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The Early Ottomans

Turks and the Byzantine World

The ancestors of Osman, the eponymous founder of the Ottoman dynasty, arrived in northwestern Asia Minor and settled in the former Byzantine province of Bithynia shortly before 1300. By that time, the Byzantine emperor of Constantinople had long lost control over much of Asia Minor. After the victory of the Seljuk Turks over the Byzantine army in 1071 at Manzikert, a branch of the Great Seljuks of Iran gradually extended its rule in eastern and central Asia Minor, which the newcomers called Rum, the land of the Romans or Greeks. Under the Seljuks and the rival Turkmen dynasty of the Danishmendids (whom the Seljuks eliminated only a century after Manzikert), large numbers of nomadic Turks from Transoxania arrived in Rum, whose upland pasturelands and warm coastlands offered ideal conditions for the pastoralists’ way of life.

Conversion to Islam, the religion of the winning party, seems to have been widespread from the eleventh century onward. Despite conversion and the Turkification of the population, the Seljuk sultanate of Rum remained a multiethnic and polyglot polity. Turks were living mainly along the border zones, which they called uc, while Greeks and Armenians were partly rural and partly urban, as were the Persians (Tajik) and Arabs. Relations between Greeks and Turks were close and intermarriages relatively common. Some Byzantine aristocratic families—the Komnenoi, Tornikoi, Gabrades, and Mavrozomai—became members
of the Seljuk nobility. Greeks worked in the Seljuk administration, while the Byzantine emperors hired Turkish troops. The emperors also launched joint military campaigns with the Seljuks against other rivals. Fleeing Seljuk rulers and rebel princes sought refuge in Byzantium as often as they did among their Muslim brethren in Asia Minor, Syria, Mesopotamia, and Iran. At the same time, rebel Byzantine lords escaped to the Seljuk capital Konya. Despite raids and punitive campaigns, there existed a long-lasting, if uneasy, political cooperation between Byzantium and the Seljuk sultanate of Rum from 1160 until 1261. This amicable relationship was based on the friendship between the Byzantine emperors and Seljuk sultans and their respective political elites, as well as on the influence of the Orthodox Church in Seljuk domains. 

The Seljuk sultanate acted as the chief guarantor of the Nicene Empire after the Latin crusaders captured Constantinople in 1204 during the Fourth Crusade, established a Latin empire in Constantinople, divided the former Byzantine lands among themselves, and forced the Byzantine emperors into exile in Nicaea (modern Iznik). During the Nicene era, the Seljuk sultans acknowledged the emperors in Nicaea. In contrast, the Seljuks considered the “Empire of Trebizond” in northeastern Asia Minor and the Despotate of Epirus in Albania and northwestern Greece (the other Byzantine successor states after the Fourth Crusade) only as regional polities of nonimperial dignity. The peoples of Rum under Seljuk rule shared elements of each other’s cultures. The beliefs of the Greeks in Seljuk Rum differed from those living under the Byzantine emperors. They also dressed like Turks, used Turkish weapons, and spoke a vernacular with Turkish and Persian loan words. Many Turks, Greeks, Armenians, and Persians in Rum spoke at least two languages. Jelaleddin Rumi (1207–73)—the founder of the mevlevi order of dervishes, originally from Balkh in Central Asia—wrote most of his works in Persian. But he also used Turkish and Greek vocabularies when addressing his poems to the townsfolk of Konya, his chosen new home.1

The influx of Turkish nomadic peoples—known as Turkmen or Turcoman—into western Asia Minor is closely related to the Mongol invasion of the Middle East in the 1240s and 1250s. A western army of the Mongols invaded and defeated the Seljuks of Rum in 1243 at
Kösedağ, northeast of Sivas. The Seljuks of Rum became the vassals of the Mongol Ilkhanids. The Ilkhanids established their empire in the vast area from present-day Afghanistan to Turkey after Hülegü Khan (r. 1256–65), the grandson of Chinggis Khan, had conquered and sacked Baghdad, ending the rule of the Abbasid caliphs (750–1258). As the Mongols occupied more and more grasslands for their horses in Asia Minor, the Turkmen tribes moved farther to the west and settled on the Seljuk-Byzantine marches. By the last decades of the thirteenth century, the Ilkhanids and their Seljuk vassals had lost control over much of Asia Minor. In the ensuing power vacuum many local Turkmen tribal chiefs, known as beg or emir, managed to establish themselves as rulers of small chiefdoms or principalities. The Ottomans, who were only one among the numerous Turco-Muslim emirates, settled in northwest Asia Minor, in the former Byzantine province of Bithynia.

The Ottomans benefited greatly from their new location. After the Byzantines recaptured Constantinople from the Latin crusaders in 1261, the emperors in Constantinople were primarily preoccupied with regaining control over southeastern Europe, while still managing their defenses in Asia Minor against Turkmen attacks. But because of Venetian threats, Emperor Andronikos II Palaiologos (r. 1282–1328) followed a more passive policy along the eastern borders. He also attempted to improve Byzantine finances by reducing the size of the army and dismantling the fleet. In the words of the contemporary Byzantine chronicler Pachymeres, writing circa 1310, “the defenses of the eastern territory were weakened, whilst the Persians (Turks) were emboldened to invade lands which had no means of driving them off.”

Holy Warriors and Marcher Lords

Until the late 1970s, most scholars understood the Ottoman polity as a quintessential Islamic frontier warrior state, whose raison d’être was the holy war or jihad—termed ghaza in Ottoman sources—against the “infidels” and the continuous expansion of the Ottoman emirate’s frontiers at the expense of its Christian neighbors. Formulated in the 1930s by the Austrian Ottomanist scholar Paul Wittek, the ghaza thesis served as an
all-embracing elucidation of the rise, evolution, and fall of the Ottoman Empire. Wittek believed that the early Ottomans shared the chivalrous spirit of the futuwwa religious “corporations,” whose understanding and practice of Islam differed from that of the religious establishment (ulama). Situated on the frontier of Byzantium, the Ottoman ghazis were strategically positioned to wage such “holy wars.” Opportunities for glory served as a magnet for the warriors of the neighboring Turco-Muslim emirates. The ostensibly inexhaustible supply of zealous ghazi warriors under the banner of the early Ottoman rulers seemed to explain their military successes.

Scholarship from the late 1970s began to question Wittek’s thesis. Critics have argued that what Wittek termed as early Ottoman ghazas were more inclusive political enterprises. In the early fourteenth century, the Muslim Turkmen emirates of Aydin, Karasi, Saruhan, and Ottoman forged alliances and launched military ventures with Christian Catalans, Byzantines, and Genoese. Catalan mercenaries, whom the Byzantines hired to fight the Turkmens, fought both against and alongside the Turks. The Byzantine emperors Andronikos III (r. 1328–41) and John VI Kantakouzenos (r. 1347–54) enlisted the help of the Muslim Turkmen emirs of Saruhan, Aydin, and Ottoman against their opponents both in the empire and beyond. Local Byzantine governors cooperated with the Ottomans, while dissatisfied Byzantine generals and soldiers joined the victorious Ottomans. In the late 1340s and early 1350s—during the war between Genoa, on the one hand, and Venice, Aragon, and Byzantium, on the other—the Genoese of Galata sought the assistance of the Ottomans. Galata was a suburb of Byzantine Constantinople north of the Golden Horn and home of a Genoese colony, established almost a century before. In the summer of 1351, the Ottomans supplied the Genoese with a thousand archers to fight against Genoa’s Christian enemy. The Genoese-Ottoman cooperation lasted until the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453. Genoese ships helped the Ottomans on multiple occasions to maintain communication between their lands in Asia Minor and southeastern Europe, sabotaging Byzantine and Western attempts to block the crossing of Ottoman troops from Asia to Europe.
The fourteenth century witnessed Ottoman campaigns against fellow Muslim Turks. The Ottomans also annexed the neighboring Turkish emirates of Karasi, Saruhan, Germiyan, and Hamid. Fifteenth-century Ottoman chroniclers portrayed the early Ottomans as ghazi warriors, often ignoring these conflicts and the Ottomans’ alliances with Christians. These chroniclers claimed that the Ottomans acquired the lands of the neighboring emirates via peaceful means, such as by purchasing it and by marriage. When they mentioned the wars between the Ottomans and their Turkish neighbors, Ottoman chroniclers tried to legitimize them by stating that the Ottomans acted in self-defense. Other chroniclers claimed that the Ottomans were forced to fight because the emirates’ hostile policies hindered the Ottomans’ holy wars against the Christians.8

The heterogeneous nature of the early Ottoman society was a rich source of military and administrative skills. Among the allies of Osman, the founder of the Ottoman dynasty, one finds Orthodox Greeks and recent Christian converts to Islam, such as Evrenos and Köse Mihal. Ghazi Evrenos was one of the most famous Ottoman marcher lords. Ottoman chronicles claimed that Evrenos was a Muslim Turk from the neighboring Karasi emirate. However, a recently discovered source suggests that he was of Serbian descent, the son of a certain Branko Lazar, who after his conversion to Islam was known as Isa Beg. Branko Lazar may have joined the Ottomans to extend his original patrimony at the expense of his local Christian rivals. His Serbian origin may explain why the Ottoman ruler Murad I entrusted Evrenos to lead the Ottoman army to the battlefield of Kosovo in 1389. Unlike the newcomer Ottomans, Evrenos had been familiar with the region’s geography and politics.9

Köse (Beardless) Mihal, a Byzantine castellan of the small fort of Harmankaya in Bithynia, which controlled strategic communication arteries along the Sakarya River basin, first fought at the side of Osman as a Greek Christian by guiding Osman’s troops against the Byzantines. Mihal later converted to Islam and mediated between the Ottomans and the local Byzantine lords. In 1326, as an Ottoman commander, Mihal negotiated the surrender of Prousa (Bursa) to the Ottomans. The latter allowed the town’s Byzantine commander to leave for Constantinople,
but his chief adviser with whom Mihal negotiated the surrender, a certain Saroz, decided to join the Ottoman conquerors.\textsuperscript{10}

Ottoman chroniclers of the fifteenth century downplayed the role of the semi-independent warrior lords of the Ottoman marches in the early Ottoman conquests, giving agency to the House of Osman. Yet, these marcher lords played a crucial role in expanding the Ottoman domains and shaping Ottoman rule in southeastern Europe. Until his death in 1417, Ghazi Evrenos was an influential actor in the Ottoman conquests in Rumeli, capturing most of the lands between the Marica River and the Adriatic coast. His light cavalry raiders fought in the battles of Kosovo (1389) against the Serbs and their allies and of Nikopol (1396) against the crusaders. Three of the four most famous marcher lord dynasties—the Evrenosoğlu, Mihaloğulları, and Malkoçoğulları (the Sons of Evrenos, Mihal, and Malkoç/the Serbian Malković family)—were of Christian origin.\textsuperscript{11}

These frontier lords possessed large hereditary estates and substantial armies of frontier raiders. The Turks called these raiders a\textit{kın}, “those who flow,” from the Turkish verb a\textit{kin}, meaning “to flow.” In the words of the fifteenth-century Byzantine chronicler Doukas (d. after 1462), when they heard “the herald’s voice summoning them to the attack—which in their language is called a\textit{kin}—they descend like a flooding river.”\textsuperscript{12} The marcher lords often acted independently of the Ottoman rulers. They governed large areas of the southeastern European marches as fellow generals equal in status to the Ottoman sultan rather than military commanders subject to the latter’s orders. The role the marcher lords played in the Ottoman succession struggles of 1402–13 illustrates their status and influence. By siding with the Ottoman prince, who seemed to have supported their raids and lifestyle, the marcher lords wielded substantial power. None of the warring Ottoman princes could hold on to their lands in southeastern Europe without their support.\textsuperscript{13} Early Ottoman rulers were very much aware of the power of the marcher lords and were thus careful not to increase their status further. This may explain why no marcher lord appears to have ever been appointed to the highest administrative positions (provincial governors-general and vizier) of the Ottoman domains. Nor do they appear to have been given
Ottoman princesses in marriage, despite the Ottoman practice of dynastic marriages, whereby Ottoman rulers forged political alliances with local Turkmen emirs in Asia Minor and vassal Christian rulers in southeastern Europe.14

The extent to which the raids of the marcher lords and the campaigns of the early Ottomans were religiously inspired is subject to debate. These wars likely meant different things to different segments of the early Ottoman society. Some understood that they fought a religious war; others joined the campaigns for the booty.15 While the early Ottomans emerged in “a largely multi-confessional context,” the military and the ruling elite later adopted “both ghazi legitimation and a more exclusive religious posture. A conquest that did not start as a ghaza became one over the course of time.”16 Such an approach is a reminder that an emphasis on Ottoman pragmatism, flexibility, inclusiveness, and political shrewdness should not overshadow the importance of religious fervor in the early Ottoman society, especially after the mid-fourteenth century. In the first decades of their emergence, the Ottomans faced Byzantine Christians, with whom the Muslim Turks of Asia Minor had established relationships after living side by side for centuries. The relationships involved wars and rivalry as much as they did cooperation and occasional political alliances. After the Ottomans crossed into southeastern Europe, however, they fought against Bulgarians, Serbs, and European crusaders from Hungary and western Europe. Fighting against these new enemies meant that ghaza became an increasingly important part of Ottoman ideology and legitimation. The Turks of western Asia Minor went willingly to war against their Christian enemies, seeking both glory and booty.

Historical Contingency and Accidents

One problem with the ghaza thesis is that it is monocausal. Monocausal explanations tend to have great appeal among historians and social scientists in explaining “origins,” especially in fields that lack major paradigms. Such explanations suggest inevitability to the way things evolved. However, the emergence of the Ottomans as a significant regional
power by the sixteenth century was neither inevitable nor foreseeable in 1300. It involved, as did all complex processes of state formation, a good deal of historical contingency and accidents. Students of the early Ottoman enterprise have long pointed out the propitious location of Osman’s small emirate, the power vacuum, and the wars among the Ottomans’ neighbors, as well as various natural disasters that aided the emergence of the House of Osman. Historians have drawn attention to the possible relationship between a flood in the spring of 1302 and Osman’s first major victory against the Byzantines in the summer of the same year on the plain of Bapheus near modern İzmit. Others have pointed to the possible effects of the Black Death, which arrived in Asia Minor in 1347. Plagues affect urban and coastal populations to a greater extent than pastoral communities in the interior of Asia Minor. Therefore, it is plausible that the Turkish maritime principalities of Menteşe, Aydın, Saruhan, and Karasu suffered more severely from the plague than did the Ottomans, who lived farther from the coast, and whose sparsely populated pastoralist society was often on the move. The plague also could have weakened the military capabilities of the Byzantines, who then hired Turkish troops, including Ottoman mercenaries, a practice that had a long tradition well before the plague.

While historical accidents and contingencies were important in the initial Ottoman conquest, the opportunities created by floods, earthquakes, civil wars, and the power vacuums within and among their neighbors were quickly exploited by the Ottomans. The early Ottomans were shrewd tacticians, and they established their first bridgehead in Europe as a direct consequence of such a policy. In 1347 Ottoman troops, profiting from yet another Byzantine domestic strife, crossed the Dardanelles Straits into Thrace as allies of John Kantakouzenos, commander in chief of the Byzantine army. Kantakouzenos challenged the rule of the underaged emperor John V Palaiologos (r. 1341–91), claiming the throne for himself. Kantakouzenos first enlisted the help of his old ally Umur, the emir of Aydın. But the emir faced a crusading army and thus was unable to assist him. Kantakouzenos then turned to Orhan (r. c. 1324–62), Osman’s son and heir. He gave his daughter Theodora in marriage to Orhan in 1346 and with Ottoman help acquired the
throne as coemperor in 1347. In 1352 war broke out between Emperor John V Palaiologos and Kantakouzenos’s son Matthew, the governor in Edirne. John V Palaiologos enlisted the support of the Serbs and Bulgarians, while Kantakouzenos called on his Ottoman son-in-law. In the battle near modern Didymoteicho in northeastern Greece, Kantakouzenos’s Ottoman mercenaries soundly defeated the emperor’s Serbian and Bulgarian allies. The Ottomans then raided and plundered Thrace. Amid these raids, Orhan’s son Süleyman, commander of the Ottoman forces, occupied the town of Tzympe near the Byzantine coastal fortress of Gallipoli on the European shore of the Dardanelles. Ottoman soldiers gradually extended their control over the north shore of the Marmara Sea from Gallipoli to Constantinople. Two years later, when an earthquake destroyed the walls of Gallipoli, Süleyman seized it. John Kantakouzenos lost support in Constantinople, primarily because he received blame for allowing the Ottomans to conquer Byzantine lands in Europe. When John V Palaiologos returned to Constantinople aboard Genoese ships, Kantakouzenos abdicated. But the damage had been done. Gallipoli became the Ottomans’ European bridgehead for their raids into Europe. The attacks commenced shortly after Kantakouzenos’s abdication, as Orhan had no allegiance or family ties to Emperor John V Palaiologos. 

The Ottomans turned Gallipoli into a maritime base and a naval arsenal, built on the existing Byzantine dockyards. Their use of Gallipoli as a springboard for raids in Europe demonstrated a significant difference between the Ottomans and the other Turkish emirs in Asia Minor. The latter were contented with pay and plunder and returned the conquered lands to the Byzantines. The Ottomans, by contrast, used their alliance with the Byzantines to acquire strategic sites and territory.

Ottoman-Byzantine relations and Gallipoli’s fate illustrate how the Ottomans capitalized on the weakness of their Byzantine neighbors. In 1366, the Ottomans lost Gallipoli to Amadeo of Savoy, who restored it to Byzantium. Sultan Murad I (r. 1362–89) had demanded the restoration of Gallipoli since 1371. Still, he regained it only years later as a consequence of yet another Byzantine civil war. In 1373, while Emperor John V—by this time an Ottoman vassal—and Murad I were campaigning in Asia
Minor, their sons Andronikos IV and Savcı plotted against their fathers. The emperor and the sultan joined forces and defeated their rebellious sons. While Murad beheaded Savcı, the emperor spared his son’s life. However, obeying Murad’s demands, he had Andronikos partially blinded and transferred his right of succession to his younger brother, Manuel. In the summer of 1376, Andronikos IV seized the throne from his father with Genoese and Ottoman help, offering the Ottoman ruler his allegiance and an annual tribute. As a token of his subservience, Andronikos surrendered Gallipoli to Murad.20

Material Rewards and Religious Legitimation

A fourteenth-century text on ghaza demonstrates that Ottoman leaders encouraged fighting for both glory and booty, as the latter composed the material base of the warriors of the marches.21 Booty was a significant source of revenue for raiders and soldiers. Narrating the attacks against Belgrade and the conquest of Smederevo (1439), the Ottoman chronicler Aşıkpaşazade, who was present during these campaigns, claimed that he purchased nine slave boys from the raiders, whom he later sold for between 200 and 300 akçe per slave.22 These were significant sums in the mid-fifteenth century, when the elite janissaries of the sultan received a daily wage of three to five akçe. Booty and service land grants (timar) remained an essential tool for the Ottoman rulers to motivate their followers. As late as 1484 Sultan Bayezid II (r. 1481–1512) mobilized for war with the following words: “All those wishing to enjoy the pleasure of ghaza and jihad, and those who desire booty, those brave comrades who gain their bread by their sword, and those wishing to receive timar by comradeship, are requested to join me with their weapons and military equipment in this blessed ghaza.”23 As a further incentive, the sultan added that in this expedition, he would not claim one-fifth of the booty, which was the Muslim ruler’s share.

While material rewards were an essential incentive for the soldiers, religion was a useful tool for loyalty creation and legitimation. From the mid-fourteenth century onward, the Ottomans increasingly thought of themselves and their religion as superior to that of the Byzantines. Gregory
Palamas—archbishop of Thessaloniki (1347–60) and a prisoner held in Orhan’s summer camp outside Bursa in 1354—remarked that his captors considered the bishop’s captivity “as a proof of the ineffectiveness” of the Christian religion, attributing their victories to Islam’s superiority.24 Recently converted Turkish marcher lords who sided with the Ottoman dynasty had become devout Muslims. Ghazi Evrenos’s pilgrimage to Mecca, and his largesse toward the various Sufi brotherhoods—the spiritual guides of the marcher lords and their akıncı horsemen—is illustrative in this regard. The region that Evrenos conquered contained 267 dervish convents and 65 soup kitchens. These buildings were initially designed to provide lodging and food for the wandering Muslim dervishes. They also served the needs of traveling merchants, students, and the local poor, both Muslim and Christian, greatly facilitating the acceptance of Ottoman rule among the conquered peoples.25

The use of religion for legitimation was not unique to the Ottomans. Neither was the 1337 Bursa inscription, Wittek’s primary source for his ghazi thesis, which titled Osman “the exalted great emir, mujāhid [the one striving in jihad] in the way of God, sultan of the ghazis, ghazi, son of the ghazi.”26 Other contemporary emirs of Asia Minor also used such titles. The ruler of Kastamonu, Yavlak Arslan of the Çobanoğlu dynasty (r. c. 1280–91), was titled “the mine of generosity and munificence to the ghazis, the eradicator of rebels and destroyer of infidels.” On mosque inscriptions and coins, Mehmed Beg of Aydın (r. 1308–34) was “sultan of the ghazis and mujāhid.” His successor, Umur Beg (r. 1334–48), was titled on his tombstone as ghazi. Ishak Beg of Saruhan (r. 1362–68) was named “protector of the ghazis and mujāhid.”27 Whether these sources used the word ghazi to mean “holy warrior” or as an alternative to the pre-Islamic Turkish term alp (meaning simply “hero” or “warrior-adventurer”) is subject to scholarly debate.28

The Ottoman sultans of the early fifteenth century routinely legitimized their rule by using normative Islamic titles on coins and mosque inscriptions, projecting their images as righteous rulers of Islam who fought for the expansion of Islam’s domains. On the Arabic-language inscription of the Hamza Beg or Eski Cami (Old Mosque) of Stara Zagora in Bulgaria—built by Prince Süleyman’s subordinate Hamza in
Prince Süleyman is titled as “the mighty, righteous and conquering sultan, the sultan of Islam and Muslims, the shadow of God,” “the lord (Persian khudawandgar) and commander Süleyman, son of Bayezid, son of Murad, the khan.” On the inscription of the Eski Cami in Edirne, Sultan Mehmed I (r. 1413–21) legitimized his rule as a righteous sultan, mujāhid and murābit (that is, the one who guarded Islam’s frontiers). The Ottoman ruler is also titled as “victorious (mansūr) with his flag, overwhelming the enemies, spreading justice and beneficence over the inhabitants of the earth, the sultan, son of the sultan, son of the sultan, helper of the earth and the religion.” The titles mujāhid and murābit are “closely connected to the piously militant frontier spirit founded in the Salvation History of the first century of Islamic history.” The Ottoman rulers used religious legitimation against the neighboring Turco-Muslim emirs because the latter employed similar Islamic titles to justify their rule. Islamic legitimacy remained important in later years too, when Ottoman sultans sought religious rulings (fatwa) to justify their wars against Muslim neighbors and rivals.

Religious legitimation also remained paramount for the Byzantine imperial propaganda. John VI Kantakouzenos framed his wars against the Turkmen emirates as a struggle between the pious Byzantines and the evil “Ismaelites” and “barbarians,” the “natural enemies” of Byzantium. Byzantine authors presented Byzantium’s defensive wars against the Ottomans in a similar fashion, emphasizing Byzantine moral and cultural superiority. While this rhetoric aimed at attracting western European military aid, it also served to exonerate John VI Kantakouzenos from the charge that his hiring the Ottomans as mercenaries against his rivals contributed to the Ottoman expansion in southeastern Europe.

Balkan Geopolitics

In the first half of the fourteenth century, three powers ruled over much of the Balkan Peninsula: the Byzantine Empire, Serbia, and Bulgaria. Serbia emerged as the most powerful of the three, controlling vast lands from the Danube in the north to the Gulf of Corinth in the south under Stephen Dušan (r. 1331–55). Dušan’s brother-in-law, John Alexander
The Early Ottomans (r. 1331–71), ruled Bulgaria. However, by the time the Ottomans started their conquests in the peninsula in earnest, all three powers had been weakened. The Byzantine Empire had been engulfed in a civil war. Serbia broke up into competing principalities following disintegration under Dušan’s son and heir Uroš (r. 1355–71), and the extinction of the Nemanjić dynasty (1371). Tsar Alexander partitioned Bulgaria between his two sons and lost northeastern Bulgaria to Dobrotica—a powerful lord of perhaps Turkish descent—after whom these lands came to be known as Dobrudja.31

King Louis I of Hungary (r. 1342–82) used the weakening of his southern neighbors to force them to accept Hungarian suzerainty. After the death of Dušan, two Serbian magnate families quarreled in the region of Braničevo in northern Serbia. By 1361, the region had seceded from Serbia and was ruled by the Hungarian king’s Serbian vassal. The same year, Prince Lazar Hrebeljanović (r. 1371–89), who ruled parts of northern and eastern Serbia, accepted Hungarian suzerainty. King Louis also recovered the Bosnian territories that his father had lost, making Tvrtko I of Bosnia (ban 1353–77, and king 1377–91) his vassal.32 The Hungarian king also arranged a marriage between Tvrtko and Dorothy, the daughter of John Stracimir of the Tsardom of Vidin. Since Stracimir was Louis’s vassal, the marriage strengthened the Hungarian king’s influence in both kingdoms.33 His suzerainty over parts of Serbia, Bosnia, and Bulgaria brought Louis I closer to the Ottomans. Realizing the Ottoman threat, Louis signaled his intention to participate in a crusade against them. In 1366, the Byzantine emperor John V Palaiologos visited Louis’s capital Buda. He pleaded for help against the Ottomans, promising to comply with papal instructions regarding church union. However, the pope soon suspended the crusade because the Greeks did “not appear to want union by choice alone and through religious zeal,” but were “driven to it so as to get your help,” wrote the pope to the Hungarian king.34

By about 1369, the Ottomans had conquered northern and central Thrace. By capturing Adrianople (Edirne)—located at the confluence of the Marica and Tundža Rivers—they gained access to Thrace and Bulgaria. That the sultan chose the city as the center of his court signaled
Ottoman plans to stay in Europe.\textsuperscript{35} Having crushed the Serbian forces at the battle of Černomen (T. Çirmen, 26 September 1371), Ottoman raiders overran Macedonia, conquering the lowlands as far as Samakov by about 1375. These events forced the Serbian princes of Macedonia, the Bulgarian tsar John Šišman of Trnovo, and the Byzantine emperor John V Palaiologos to accept Ottoman suzerainty. The Ottoman victory in 1371 was more significant in opening the Balkan Peninsula to the Ottomans than the better-known battle of Kosovo in 1389.\textsuperscript{36}

Following the Serbian princes’ defeat in 1371, Pope Gregory XI urged Louis I to resist the Ottomans. However, two months later, the pope expressed his hopes that the Hungarian king would help him in his war against the Visconti. While King Louis demonstrated a genuine interest in leading a crusade against the Ottomans, he soon defaulted on his promise. However, when the rumor spread that Vaicu of Wallachia had sided with the Ottomans, Louis marched against him in 1375. In Wallachia, the Hungarians clashed with Ottoman troops who supported the Wallachians. To secure his realm’s southeastern borders against Wallachian and Ottoman incursions, Louis built and reconstructed several forts. However, these could not stop Ottoman raids into Transylvania, which had traditionally played the role of Hungary’s eastern frontier province. Despite his limited success against the Ottomans, King Louis gained a reputation as a devote son of Christ who campaigned against the pagan Lithuanians and the schismatics and heretics of Serbia, eliciting titles from the popes like “champion of Christ” (\textit{athleta Christi}), “very devout prince and most illustrious son of God’s holy Church,” and “most Christian prince and heroic hammer of the infidels.”\textsuperscript{37}

Following the death of Louis I in 1382, Prince Lazar regained his independence by taking advantage of the succession struggles for the Hungarian crown between the Angevin claimants and Sigismund, son of Emperor Charles IV of Germany.\textsuperscript{38} However, sometime before 1386, Lazar arranged the marriage of his daughter Theodora to Nicholas II Garai (Nikola Gorjanski). Ban of Croatia and Slavonia and leader of the pro-Sigismund baronial faction, Garai played an essential role in persuading his father-in-law to acknowledge King Sigismund’s (r. 1387–1437) suzerainty in 1389.\textsuperscript{39}
In 1386 Murad conquered Niš and thus gained access to the northern section of the Roman military road leading to Prince Lazar’s Serbia in the Morava River valley. However, either before or shortly after the Ottoman conquest of Niš, Prince Lazar managed to temporarily stop the Ottomans near Pločnik, southwest of Niš. Pločnik was an Ottoman setback, as was Şahin Pasha’s defeat at the hands of the Bosnians of Tvrtko at Bileća before or on 27 August 1388. Şahin’s defeat at Bileća provoked Murad to retaliate in the spring of 1389.

The Ottoman chronicler Nešri believed that the troops of Prince Lazar fought with the Bosnians at Bileća. But Sultan Murad had good reasons to attack Lazar, as the latter’s acknowledgment of Hungarian suzerainty threatened Ottoman interests. The armies of Murad and Lazar met on 15 June 1389 at the battle of Kosovo Polje, near present-day Priština. While Lazar was captured and executed, the Serbian Miloš Obilić murdered the sultan. After the battle, Stephen Lazarević (c. 1377–1427), Lazar’s son and successor, became the vassal of the new Ottoman ruler, Bayezid I (r. 1389–1402), while Stephen’s sister, Olivera, married Bayezid. For more than a decade, Stephen Lazarević fought alongside his Ottoman overlord against Hungary, Wallachia, the European crusaders, and Timur (Tamerlane). The sultan rewarded his vassal’s services by giving him the lands of his Serbian rival.

As Sultan Bayezid I’s vassal, Stephen Lazarević was compelled to allow Ottoman soldiers into his castles, including Golubac on the border river Danube. Ottoman and Serbian raids into Hungary’s southern counties became yearly occurrences. For the first time since the Mongol invasion in 1241, Hungary’s border regions suffered from regular foreign attacks, increasingly with devastating consequences. In retaliation, King Sigismund led his armies into Serbia annually between 1389 and 1392, when the sultan was fighting against the Karamans in Asia Minor. Sigismund’s forces captured several Serbian forts and fought the Ottoman and Serbian troops in the district of Braničevo, southeast of Belgrade.

In 1393, the Ottomans conquered Trnovo, annexing Danubian Bulgaria and sending Tsar Šišman to Nikopol on the Danube as Sultan Bayezid’s vassal. In 1394 Bayezid invaded southern Hungary and Wallachia, and ousted the pro-Hungarian voivode Mircea the Elder (r. 1386–1418),
replacing him with his own vassal, Vlad the Usurper (r. 1394–97). At the battle fought in the fall of 1394 at the mountain pass of Rovine, Mircea and his allies defeated the retreating Ottoman army, killing Ottoman begs and the Ottoman-vassal Serbian princes Marko “Kraljević” and Constantine Dejanović. Bayezid managed to cross the Danube at Nikopol aboard ships provided by Tsar Šişman. Back on Ottoman-controlled lands, the sultan—suspicious of the Bulgarian tsar’s collusion with Mircea and King Sigismund—ordered Šişman’s execution.45 Most of modern Macedonia fell under Ottoman rule after Rovine. The better part of the region, however, was included in the frontier lands of the marcher lords Paşa Yiğit, his heir İshak Beg (1414–39), and Isa Beg (1439–63), İshak’s son.46 Despite his defeat at the battle of Rovine, Bayezid managed to depose the pro-Hungarian Wallachian voivode and installed his own vassal. The deposed Mircea fled to Sigismund, and in March 1395 he and his boyars acknowledged Hungarian suzerainty, promising to participate in Sigismund’s planned crusade. Sigismund restored Mircea into the voivodeship in the summer. By the fall, however, the Ottomans had their man back in Wallachia. Ottoman control over Wallachia, Bulgaria, and two strategic Danubian crossings at Nikopol and Vidin sped up the preparations for the crusade.47

The Crusade of Nikopol

Ottoman conquest in southeastern Europe reinvigorated the idea of the crusade, especially in Byzantium, whose monarchs and envoys had traveled in Europe from Buda to London, hoping to secure military and financial aid against the Ottomans. Owing to a four-year truce in the Hundred Years’ War, French and English knights were available for the crusade. In the end, western European participation in the crusade remained rather limited. Although Pope Boniface IX supported the crusade, he called the peoples of Dalmatia, Bosnia, Croatia, and Slavonia into arms not against the “infidel Turks” but against his own rival, Benedict III, the pope in Avignon.48 Only a few thousand European knights—from France-Burgundy, England, Germany, and Bohemia—joined the crusade. The French-
Burgundian heavy cavalry of about a thousand men was the largest army. The backbone of the crusader army was the Hungarian troops, numbering perhaps ten thousand men. With a thousand Wallachian mounted archers and woodland fighters provided by Mircea, the crusader army could have reached fifteen thousand fighting men. The majority of the troops consisted of heavy cavalry, but the Hungarians and Wallachians also fielded mounted archers. While these were better suited to fight the Ottoman light cavalry, Ottoman archers were superior owing to their outstanding composite reflex bows and better firing technique.

Historians have criticized Sigismund for wasting time capturing Ottoman castles along the Danube. However, the crusaders’ slow movement reflected a strategy aimed not at expelling the Ottomans from Europe but at expanding the Hungarian zone of influence in southeastern Europe so that the advance of the enemy could be halted beyond the borders of the kingdom. Whatever Sigismund’s goals may have been, the crusade ended in disaster. The defeat came as a result of the French knights’ insistence to lead the charge despite their ignorance of the enemy’s tactics. The Ottoman infantry’s fortified positions stopped the French heavy cavalry’s charge, and the knights’ retreat swiftly degenerated into a rout.

Barely escaping with his life, King Sigismund fled via the Black Sea to Constantinople and then to Hungary by sea. The rest of the Hungarian army, led by Sigismund’s governor of Transylvania, returned home via Wallachia. In 1397, the Hungarians managed to unseat the Ottoman vassal Wallachian voivode, who had assaulted the crusaders on their return to Hungary. They restored Mircea to the voivodeship, this time for good. However, having seized the territories of the Bulgarian tsardom of Vidin from his ruler in 1396, the Ottomans now were bordering Hungary and Wallachia along the Danube River.

Called “a ghazi river” by fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Ottoman chroniclers and “the mother of rivers” by the seventeenth-century Ottoman traveler Evliya Çelebi, the Danube henceforth defined the northern border of the sultan’s domains. For the Ottomans on the frontier, the Danube separated the lands of Islam from those of the “infidel.”
The Ottomans organized the conquered territories to the south of the Danube into the districts (sancak) of Nikopol (T. Niğbolu), Vidin, and Silistra (T. Silistre). They conquered Silistra in 1388, appointing the marcher lord Mihaloğlu Firuz Beg as its first sancak governor. However, the voivode Mircea retook the border town several times until Mehmed I subdued him into vassalage in 1417 and reconquered Silistra in 1419. Silistra, Vidin, and Nikopol served as Ottoman springboards for cross-border raids into Hungary, Wallachia, and Moldavia until the conquest of Hungary in the middle of the sixteenth century.55
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