Straits to the northern entrance, so that the fort could be attacked from the rear. After accomplishing this monumental task in utmost secrecy, Mehmet II

ordered a general assault on the city by land and by sea. The Byzantine defense was desperate just as the Turkish assault was determined and relentless. After repeated forays, Constantinople fell on the 29th of May 1453.

There was joy in the Islamic world while Europe mourned this loss. The year 1453 became a landmark in the histories of Europe and Asia alike. The Ottomans renamed the city Istanbul (Islambol), and made it the capital of their expanding empire. Mehmet's vision was to revive the city as the seat of a successor state to the Roman Empire, and to make it the focus of a universal Islamic state. To fulfill this vision, Mehmet took several concrete steps. First, he allowed those Greeks who had not resisted the Turkish advance to return and repossess their properties. Second, to further his goal of making Istanbul a universal, cosmopolitan city, Mehmet II invited the Greek Patriarch as well as the chief Jewish rabbi to stay in the capital. Third, the administration of the state was centralized and all of the Ottoman dominions in Europe were brought under the central rule of Istanbul.

The explosive growth of the Ottomans continued in all directions. To the north, in a series of campaigns between 1454 and 1465, Mehmet beat back the Hungarians and firmly established Ottoman control over Serbia and Bosnia. Trebizond on the Black Sea was captured, and Morea followed suit. The Turkish navy crossed the Black Sea and brought southern Crimea under Ottoman rule (1475). The addition of the Crimean Tatars to the Empire brought a valuable source of men and material into the service of the Sultan.

Mehmet's conquests brought a new call for a Crusade by Pope Nicholas V. The Hungarians, Wallachians, and the Venetians answered the call and formed an alliance with the Albanians who were then in rebellion against the Ottomans. The war began in 1463 and lasted four years. The Crusaders captured Morea, and Istanbul was threatened. Mehmet built two fortresses, facing each other, in Gallipoli to block an enemy naval advance and to prevent an attack on Istanbul from the rear. A powerful Ottoman navy was built which beat back the Venetians and recaptured Morea. On land, the Ottoman cavalry fought its way up the Adriatic coast and approached the outskirts of Venice. An alarmed Venice sued for peace, surrendered Morea to the Turks and agreed to an annual tribute of 10,000 gold coins.

The Ottoman borders to the east were far from quiet. There was friction with the Turkmen Aq Kuyunlu ruler Uzun Hassan over control of the province of Karaman. The Ottomans had annexed the province in 1468 but some of the Karaman princes had fled to Persia and had sought the protection of Uzun Hassan. The Vatican saw in this a golden opportunity to outflank the Ottomans. Ambassadors were exchanged between the Latins and Uzun Hassan and an alliance was concluded. In 1472 Uzun Hassan advanced into Anatolia at the head of over 30,000 cavalrymen. Mehmet II, recognizing the grave danger from the east, marshaled the Ottoman forces numbering over 100,000, and in a pitched battle near Bashkent (1473) trounced Uzun Hassan. Beaten in battle, Uzun Hassan concluded a treaty with Mehmet and promised not to interfere in Anatolian politics. It was also during the struggle for Karaman that the Ottomans came face to face with the powerful Mamlukes of Egypt. The border areas between Anatolia and Persia would involve, in the coming decades, a three-way struggle between the Ottomans, the Safavids and the Mamlukes.

Mehmet continued to reinforce his naval forces. In 1480, the Turks crossed the Adriatic and occupied several strong points in southern Italy including the city of Otranto (1480). The presence of the Turks so close to home struck panic in Rome and the Pope made preparations to flee to France. Mehmet's next target was the island of Rhodes, which was controlled by the Knights of St. John. These Knights were pirates who routinely attacked Turkish ships ferrying pilgrims from Anatolia, kidnapping and robbing

them. In 1480, the Turkish general Ahmed Pasha drove out the Knights of St. John from the island. When Mehmet died in 1481, he had more than recovered what was lost at the Battle of Ankara (1402). He had extended the frontiers of the Ottoman Empire beyond those achieved by his grandfather Bayazid I. He had projected Turkish power into Italy and soundly trounced the Hungarians. Most important, he had conquered Istanbul, crown jewel of the Mediterranean and capital of the Byzantine Empire.

Several reasons may be offered for the explosive growth of the Ottoman Empire. In the pre-Ottoman era, feudalism was rampant in the Balkans. There was no central authority. The peasantry suffered under local fiefdoms. Local lords and the church imposed exorbitant taxes and exacted forced labor. To the peasants, toiling under the yoke of the feudal lords, the Ottomans came as liberators.

The Ottomans instituted several reforms to change the feudal social structure that they had inherited. First, they abolished the fiefdoms and placed all rights to the land under state control. Taxation was fixed depending on the produce. Secondly, the Ottomans protected the religious rights of the conquered people. Under the *milliyet* system of administration, each religious group was given autonomy with respect to its personal laws. The Church was protected. Third, the conflict between the Roman and Eastern Orthodox churches worked to the advantage of the Turks. The peasants were Eastern Orthodox, whereas the lords and noblemen were Roman Catholic. The peasants were much better off under the Turks than they were under the Latin lords and often cooperated with the Muslim Turks against the Latin Christians. Many accepted Islam to escape the oppression of their former feudal masters. Fourth, the Ottoman conquests were not merely imperial expansions but a great migration of Turkish people. This migration had commenced in Central Asia in the 11th century under the Seljuks. Each Ottoman conquest was followed by a grand migration to the new territories. The ethnic and religious composition of the Balkans went through a transformation as the Turks migrated deeper into south central Europe. Each settled wave of settlers paved the way for the next one.

But the most important reason for the success of the Ottomans was the spirit of *ghazza*. Those who performed *ghazza* were known as ghazis. The ghazi vision was to establish a world order based on equity, justice, freedom of worship, enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong. The spirit of the ghazis permeated the Ottoman struggle since the early days of Uthmanali. It was this spirit that provided the explosive energy for the Ottomans. In its implementation, it demanded of the ghazis self-restraint, unceasing struggle, discipline, valor, sacrifice, mutual help and adherence to a strict code of honor. The ghazi was not to harm the civilian population but to protect it. The Ottomans jealously guarded this reputation as the ghazis of Islam and won the admiration of Muslims around the globe. Even Babur, the founder of the Moghul Empire in India, pays tribute to the "ghazis of Rum" in his autobiography, the Baburnameh.

The organization of the *ghazis* lent itself to a decentralized command structure, which allowed the Turks to take advantage of local conditions. The overall struggle was organized into marches. For instance, during the period of Bayazid I, in 1402, there were no less than four marches, each pushing the Ottoman advance in a different direction: the march of Dobruja directed at Wallachia; the march of Vidin directed at Hungary; the march of Uskup directed at Bosnia and Albania; and the march of Tirkkala directed at Morea and Greece. The Emperor considered himself to be a ghazi and was always in the front lines. Thus, the expansive spirit of a border state animated the Ottoman Empire. Once a forward area was subdued, it was populated by a fresh wave of Turks, and it, in turn, became a center for further expansion. In some ways, it resembled the expansion of American settler colonies in the American West in the 19th century. The leaders of the marches were rewarded with large estates in the conquered territories, which they governed as autonomous officials of the Ottoman state. Up until the time of Murad II, the marches were led by free-wheeling Turkish chiefs. Murad II put his trusted soldiers from

the palace guards in charge of the marches and brought the marches under centralized state control. In the 16th and 17th centuries, as defensive positions in central Europe hardened, it became more and more difficult to continue the marches. After the 16th century, the role of the ghazis changed, from conquest to providing advance support for the Turkish army by conducting forays ahead of the main armed forces, harassing the enemy, cutting its supply lines and gathering intelligence.

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