THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

A HISTORY

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HISTORY

PREFACE

The Ottoman Empire was the last of the great Islamic empires and the last of the great empires that had dominated the Middle East and Mediterranean since the dawn of the history of civilisation. The Ottoman Empire shared many of the same features as these other empires. Like them, it was an urban-based empire in which power was concentrated in a single centre and delegated out to intermediaries. Like them, it was made up of a host of different ethnic and religious groups, and the state, with a self-centred world civilisation discourse, was to protect and promote religion, justice, and the common welfare.

The circumstances surrounding the emergence and rise of this remarkable historical case and the factors behind its success and long life have long been a subject of curiosity and historical debate. In recent years, Ottoman history has benefited from an 'imperial turn' in historical studies, an increasing interest in the study of empire as a historical phenomenon which gained momentum in the aftermath of the Cold War and under the influence of the forces of globalisation. The study of the Ottoman Empire qua empire has produced a relatively rich body of scholarship in the context of both Islamic and world history, one that promises to continue to grow in the years to come.

The Ottoman Empire began around 1300 as a late-medieval entity, and it transformed several times over its six centuries of existence as it adapted to the conditions of the early modern and modern periods, until its ultimate demise in 1922. Over the course of time, it expanded out to cover a vast geographical area over three continents. Writing a history of such an empire is a challenge, one made all the more daunting by the need to limit that history to the confines of a single, concise volume.

The effort to compose a one-volume history of the Ottoman Empire has forced me to be selective in the details, topics, and dimensions I include and to adopt something of a bird's-eye view on Ottoman history. My general approach is necessarily that of macro-analytical narrative, a search for the shifting dynamics of change and underlying unity in the history of the

Ottoman Empire. In line with this approach, and to make this book more accessible to the general reader, I have endeavoured to keep references to a minimum, offering citations for quotations or specific topics where I deemed them particularly necessary but otherwise limiting myself in each chapter to a bibliography of particularly useful sources and suggested further readings.

The history of the Ottoman Empire can be approached in a number of different ways. I approach it here as an Islamic empire, emphasising both the imperial nature of the Ottoman state structure and the Islamic qualities of the imperial system. Accordingly, I place the Ottoman Empire and its institutions in the broader Islamic state tradition, but also try to shed some light on the dynamics of imperial rule, key themes and institutions, socio-economic and political transformation, and roles of various actors in the empire.

In this sense, this book is not a history of the Ottoman Empire as an introduction to modern Turkey. It does not seek merely to provide the historical background to the emergence of modern Turkey or the Turkish nation-state. Although it places a special emphasis on the multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multi-cultural landscape of the Ottoman Empire, it does so as part of a broader narrative of the history of the Ottoman centre. This book is thus primarily a political and institutional history of the Ottoman state rather than of the lands and peoples it once ruled.

The book covers the major political, diplomatic, and military events and social, economic, financial, administrative, and legal institutions of the Ottoman Empire from the late fourteenth to the early twentieth century. I do not devote any chapters specifically to economic, social, or legal history in their own right, but instead address such subjects from the perspective of their function and institutional dynamics within the Ottoman imperial system. Social and economic subjects like tax farming, land tenure, nomadic groups, and non-Muslims thus find a place in this book, but do so in the context of the characteristics and transformations of the political-economic and socio-economic structures and processes of the empire rather than as stand-alone topics. Because of the nature of the book, some topics have perforce not received the same degree of attention or emphasis as others. These include religious history, intellectual history, and cultural history, as well as the history of women, science, and the peoples and lands that made up the empire.

This book is divided into two parts, the first covering political, diplomatic, and military history, and the second the imperial institutions of the Ottoman social, economic, political, and legal spheres.

Part I focuses on the history of the Ottomans from their first emergence as a frontier principality around 1300 until the demise of the empire in 1922 at the end of the First World War. This history of the Ottoman Empire is divided into four main periods of roughly 150 years each: c. 1300–1453, 1453–c. 1600, c. 1600–1792, and 1792–1922. These chapters also each mark important turning points and separate periods in the empire's political-administrative and social-economic systems and institutions in the context of interactions with parallel similar shifts in the history of the Mediterranean and western Asia. All periodisations are in some sense artificial, imposed as much by the author's need to divide history into manageable chunks as by the past itself. But while this periodisation certainly serves this purpose, I believe it is as natural a one as any such periodisation can be. It is one that emerged during the process of researching and writing this book, and it is one that comfortably fits the political-military, socio-economic, and imperial-system criteria I use as the organising principles for this portion of the book.

After examining the emergence and rise of the Ottomans in the first chapter, chapters 2, 4, 6, and 8 offer a concise history of the major events in each of four main periods of Part I. The transitions between these different periods each mark a transformation into what is in effect a 'different empire', and chapters 3, 5, and 7 lay out the political-administrative and socio-economic changes that paved the way for these transformations to what have respectively been termed (following Baki Tezcan's terminology[1]) the 'First', 'Second', and 'Third' Ottoman Empire.

Part II is devoted to Ottoman institutional history, to the systems, structures, processes, and mechanisms that sustained the empire over the course of its long life and to the changes these underwent through the centuries. I frame my discussion of Ottoman institutional history in terms of the concept of the 'Circle of Justice' in the Middle Eastern state tradition, with chapters on five major themes: Ottoman social structure, Ottoman economic and financial structure, Ottoman military and administrative structure, authority and sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire, and law and justice in the Ottoman Empire. In each of these five chapters, I survey the relevant imperial

1 See Baki Tezcan, *The Second Ottoman Empire: Political and Social Transformation in the Early Modern World* (Cambridge: CUP, 2010).

institutions from the beginning of the classical period in the mid-fifteenth century until the end of the modern period in the early twentieth century.

In the conclusion, I discuss three key questions and offer some answers to them: What is the relative place of the Ottoman Empire in world history vis-à-vis that of other empires? What factors account for the great longevity of the Ottoman Empire? And how to deal with the controversial legacy of the empire in its successor states?

In addition to a series of box texts and tables on various subjects throughout the book, a basic timeline of key dates and events is offered at the beginning of every chapter, and a list of suggested readings at the end.

INTRODUCTION

Born at the nexus of Europe, Asia, and Africa, the Ottoman Empire reigned over many of the main connection points and (land and sea) routes between these continents for centuries. Its geopolitical position made it a central actor in world history.

The Ottoman Empire was one of the greatest, mightiest, largest, and longest-lived empires of all time. Like the other such empires, it presided over a wealth of different ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cultural groups. Like them, it was a dynastic empire. Though Europeans long referred to the Ottomans as 'Turks', to Ottoman lands as 'Turkey', and to the empire as a 'Turkish' empire, the Ottoman Empire was not Turkey.

Of all the states in Islamic and Turco-Mongol history, the Ottoman Empire was the longest lived. It was one of the few empires in world history to span the 'pre-modern', 'early modern', and 'modern' periods. It was longer lived than any of the other great empires of the Mediterranean Basin and western Asia, with the sole exception of the Byzantine Empire.

The Ottoman Empire was also one of the largest empires in world history. Of the great Mediterranean empires, only Rome ruled over a larger portion of the world's surface. The Ottomans ruled lands in Europe, Asia, and Africa. Much like the Byzantines, only larger, their territories stretched from the borders of Morocco and the outskirts of Vienna in the west to the Indian Ocean in the east, and from the Pontic Steppe in the north to the Nile River and the Sahara Desert in the south. The empire's territories reached 2.5 million km^2 by the 1580s, and 3.8 million km^2 by the 1670s, making it one of the largest empires in the world.

At the height of its power in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Ottoman Empire ruled all of southeastern Europe and most of North Africa and the present-day Middle East (except Iran). Over thirty modern states – from Hungary and Algeria in the west to Azerbaijan and the emirates of the Persian Gulf in the east, and from Slovakia and Ukraine in the north to Eritrea and Yemen in the south – once belonged in whole or in part to the empire.

The Ottoman Empire left a lasting impact on the multitude of different ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups over which it once ruled, and thus on the lives of their millions of descendants across the world today. The empire ruled over many of the ethnic groups that constituted the great cultures of Eurasia. From the Berbers of North Africa to the peoples of the Caucasus and from the Vlachs to the Yemenis, the Ottomans presided over an extensive range of territory and a complex mix of different peoples.

Most of these diverse peoples followed one of the Abrahamic faiths: Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. Ottoman rule was a tolerant one, at least relative to that of the other states of the day, and members of these faiths' various sects and denominations – including Sunni and Shiite Muslims and Greek, Armenian, Syriac, and Catholic Christians – lived in comparative peace.

Ottoman Turkish was the principal language of the state, but other languages also enjoyed wide currency. Chief among these were Arabic, the use of which was particularly widespread not only among the empire's Arab peoples but also in the religious and legal spheres, and Greek, as well as a variety of others, including Kurdish, Albanian, Armenian, Hebrew, Ladino (Judeo-Spanish), Hungarian, and a variety of Slavic and Caucasian languages. All told, there were around a hundred different languages and dialects spoken within the Ottoman realm.

The human diversity of the empire was matched by the diversity of its geography: from the coastal regions of the Mediterranean to the plateaus of Anatolia and Iran, and from the deserts of North Africa and Arabia to the mountains of the Balkans and Caucasus and dry steppes north of the Black Sea. This geographical diversity led to a richly diverse human geography, with a variety of forms of urban and rural settlement as well as pastoral-nomadic life, including the goat- and sheep-herding Turkoman and Kurdish tribes of Anatolia and the camel-raising Arab and Bedouin tribes of the Middle East and North Africa.

Although some imperial historians have disputed whether the Ottoman Empire was a true world power, for it was not a major maritime empire, there seems little doubt on this point.[1] The Ottomans themselves – that is, the ruling class and state elites of the empire – certainly viewed their empire as a

1 See Gabor Agoston, "Ottoman Military and Naval Power in Comparative Perspective: Before and After Lepanto", *Tarih Dergisi*, 76 (2022), 1-19.

world power. They described themselves as the 'masters of the seven climes and four corners of the [old] world' and 'the lords of the universe', their empire as 'the exalted state' and 'the eternally lasting state', and their realm as 'the domains of the House of Osman' and 'the well-protected domains'.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Ottomans' rivals in Europe and elsewhere viewed the Ottoman Empire as the most formidable military power and best-administered imperial power of the era. The Ottomans held this status by virtue of their geopolitical position, their vast population and territory, the rich array of economic resources at their disposal, and an administration – both in the imperial centre and in the empire's provinces – that was able to mobilise the resources of the empire to realise the priorities of the state.[2]

The Ottomans' power rested on their effective management of the empire's economic and human resources. The resulting wealth allowed the Ottomans to raise armies that frequently outnumbered those of their rivals in both the East and the West. Their military was recognised by contemporary states from the fifteenth through the seventeenth century as the most efficient and formidable of the time. The advantages of the Ottoman land and tax system, the empire's efficient management of its resources, the discipline of its large armies, its self-sufficiency in the production of weapons and ammunition, and its unparalleled logistical and supply networks all enabled the Ottomans to maintain their military superiority against their Eastern and Western rivals until the late seventeenth century. It was only after the Ottomans had pushed themselves beyond their strategic limits, and lost their financial capacity, and their rivals united against them that the tide turned against the empire.[3]

Ottoman military and economic power went hand in hand, each serving to strengthen the other. Each new conquest brought new income into the treasury, and as the treasury expanded, the Ottomans were able to marshal and supply ever-stronger armies. Surplus wealth and efficient supply networks allowed the Ottomans to mount regular campaigns, each of which further extended the borders of the empire and brought in new wealth. As a result of conquests in Egypt and Syria in the first quarter of the sixteenth century, the Ottoman central treasury quadrupled in size within the space of less than

2 See Gabor Agoston, "The Ottomans: From Frontier Principality to Empire", *The Practice of Strategy: From Alexander the Great to the Present*, eds J. A. Olsen and C. S. Gray (Oxford, OUP, 2011), 105-131.

3 Ibid., and Gabor Agoston's works in the suggested readings sections.

two decades. Able to maintain security and a system of taxation at home, the empire grew not only in size but also in wealth and population. By the 1580s, the population of the empire had reached some 20 to 25 million, making the empire the third largest in the world after China and Mughal India. Its growing size and wealth bolstered the empire's military might and made the Ottomans one of the great powers of the world for centuries, until the 1770s.

Even by the nineteenth century, when the Ottoman Empire came to be viewed as the 'sick man of Europe', the empire continued to be regarded as one of the Great Powers of Europe. Though by then weaker than many of the other European powers, the Ottoman Empire nevertheless continued to be an important force in international affairs, one with the power to influence the interests and actions of even its more powerful rivals. If anything, the decline in Ottoman military strength only increased the might of the empire's 'soft power', as the Ottomans – the last independent Islamic political entity – came increasingly to serve as the defender of the Islamic caliphate and the world's roughly 300 million Muslims in the face of European imperialism and colonialism.

Looking back at Anatolia at the turn of the fourteenth century, to a local warlord by the name of Osman and his small band of raiders, few would have imagined that this humble group would lay the foundations of what would become a grand empire that would mark the history of the world. This book is the story of how that came to pass.

PART I

THE EMERGENCE OF THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

CHAPTER 1

The Genesis of the Ottomans

The genesis of the Ottomans is obscure. Little is known about the early Ottomans, their origins, their ancestors, or their history. What information does exist is patchy and the subject of much debate. The first Ottoman historical accounts are chronicles written sometime in the fifteenth century, and those accepted as reliable and comprehensive were not written until the 1480s or later. These accounts thus describe events that occurred some 100 to 150 years before they were written, often in the form of stories and myths about Ottoman ancestry and the foundation of their state that were designed to legitimise Ottoman rule in the period in which the chronicles were written rather than offer an accurate portrayal of the events they describe.

Much of our knowledge of the early Ottomans is thus mixed with legend and myth. What we know for certain is that they were Turkomans, Western or Oghuz Turks, and pastoral nomads who carried out raids along the Byzantine frontier in northwestern Anatolia. They gradually emerged as a frontier principality towards the close of the thirteenth century as a result of complex dynamics at work from the eleventh century onwards. After the Battle of Malazgirt (Manzikert) between the Great Seljuk Empire (1040–1157) and the Byzantine Empire in 1071, a new state, the Seljuk Sultanate of Rum (1077–1308), together with a number of small Turkic-Islamic emirates (the Danişmends, Saltuks, Mengüceks, and Artuks), was established in the region of Anatolia, from the Euphrates in the east to the Sakarya River in the west.

This political shift led to a socio-demographic transformation, as waves of migration, primarily of Oghuz Turks and other Turkic tribes, began to flow into the region from Central Asia and Iran. The first of these waves arrived after 1071, but it was not until the 1220s and later that migrants started arriving in Anatolia in any great numbers, driven there by Mongol advances in the east. While the first wave of migration to Anatolia was made up primarily of pastoral nomads, the second wave was a diverse mix, with nomads and farmers, artisans and traders, and scholars and Sufi sheikhs/dervishes.

Over the course of 200 years, Anatolia's rural and urban areas became home to a wide range of immigrants from every rung of the social ladder and from numerous different Turkic tribes. This influx of immigrants radically altered the ethnic, linguistic, and religious makeup of Anatolia, which experienced a slow but steady 'Turkification' and Islamisation. It also led to an economic revival in the region, as flourishing transit trade turned Anatolia into an economic hub. Especially after the second wave of migration, the Seljuks, and later the Mongols/Ilkhanids, directed large number of Turkoman pastoral nomads to the mountain ranges and highland plateaus bordering inner Anatolia, including the Byzantine frontier in western Anatolia.

In the second half of the thirteenth century, a number of parallel, interlinked, and mutually reinforcing events took place simultaneously in central and western Anatolia. These would pave the way for the foundation of the Ottoman Empire. From the 1240s onwards, Seljuk control over Anatolia began to unravel, first as a result of the Mongol invasions and later under the pressure of Ilkhanid rule. This led to the political fragmentation of the region and undermined the social order. At the same time, Turkomans migrated in ever-greater numbers to the frontier along the Byzantine border in western Anatolia, the mountainous terrain of which provided ideal pasturelands for their herds and safety from Mongol pressure.

Meanwhile, in Byzantium to the west, important changes were afoot. Armies from the Fourth Crusade (1204) had occupied Constantinople, and the Byzantine Empire had withdrawn to Nicaea (the modern-day city of İznik), not returning to the capital until 1261. Focused on its strategic rivals to the west, the Byzantines neglected the defence of its eastern border with the Seljuks in Anatolia, which weakened and eventually collapsed entirely. All this coincided with a series of upheavals that left a power vacuum in western Anatolia by the close of the century, including power struggles between the Ilkhanids and the Mamluks over Anatolia from the 1270s onwards, Turkoman uprisings against Ilkhanid power in Anatolia in the 1280s, and the revolt of Ilkhanid governors in Anatolia in the 1290s.

This turbulent political environment left the Turkomans a great deal of a chaotic freedom, which they soon put to good use. The frontier lords of the recently arrived Turkomans began to pursue their own interests without regard for the wishes of the central authority, breaking the peace with the Byzantines and expanding into new lands carved out of Byzantine domains to the west. Over the course of this process, a series of new frontier principalities were

established in the frontier region between the Byzantines and the Seljuks in western Anatolia, especially in the fourth quarter of the thirteenth century, including Teke, Menteşe, Aydın, Hamid, Saruhan, Karesi, Germiyan, and Çobanoğulları-Candaroğulları.

One of these frontier principalities, a small and relatively minor one, was the Ottoman principality, which formed around 1300 in northwestern Anatolia. These frontier principalities were commonly known by the name of the leader of their raiding group. Thus it was that the principality headed by Osman/Othman (d. 1324) came to be known as the Ottomans. Osman's father, Ertuğrul, likely first arrived with his 'tribe' at the Byzantine–Seljuk frontier in the region of northwestern Anatolia between the modern city of Eskişehir and the Sakarya River in the 1260s. From the early 1280s, Osman participated in raids against the Byzantines. In time, Osman came to be known as 'Ghazi', or 'warrior for the faith'. He took every opportunity to seize land from the Byzantines and to expand at their expense. Thus it was that over a period of twenty years, Osman's raiding group expanded into a frontier principality in its own right, one that would come to form the nucleus of the Ottoman Empire.

The precise date of the founding of the Ottoman polity is the subject of some debate. Most classic and modern historians accept 1299, the year in which the early chronicles say Osman proclaimed his independence, as the date of the foundation of the Ottoman principality. Others, however, argue that the conditions of the era would have made a proclamation of independence impossible until the 1330s. On the basis of a critical reading of the early chronicles, they argue instead that the Seljuk sultan likely recognised Osman as a frontier lord sometime between the late 1280s and the late 1290s. One historian has proposed the year 1302 as a better date to take as the foundation of the Ottoman state, for that year marks the first known mention of the Ottomans in the historical record, in a Byzantine chronicle written by Pachymeres.[1] It is thus perhaps safe to say the Ottomans transformed from a group of raiders into a frontier principality, governing a particular territory, in northwestern Anatolia around the turn of the fourteenth century (c.1300).

In their early years as a frontier principality, the Ottomans were initially bound to the Çobanoğulları (and later Candaroğulları) of Kastamonu, a

1 Halil İnalcık, "Osman Ghazi's Siege of Nicea and the Battle of Bapheus", *The Ottoman Emirate (1300-1389)*, ed. Elizabeth A. Zachariadou (Heraklion: Crete University Press, 1993), 77-101.

frontier emirate bound to the Seljuk sultan. They later became a tributary of the Ilkhanid governors of Anatolia. But, by nature of the environment in the frontier regions where they established themselves, the Ottomans were in practice free to operate independently of their overlords. The political power vacuum and environment of disorder that prevailed in Anatolia only grew through the first quarter of the fourteenth century. In 1308, the Anatolian Seljuk state collapsed entirely. The principalities in the region, however, continued to exist, swearing fealty directly to the Ilkhanids in Tabriz. The Ilkhanids, too, eventually entered a period of decline, and as their influence decreased, the Anatolian principalities gained a degree of freedom and independence to which they soon became accustomed. With the weakening of Ilkhanid authority (1328), and certainly by the time that authority was extinguished altogether (1335), the Ottomans were left truly free, paying tribute to no one. This is clear from the titles the Ottomans used. The first to call himself a sultan was Orhan Bey, in 1336. It was also Orhan who first minted coins in his own name, in 1327.

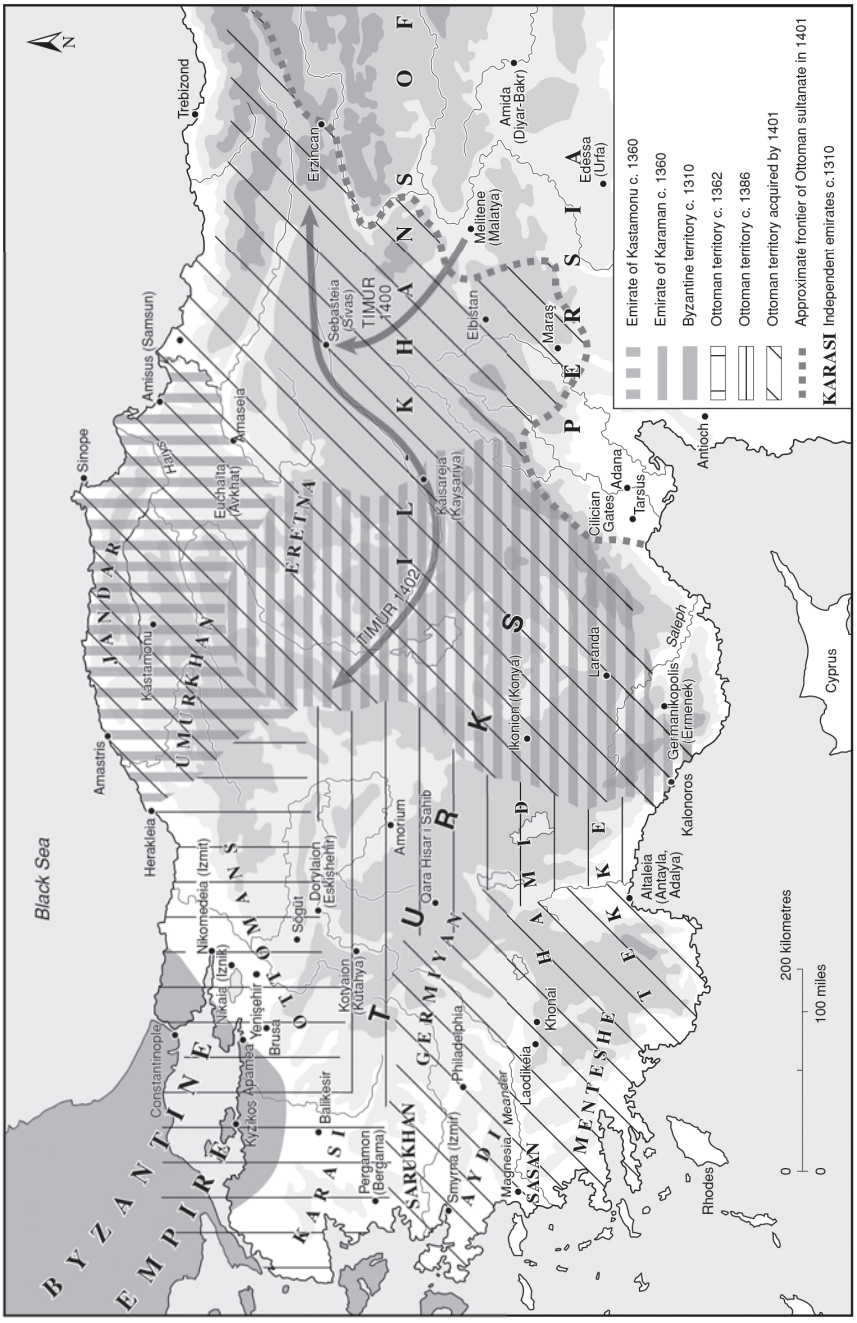
Thus it was that the Ottomans first appear in history as a tiny spot on the map in northwestern Anatolia at the beginning of the fourteenth century, merely one of a number of small Muslim-Turkish frontier principalities. But within a few decades, the Ottomans had become the richest and most powerful of them, and they soon began to fill the power vacuum left by the Byzantine and Seljuk-Ilkhanid empires. As Ibn Batuta observed in 1334:[2]

> This sultan [Orhan] is the greatest of the kings of the Turkmens and the richest in wealth, lands and military forces. Of fortresses he possesses nearly a hundred, and for most of his time he is continually engaged in making the round of them, staying in each fortress for some days to put into good order and examine its condition. It is said that he has never stayed for a whole month in any one town. He also fights with the infidels continually and keeps them under siege.

The Rise of the Ottomans

The real Ottoman expansion began as the Ottomans began to eclipse their rivals in Europe and Asia after 1354, becoming a regional power and spreading into European lands. In less than half a century, by 1402, they ruled over a domain that stretched from the Danube in the west to the Euphrates

2 *The Travels of Ibn Batuta*, ed. H.A.R. Gibb (Cambridge, 1962), II, 451-52.



Source: John Haldon, *The Palgrave Atlas of Byzantine History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 149.

in the east. Within 150 to 200 years, though they experienced a number of setbacks, they had grown into a great world empire.

How was this possible? What factors account for the Ottoman's success? The short answer is that the Ottomans were in the right place at the right time and used the right strategies in their process of becoming a state. The political fragmentation of Anatolia and the Balkans and ongoing disorder in those regions in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries created a set of conditions that favoured the rise of a single dominant power.

The lands in the vicinity of the Ottomans were ruled by powers in decline, especially the two major empires, the Byzantine and the Seljuk, immediately bordering them. The Ottomans' expansion came at their expense, as the Ottomans expanded eastwards and westwards to fill in the power vacuum in the classic Byzantine hinterland. It fragmented after the Crusader invasion of Constantinople in 1204. Though the Byzantines managed to retake the city again in 1261, recovery was slow, and ongoing struggles over the throne and loss of lands only furthered the empire's decline. Byzantium was fast falling from an empire to little more than a city-state. The years of Byzantine decline were the years of the Ottoman rise, as the region passed from one universal empire to another.

When the Ottomans began to expand into the Balkans from the mid-fourteenth century onwards, they, in contrast to the declining Byzantines, had becoming a dynamic military power presiding over a promising socio-economic order. The other political entities in the Balkans were a kaleidoscope of small, politically and geographically fragmented Orthodox and Latin principalities, riven by internal competition and antagonism. The disorder and disunity of the Balkans was not only political, it also had socio-economic and religious dimensions. The rivalry and divisions between the Orthodox and Catholic churches, or between the Slavs and the Latins, paved the way for an Ottoman conquest.

The states of the Balkans were weak, and they lacked the strength, whether individually or collectively, to resist the Ottomans. They were no match for the military and socio-economic might of the Ottomans. Though the Serbian and Bulgarian kingdoms stepped in to fill the strategic vacuum in the Balkans, respectively in the 1350s and the 1370s, at roughly the same time as the Ottomans, they themselves soon entered a period of decline, leaving the region greatly weakened and divided. These conditions worked to the advantage of the Ottomans and greatly facilitated their conquest of the

Balkans. The Ottomans exploited existing divisions in the Balkans to good effect, allying, in the main, with the Orthodox camp against the Latins and their local supporters, or, alternatively, securing ties of vassalage from rival factions keen on Ottoman protection from their enemies.

Meanwhile, as the Ottomans began to expand in the Balkans in the mid-fourteenth century, the states of Western and Eastern Europe were in no position to work together to stop their advance. Europe at the time was in the grip of the Great Plague or 'Black Death' (1347–1351), coupled with a period of intense political fragmentation in the form of the Avignon Captivity (1303–1378) and the resulting Great Schism of the Roman Catholic Church (1378–1418), all of which left the Holy Roman Empire a loose federation of autonomous states. The rest of Europe, too, was in the throes of war: Britain and France were in the midst of the Hundred Years' War (1338–1453). Venice and Genoa were locked in rivalry and war (1350–1355). And Hungary and Poland-Lithuania were beset by problems external and internal. By the time the states of Europe finally came together for their first anti-Ottoman crusade in 1396, Ottoman military might and the socio-economic order they had established in the Balkans had already taken root. All of this marked the beginning of some two centuries of more or less constant Ottoman expansion into Eastern and Central Europe (1350–1550).

At the same time, in Anatolia, the dissolution of the Ilkhanids in 1335 led to the birth of a number of new principalities and other regional powers by the end of the fourteenth century, including the Karaman, Dulqadir, Ramazan, Eretna, Qadi Burhaneddin, Karakoyunlu, and Akkoyunlu. Over the course of the following century, the Ottomans used the military and economic power they secured from the Balkans to gradually defeat these other groups, annex them, or turn them into vassals. Though there were setbacks, the Ottomans eventually established control over all of Anatolia. As the Ottomans took over the lands of the Byzantines and the Seljuk-Ilkhanids in the Balkans and Anatolia, they also took over the administrative infrastructures of those states, as well as the people who ran them.

Why the Ottomans?

While the account above helps to explain Ottoman success, it does not explain why it was the Ottomans, rather than one of the many other actors competing to fill the power vacuum in the Balkans and Anatolia during the period, who came out on top. What is more, many of these other actors were

stronger and appear to have been better placed to succeed. The Karamanids, for example, were both stronger and larger than the Ottomans in 1350. But the flow of history was with the Ottomans, and by the end of the fifteenth century, the Ottomans had managed to overcome all other potential rivals in both the east and the west to fill the vacuum in the Byzantine and Seljuk-Ilkhanid hinterland and beyond and become the dominant power of the region.

The secret to Ottoman success in this regard – why it was the Ottomans rather than one of their rivals who managed to fill this vacuum – must be sought in Ottoman strategy. Perhaps the most important element of this strategy was the successful Ottoman expansion in to the Balkans, which provided an unparalleled opportunity for raiding, conquest, and expansion and allowed the Ottomans to settle new territories and consolidate their military and economic power. Historians all agree that if the Ottomans had been forced to restrict their raiding and conquests to Anatolia, as were the other Turkoman principalities of the period, they would have shared the same fate – becoming little more than a small landlocked state in the Anatolian interior. What allowed the Ottomans to escape this fate and transform from a frontier principality into a regional state, and eventually an empire, was their arrival at the Dardanelles at Gallipoli and their conquest of the territory around the straits. This is what opened the Balkans to them, first as a raiding ground and later as a field of conquest and settlement.

The Ottoman expansion into the Balkans, especially once they began to settle and put down permanent roots in the region, opened to them a wealth of new socio-economic resources, including more manpower. As the Ottomans began to avail themselves of these new resources, they grew stronger, eventually eclipsing their rivals in Anatolia. Success in the Balkans thus led to success across the straits in Anatolia. And it was this factor, too, that helped prevent fragmentation during periods of crisis, as during struggles over the throne. Beyond this, the same factors that led to Ottoman successes in Anatolia also led to success in the Balkans: a combination of political fragmentation in the region, the Ottoman raiding spirit, a steady stream of migration and new settlement, a culture of accommodation and inclusiveness, and political and diplomatic skill.

Raiding was a way of life, a frontier ethos that was widespread in western Asia and the Muslim world. Under the name of *ghaza*, or holy war, it combined a drive for booty and captives with an opportunity for personal glory as a 'ghazi', or champion of the faith. *Ghaza* is a factor that helps explain