

The Biography of Mehmet the Conqueror



An article by Shahriyar Eghdam Shargh

The World Before Mehmed

On the morning of 29 May 1453, an Ottoman army stood before the walls of Constantinople.

For nearly two months, the soldiers of Sultan Mehmed II had surrounded the greatest surviving city of the eastern Mediterranean, while inside the city a dwindling population prepared for what many understood to be an existential struggle.

At the head of the Ottoman forces stood a ruler who was only twenty one years old. Within days, his name would become inseparable from the greatest conquest of his age.

History would remember him as Mehmed the Conqueror.

Yet the story of Mehmed did not begin in 1453, and it did not truly begin with his birth in 1432.

To understand why this young Sultan was determined to capture Constantinople, why he possessed the resources required to attempt such an undertaking, and why the Byzantine Empire had become vulnerable enough to face an Ottoman conquest, we must go back many generations.

Mehmed was the product of a long historical process that had begun before his dynasty had acquired an empire and before Constantinople had become the final stronghold of a fading Roman state.

The Ottoman Empire did not suddenly appear as a great power.

It emerged from a frontier principality in northwestern Anatolia and developed over generations through warfare, diplomacy, political alliances, territorial expansion, and the gradual creation of a sophisticated state. Its rulers took advantage of the fragmentation of the regions around them while building institutions capable of sustaining further expansion.

By the time Mehmed was born, the state founded by his ancestors had already become one of the most powerful political forces in southeastern Europe and Anatolia.

The Byzantine Empire was following a very different path.

The state centered on Constantinople had survived for centuries after the disappearance of the Western Roman Empire, but its territory had contracted repeatedly.

In the fifteenth century the Byzantine emperor ruled a fraction of the lands once controlled by his predecessors.

Constantinople still possessed extraordinary walls, enormous symbolic importance, and a strategic position that few cities could match, but the empire surrounding it had become extremely fragile.

Between these two worlds lay centuries of conflict and interaction.

Byzantine emperors and Ottoman sultans fought one another, negotiated with one another, entered into temporary alliances,

and intervened in each other's political struggles.

Crusaders came from western Europe and transformed the fate of the Byzantine Empire. Turkish armies crossed from Anatolia into Europe and established permanent settlements there.

Dynasties rose and fell, kingdoms disappeared, and borders were redrawn.

Mehmed inherited the consequences of all of this.

The city he would conquer was already ancient when his dynasty first appeared in Anatolia.

The empire that would provide him with the army, fleet, artillery, administrators, and wealth needed for the conquest had been

built by generations of Ottoman rulers before him.

Even the dream of conquering Constantinople was not uniquely his.

Earlier Ottoman sultans had already fought for the city, surrounded it, and attempted to bring it under their authority.

The conquest of 1453 was therefore not an isolated event. It was the culmination of a much longer struggle between a rising Ottoman state and a Byzantine Empire that had endured for centuries but was approaching the final stage of its existence.

The Roman City in the East

Long before the Ottomans emerged, Constantinople stood at the center of an immense political world. The Roman emperor Constantine I founded the city as a new imperial capital in the fourth century, and in 330 it was formally inaugurated as Constantinople. Its position gave it enormous strategic importance.

The city stood beside the Bosphorus, controlling the passage between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean world while occupying a natural meeting point between Europe and Asia.

Its importance was not merely geographical. Constantinople became the political heart of

the Eastern Roman Empire and one of the greatest cities of the medieval world.

Palaces, churches, markets, military installations, and public monuments filled its urban landscape. Ships carrying grain, luxury goods, soldiers, and merchants passed through its waters.

Its wealth and prestige attracted both allies and enemies.

The empire centered on Constantinople is commonly called the Byzantine Empire today, but its inhabitants did not use that name for themselves. They generally understood themselves to be Romans.

Their emperors were Roman emperors, their state was the Roman Empire, and

Constantinople was the capital of that empire.

Greek gradually became the dominant language of government and culture in the eastern provinces, while Christianity shaped the political and social life of the state, but the Roman inheritance remained fundamental to Byzantine identity.

For centuries the empire survived disasters that might have destroyed a less resilient state.

Arab armies conquered enormous territories in the seventh century.

Slavic peoples transformed the political landscape of the Balkans.

Internal rebellions repeatedly threatened the imperial government.

Yet Constantinople endured, protected by its walls and by the strategic advantages of its location.

The strength of the city was closely tied to the strength of the empire around it.

As Byzantine territory contracted, Constantinople became increasingly isolated.

The empire survived, but each generation inherited a state smaller than the one before it.

By the eleventh century, another transformation was beginning to reshape Anatolia.

The Turks Enter Anatolia

The arrival of Turkic peoples in Anatolia was one of the defining developments in the later history of the Byzantine Empire.

The Seljuk Turks established a major political presence in the region after their victory over the Byzantine emperor Romanos IV Diogenes at the Battle of Manzikert in 1071.

Manzikert did not destroy the Byzantine Empire overnight, and the battle should not be treated as a single moment that instantly handed Anatolia to the Turks.

Its importance lay in what followed.

Byzantine political authority in much of Anatolia weakened, while Turkic migration, settlement, and military expansion increased.

Over time a new political order emerged across the region.

One of the most important powers to arise was the Seljuk Sultanate of Rum.

From its center at Konya, the Seljuks established a durable Turkish state in Anatolia. Their rulers developed cities, trade routes, agricultural lands, administrative institutions, and military networks. Anatolia was becoming a region in which Turkish political and cultural influence was no longer temporary.

The Seljuk state eventually weakened under pressure from the Mongol expansion.

The defeat of the Seljuks at Köse Dağ in 1243 greatly reduced their independence and contributed to the fragmentation of Anatolia. Local Turkoman rulers and military leaders gained increasing autonomy, and a collection

of principalities emerged from the weakening political order.

One of these small states was ruled by a man named Osman.

At the time, there was no reason to assume that Osman would found a dynasty that would eventually rule much of southeastern Europe, the Middle East, and the eastern Mediterranean.

He controlled a frontier territory in northwestern Anatolia, where his lands bordered the weakening Byzantine Empire.

Yet that frontier offered extraordinary opportunities.

Osman and the Birth of Ottoman state

Osman emerged as the leader of a Turkoman principality during the late thirteenth century. His territories lay in a region where Byzantine authority was weakened and where local political boundaries could change rapidly. Warfare was common, but military force alone did not explain the growth of Osman's power.

Alliances, family connections, the movement of warriors, access to trade routes, and the ability to absorb neighboring populations all played important roles.

The early Ottoman state is often associated with the Islamic ideal of the ghazi, a warrior who fought for the expansion or defense of Islam.

That tradition was certainly significant to Ottoman political identity, but the development of the Ottoman state was more complicated than a simple story of religious conquest.

The frontier was a place of shifting loyalties where Muslims and Christians interacted constantly.

Political ambition, economic opportunity, and local rivalries were just as important to the growth of Ottoman power as religious ideals.

Osman's greatest achievement was the establishment of a dynasty that could continue expanding after his death.

His son Orhan inherited a developing frontier state and turned it into a more organized political power.

The Ottoman story was beginning to move beyond the frontier.

Orhan and the Road to Europe

Under Orhan, the Ottomans captured Bursa in 1326. The city became an important political and administrative center and served as one of the earliest capitals of the Ottoman state.

The conquest demonstrated that the dynasty could seize and retain major urban centers rather than relying entirely on the warfare of the frontier.

The Ottomans developed more organized institutions of government and military administration during this period.

Their territory expanded across northwestern Anatolia, and they became increasingly involved in Byzantine political affairs.

The Byzantine Empire was weakened by internal conflicts and dynastic struggles, and those conflicts repeatedly brought Ottoman forces into European politics.

Ottoman troops were sometimes invited to intervene in Byzantine disputes, allowing them to cross into Europe under circumstances that would have been far more difficult under normal conditions.

This mattered enormously.

Once Ottoman forces gained access to the European side of the Dardanelles, they could establish themselves there permanently. Gallipoli became the foundation of a lasting Ottoman presence in Europe.

The dynasty had begun as a small power in Anatolia, but it was now in a position to expand into the Balkans.

The consequences would be profound.

The Ottoman state was becoming a European power as well as an Anatolian one.

Murad I and the Expansion of Ottoman Power

Orhan's successor, Murad I, continued the expansion with great determination.

Ottoman forces advanced through Thrace and the Balkans, while Adrianople, known to the Ottomans as Edirne, became an important center of Ottoman government.

The conquest of territory brought the Ottomans into conflict with Serbian, Bulgarian, Byzantine, Hungarian, and other political powers.

Some states resisted the Ottoman advance directly, while others were incorporated into a system of tribute and vassalage.

The Ottoman rulers developed a flexible approach to expansion that allowed them to control territories without always destroying the political structures that already existed there.

The Ottoman military system also grew more sophisticated.

During the fourteenth century, the dynasty developed institutions that would later become defining elements of Ottoman warfare. Among them was the Janissary corps, an elite infantry force that became closely associated with the authority of the Sultan.

The expansion of Ottoman power inevitably attracted attention from western and central Europe.

Christian rulers increasingly regarded the Ottoman advance as a major threat, and

military expeditions were organized in an effort to stop it.

In 1389 the Ottomans fought the forces of Serbia and their allies at the Battle of Kosovo. The battle became one of the most important events in the later historical memory of the Balkans. For the Ottomans, it formed part of the continuing expansion of their rule into southeastern Europe.

For the Serbian tradition, it became a foundational event in national memory.

The Ottoman state was no longer a minor Anatolian principality, It had become a major power in Europe.

Bayezid I and the Threat to Constantinople

Murad I was succeeded by his son Bayezid I, who became known by the title Yıldırım, meaning Thunderbolt.

The name reflected the speed and energy of his campaigns.

Bayezid expanded Ottoman authority in both Anatolia and the Balkans.

He strengthened Ottoman control over territories that earlier rulers had brought under their influence and pushed toward the remaining independent centers of Byzantine power.

Constantinople increasingly found itself surrounded.

The Byzantine Empire had already lost most of its territory in Anatolia and much of its influence in the Balkans.

The city remained extraordinarily difficult to capture because of its massive land walls and its access to the sea, but the Ottoman advance made its strategic position increasingly precarious.

The threat became even more serious after the Ottoman victory at Nicopolis in 1396.

A large crusading army had assembled in Europe in an attempt to halt Ottoman expansion, but the expedition ended in a decisive Ottoman victory.

The result strengthened Bayezid's position and made the Ottoman state appear more formidable than ever.

Constantinople was under intense pressure. Then the balance of power changed again.

Timur and the Disaster at Ankara

While Bayezid was building his empire in the west, another conqueror was expanding an enormous realm in the east.

Timur had established his power across Central Asia and Persia and was extending his influence into regions that bordered the Ottoman sphere.

Tensions between Timur and Bayezid eventually became open conflict.

In 1402 the two armies met at Ankara.

Bayezid was defeated and captured.

The consequences for the Ottoman state were severe. The empire did not disappear, but Bayezid's defeat weakened central

authority and created a struggle among his sons over the succession.

Ottoman territories were contested, rival princes fought for control, and the dynasty entered a period of civil war known as the Ottoman Interregnum.

For more than a decade, the empire was divided by internal conflict.

This was one of the most dangerous moments in Ottoman history.

A state that had expanded rapidly under Bayezid could easily have fractured permanently.

Instead, the dynasty survived.

Mehmed I eventually defeated his rivals and reunited the Ottoman territories under his rule.

Mehmed I and the Restoration

Mehmed I inherited a state that had suffered enormous political and territorial disruption. His primary task was not conquest but restoration.

He needed to rebuild the authority of the central government, reconcile competing factions, and reestablish the political unity of the Ottoman dynasty.

He succeeded in doing so.

By the end of his reign, the Ottoman state had recovered much of the stability that had been lost after Ankara. The dynasty remained intact, and the political foundations for renewed expansion had been restored.

When Mehmed I died in 1421, his son Murad II inherited a functioning state and a new

opportunity to resume the expansion that had been interrupted by the disaster of 1402.

Murad II would become the father of the man whose name would eventually overshadow all of his predecessors.

Murad II and the World into Which Mehmed Was Born

Murad II ruled during a period of renewed Ottoman expansion but also constant military pressure.

The Ottomans faced powerful enemies in the Balkans, including Hungary and other Christian states that sought to limit Ottoman influence.

The Byzantine Empire was still standing, but its territory had been reduced to scattered possessions surrounded by Ottoman lands.

Murad also inherited the problem that had confronted earlier Ottoman rulers.

Constantinople remained outside Ottoman control.

Earlier attempts to capture the city had failed, partly because the walls remained formidable and partly because the Ottomans had not yet possessed the combination of artillery, naval power, manpower, and political circumstances required for a successful siege.

The Byzantine position had also been transformed by events that had taken place centuries before Murad's reign.

In 1204, during the Fourth Crusade, western European crusaders captured Constantinople. The city was subjected to a violent sack and the Byzantine Empire was temporarily displaced by the Latin Empire. Byzantine rulers eventually recovered Constantinople in 1261, but the empire never fully recovered from the consequences of the conquest.

The events of 1204 were therefore crucial to the later history of the city.

Constantinople survived, but the political and economic strength of the Byzantine Empire had been deeply damaged.

The restored Byzantine state was considerably weaker than the empire that had existed before the crusader conquest.

By the fifteenth century, Constantinople stood almost alone.

The city still possessed some of the strongest fortifications in the medieval world.

Its harbors remained strategically valuable, its religious institutions remained important, and its political symbolism was immense.

Yet the Byzantine government had limited resources and few dependable allies.

This was the world into which Mehmed was born.

In 1432, somewhere within the Ottoman realm, a son was born to Sultan Murad II.

He was named Mehmed.

He had entered a dynasty that had spent more than a century and a half advancing toward the walls of Constantinople.

He had been born into a world in which the Byzantine Empire was already in decline and the Ottoman Empire was rising rapidly.

The circumstances of his birth did not guarantee that he would become the ruler who captured the greatest city of the eastern Mediterranean, but they placed him at the center of a struggle that had been unfolding for generations.

The child was still years away from becoming a Sultan.

He was even farther away from becoming a conqueror.

But the world into which he had been born was already preparing the stage for him.

The Boy Who Would Become Sultan

A Child of the Ottoman Dynasty

Mehmed was born in Edirne on 30 March 1432, the fourth son of Sultan Murad II.

Edirne was not an unimportant provincial city. By this point it had become one of the most important centers of the Ottoman state and served as the principal seat of the Sultan in Europe.

The city stood close to the Byzantine frontier and was surrounded by a political world in which Ottoman armies were constantly campaigning.

For a child of the dynasty, Edirne was therefore both a palace and a lesson in power.

The presence of soldiers, ambassadors, scholars, administrators, merchants,

religious officials, and members of the ruling household exposed the young prince to the machinery of government from an early age.

The circumstances of Mehmed's childhood are not preserved with the same detail that we would expect from a modern royal biography.

Later Ottoman chroniclers sometimes supplied stories about his youth that cannot always be separated cleanly from political memory and legend.

What can be established with greater confidence is that Murad II considered the education and preparation of his sons an important part of dynastic policy.

Ottoman princes were not raised simply to inherit wealth and titles.

They were expected to learn how to govern provinces, command men, understand

military affairs, and participate in the political world of the dynasty.

Mehmed's early life therefore unfolded within an environment in which the succession was never entirely secure.

Ottoman princes lived with the knowledge that their brothers could become rivals, that powerful statesmen could influence the throne, and that the survival of the dynasty depended upon maintaining the loyalty of the army and the political elite.

The future Sultan would eventually become famous for the ruthless measures he took to prevent dynastic conflict, but the origins of that concern can be understood only by looking at the world in which Ottoman princes were raised.

There is uncertainty surrounding some accounts of Mehmed's earliest provincial appointments. The claim that he was sent to

govern Amasya at the age of six is regarded by modern scholarship as doubtful.

What is much better established is that in the spring of 1443, when he was eleven years old, he was sent to Manisa with two senior attendants, Kassabzade Mahmud and Nişancı İbrahim.

This was an important stage in his preparation for rule.

Manisa was far more than a place where a young prince could live away from the capital. Provincial government gave Mehmed an opportunity to observe administration directly.

He was surrounded by officials who were responsible for taxation, justice, military affairs, and communications with the central government. In theory, the prince was learning how a ruler transformed decisions into action.

In practice, he was also learning how difficult governing could be.

The eleven year old Mehmed was therefore being prepared for a responsibility that could arrive much sooner than anyone might expect.

The Education of a Prince

The education of an Ottoman prince was broad because the responsibilities of a Sultan were broad.

A future ruler needed to possess religious knowledge, understand law, communicate with scholars and administrators, appreciate literature, and command an army.

He also needed the confidence to make decisions in circumstances where the information available to him might be incomplete or deliberately distorted by people competing for influence.

Mehmed was fortunate to receive an education from some of the most capable scholars associated with his father's court. Ottoman sources and later biographical traditions connect him with learned figures including Molla Gürani, Molla Hayreddin,

Molla İlyas, Siraceddin Halebi, Molla Abdülkadir, and Hasan Samsuni.

Akşemseddin was also an important religious and intellectual figure in Mehmed's life. The precise nature and timing of every teacher's influence cannot always be reconstructed with certainty, but the overall picture is clear. Murad's son was being exposed to a serious intellectual education rather than being trained only as a military commander.

This distinction matters because Mehmed's later reputation can make it tempting to imagine that his childhood education consisted mainly of weapons, horsemanship, and battlefield exercises.

Those skills were certainly necessary for an Ottoman prince, but they formed only one part of his preparation.

He was expected to understand the intellectual traditions of the Islamic world.

He encountered Arabic and Persian literature and the scholarly disciplines associated with the Islamic madrasa.

Persian in particular held an important position within elite culture, and its influence at the Ottoman court had already been growing under Murad II.

Translations from Arabic and Persian into Turkish increased during this period, while Turkish itself was developing as a major literary and administrative language.

Mehmed's later intellectual interests suggest that this environment left a deep impression on him.

He became interested in history, geography, mathematics, astronomy, philosophy, literature, and the religious sciences. His curiosity was unusually wide ranging for a ruler of his period, and it would later shape the character of his court.

The Sultan who captured Constantinople would eventually invite scholars from distant parts of the Islamic world and cultivate relationships with intellectuals from different traditions.

His intellectual ambition was therefore not an ornament added to his reign after the conquest.

Its foundations were already being laid during his youth.

The education of a prince also had a practical dimension.

Mehmed was learning to move among competing forms of authority.

Religious scholars possessed one kind of influence.

Military commanders possessed another. Palace officials and statesmen possessed another.

Provincial governors and local elites exercised influence of their own. A ruler needed to understand all of them while allowing none to become powerful enough to dominate the throne.

This would become especially important during Mehmed's first period as Sultan.

The First Signs of a Difficult Character

Later accounts of Mehmed's youth often portray him as unusually determined, intellectually ambitious, and difficult to control.

Such descriptions need to be approached carefully because many were written after his conquest of Constantinople had transformed him into an almost legendary figure.

Later writers naturally looked back at the boy and searched for signs of the conqueror he would become.

Nevertheless, there is good reason to believe that Mehmed was an unusually serious young prince.

He had been placed in a demanding educational environment and was exposed to politics at an age when most children would

still have been far removed from the responsibilities of government.

His father also appears to have understood that Mehmed was capable of developing into an independent and potentially formidable ruler.

That potential became a political problem when circumstances suddenly placed the throne in Mehmed's hands.

The change came in 1444.

The Twelve Year Old Sultan

Murad II had spent much of his reign fighting enemies in the Balkans. War had exhausted the Ottoman state, and by 1444 the Sultan sought a settlement that would give him time to withdraw from active political life.

Agreements were reached with his principal opponents, including the Hungarians, and Murad decided to abdicate in favor of his son.

The new Sultan was only twelve years old.

The decision was extraordinary.

Mehmed had not yet reached an age at which most rulers would expect him to command an empire personally.

Yet he now occupied the Ottoman throne.

This was not merely a symbolic change.

The young Sultan possessed supreme authority in theory, but the practical

administration of the empire remained in the hands of experienced statesmen and military commanders.

Among the most important was Grand Vizier Çandarlı Halil Pasha, an enormously influential member of an established Ottoman political family.

At the same time, Mehmed was surrounded by advisers who encouraged him to exercise his authority more directly.

The balance between the young ruler and the experienced officials around him quickly became unstable.

The problem was not simply that Mehmed was young.

It was that he was ambitious.

He did not appear content to function as a ceremonial Sultan while experienced men governed in his name, he wanted to rule.

That created a struggle over the direction of Ottoman policy.

Different advisers promoted different approaches, and the young Sultan's behavior convinced some senior officials that the empire's government was becoming dangerously unpredictable.

Then a new crisis appeared.

The Crusade of Varna

The peace agreements reached earlier in 1444 did not bring lasting stability.

Christian forces in Europe renewed the war against the Ottomans, encouraged by the belief that the empire had been weakened by Murad's withdrawal and the accession of a child.

A crusading army advanced into Ottoman territory.

The crisis placed the Ottoman government in an extraordinary position.

The Sultan was just a boy.

The Grand Vizier and other senior statesmen were divided. The army needed an experienced commander capable of confronting a large Christian force.

The obvious solution was to call Murad II back.

Murad had withdrawn from active rule, but the danger facing the state was too serious to ignore. He returned to command the Ottoman army.

On 10 November 1444, Ottoman forces met the crusading army at Varna.

The battle ended in a decisive Ottoman victory.

The Christian army was destroyed, and King Władysław III of Poland and Hungary was killed.

The victory restored Murad's reputation as a military leader and demonstrated the danger created by allowing a young and inexperienced ruler to face a major international crisis without the guidance of an established commander.

For Mehmed, however, the consequences went much deeper than the loss of practical control.

He had learned something fundamental about kingship.

Being Sultan and being able to rule were not necessarily the same thing.

A Throne Taken Away

After Varna, Murad's position became impossible for Mehmed to ignore.

The empire needed his father's military experience, and the political establishment increasingly supported Murad's return.

Mehmed remained Sultan for a time, but the effective balance of power shifted.

The young ruler was forced to watch as his father reclaimed authority.

This experience would remain important when examining Mehmed's later personality. The future conqueror of Constantinople had experienced the Ottoman throne not as an abstract inheritance but as something that could be taken from him even while he technically possessed it.

The political lesson was brutal.

A Sultan needed more than a title.

He needed the army, loyal officials, financial resources and political intelligence.

Above all, he needed to make certain that the people surrounding him could not simply decide that another ruler would govern in his place.

Murad II returned to full authority, while Mehmed was removed from the center of imperial decision making and returned to Manisa.

The exact emotional reaction of the young prince is impossible to know, but the episode provided him with a political education far more severe than anything he could have learned from a classroom.

He had seen how fragile royal authority could be.

The Prince in Manisa

Mehmed's years in Manisa deserve attention because they have often been overshadowed by the dramatic events of 1453.

Yet this period may have been crucial to the development of his personality and political vision.

He was no longer an inexperienced child suddenly placed on the throne.

He was a prince who had already tasted sovereignty, lost it, and learned that powerful men could determine whether a Sultan's orders were actually obeyed.

In Manisa he continued to receive education and became increasingly involved in the affairs of his province.

The prince had access to a court of his own and interacted with officials, soldiers,

scholars, and members of the local political elite.

He could observe military preparations and administrative practice while remaining close enough to the central government to follow major developments.

The lessons he learned were not necessarily pleasant.

He was discovering that an empire could not be ruled through ambition alone.

A ruler needed institutions, but institutions could also restrict him.

A ruler needed experienced officials, but experienced officials could become political powers in their own right.

A ruler needed military commanders, but military commanders could influence succession and government.

These tensions would become central to Mehmed's reign.

They would also help explain why, after 1451, he would work so deliberately to strengthen the authority of the Sultan.

The Prince and the Idea of Power

There is another reason why Mehmed's education matters.

He was growing up in a dynasty that increasingly viewed itself as an imperial house rather than the ruler of a small frontier principality.

The Ottomans had conquered territory in Europe, controlled important cities, defeated crusading armies, and established a political system capable of incorporating different peoples and religions.

Mehmed inherited this expanding vision.

Yet he also lived close to the greatest symbol of an empire that the Ottomans had not conquered.

Constantinople stood only a short distance away.

Its enormous walls could be seen as a military challenge.

Its location could be seen as a strategic obstacle.

Its Christian churches and Roman monuments could be viewed as symbols of an older imperial order.

Its survival represented the unfinished work of generations of Ottoman rulers.

For Mehmed, the city would eventually become all of these things at once.

It would be a military, a religious, and imperial objective all at once.

It would also become a personal ambition.

But before he could pursue that ambition, he needed to become Sultan again.

Murad II's Final Years

Murad II continued to rule for several years after the crisis of 1444.

His reign remained marked by war and diplomacy, but the empire had become more stable than it had been during Mehmed's first accession.

The young prince continued his life in Manisa, waiting.

In 1450, circumstances brought him closer to the center of Ottoman power again.

The death of his elder brother Alaeddin Ali left Mehmed as the most prominent surviving male heir among Murad's sons.

The succession question therefore became increasingly straightforward.

When Murad II died in 1451, Mehmed was nineteen years old.

He was no longer the twelve year old boy who had been placed on the throne and then displaced by his father.

He returned to power as a young adult who had already experienced humiliation, political conflict, military danger, and the reality of imperial government.

This time, he intended to rule differently.

He crossed from Manisa toward Edirne to claim the throne.

The young Sultan who arrived there was still only nineteen.

But he was no longer merely a boy.

He had spent years studying the people around him, learning from scholars, observing military affairs, and witnessing the weaknesses of political authority.

His second reign would reveal what he had learned.

And almost immediately, his attention turned toward the city that had stood at the center of Ottoman ambitions for generations.

Constantinople, The heart of Byzantine.

Mehmed intended to change that.

The Sultan Returns

When Mehmed returned to Edirne in 1451, he returned to a state that was far more stable than the one he had inherited seven years earlier.

He was nineteen years old, but his previous experience had given him an understanding of politics that few rulers of his age possessed.

He had already learned that a Sultan could hold the throne without possessing complete control over the government.

He had seen his father withdraw, watched senior statesmen struggle over policy, and then watched those same political forces bring Murad back to power.

Now there would be no Murad to overshadow him.

Mehmed's first task was to secure his position.

His accession had to be accepted by the army, the court, the provincial authorities, and the men who administered the empire.

He also had to make certain that no rival claimant could emerge.

The Ottoman succession system did not follow a simple rule of primogeniture.

Multiple sons of a Sultan could become contenders for the throne, and the survival of the dynasty had repeatedly depended upon whichever prince could secure the support of the military and political establishment.

Mehmed therefore understood that political authority had to be established immediately.

His accession also contained a personal dimension.

This was the moment in which the lessons of his first reign would be tested.

He would have to decide how much power to leave in the hands of the experienced men who had governed under his father and how much to keep for himself.

One of the most important figures was Grand Vizier Çandarlı Halil Pasha.

Halil belonged to one of the most established families within the Ottoman political elite.

He had served Murad II for years and possessed enormous influence over the bureaucracy, the military, and the court.

He was experienced, respected, and cautious.

Mehmed was ambitious, impatient, and determined to rule in his own manner.

Their relationship would become one of the defining political tensions of the early reign.

A Different Kind of Sultan

Mehmed did not intend to spend his reign merely continuing his father's policies.

He had inherited an empire that was already strong, but he wanted to transform it into something greater.

His ambitions extended beyond territorial expansion.

He wanted a centralized state in which the authority of the Sultan was unquestionable.

He wanted a capital worthy of an empire.

He wanted to establish the Ottoman dynasty as a legitimate imperial house with a claim to historical greatness that went beyond its origins as a frontier principality.

This vision helps explain his fascination with Constantinople.

The city was not simply an enemy fortress.

It was the capital of the Roman Empire.

It stood at the crossroads of Europe and Asia.

It controlled the Bosphorus and had enormous influence over the movement of goods

between the Black Sea and the
Mediterranean.

It was also almost completely surrounded by
Ottoman territory.

From a strategic perspective, Constantinople
was an extraordinary anomaly.

The Ottoman state controlled extensive lands
on both sides of the city, yet the city itself
remained outside Ottoman authority.

Its existence complicated communications
between Ottoman possessions and provided
a potential base for foreign intervention.

As long as Constantinople remained
independent, Mehmed would have an enemy
inside the geographical center of his empire.

Constantinople in 1451

The city Mehmed inherited as an objective was not the same Constantinople that had dominated the eastern Mediterranean during the height of the Byzantine Empire.

Centuries of war, epidemic disease, economic decline, and territorial contraction had transformed it.

The Latin conquest of 1204 had been especially destructive.

The crusaders who captured the city did not merely change its government.

The conquest disrupted its economy, damaged its institutions, and divided the Byzantine political world.

Although the Byzantine Empire recovered Constantinople in 1261, it never restored the full power that had existed before the Fourth Crusade.

By the fifteenth century, the Byzantine emperor ruled a state surrounded almost entirely by Ottoman territory.

Yet the city itself remained formidable.

The Theodosian Walls stretched across the landward side of Constantinople in a vast defensive system consisting of multiple lines of walls, towers, ditches, and fortified gates.

The Golden Horn provided a protected harbor, while the Sea of Marmara and the Bosphorus offered additional natural defenses.

The city was difficult to take because an attacker could not simply approach it from one direction.

An army approaching from the west had to overcome the enormous land walls.

A naval force attempting to attack from the sea had to deal with the city's maritime defenses.

And the Golden Horn could be closed with a heavy chain stretched across its entrance.

Constantinople was therefore vulnerable only under particular circumstances.

Mehmed needed to create those circumstances himself.

The Byzantine Emperor

The emperor sitting on the throne of Constantinople was Constantine XI Palaiologos.

He had become emperor in 1448 after the death of his brother John VIII.

Constantine inherited a city that was politically isolated and financially strained, but he also inherited the responsibility of defending the final capital of the Byzantine Empire.

Constantine was not naïve about the danger.

He understood that the Ottoman state was becoming overwhelmingly powerful.

He had spent years involved in Byzantine politics and had witnessed the steady loss of imperial territory.

He also knew that the Byzantine government could no longer defend itself without foreign assistance.

The emperor therefore pursued diplomacy.

He sought support from the Christian powers of Europe and attempted to strengthen

relations with the papacy and the Italian states.

Yet obtaining substantial military assistance was extremely difficult.

Western Europe had its own political conflicts, financial problems, and strategic concerns.

Religious disagreements also complicated the relationship between Constantinople and the Latin Church.

The question of church union was particularly divisive.

Some Byzantine leaders believed that accepting greater reconciliation with Rome might encourage western rulers to provide military assistance.

Others considered such concessions unacceptable and feared that the Byzantine population would regard them as a betrayal of Orthodox Christianity.

Constantine was caught in the middle.

What he needed was soldiers from the West.

He also needed the loyalty of his own population and this was not an easy balance.

The Last Roman Capital

Constantinople's defenders understood that they were not simply defending buildings.

They were defending the final political center of a civilization that considered itself Roman.

The imperial court still preserved the ceremonies and traditions of the ancient empire.

Churches stood beside buildings that had existed for centuries.

Ancient monuments remained throughout the city.

Greek scholars continued to study classical texts.

Orthodox Christianity remained central to the city's identity.

Yet the physical condition of Constantinople revealed the decline of the empire.

Entire districts had become sparsely populated.

Some former urban areas contained gardens and farmland rather than dense neighborhoods.

The population was a fraction of what it had been during the city's medieval peak.

Trade continued, but Constantinople was no longer the overwhelmingly dominant commercial center of the eastern Mediterranean.

Italian merchants, especially Venetians and Genoese, possessed enormous influence over maritime commerce.

The Genoese colony at Galata, across the Golden Horn, was particularly important.

This created another complication.

The Italians were deeply involved in the city's defense, but their interests were not identical to those of the Byzantine government.

They wanted to preserve their commercial privileges and protect their own communities.

The challenge for Constantine was to turn a collection of Greeks, Italians, mercenaries, sailors, and civilians into a single effective defensive force.

Among the foreigners who answered the call
was a Genoese soldier whose name would
soon become inseparable from the defense
of the city.

The Defender of Constantinople

Giustiniani arrived in Constantinople in January 1453 with a force of Genoese soldiers.

He was an experienced military commander, and Constantine placed him in charge of the city's principal land defenses.

His arrival was one of the most important developments in the final months before the siege because the defenders urgently needed

someone with experience in fortification warfare and organized military command.

Giustiniani understood the nature of the problem immediately.

The city could not afford to defend every part of its walls equally.

The Ottoman army would be far larger than the defending force, and any serious breach could become catastrophic.

The defenders therefore needed to identify the most vulnerable sections of the

fortifications and concentrate their limited manpower where it mattered most.

Giustiniani's strategy relied on an active defense.

Damaged walls had to be repaired as quickly as possible.

Artillery positions had to be maintained.

Soldiers had to move rapidly toward threatened areas.

Breaches had to be blocked before Ottoman troops could exploit them.

The defenders also needed to make use of the terrain surrounding the walls.

The Theodosian fortifications were enormously impressive, but they were not indestructible.

Their very size created a problem, every tower required men, and every gate required guards. Every vulnerable section had to be watched.

The defenders were therefore fighting not only an Ottoman army.

They were fighting mathematics.

Their enemy could replace soldiers more easily than they could.

Their walls could absorb punishment, but every damaged section required labor, materials, and men to repair.

A prolonged siege would therefore favor the Ottomans.

Giustiniani knew that, so did Constantine.

And soon Mehmed would make certain that the defenders had as little time as possible.

Mehmed Studies the Problem

Mehmed had inherited the dream of capturing Constantinople, but he approached the problem differently from some of his predecessors.

He did not want to rely solely on an army approaching the city and hoping that overwhelming numbers would eventually break the walls.

He wanted to construct a complete system designed to isolate Constantinople before the final assault.

The first component was control of the Bosphorus.

In 1452, before the siege began, Mehmed ordered the construction of a massive fortress on the European side of the strait.

The new fortress became known as Rumeli Hisarı.

Its position was carefully chosen.

From the fortress, the Ottomans could monitor and threaten ships attempting to pass through the Bosphorus.

Together with the existing Ottoman fortress on the Asian shore, Rumeli Hisarı allowed Mehmed to tighten Ottoman control over the waterway.

The construction itself was a demonstration of Ottoman organization.

The fortress was completed with remarkable speed.

The message was unmistakable.

Mehmed was not merely preparing to attack
Constantinople.

He was preparing to cut it off.

The Fall of the Last Alternatives

The strategic importance of isolation becomes clearer when we examine Constantinople's diplomatic position.

The city's survival depended heavily on the possibility of outside assistance.

A western army could theoretically arrive by sea.

A Venetian fleet might reinforce the defenders.

Ships from other Christian states might bring soldiers, food, and weapons.

But all of these possibilities depended upon the ability of those forces to reach the city.

Mehmed therefore needed to make intervention increasingly dangerous.

The Bosphorus was one part of this strategy.

The Ottoman fleet was another.

The army would be a third.

The plan was becoming systematic.

Constantinople would be surrounded by land.

Ottoman forces would control the
surrounding waters.

Ottoman territory would prevent easy
movement through Thrace and Anatolia.

And the city's defenders would gradually be
isolated from the outside world.

For centuries Constantinople had survived
precisely because its enemies struggled to
coordinate attacks on all sides.

Mehmed intended to solve that problem.

The Question of Artillery

There was another development that changed the possibilities of siege warfare.

Artillery had become increasingly important in Europe and the Islamic world during the preceding centuries.

Large cannon was capable of damaging fortifications that had previously been considered almost immune to conventional siege weapons.

Mehmed understood the potential.

He recruited and employed specialists capable of constructing large guns for the siege. Among the most famous was a cannon associated with the Hungarian engineer Orban, although the exact details surrounding his employment and the construction of individual guns have been debated by historians.

The important fact is that Mehmed's siege artillery was substantial.

The Ottoman army did not possess a single miraculous weapon that made the city's defenses obsolete overnight. Instead, it

possessed an increasingly sophisticated artillery train that could bombard selected sections of the walls repeatedly.

This was a war of erosion.

The cannon would damage the walls and the defenders would strengthen them repeatedly.

Eventually, Mehmed hoped, the process would become impossible for them to sustain.

The Ottoman Army

The army that gathered for the siege was a vast force compared with the city's defenders.

Exact numbers remain uncertain because contemporary sources provide widely differing estimates, many of which were influenced by political motives or literary exaggeration.

Modern historians generally agree that Mehmed possessed an enormous numerical

advantage, even if the precise figure cannot be established with certainty.

The army contained many different elements.

There were elite Janissary infantry, regular Ottoman soldiers, cavalry formations, engineers, artillery crews, and contingents drawn from different parts of the empire.

The Sultan also relied upon sailors and other specialists whose role would become increasingly important as the siege developed.

The force had another advantage beyond its numbers.

It had a unified commander.

Mehmed was personally directing the operation.

He could alter the plan, shift troops, order new bombardments, and experiment with different methods of attacking the city.

Inside Constantinople, Constantine and Giustiniani had to react to every major change.

The Ottoman side possessed the initiative.

The Last Preparations

During the winter of 1452 and the early months of 1453, both sides prepared for the confrontation they knew was coming.

Inside Constantinople, soldiers repaired the walls and gathered whatever supplies could be obtained.

Churches and private households contributed resources.

Civic authorities attempted to organize the population. Foreign volunteers arrived, while

Venetian and Genoese communities debated how extensively they should become involved.

Constantine understood that the city could not survive indefinitely without assistance.

Yet assistance did not come quickly enough.

Outside the walls, Mehmed completed his preparations.

Every part of the siege demanded organization on a scale far beyond a normal military expedition.

By the spring of 1453, the Ottoman
preparations were complete.

The Sultan was ready and the defenders
could see the army approaching.

The final confrontation was no longer a
question of whether the siege would happen.

It was a question of when it would begin.

The Army Arrives

In early April 1453, the Ottoman army reached the outskirts of Constantinople.

The sight must have been overwhelming.

The city was about to face an army far larger than anything the defenders could field.

Campfires spread across the countryside.

Siege equipment was assembled.

Cannon were positioned before the walls.

Engineers and soldiers prepared the trenches

and earthworks that would protect the attacking forces.

Inside the city, the defenders moved to their assigned positions.

The walls that had protected Constantinople for more than a thousand years were about to face their greatest test.

Giustiniani organized the defense of the land walls.

Constantine took his place among the defenders.

The city's bells rang.

Prayers were offered and weapons were prepared.

Outside the walls stood an Ottoman Sultan who had spent years preparing for precisely this moment.

He was no more than twenty one years old at the time, but he had been through too much to go back now and give up.

He had been educated by scholars and tested by political crises.

Now he was about to attempt what
generations of Ottoman rulers had failed to
accomplish.

Mehmed II was ready to besiege
Constantinople.

And on **6 April 1453**, the siege began.

First day of the Siege

On 6 April 1453, the siege of Constantinople formally began. Ottoman troops took up positions along the city's landward side while the enormous force assembled by Mehmed II prepared for the bombardment.

From the walls, the defenders could see an army that was vastly larger than their own.

From the Ottoman camp, the sight was equally imposing.

Before Mehmed stood the greatest surviving defensive system of the medieval Mediterranean, a chain of walls that had protected Constantinople from countless enemies for centuries.

The Ottoman Sultan had not come simply to surround the city.

He intended to destroy the conditions that had allowed Constantinople to survive previous sieges.

The defenders had one overwhelming advantage.

They were behind walls.

Mehmed had several overwhelming advantages of his own.

He possessed the larger army, greater resources, an organized artillery train, a fleet, and control over much of the surrounding territory. Most importantly, he possessed time and the ability to replace losses.

Constantinople did not.

The siege therefore began as a contest between the strength of the walls and the strength of the Ottoman state.

The Theodosian Walls

To understand the battle, it is necessary to understand the defenses that Mehmed was trying to overcome.

The western side of Constantinople was protected by the famous Theodosian Walls, constructed during the fifth century under the emperor Theodosius II. They extended for several kilometers from the Sea of Marmara to the region of the Golden Horn, enclosing the city on its most vulnerable side.

The defensive system consisted of multiple elements.

There was an outer moat, an outer wall, an extensive open area known as the peribolos, and the massive inner wall crowned with towers.

The system had been designed to force an attacking army to overcome successive obstacles while remaining exposed to defenders above.

These fortifications had protected Constantinople through centuries of warfare.

Arab armies had failed before them.

Bulgarian armies had failed before them.

Russian forces had failed before them.

Crusading armies had eventually entered the city in 1204, but that conquest had occurred under circumstances very different from the siege now being conducted by Mehmed. The walls remained a formidable military system.

Yet they had one weakness.

They had been designed for an age before the development of enormous gunpowder artillery.

The Ottoman Bombardment

The Ottoman cannon began firing against the walls.

The sound of the artillery would have been unlike anything many of the defenders had ever experienced.

Medieval sieges commonly relied upon stone throwing machines, mining, towers, ladders, and repeated infantry assaults.

Cannon had already been used in warfare for generations, but Mehmed employed them on

a scale that reflected the increasing importance of gunpowder technology.

The largest guns were difficult to operate and slow to reload. They were also not magically capable of reducing the walls to rubble after a few shots. Their importance came from sustained bombardment.

A section of wall that had remained stable for centuries could now be struck repeatedly.

Defensive structures that had been designed to withstand arrows, stones, fire, and scaling attacks were facing a new type of weapon.

The defenders immediately began repairing the damage.

Their response became one of the defining and the defenders would rush to the affected section.

Stones, timber, earth, and other materials would be used to reinforce the damaged areas.

Then the bombardment would resume.

The siege became an enormous contest of destruction and repair.

Giustiniani Takes Command

Giovanni Giustiniani Longo understood that the Ottoman artillery could not be stopped by simply standing behind the walls.

He needed to keep the defensive system functioning.

His men were placed where the Ottoman attacks were expected to be most dangerous.

He concentrated forces around the sections of the land walls that Mehmed's army was most likely to target and ensured that

reserves could be moved quickly when a breach threatened to develop.

Giustiniani's role was especially important because the defenders were a coalition rather than a single professional army.

Greek soldiers served alongside Genoese troops, Venetian volunteers, sailors, monks, and civilians who had taken up arms.

Their languages, military experience, equipment, and motivations varied greatly.

Giustiniani gave them a degree of military coordination that Constantinople desperately needed.

Constantine XI also played an active role.

The emperor did not remain safely inside the palace while his soldiers fought.

He moved along the walls, inspected threatened positions, encouraged the defenders, and participated directly in the organization of the defense.

The atmosphere inside the city was tense.

Everyone understood the basic arithmetic.

There were not enough defenders to replace heavy casualties indefinitely.

There was not enough food to support a long siege without outside assistance.

There were not enough ships to guarantee control of the surrounding seas.

And there was no certainty that western Europe would arrive in time.

The defenders therefore needed the Ottoman army to fail before the city ran out of options.

The Golden Horn

While the land walls were the main battlefield, the Golden Horn presented another challenge.

The harbor was crucial to Constantinople because it offered a protected body of water from which defenders could support the city's maritime defenses.

To prevent Ottoman ships from entering, the defenders stretched a massive chain across the mouth of the Golden Horn.

The chain was more than a symbolic barrier.

It was a serious obstacle to the Ottoman fleet.

Mehmed's naval forces could attack from the Bosphorus and the Sea of Marmara, but the chain prevented them from freely entering the Golden Horn. The defenders could therefore concentrate ships in the harbor while protecting the vulnerable shoreline.

This created an important imbalance in Mehmed's original plans.

His land army could attack the walls, but his navy could not easily threaten the entire perimeter.

The Sultan needed another solution.

He found one through engineering rather than brute force.

The Ships That Traveled Over Land

One of the most famous episodes of the siege occurred in April.

Mehmed ordered Ottoman ships to be transported overland from the Bosphorus into the Golden Horn, bypassing the defensive chain.

The idea was extraordinary, but it was not a spontaneous act of desperation.

It formed part of Mehmed's larger effort to change the geometry of the siege.

Wooden tracks and prepared routes were used, allowing ships to be moved around the obstacle and launched into the harbor on the other side.

When the defenders looked toward the Golden Horn, they discovered that Ottoman vessels had appeared inside waters they had believed protected.

The psychological effect was considerable.

The chain had not failed.

The defenders had not forgotten to guard it.

Their enemy had simply found a way around it.

The Ottoman fleet inside the Golden Horn forced Constantine's commanders to redistribute troops and reconsider their defensive priorities. Constantinople now had to defend against pressure from more than one maritime direction while continuing to hold the land walls.

Mehmed was demonstrating one of his most important qualities as a commander.

He was willing to change the battlefield itself
when the existing battlefield did not favor
him.

The Struggle Inside the City

The siege also produced political disagreements among the defenders.

Constantinople was divided by more than the walls surrounding it.

There were disagreements over religious policy, military strategy, and the extent of cooperation with the Italians.

The question of relations with Rome remained especially sensitive.

Many Orthodox Christians regarded the union with the Roman Church as unacceptable.

Others believed that obtaining military assistance from western Europe was worth the religious concessions involved.

These disagreements could not easily be resolved under siege conditions.

The city also contained communities whose interests did not always perfectly align with those of the Byzantine government.

The Genoese of Galata were particularly complicated.

Their commercial interests were deeply connected to the Ottoman world, yet Genoese soldiers were helping to defend Constantinople. Some Genoese leaders wanted to avoid provoking Mehmed unnecessarily while also protecting their own community and commercial privileges.

The resulting political environment demanded considerable skill from Constantine XI.

He had to preserve cooperation between people who did not necessarily trust one

another while maintaining the appearance of
unity in front of the enemy.

The First Assaults

Mehmed's forces continued to bombard the walls, and Ottoman troops tested the defenses at several locations.

The early assaults were important for reasons beyond their immediate military results.

Mehmed needed to determine exactly how the walls behaved under bombardment and where the defenders were strongest.

Constantine and Giustiniani needed to discover where the Ottomans intended to concentrate their main effort.

The defenders were able to repulse repeated attacks.

This was not surprising.

The Ottoman numerical superiority did not eliminate the fundamental difficulty of assaulting fortified walls. Men advancing across open ground were vulnerable to missiles, cannon, firearms, and concentrated defensive fire. Scaling ladders were difficult to use under attack, and any breach had to

become large enough for substantial numbers of troops to enter before the defenders could close it.

The first weeks therefore demonstrated that the city would not simply collapse because Mehmed possessed a larger army.

Something more was required.

The Sultan needed to create a breach that could not be repaired.

The Battle Beneath the Walls

The defenders did more than remain on the walls.

They conducted sorties.

These attacks allowed them to damage Ottoman positions, kill soldiers, destroy equipment, and interfere with siege operations.

Such operations were dangerous because a small force leaving the protection of the walls could easily become surrounded.

But Constantine and Giustiniani understood the value of aggressive defense.

Every day that the Ottoman army spent repairing its own fortifications or replacing damaged siege equipment was a day gained by the defenders.

Time was therefore the city's greatest weapon.

It was also its greatest enemy.

If help arrived from Europe, the situation could change dramatically.

If help did not arrive, every dead defender was effectively irreplaceable.

The Search for Reinforcements

Constantine had appealed repeatedly to western powers for assistance.

Some assistance did arrive.

Genoese soldiers under Giustiniani were among the most important reinforcements to reach the city.

Ships and troops from Venice also became involved in the defense, although the larger relief force that the emperor hoped for never appeared in time to save the city.

This was one of the great disappointments of the siege.

Constantinople had appealed to a Christian Europe that theoretically had an enormous interest in preventing its capture.

But theory did not translate into immediate military action.

European rulers were divided by their own wars and political interests.

The Byzantine Empire had also become so weak that its ability to influence western policy was limited.

Mehmed understood this very well.

He could not assume that no relief fleet
would appear, but he could make the siege
increasingly difficult to break.

The isolation of Constantinople was working.

The Ottoman Army Tightens Its Grip

As April progressed, Mehmed's forces strengthened their positions.

Tents and fortifications spread across the countryside.

Artillery positions were improved and the troops were reorganized.

The Ottoman fleet increased pressure around the city.

The walls continued to suffer bombardment.

Inside Constantinople, repairs were becoming a permanent activity.

Men worked through the night.

Collapsed masonry had to be removed.

Temporary barriers had to be constructed.

Earth and rubble were packed into damaged sections.

The defenders used whatever materials were available.

The famous stone walls remained visible, but behind and around them a second defensive

world was taking shape from whatever

Constantinople could spare.

This improvised defense became increasingly important.

The city was beginning to rely on the ability of its defenders to improvise faster than the Ottoman artillery could destroy their work.

Psychological Warfare

The siege was also a psychological battle.

Mehmed sought to convince the defenders that resistance was pointless.

The sheer size of the Ottoman army served its purpose.

The continuous bombardment served it.

The sight of Ottoman ships appearing inside the Golden Horn served it.

The defenders responded by displaying their own confidence.

Church services continued.

Religious processions moved through the city.

Soldiers remained at their posts.

Constantine attempted to sustain morale.

Yet the psychological pressure was immense.

People knew that the Ottoman army was not leaving.

They also knew what a final assault might mean.

The possibility of death was not the only concern.

A city captured by a medieval army could face widespread looting, enslavement, destruction of property, and separation of families.

Constantinople had every reason to fear what would happen if its walls failed.

The Ottoman Engineers

The siege also demonstrated that Mehmed's army was not simply a mass of infantry and cavalry.

Engineers played a central role.

Ottoman troops dug trenches and constructed protective works that allowed soldiers and artillery to approach the walls under cover.

They sought to reduce the distance between the artillery positions and the fortifications while limiting exposure to defensive fire.

Mining was also employed.

Underground passages could be dug toward the foundations of the walls in an attempt to weaken them from below.

The defenders responded by listening for the sounds of digging and constructing countermines.

Underground warfare became its own battlefield.

The city above and the earth below were both
contested.

The Defenders Hold

Despite everything Mehmed had prepared,
Constantinople remained standing.

The artillery had damaged the walls, but the
defenses had not collapsed.

The Ottoman fleet had entered the Golden
Horn, but the harbor had not been taken.

Repeated assaults had failed to break the
defenders.

The city was battered, but still fighting.

This was important because Mehmed now faced a choice.

He could continue a long blockade and hope that hunger, disease, and exhaustion eventually forced surrender.

Or he could intensify the assault and risk enormous casualties.

A prolonged siege might also give the defenders time to receive reinforcements.

A decisive assault could end the war quickly if it succeeded.

The Sultan chose escalation.

The Final Weeks

By the middle of May, the character of the siege began to change.

The Ottoman bombardment grew more concentrated.

Several sections of the land walls had suffered serious damage.

The defenders repaired them repeatedly, but the repairs became more difficult as the attacks continued.

The Ottomans also intensified mining operations and prepared for a general assault.

Inside the city, the defenders could no longer pretend that the siege would simply end through negotiation.

They had to prepare for the possibility that Mehmed would order the entire army forward.

Constantine XI gathered his commanders.

The city's soldiers were redistributed.

Giustiniani concentrated his men around the areas most likely to be assaulted.

The Last Proposal

Mehmed had the option of offering terms.

The Sultan could have demanded surrender before an assault and promised the population a degree of protection.

Negotiations and threats formed part of medieval siege warfare, and Mehmed understood the advantage of frightening the defenders into surrender if possible.

Constantine refused to surrender the city.

His decision was understandable.

Constantinople was not merely another provincial town.

It was the imperial capital.

If it fell, the Byzantine Empire would effectively cease to exist.

Constantine and his defenders chose to continue.

The decision meant that the final battle would be fought at the walls.

The Last Night

By late May, both sides knew that the end was approaching.

The Ottoman camp prepared for a final assault.

Inside Constantinople, the population gathered in churches.

Soldiers prepared their weapons.

The emperor moved among the defenders.

Giustiniani inspected the positions where his men would fight.

The city that had survived for centuries was preparing for its final night as a Byzantine capital.

The atmosphere was unlike an ordinary military camp.

Everyone understood the magnitude of what was happening.

For the Byzantines, this might be the last night of their empire.

For the Ottomans, this was the opportunity to achieve what generations of their rulers had failed to accomplish.

At the center of it all was Mehmed.

He had spent weeks testing the walls, moving ships, firing cannon, conducting assaults, and studying the defenders.

Now he intended to commit the full strength of his army.

On the night of 28 May 1453, Constantinople waited.

The dawn would bring the final assault.

The Fall of Constantinople

The night of 28 May 1453 was unlike any other night in the history of Constantinople.

The Ottoman army remained outside the walls, prepared for the assault that Mehmed II had promised would come with the dawn.

Inside the city, the defenders understood that there was very little left to do except prepare themselves for whatever the morning would bring.

The atmosphere within Constantinople was dominated by fear, exhaustion, and religious devotion.

Churches were filled with people praying for the city's survival. Soldiers gathered in their positions along the walls, while civilians sought comfort in religious ceremonies.

The emperor moved among his men and commanders, attempting to sustain their courage even though he understood the enormous danger facing them.

The divisions that had troubled the city during the siege temporarily faded.

Greeks, Genoese, Venetians, and other defenders now stood together behind the same walls. Whatever disagreements had existed over religion, politics, or military strategy, the approaching Ottoman assault gave everyone a common purpose.

At the center of the final defense stood Constantine XI.

He had no realistic expectation that a great Christian army was about to appear outside the walls. No massive relief force was approaching from western Europe.

The city would have to defend itself.

Giovanni Giustiniani Longo and his soldiers remained among the most important defenders.

Their experience and discipline had helped keep the Ottoman army from exploiting the breaches in the walls, and Constantine relied heavily upon Giustiniani's ability to command the defense.

Outside the city, Mehmed was completing his preparations.

The Sultan had divided his forces into successive waves.

The first troops would be used to exhaust the defenders and create disorder. Additional formations would follow, increasing pressure on the walls. The elite Janissaries were reserved for the decisive stage.

This was not an impulsive attack.

It was designed to wear down the defenders before committing the strongest troops.

The Morning of 29 May

Before dawn on 29 May, the Ottoman assault began.

The first wave moved toward the walls.

These initial attackers were not the elite troops of the Ottoman army.

Their purpose was to force the defenders to reveal their strength, exhaust them, and keep them under continuous pressure.

The defenders responded with concentrated fire and missiles from the walls, and the first attacks were repulsed.

The second Ottoman wave followed.

Again, the defenders held their ground.

The battle became increasingly brutal as men fought for narrow stretches of open ground immediately outside the fortifications.

The Ottomans had to cross areas exposed to defensive fire while the defenders fought from elevated positions.

The walls still worked.

Every successful defense gave the Byzantines another moment.

Every failed Ottoman assault cost lives.

But the defenders were facing a problem that could not be solved through courage alone.

There were too few of them.

The Ottoman army could continue sending men forward.

The defenders could not replace their losses.

The Breach at the St Romanus Gate

Mehmed's artillery had concentrated much of its fire on the section of the walls around the St Romanus Gate, near the valley that would later become closely associated with the final fighting.

The bombardment had created serious damage.

The great walls had not simply collapsed, but sections of them had been reduced to broken masonry and earth. The defenders had

constructed emergency barricades behind damaged areas, trying to create a second line of resistance.

This was exactly the kind of defensive improvisation Giustiniani had prepared for.

The problem was that the Ottoman assault was designed to exploit the accumulated damage.

The defenders had repaired the breaches again and again, but every repair had been made while the Ottoman artillery continued firing.

The final assault now concentrated precisely
where the defenses were weakest.

Giustiniani's Last Stand

Giustiniani and his men fought at the most threatened part of the wall.

For much of the battle, his presence was essential.

His troops provided disciplined resistance in places where the defenders were under the greatest pressure.

Then Giustiniani was wounded.

The circumstances surrounding his wound have been described differently in the

sources, and later accounts sometimes turned his withdrawal into a dramatic moment of betrayal.

The reality appears to have been more complicated. He had suffered a serious injury, and his condition made continued fighting extremely difficult.

Giustiniani was eventually carried away from the battlefield.

His departure was devastating for morale.

Constantine had depended heavily upon him.

The soldiers under his command depended upon him.

And the defenders now faced the final Ottoman assault without one of their most experienced battlefield commanders.

The battle was beginning to turn.

The Janissaries Advance

Mehmed now committed the elite troops he had held in reserve.

The Janissaries advanced toward the weakened sections of the walls.

They were among the best trained soldiers in the Ottoman military system.

Unlike the earlier assault waves, whose primary purpose had been to exhaust the defenders, the Janissaries were being sent forward to achieve the breakthrough.

The fighting became more intense.

Ottoman troops climbed over damaged sections of the fortifications while defenders attempted to force them back.

The defenders still fought fiercely.

For a brief period, the result remained uncertain.

Then the Ottomans achieved a breakthrough.

Several Ottoman soldiers succeeded in reaching positions inside the outer defensive system.

Once the defenders' lines were penetrated,
the tactical situation changed immediately.

A wall could protect a city only while it
remained intact.

Once an attacking army entered through a
breach, the defenders had to fight inside their
own fortifications.

The Ottoman Flag

Among the most famous traditions associated with the final assault is the story of the Ottoman soldiers raising their banners on the walls.

Although later narratives have embellished the exact sequence of events, there is no doubt that Ottoman troops eventually established themselves within the city's defenses.

Once that occurred, the psychological barrier that had protected Constantinople for weeks was broken.

The city was no longer merely under siege.

It was being entered.

Some defenders attempted to reorganize around secondary positions.

Others retreated toward the interior.

The alarm spread rapidly.

The Ottoman army began pouring through the breaches.

Constantine XI's Final Battle

Constantine XI refused to abandon the city.

The final moments of the Byzantine emperor remain among the most famous and uncertain episodes of the entire conquest because contemporary sources provide conflicting details.

The broad outline, however, is clear.

Once the Ottoman troops broke through, Constantine went toward the fighting.

He was accompanied by a small group of men and took part in the final defense.

He understood what the Ottoman breakthrough meant.

If the city fell, the Byzantine Empire would effectively disappear.

There would be no second capital waiting in reserve.

No large Byzantine army stood behind Constantinople.

No other major imperial city remained capable of sustaining the Roman state.

Constantine fought alongside the defenders
as the Ottoman forces moved deeper into the
city.

Then he disappeared in the chaos of the final
battle.

His body was never identified with complete
certainty.

Later accounts claimed that the emperor
removed his imperial insignia before dying so
that he would not be recognized.

Other traditions developed around the possibility that his body was buried secretly or that he would one day return.

These stories belong partly to the mythology that grew around the final Byzantine emperor.

What can be established is simpler and more tragic.

Constantine XI died during the Ottoman capture of the city.

He was the last Byzantine emperor.

With him died the political continuity of the Byzantine Empire.

Constantinople Falls

As Ottoman troops entered the city, organized resistance began to collapse.

Some defenders continued fighting.

Others attempted to reach the ships in the harbor.

Civilians fled through the streets.

The Ottoman soldiers spread into the city.

The consequences were terrifying.

Medieval armies commonly considered a city that had refused to surrender before an assault to be subject to plunder.

The capture of Constantinople was therefore followed by killings, enslavement, and looting.

Churches and private houses were entered.

Families were separated. Valuable objects were seized.

The famous Hagia Sophia was among the most important sites reached by Ottoman troops.

It had served as the great cathedral of
Constantinople for nearly a thousand years.

Now the soldiers entered it.

The Byzantine capital had fallen and the
Ottoman banners flew above the city.

Mehmed Enters Constantinople

Mehmed did not rush immediately into the city at the head of the first soldiers who entered.

The Sultan remained outside while his troops secured their positions and resistance weakened.

Only when he was convinced that the city was effectively under Ottoman control did he enter.

His entry was ceremonial as well as political.

Mehmed was no more than twenty one years old but he had achieved what previous Ottoman rulers had attempted and failed to accomplish.

He had captured Constantinople and the city was now his.

Accounts describe him entering the city and proceeding to Hagia Sophia, where he acknowledged the transformed political reality.

Whether every detail of the traditional narratives is accurate is another question.

The symbolism, however, is undeniable.

The great cathedral of the Byzantine emperors
had become the principal symbol of the city
Mehmed had conquered.

The Sultan had not merely defeated an army.
He had taken a capital that represented one
of the longest political traditions in European
and Near Eastern history.

Hagia Sophia

Hagia Sophia became one of the defining symbols of the conquest.

The cathedral had been built under the emperor Justinian in the sixth century and had stood at the heart of Constantinople for nearly nine hundred years by the time Mehmed entered it.

For the Byzantine population, it represented the spiritual center of the empire.

For Mehmed, it became an imperial possession.

The building was converted into a mosque.

This was not simply a religious change.

It was also a statement about sovereignty.

The Sultan was declaring that the political and religious symbols of the old empire had been incorporated into the new one.

At the same time, Mehmed did not simply destroy everything he encountered.

He quickly began considering what Constantinople could become under Ottoman rule.

The city had been battered by war and depopulation.

If the Sultan wanted an imperial capital, he needed a functioning city.

The First Days After the Conquest

The immediate aftermath was chaotic.

Soldiers searched for valuables.

Captives were gathered and buildings were occupied.

The surviving population feared what the future would bring.

Mehmed eventually ordered an end to uncontrolled looting.

This decision had a practical purpose as well as a political one.

A completely devastated city would have little value to the Ottoman state.

Mehmed did not want a ruin, he wanted a capital.

The Sultan therefore began the transition from conquest to government.

The population had to be controlled and public order had to be restored.

Religious institutions had to be reorganized.

Trade had to resume.

The city's damaged infrastructure needed attention.

Most importantly, Mehmed had to repopulate Constantinople.

The conquest had created an Ottoman possession.

Mehmed intended to transform it into the center of an empire.

The Fate of the Byzantine People

The capture of Constantinople did not mean that every Christian inhabitant was killed or driven away.

A portion of the population was enslaved, many died during the conquest, and others fled.

Yet a substantial Christian population remained, and Mehmed eventually encouraged the return or resettlement of inhabitants.

This was consistent with a broader Ottoman practice of population management.

The Sultan needed people.

A capital required artisans, merchants, farmers, sailors, administrators, scholars, religious officials, and laborers.

Mehmed therefore began a deliberate program of repopulation.

People from different parts of the Ottoman territories were moved into the city.

Greek Christians were encouraged to return.

Jewish communities also became part of the growing population.

Muslims settled in increasing numbers.

Over time the city became a remarkably diverse imperial capital.

The destruction of the Byzantine capital had therefore been followed by the construction of a new political order within the same urban space.

The End of the Byzantine Empire

The conquest of Constantinople is often described as the moment when the Byzantine Empire ended.

That is correct in political terms.

The empire no longer possessed a capital, an imperial government, or a sovereign capable of maintaining the Byzantine state.

There had been fragments of Byzantine rule outside Constantinople.

Some survived briefly after the city's fall, most notably the Despotate of Morea, but the political center that had sustained the Byzantine Empire for more than a thousand years was gone.

The final emperor was dead.

The imperial capital belonged to another dynasty.

The Roman state in the East had reached its end.

Yet its cultural influence did not disappear.

Greek scholars, manuscripts, religious traditions, artistic styles, and political ideas continued to influence the Mediterranean world.

Mehmed himself would become deeply interested in that inheritance.

The conqueror of Constantinople was now preparing to become its emperor.

Istanbul

The young Sultan understood that capturing Constantinople was only the beginning.

An empire could not be governed from a devastated city.

Mehmed therefore embarked upon an ambitious program to restore the capital.

Mosques, schools, markets, workshops, administrative buildings, roads, and public infrastructure began to transform the city.

He established the institutions required to make Constantinople the center of Ottoman government.

The city gradually became known in Ottoman usage as Kostantiniyye, while the name Istanbul would become increasingly common in later periods.

The Sultan also reorganized the Orthodox Christian population.

An Orthodox patriarch was appointed, and the church was given a recognized place within the Ottoman political order.

This allowed Mehmed to govern the Christian population through an established religious hierarchy while maintaining ultimate imperial authority over it.

The new regime therefore did not attempt to erase every institution of the old city.

It incorporated many of them.

This would become one of the defining characteristics of Mehmed's rule.

Mehmed's Claim to Rome

The significance of the conquest went beyond the fall of a Christian city.

Mehmed increasingly presented himself as an emperor whose authority had inherited the legacy of Rome.

This claim was extraordinary.

The Ottoman dynasty had emerged from a small Turkoman frontier state, yet its ruler now controlled Constantinople, the city that

had been the eastern capital of the Roman Empire for more than a thousand years.

Mehmed recognized the implications.

He was not simply the Sultan of the Ottomans.

He could portray himself as the successor to the emperors whose throne he had conquered.

His interest in Byzantine history and classical civilization became increasingly visible during the years that followed.

He collected manuscripts, employed scholars, commissioned artists, and cultivated relationships with figures from both the Islamic world and Europe.

His ambition was therefore larger than military expansion.

He wanted to inherit civilization.

The Conqueror's First Victory

The conquest of Constantinople transformed Mehmed personally.

Before 1453, he was a young Sultan struggling to establish himself among powerful political figures.

After 1453, he was the ruler who had captured the most famous city in the eastern Mediterranean.

His authority increased enormously.

The Ottoman political elite could no longer regard him as an inexperienced young ruler who needed to be controlled by older statesmen.

He had accomplished something that generations had considered extraordinarily difficult.

The conquest gave Mehmed legitimacy, prestige, wealth, and a new imperial identity.

But it also created new responsibilities.

The city had to be rebuilt.

The World After 29 May 1453

The fall of Constantinople sent shock waves through Europe and the Mediterranean.

Christian rulers understood that a major strategic barrier had disappeared.

The Ottomans now controlled one of the world's most important cities and possessed direct access to the maritime routes linking the Black Sea with the Mediterranean.

For some Europeans, the conquest was treated as a catastrophe.

For the Ottoman court, it was a triumph.

For the Greek population, it was a disaster
and the beginning of life under a new imperial
government.

For Venice and Genoa, it created a new
political reality that had to be negotiated
rather than ignored.

For Mehmed, it was something even greater.

It was proof that his ambitions were
achievable.

He had set out to capture Constantinople.

He had done so.

The question that now remained was how far he intended to go.

The answer would soon become clear.

The conquest had transformed Mehmed from a young Sultan into one of the most powerful rulers of the fifteenth century.

But Constantinople had not satisfied his ambitions, it had enlarged them.

And the next years would reveal that the conquest of the city was not the end of Mehmed's story.

It was the beginning of his imperial reign.

A Victory That Created a New Problem

The conquest of Constantinople had given Mehmed II an achievement that had eluded generations of Ottoman rulers, but victory had also created a problem that could not be solved with armies alone.

The city had been captured, yet it was severely weakened.

Its population had fallen dramatically over the preceding centuries, large areas had been damaged or abandoned, and the political

institutions that had once made

Constantinople the center of the Byzantine world had disappeared.

Mehmed had conquered a capital, but he now had to create one.

This distinction was fundamental to his reign.

A conqueror could destroy a city.

An emperor had to make one function.

Mehmed understood that Constantinople was valuable precisely because of what it could become.

Its geographical position remained exceptional.

It commanded the Bosphorus and stood between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean.

It connected Ottoman territories in Europe with those in Anatolia and gave the Sultan a capital from which he could project his power in several directions at once.

The city could therefore become the physical expression of Mehmed's ambitions.

Restoring the Population

One of Mehmed's first major tasks was to restore Constantinople's population.

The devastation of the conquest had reduced the number of inhabitants still living in the city, while many others had fled during or after the siege.

A capital could not survive without craftsmen, merchants, farmers, soldiers, scholars, religious officials, sailors, and administrators.

Mehmed therefore pursued an active policy of resettlement.

People were brought into the city from different parts of the Ottoman territories.

Greek Christians returned.

Muslim communities expanded.

Jewish inhabitants became part of the city's growing population.

Armenian communities were also encouraged to settle in the capital and contributed to its commercial and cultural development.

By the later fifteenth century, Constantinople was becoming a multiethnic and multireligious Ottoman city rather than a remnant of the Byzantine capital.

This process was deliberate.

Mehmed did not want the city to remain a monument to a defeated empire.

He wanted it to become the capital of his own.

The transformation would take decades, but the basic direction was established almost immediately after the conquest.

The Orthodox Church

Mehmed also understood that the Christian population had to be incorporated into the new political order.

The Byzantine imperial government had disappeared, but the Orthodox Church remained an important institution.

Rather than attempting to eliminate it, Mehmed reorganized it under Ottoman sovereignty and recognized an Orthodox patriarch in Constantinople.

This provided the Christian population with a recognized religious authority while making the patriarch responsible to the Sultan.

The arrangement was politically useful.

Mehmed could govern a large Christian population without forcing every aspect of its community life under direct Ottoman administration.

Religious leaders could administer many matters involving marriage, education, inheritance, and communal organization while recognizing the sovereignty of the Ottoman state.

The conqueror was therefore becoming a manager of a diverse empire.

This required a different set of skills from those that had been necessary on the battlefield.

Building the New Capital

Mehmed's reconstruction program was ambitious.

He commissioned religious institutions, markets, administrative buildings, public works, and palaces.

One of the earliest major projects was the construction of the palace that would become known as the Old Palace, followed by the palace complex that eventually became Topkapı.

He also established the great mosque complex that would later be known as the Fatih complex.

The institution combined religious, educational, charitable, and commercial functions and reflected the Sultan's understanding that architecture could be used to organize an imperial capital as well as glorify its ruler.

The reconstruction also demonstrated something important about Mehmed's tastes.

The new Ottoman capital was not built by rejecting everything that had existed before.

Ottoman, Persian, Islamic, and Byzantine traditions were combined within the developing city.

Mehmed recognized that the conquest of Constantinople had given him access to a cultural inheritance that was too valuable to destroy so he decided to possess it.

The Palace and the Sultan

The palace was central to this transformation.

For Mehmed, the palace was not simply a residence. It was the place from which imperial power was organized.

Officials were appointed there. Foreign envoys were received there.

Decisions concerning war, taxation, diplomacy, religion, and administration were made there.

The palace therefore helped turn the Sultan's personal authority into a system of government.

This was especially important because Mehmed had learned from his first reign how dangerous it could be for the Sultan to depend too heavily upon older political elites.

He wanted the court to become more closely tied to himself.

He wanted the institutions of government to serve the Sultan rather than overshadow him.

And he wanted to reduce the possibility that powerful families could become independent centers of political authority.

The Fate of Çandarlı Halil Pasha

The most dramatic example of Mehmed's determination to establish his authority was the fate of Grand Vizier Çandarlı Halil Pasha.

Halil had been one of the most powerful men in the Ottoman government during Murad II's reign.

During Mehmed's first accession, he had played an important role in bringing Murad back to power.

He represented an older political order in which experienced statesmen possessed substantial influence over the direction of government.

Mehmed increasingly regarded this influence as a threat.

Shortly after the conquest of Constantinople, Çandarlı was arrested and executed.

The significance of the event went far beyond the removal of one individual.

It marked the destruction of one of the most powerful old Ottoman political families and

demonstrated that the young Sultan who had once been overshadowed by his advisers was now willing to eliminate even the most influential statesman in the empire.

The balance of power had changed.

The Sultan was firmly in command.

Mehmed's government would increasingly rely upon men whose authority came directly from him rather than from established aristocratic families.

This helped create the highly centralized imperial structure that later rulers would inherit.

Mehmed and the Roman Inheritance

The transformation of Constantinople also changed the way Mehmed understood himself.

He had conquered the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire.

The obvious question was what that made him.

Mehmed increasingly presented himself as a ruler with an imperial inheritance extending beyond the Ottoman dynasty.

His interest in Roman and Byzantine history was genuine, and his court welcomed figures from the European intellectual world as well as scholars from the Islamic world.

His patronage of Italian artists is particularly revealing.

Mehmed employed European artists and showed an interest in Renaissance portraiture.

The Venetian painter Gentile Bellini eventually came to Constantinople and produced the famous portrait of the Sultan.

Mehmed also favored Italian medalists whose work presented him within the tradition of the great emperors of Rome and Byzantium.

This was not merely admiration for foreign art.

It was political language.

Mehmed wanted the world to understand that he had not simply destroyed a Roman capital but he had inherited it.

The Idea of Universal Empire

The young Sultan's ambitions were therefore becoming larger than those of the rulers who had preceded him.

His ancestors had expanded the Ottoman state.

Mehmed wanted an empire.

An empire seeks legitimacy over different peoples, cultures, and historical traditions.

Mehmed's Constantinople became the center from which he could pursue that larger vision.

He possessed lands in Anatolia and territories across the Balkans.

He controlled the Bosphorus and Constantinople.

But several important Byzantine and Christian states remained beyond Ottoman control.

There were also powerful Muslim states and independent Anatolian rulers whose

territories stood outside the Sultan's authority
and they had to be dealt with.

The Byzantine World Beyond

Constantinople

The fall of Constantinople had destroyed the main Byzantine state, but remnants of the Byzantine political world survived.

One of the most important was the Empire of Trebizond on the southern shore of the Black Sea.

Trebizond had been established as an independent Byzantine state in 1204, after the Fourth Crusade captured Constantinople.

For more than two centuries it had survived separately from the rulers who eventually recovered Constantinople.

By the time Mehmed turned his attention toward it, Trebizond was ruled by Emperor David Komnenos.

Its survival presented Mehmed with both a strategic and symbolic problem.

Strategically, Trebizond occupied an important position on the Black Sea.

Symbolically, it represented another surviving Byzantine imperial tradition.

The Campaign Against Trebizond

In 1461, Mehmed launched a major campaign against Trebizond.

The campaign demonstrated that the conquest of Constantinople had not satisfied his imperial ambitions.

He was now pursuing the remaining Byzantine state while simultaneously strengthening Ottoman authority across Anatolia.

The campaign ended with the surrender of Trebizond.

The last major Byzantine imperial state had fallen.

The political world that had emerged from the crisis of 1204 had now been almost completely absorbed by the Ottomans.

Constantinople had fallen in 1453.

Trebizond followed in 1461. The remaining Byzantine territories in Greece were also absorbed into Ottoman rule around this period.

For Mehmed, this was more than another territorial acquisition.

It was another step toward constructing the
empire he imagined.

Anatolia and the Ottoman State

Mehmed's ambitions were not limited to former Byzantine lands.

Anatolia itself remained politically fragmented, and several Turkish principalities possessed traditions of independence that preceded the Ottoman expansion.

The Sultan regarded this fragmentation as a problem.

A great imperial state could not tolerate powerful independent rulers sitting between its provinces.

Mehmed therefore continued the work of absorbing Anatolian territories into the Ottoman political system.

This process was not always achieved through direct warfare.

Diplomacy, dynastic marriages, pressure, tribute, and political agreements could all be used to bring territories under Ottoman influence.

When necessary, Mehmed used force.

The result was a gradual strengthening of central Ottoman authority across Anatolia.

The empire was beginning to resemble the structure of a continental power rather than a collection of territories held together by a frontier dynasty.

Europe Begins to Fear the New Sultan

The conquest of Constantinople had also changed the political calculations of Europe.

The Ottoman Empire now controlled the city that connected the Black Sea with the Mediterranean world and possessed a capital that could support much larger military and administrative ambitions.

European states now had to deal with Mehmed as a major imperial ruler.

Venice was particularly important because Venetian merchants possessed extensive commercial interests throughout the eastern Mediterranean.

Trade required peace and strategic rivalry required war.

These two realities repeatedly collided.

The Ottoman Venetian conflict that followed became one of the defining military struggles of Mehmed's later reign.

The War with Venice

The conflict between the Ottomans and Venice was not simply a religious war.

Commercial interests were at its center.

Venice depended upon access to markets and ports throughout the eastern Mediterranean.

The Ottoman Empire was increasingly controlling the same routes.

Both sides understood that whoever controlled the major ports and islands of the region would possess a significant advantage.

The war therefore extended across land and sea.

Ottoman forces attacked Venetian possessions.

Venetian fleets attempted to disrupt Ottoman communications.

Fortresses changed hands and cities were besieged.

The conflict demonstrated that Mehmed's empire was becoming a maritime power as well as a land empire.

The young Sultan who had once faced the walls of Constantinople was now commanding campaigns across an increasingly interconnected imperial world.

Mehmed the Builder

It would be easy to remember Mehmed only as a conqueror.

The same ruler who ordered campaigns across Europe and Anatolia devoted enormous energy to architecture, scholarship, administration, and urban development.

His rebuilding of Constantinople was one of the greatest projects of his reign.

He established institutions and supported the people who helped build them.

The transformation was gradual, but the direction was unmistakable.

Constantinople was becoming Ottoman.

And the Ottoman Empire was becoming increasingly centered upon Constantinople.

The city that Mehmed had entered as a conqueror was becoming the city from which he would rule as an emperor.

The Scholar Sultan

Mehmed's intellectual interests also became more visible after the conquest.

He collected books and encouraged scholars to come to his court.

Mehmet was interested in the sciences, philosophy, history, geography, and literature.

His court brought together traditions that had developed in different parts of the Mediterranean and Islamic world.

This intellectual environment helps explain why Mehmed's personality cannot easily be reduced to that of a warrior.

He could be ruthless in politics and warfare while simultaneously displaying genuine curiosity about languages, history, art, and science.

The contradictions were real.

They were also characteristic of the ruler he had become.

Mehmed could admire a Greek scholar while conquering Greek territory.

He could employ a Venetian artist while preparing to fight Venice.

He could preserve Christian institutions while converting Hagia Sophia into a mosque.

He was not attempting to return to the world that had existed before the conquest.

He was attempting to absorb that world into his own.

The Empire Expands

By the 1460s, Mehmed had achieved something extraordinary.

The Ottoman state had survived the crisis of Ankara less than two generations earlier.

Now it controlled Constantinople, much of the Balkans, extensive territories in Anatolia, and important Black Sea positions.

The Sultan's empire stretched across two continents and interacted with nearly every

major political force in southeastern Europe
and the eastern Mediterranean.

Yet expansion also brought new enemies.

Hungary remained a major military rival.

Venice remained a major maritime rival.

The Papacy and other Christian powers
viewed Ottoman expansion with increasing
alarm.

Eastern Mediterranean politics were
becoming more complex.

And in the north, along the Danube, another region was beginning to attract Mehmed's attention.

Wallachia.

There the Ottoman Empire would encounter a ruler whose reputation would eventually become almost as legendary as that of Mehmed himself.

His name was Vlad Dracula.

Before the two men became enemies, however, Vlad's story had to begin with his father.

It was a story of a dynasty trapped between Hungary and the Ottoman Empire, a boy held in Ottoman custody, a prince fighting for a throne, and a name that would eventually become one of the most famous in European history.

The man known to the world as Dracula was about to enter Mehmed's story.

Vlad Dracula, Son of the Dragon

While Mehmed II was transforming Constantinople into the center of his empire, another struggle was unfolding along the northern frontier of the Ottoman world.

The region known as Wallachia occupied a dangerous position between the Ottoman Empire and the Kingdom of Hungary.

Its rulers were expected to navigate between two powerful neighbors, each of which wanted influence over the principality.

Wallachia was not a large state compared with the Ottoman Empire or Hungary, but its geographical position gave it considerable importance.

The Danube formed a major frontier between Ottoman territories and the lands farther north, while the routes through Wallachia connected the Balkans with the regions of Transylvania and central Europe.

A ruler who controlled Wallachia could therefore threaten Ottoman positions south of the Danube or serve as a useful buffer protecting the Ottoman frontier.

This made the Wallachian throne
extraordinarily dangerous.

A prince could not simply rule according to
his own wishes.

He had to consider Ottoman demands,
Hungarian ambitions, the interests of local
boyars, rival claimants, and the constant
possibility of rebellion.

Into this environment was born the man who
would become known as Vlad III.

The exact year of his birth is uncertain, but it
was probably around 1431 or 1432.

He belonged to the House of Drăculești, a branch of the ruling Basarab dynasty of Wallachia.

His father was Vlad II, who would become known as Vlad Dracul.

That name would eventually create one of the most famous names in European history.

Vlad II Dracul

Vlad II was a member of the Wallachian ruling family and spent much of his early political life trying to secure a position between Hungary and the Ottoman Empire.

The struggle was difficult because neither power was willing to tolerate a completely independent Wallachian ruler for long.

Vlad eventually became involved with the Order of the Dragon, a Christian military and chivalric order founded by the Hungarian King

Sigismund. The order was dedicated in part to the defense of Christianity against the expanding Ottoman Empire.

Vlad's association with the order contributed to his name becoming Dracul.

In the Latin and western European context, the title was associated with the dragon represented by the order. In Romanian, however, drac could also mean devil, which later helped create additional layers of meaning around the name.

His son would then become known as Drăculea, meaning roughly "son of Dracul."

This is the historical root of the name Dracula.

There was no vampire in this story.

The original name belonged to a real fifteenth century dynasty and reflected the complicated political world of Christian rulers living on the frontier of the Ottoman Empire.

The Father Between Hungary and the Sultan

Vlad II's political position became increasingly difficult.

Hungary wanted Wallachia to resist Ottoman expansion.

The Ottoman Sultan wanted Wallachia to acknowledge Ottoman authority and fulfill its obligations.

Vlad attempted to survive by changing his alignment when circumstances demanded it.

This was not unusual for rulers of the region.

Small states frequently had to submit to one great power temporarily in order to survive pressure from another.

Loyalty in the modern sense was often less important than preserving the dynasty and keeping control of the throne.

For Vlad II, however, these decisions had consequences for his sons.

The Ottoman court regarded members of his family as potential guarantees of his loyalty.

Among those sons were Vlad III, the future Impaler, and his younger brother Radu.

The two boys would spend part of their youth in the Ottoman world.

That experience would shape both of their lives.

The Ottoman Hostages

In 1442, Vlad II was summoned to the Ottoman court and detained for a period after being accused of disloyalty.

As part of the political settlement that followed, his sons Vlad and Radu were left in Ottoman custody.

The precise circumstances have been debated, but the broader significance is clear.

The two boys were being used as political guarantees.

Their father was expected to understand that the Sultan possessed something extremely valuable.

Vlad and Radu were extremely valuable, therefore not ordinary prisoners.

They were princes whose fate depended upon their father's behavior.

The experience exposed them to the world of the Ottoman court at a formative age.

Vlad saw Ottoman administration, military culture, religion, and palace politics from the

inside. He also learned how the empire exercised power over smaller states.

Radu, in contrast, eventually became deeply connected to Ottoman political culture and would later become one of Mehmed's most important allies in Wallachia.

The brothers would therefore leave Ottoman custody with very different political orientations.

A Prisoner Who Learned the Empire

Vlad's years among the Ottomans are important because they make his later resistance more complicated.

He did not encounter the Ottoman Empire from a distance.

He had lived within it to fully experience it.

Vlad had also experienced personally what it meant for the Sultan to possess power over a prince's life.

This could have produced admiration, fear, resentment, or a combination of all three.

There is no reliable evidence that allows us to reconstruct Vlad's private thoughts during these years.

What we can say is that the experience gave him intimate knowledge of the political world he would later fight.

When he eventually opposed the Ottomans, he would not be confronting an unknown enemy.

He understood them and knew their
methods.

He understood the importance of fear.

And he understood how quickly a ruler who
appeared weak could lose his throne.

Vlad Returns to a Broken Country

The political situation of Wallachia became increasingly violent.

Vlad II's position deteriorated, and in 1447 he was killed after losing support from powerful opponents connected to the Hungarian side of the regional struggle.

His son Mircea, Vlad III's elder brother, was also killed.

Vlad was suddenly faced with the reality that the throne of Wallachia was not simply a hereditary prize.

It was a battlefield.

Rival factions were prepared to kill members of the ruling family to secure their own power.

Hungary wanted influence.

The Ottoman Empire wanted influence.

The local boyars wanted influence.

And every claimant to the throne needed military backing.

For Vlad, this was a political education far more violent than anything he had experienced in the classroom.

The First Attempt to Take the Throne

In 1448, Vlad briefly became ruler of Wallachia.

His first reign, however, lasted only a short time.

He lacked the political support required to maintain his position, and his enemies quickly forced him from power.

The experience taught him another lesson.

Being the rightful claimant did not matter without a force capable of defending the claim.

Vlad spent years attempting to recover the throne.

During this period, Wallachia remained caught between the Hungarian and Ottoman spheres.

The kingdom of Hungary possessed one of the strongest armies in central Europe, while the Ottoman Empire under Murad II and later Mehmed II was rapidly expanding. Neither power could ignore Wallachia.

A prince who chose the wrong side could lose everything.

A prince who successfully balanced them could become remarkably powerful.

Vlad was determined to return home.

The Return of Vlad

After the death of his rival **Vladislav II** in 1456, Vlad III finally regained the Wallachian throne.

This time he intended to rule differently.

He had witnessed his father being betrayed.

He had lost his brother and spent years watching rival rulers treat political opponents as enemies to be eliminated rather than negotiated with.

Now Vlad had power and he intended to make certain that nobody could easily take it from him.

The Boyars

One of Vlad's greatest internal problems was the Wallachian boyar class.

The boyars were powerful nobles who controlled land, wealth, local authority, and political influence.

Their support was essential to any prince, but their loyalty could shift whenever a rival claimant offered better prospects.

Vlad saw them as a direct threat to centralized authority.

He therefore moved aggressively against nobles he considered disloyal.

One of the most famous stories describes Vlad inviting boyars to a feast and then punishing those whom he considered responsible for the deaths of earlier rulers.

The broad pattern of violence against political opponents is well supported, although later sources exaggerated the scale of individual massacres.

This distinction is important.

Vlad was unquestionably violent.

The question is not whether he killed political opponents?

Which he did.

The question is how many, under precisely what circumstances, and by what methods?

Recent scholarship has shown that the enormous figures found in later accounts need to be treated with caution.

A 2025 study of Vlad's collective impalements argues that contemporary and later sources systematically exaggerated the numbers, while also confirming that Vlad did use

impalement and other forms of mass execution as instruments of political intimidation.

The real Vlad was therefore neither the harmless prince of romantic fiction nor necessarily the almost superhuman monster described by some later pamphlets.

He was a brutal fifteenth century ruler who deliberately used spectacular violence to control his enemies.

Why Vlad Became Feared

Vlad's reputation grew rapidly because his punishments were intended to be visible.

He understood something that successful medieval rulers repeatedly understood.

Fear could become a political weapon.

A private execution removed an enemy but a public execution could intimidate hundreds.

Impalement was especially effective for this purpose because the victim's body could

remain visible for an extended period, turning an execution into a message.

Vlad used this method against political enemies, criminals, and foreign opponents.

His executions were not random expressions of madness.

They were part of a political strategy.

That does not make them less brutal.

It makes them more purposeful.

The spectacle itself mattered.

One of the clearest examples came during Vlad's conflict with the Ottomans in 1462,

when a large number of bodies were displayed around Târgoviște. Contemporary and near-contemporary accounts confirm that Ottoman soldiers encountered a horrifying display, although the traditional figure of 20,000 impaled people is almost certainly exaggerated. Recent analysis suggests that the actual number of impaled victims represented in the famous "forest" was probably far lower, perhaps around 1,600 to 1,700 when the available evidence is assessed critically.

This does not make the event insignificant.

A field containing even hundreds or thousands of impaled bodies would have been an extraordinary psychological weapon.

Vlad wanted the Ottoman army to see it.

Vlad the Defender

Yet the image of Vlad as simply a sadistic ruler is incomplete.

He also represented resistance to Ottoman expansion in a region that had limited resources and few good options.

Wallachia was not capable of confronting the Ottoman Empire in a conventional war and expecting to win.

Vlad therefore relied upon aggressive raids, surprise attacks, destruction of resources, rapid movement, and intimidation.

He attacked Ottoman positions across the Danube and attempted to make the cost of maintaining Ottoman influence in Wallachia as high as possible.

In 1461 and 1462, his conflict with Mehmed escalated dramatically.

Vlad refused to accept the level of Ottoman control that Mehmed expected.

He attacked Ottoman settlements and fortifications along the Danube.

He killed Ottoman and allied troops and sent reports of his victories to his Hungarian allies and attempted to demonstrate that he was successfully resisting the Sultan.

In a letter to Matthias Corvinus dated February 1462, Vlad reported the deaths of more than twenty thousand Ottoman and Bulgarian opponents during his campaign.

The surviving copies contain inconsistencies in the precise totals, but the documents nevertheless provide direct evidence that

Vlad was conducting major attacks along the Danube and was deliberately presenting himself as a successful anti Ottoman warrior.

His political position was therefore complicated, he was a brutal ruler.

He was also fighting for the survival of his state.

Both facts can be true at the same time.

The Sultan Takes Notice

Mehmed could not ignore Vlad's actions.

The Ottoman Empire had just emerged from the conquest of Constantinople and was consolidating its authority throughout the Balkans. The Sultan could not allow a small frontier ruler to attack Ottoman territory, kill Ottoman soldiers, and refuse the obligations expected from a dependent prince without consequence.

There was also a personal dimension.

Mehmed had known Vlad and Radu from their youth.

He understood the political importance of the Wallachian throne.

He also knew that Vlad's brother Radu was a potential alternative.

Radu had remained much more closely connected to the Ottoman political world and had acquired supporters at the Sultan's court.

The contrast between the brothers was becoming increasingly important.

Vlad represented resistance.

Radu represented accommodation with Mehmed.

The Sultan now had a choice.

He could attempt to negotiate with Vlad or he could remove him.

The Sultan chose the second option.

The Campaign of 1462

In the spring of 1462, Mehmed II personally led a major Ottoman expedition against Wallachia.

This was a significant decision.

The Sultan did not send a small punitive force.

He intended to crush Vlad's resistance and replace him with a ruler who would accept Ottoman authority.

The Ottoman army entered Wallachia in enormous strength, although the exact size of the army cannot be determined reliably from the surviving sources.

Vlad understood that a conventional battle would be disastrous.

He could not stand in an open field and expect to defeat Mehmed's army.

He therefore adopted a strategy designed to make the environment itself hostile.

The Wallachians destroyed food supplies.

Villages were evacuated or abandoned.

Wells could be poisoned, livestock could be driven away, crops could be destroyed.

The objective was simple.

If the Ottoman army could not feed itself, its numerical superiority would become a burden rather than an advantage.

Mehmed had brought an enormous force into a country that Vlad intended to turn into a wasteland.

War Without a Battlefield

The campaign became a struggle of movement rather than a conventional battle.

The Ottoman army needed to locate Vlad and force him into a decisive confrontation.

Vlad wanted exactly the opposite.

He wanted to remain mobile and strike suddenly then, disappear.

He wanted Mehmed's army to advance farther into territory where food and water became increasingly scarce.

This type of warfare was extremely difficult for a large imperial army.

The Ottoman forces could defeat Wallachian units in open battle, but Vlad did not intend to give them that opportunity.

Instead he attacked the edges of the army.

He used the night, exploited the terrain., gathered intelligence and moved rapidly.

The Ottoman campaign was becoming a war of attrition.

And then Vlad attempted one of the boldest attacks of his life.

The Night Attack

Near Târgoviște, Vlad launched a night attack against the Ottoman camp.

The exact details of the fighting remain debated because the surviving accounts differ and later writers transformed the episode into a dramatic legend. What is clear is that Vlad's forces entered the Ottoman camp at night and caused significant confusion and casualties before being forced away.

His apparent objective was to reach Mehmed himself.

If the Sultan had been killed, the consequences for the Ottoman campaign could have been enormous.

Vlad failed to kill Mehmed.

But the attack demonstrated the degree of danger posed by the Wallachian prince.

The Ottoman army had penetrated deep into Vlad's territory, yet it was still vulnerable to surprise.

The campaign had become costly.

And then Mehmed encountered the sight for
which Vlad would become famous
throughout history.

The Forest of the Impaled

When Ottoman forces approached Târgoviște, they encountered a horrifying display of bodies impaled on stakes.

Later accounts gave enormous numbers, the most famous being approximately twenty thousand.

That figure should not be accepted without qualification.

As modern scholarship has demonstrated, the numerical claims surrounding Vlad's

executions were heavily exaggerated by hostile or propagandistic sources. Even so, the existence of a large display of impaled victims is supported by multiple sources, including an Ottoman participant in the campaign.

The scene had been designed for exactly this moment.

Vlad wanted Mehmed's soldiers to see what awaited anyone who opposed him.

The bodies were not simply casualties, they were a message.

The message was that Wallachia would resist through terror if necessary.

The Ottoman army could continue advancing, but every soldier would know what kind of enemy was waiting ahead.

The psychological impact was enormous.

Yet the display did not save Vlad.

Mehmed's Strategic Victory

Later popular accounts sometimes portray the forest of the impaled as the moment when Mehmed was so horrified that he abandoned the campaign and fled back toward Constantinople.

The historical reality is more complicated.

The Ottoman campaign faced severe logistical difficulties, and Vlad's tactics had imposed serious costs.

But Mehmed did not simply abandon the war in terror.

The larger Ottoman objective was to remove Vlad from power.

To accomplish that, Mehmed did not necessarily need to capture Vlad personally.

He needed an alternative ruler.

That alternative was already available.

Vlad's younger Radu, brother had remained connected to the Ottoman world.

Mehmed now supported him as an alternative claimant to the Wallachian throne.

The war therefore shifted from a direct attempt to destroy Vlad's army to a struggle over political legitimacy.

And this was where Vlad's greatest weakness became apparent.

Radu the Handsome

Radu, Vlad's younger brother, had spent part of his youth in Ottoman custody alongside him.

Unlike Vlad, however, Radu developed a close relationship with the Ottoman court and eventually became a trusted Ottoman client.

Mehmed supported Radu's claim to Wallachia.

This created a civil war inside the principality.

The Wallachian nobles now had a choice.

They could continue supporting Vlad and risk destruction at the hands of the Ottoman Empire.

Or they could support Radu and preserve their political positions under Ottoman influence.

For many of them, the second option became increasingly attractive.

Vlad's reign had also alienated powerful local elites through his brutal efforts to centralize authority.

His war against the boyars had strengthened the power of the prince, but it had also created enemies who now had an alternative.

Radu's position grew stronger and Vlad's position weakened.

The Sultan did not need to destroy every Wallachian soldier.

He simply needed to make Vlad's continued rule impossible.

Vlad Loses the Throne

By the end of the campaign, Vlad was no longer in a secure position.

He withdrew toward Transylvania and sought assistance from Matthias Corvinus, the king of Hungary.

He expected to find an ally.

Instead, he encountered another political crisis.

Matthias arrested Vlad.

The precise reasons for this decision involved the complicated relationship between Hungary and the Ottoman Empire, as well as accusations and political correspondence concerning Vlad's conduct.

Vlad would remain under a form of detention for years.

The prince who had spent his life fighting to control Wallachia had been defeated not by a single battlefield blow but by the combined effects of military pressure, political isolation, and the emergence of a rival claimant.

Radu became the dominant ruler of

Wallachia with Ottoman support.

Mehmed had now achieved his objective.

Hero or Tyrant

The legacy of Vlad III became complicated almost immediately.

To his enemies, he was a monster.

To some of his contemporaries, his cruelty was so extreme that stories about him circulated across Europe, often in the form of sensational pamphlets.

To supporters and later Romanian historical traditions, he became a defender of his

country who resisted the expansion of a powerful empire.

Both images contain elements of truth, but neither is sufficient by itself.

Vlad really did resist Ottoman expansion.

He really did fight to preserve his position and the independence of Wallachia.

Dracula also really did employ brutal punishments on a scale that frightened both his subjects and his enemies.

The historical Vlad was therefore a ruler shaped by an extraordinarily violent political

environment who in turn made that
environment even more violent.

His resistance to Mehmed made him famous
but his methods ruined this fame.

And his name, inherited from his father,
ensured that his reputation would survive far
beyond the fifteenth century.

The Son of the Dragon

The name Dracula has survived because it combines history and legend in an unusually powerful way.

Vlad's father was known as Dracul because of his association with the Order of the Dragon.

His son therefore became known as Drăculea.

The original meaning was essentially son of Dracul.

Over time, the name acquired additional meanings.

Romanian drac could mean devil, and foreign writers who heard stories about Vlad's cruelty found the name especially suitable for the image they were creating.

Centuries later, Bram Stoker would transform Dracula into a fictional vampire.

That fictional character bears only a distant relationship to Vlad III.

The historical Dracula was a prince and a well known soldier.

He was a political survivor, a ruler who fought
an empire and a man capable of extraordinary
brutality.

The vampire belonged to literature but the
Dragon's son belonged to history.

The Two Princes

The conflict between Vlad and Radu was therefore more than a struggle between two brothers.

It represented two possible futures for Wallachia.

Vlad believed survival required resistance.

Radu believed survival depended upon cooperation with the Ottoman Empire.

The difference was not simply personal, It was strategic.

Vlad's approach required Wallachia to endure the consequences of permanent confrontation with a vastly more powerful state.

Radu's approach required Wallachia to accept Ottoman supremacy in exchange for political survival.

Mehmed preferred Radu because Radu offered what Vlad could not.

Predictability.

A ruler loyal to the Sultan was far more valuable to the Ottoman Empire than a ruler who constantly attacked Ottoman territory.

For the moment, Mehmed had won.

But Vlad's story was not yet finished.

Years later, he would return to the political struggle in Wallachia.

The final chapter of his life would once again involve war.

And once again, the fate of a small principality would become entangled with the ambitions of larger empires.

Before that happened, however, Mehmed II would continue his own expansion.

The Sultan had conquered Constantinople.

He had defeated Vlad's challenge.

He had transformed the Ottoman state into an imperial power.

Yet he still had many years of war ahead of him.

And his greatest ambitions had not been exhausted by the conquest of a single city.

The Last Years of the Conqueror

The defeat of Vlad did not mark the end of Mehmed II's military ambitions.

By the 1460s, the Ottoman Sultan had moved far beyond the immediate objective that had defined the beginning of his reign.

Constantinople was securely in Ottoman hands, the remaining Byzantine imperial territories were being absorbed, and the Sultan was increasingly turning his attention toward the consolidation of Anatolia and the

expansion of Ottoman influence across the Balkans and the Black Sea.

Mehmed understood that conquering territory was only one stage of imperial expansion.

Every conquest created another problem.

Newly acquired territories had to be administered, taxes had to be organized, military garrisons had to be established, roads and fortresses had to be secured, and local political elites had to be brought into the Ottoman system.

His reign therefore became a period of continuous state building alongside continuous warfare.

This was one of the reasons Mehmed's reign was so important to the later history of the Ottoman Empire.

He did not simply enlarge the territory inherited from his predecessors.

He reorganized the political structure of that territory and strengthened the authority of the central government.

The Ottoman Empire and Venice

One of Mehmed's most persistent opponents during this period was Venice.

The relationship between the two powers was complicated because they needed one another even while competing for control of the eastern Mediterranean.

Venetian merchants depended upon access to Ottoman territories, while the Ottoman Empire benefited from the commercial activity of Venetian traders.

At the same time, Venice possessed fortified ports and islands that Mehmed regarded as obstacles to Ottoman expansion.

The rivalry eventually became open war.

The Ottoman Venetian War lasted from 1463 until 1479 and spread across the Balkans and the Aegean. Ottoman armies fought on land while Venetian fleets attempted to disrupt Ottoman maritime communications.

The conflict was expensive and lengthy, but it gradually strengthened the Ottoman position.

The conquest of Euboea in 1470 was particularly significant.

The island, known to the Ottomans as Eğriboz, had been one of Venice's most important possessions in the Aegean.

Its capture demonstrated the growing strength of the Ottoman navy and confirmed that Mehmed was building an empire capable of fighting major European maritime powers rather than merely defending its own coastline.

Ottoman forces also expanded their control along the Albanian coast.

When peace was finally reached in 1479,
Venice had been forced to recognize the
changed balance of power.

Mehmed had won something more important
than a single battlefield victory.

He had demonstrated that the Ottoman
Empire could compete with one of Europe's
most experienced maritime republics.

The Black Sea

Mehmed's ambitions also extended northward.

The Black Sea had long been connected to Byzantine, Genoese, Venetian, and local commercial networks.

After the conquest of Constantinople, Mehmed wanted to transform the Black Sea into an Ottoman controlled sphere.

This required more than capturing Byzantine territory.

The Genoese possessed important colonies and trading centers along the Black Sea coast. The Crimean Khanate maintained its own political interests.

The important coastal states of the region had their own rulers and commercial networks.

Mehmed began systematically reducing these competing influences.

The capture of Trebizond in 1461 had already given the Ottomans control over one of the most important former Byzantine centers on the southern coast.

Further campaigns strengthened Ottoman authority in the Black Sea region.

The process demonstrated once again that Mehmed thought in terms of strategic systems.

He did not look at Constantinople as an isolated city, saw the waters around it.

He did not look at Trebizond as an isolated kingdom, saw the Black Sea.

The same strategic mentality that had helped him isolate Constantinople was now being applied across an enormous geographical area.

Mehmed and the Akkoyunlu

Challenge

The greatest military threat to Mehmed's authority in Anatolia eventually came from the Akkoyunlu, a powerful Turkmen confederation that had risen under Uzun Hasan.

Uzun Hasan controlled large parts of eastern Anatolia and Iran and possessed ambitions that brought him into direct conflict with Ottoman interests.

The rivalry became increasingly serious during the 1460s.

Mehmed could not allow an independent power of this scale to dominate eastern Anatolia.

Such a state could threaten Ottoman territory, interfere with the loyalty of Anatolian rulers, and potentially encourage Ottoman enemies elsewhere.

Diplomacy failed to resolve the problem.

The two powers prepared for war.

The Battle of Otlukbeli

In 1473, the Ottoman and Akkoyunlu armies met at Otlukbeli.

The resulting Ottoman victory was one of the most important battles of Mehmed's later reign.

The Ottoman army had demonstrated once again the effectiveness of its combination of cavalry, infantry, firearms, artillery, and disciplined command. The victory greatly strengthened Ottoman authority in Anatolia

and reduced the immediate threat posed by Uzun Hasan.

Otlukbeli also revealed something important about Mehmed as a commander.

The Sultan who had conquered Constantinople was still adapting.

His armies were not frozen in the military traditions of his grandfather's generation.

Ottoman warfare was increasingly incorporating firearms and artillery into a broader system that could be used against both fortified positions and large field armies.

Mehmed the scholar

The transformation of the Ottoman state was not limited to military organization.

Mehmed also worked to create a more centralized legal and administrative system.

The famous Kanunnâme of Mehmed II brought together regulations concerning government, taxation, punishment, official ranks, court organization, and relations between different elements of the state.

Some of these practices had existed before Mehmed and were written down during his reign rather than invented entirely by him.

Nevertheless, the codification of these rules represented a major stage in the development of the Ottoman state.

The purpose was practical.

A large empire could not depend entirely upon the personal decisions of the Sultan.

It needed rules.

Officials needed defined responsibilities.

Taxes had to be collected according to recognizable standards.

Military obligations needed to be established.

The central government needed ways of controlling provincial officials.

Mehmed therefore strengthened the legal traditions of the state while also increasing the authority of the Sultan.

He was creating an empire in which the ruler stood at the center of a carefully structured administrative hierarchy.

The Imperial Council

The government institutions of Mehmed's reign also helped shape what would later become the classical Ottoman administrative system.

The Divan, or Imperial Council, developed considerably under Mehmed.

One important change was that the Sultan no longer presided over its ordinary meetings in the manner of earlier rulers.

The Grand Vizier increasingly assumed responsibility for conducting the council's proceedings while the Sultan maintained ultimate authority over the state.

This may appear contradictory.

The Sultan was becoming more powerful while becoming less directly involved in the routine meetings of government.

In reality, the system strengthened the monarchy.

The Sultan could remain above the daily disputes of officials while receiving reports and making final decisions.

The Grand Vizier and other administrators became instruments through which imperial authority could be exercised throughout the empire.

Mehmed was therefore creating a political structure that could survive beyond his own personality.

This was one of the most important achievements of his reign.

The Question of Succession

Mehmed's experience as a young prince had taught him the dangers of dynastic conflict.

The Ottoman Interregnum had nearly destroyed the state.

His own first reign had been disrupted by the political struggle between his authority and that of his father.

He therefore viewed the succession problem with particular seriousness.

Ottoman princes were not guaranteed peaceful inheritance.

Several sons of a Sultan could claim the throne.

Each prince could potentially gather supporters within the military and political establishment.

A succession struggle could therefore turn immediately into civil war.

Mehmed attempted to address this problem through a principle that later became associated with his dynastic law.

A Sultan who inherited the throne could order the killing of brothers when this was considered necessary for the preservation of political order.

The law is associated with the phrase nizâmî âlem, meaning the preservation of the order of the world or state.

The principle was extraordinarily harsh.

It also revealed how Mehmed understood the survival of the empire.

For him, the state could not be allowed to collapse because princes were competing for power.

The dynasty had to remain unified under one ruler.

That principle would have terrible consequences for Ottoman princes in later generations.

It would also become one of the darkest parts of Mehmed's institutional legacy.

The Sultan and His Intellectual World

Despite his reputation for warfare and centralized authority, Mehmed remained deeply interested in scholarship.

His court brought together Muslim scholars, Greek intellectuals, Persian writers, and European artists.

His interests included geography, astronomy, mathematics, philosophy, history, and literature.

His curiosity about the ancient world was particularly significant.

Mehmed possessed a fascination with Alexander the Great and the Roman emperors.

His ambitions were global in scale, and he understood conquest partly through the examples of earlier rulers.

This helps explain why his patronage of European art mattered to him.

The Italian medalist Bertoldo di Giovanni created a portrait medal based on the likeness established by Gentile Bellini.

The imagery presented Mehmed in a tradition associated with Roman and Byzantine imperial rulers.

The Metropolitan Museum notes that Mehmed deliberately favored Italian medalists because he saw their art as a way of emphasizing his connection to the imperial lineage of ancient Rome and Byzantium.

The meaning was unmistakable.

Mehmed was presenting himself as the ruler
who had inherited the Roman capital.

The Sultan of Land and Sea

By the later years of his reign, Mehmed had acquired a reputation as a ruler of both land and sea.

His armies had conquered cities and fortresses across southeastern Europe and Anatolia.

His navy was increasingly capable of operating across the Aegean and eastern Mediterranean.

His title as a ruler of both land and sea reflected the growing geographical scope of Ottoman power. Ottoman campaigns had reached deep into the Balkans, across Anatolia, and into the waters surrounding Greece and the Adriatic.

Yet Mehmed's ambitions extended even farther.

His attention now turned toward Italy.

The Road Toward Italy

The possibility of an Ottoman foothold in southern Italy had existed in Mehmed's strategic thinking for years.

Italy was politically fragmented.

The major Italian states often competed with one another rather than cooperating against the Ottomans.

The Adriatic was relatively close to Ottoman territory in the Balkans.

The conquest of Constantinople had strengthened Ottoman naval capabilities.

And Rome itself possessed enormous symbolic importance.

If Mehmed could establish a permanent Ottoman presence in Italy, the political consequences would be immense.

He would not merely have conquered another province.

He would have brought the Ottoman Empire directly into the heart of western Christendom.

In 1480, the opportunity appeared.

Mehmed sent Gedik Ahmed Pasha across the
Adriatic with a large Ottoman fleet.

The Ottoman forces landed in southern Italy.

Otranto

The Ottoman fleet reached Apulia in July 1480.

On 11 August, Otranto fell after a siege.

The event caused enormous alarm in Italy.

For the first time, an Ottoman army had established a significant foothold on Italian soil.

The conquest of Constantinople had once terrified western Europe because the

Ottomans had captured the great city of the eastern Christian world.

Now the Ottoman military was inside Italy itself.

The strategic position of Otranto was ideal for further operations.

It could serve as a bridgehead for additional campaigns along the Adriatic and toward the Italian interior.

Mehmed's forces carried out raids and prepared for a larger campaign in the following year. Ottoman sources and later

scholarship connect the expedition with a broader imperial strategy that contemplated further expansion into Italy.

The possibility of an Ottoman advance toward Rome was now no longer merely an imagined nightmare.

It was a military possibility.

Mehmed's empire had reached Italy, then everything changed.

The Last Campaign

In the spring of 1481, Mehmed prepared another major military expedition.

The exact destination of the campaign remains a subject of historical debate, and this uncertainty has contributed to the mystery surrounding his final days. Some sources and later interpretations connect the expedition with a renewed campaign toward the western Mediterranean, while other evidence points toward Anatolia.

Whatever his ultimate objective, Mehmed left Constantinople with another army.

He would never reach his destination.

By this stage of his reign, the Sultan was physically unwell.

He suffered from serious health problems, including gout, and his condition had reportedly deteriorated during the final years of his life.

On 3 May 1481, after crossing into Anatolia, Mehmed died at Hünkârçayırı near Gebze.

He was forty nine years old now.

The man who had conquered Constantinople,
defeated major European and Asian powers,
transformed Ottoman government, rebuilt the
Byzantine capital, and carried Ottoman
armies to Italy was dead.

How Did Mehmed Die?

The cause of Mehmed's death has been debated for centuries.

The most widely accepted medical explanation is that he died from illness associated with gout and other chronic health problems.

Later stories claimed that he had been poisoned.

Those accusations have become part of the mythology surrounding his death, but the evidence for deliberate poisoning is weak.

The surviving historical tradition does not provide sufficient evidence to establish that Mehmed was murdered. The Ottoman scholarly tradition identifies gout as the principal explanation, while the poisoning theory rests largely on an interpretation of a passage in Âşıkpaşazâde rather than a consistent body of evidence.

The uncertainty is fitting in a way.

Mehmed had spent his life surrounded by political intrigue, dynastic conflict, foreign enemies, and court rivalries.

Even his death became entangled in suspicion.

But whatever the final cause, the political consequences were immediate.

The empire now needed a new Sultan.

And Mehmed had left behind two sons who could potentially claim the throne.

Bayezid and Cem

Mehmed's death created another dynastic crisis.

His eldest surviving son was Bayezid, who governed in Amasya.

His younger son was Cem, who governed in Karaman.

Both princes possessed supporters, both had legitimate claims and both had experienced political networks.

The question was not simply which prince was older.

The question was which prince could reach Constantinople first and secure the support of the military and political establishment.

The situation became extremely tense.

Grand Vizier Karamani Mehmed Pasha favored Cem, while powerful figures in Constantinople supported Bayezid.

When news of Mehmed's death arrived, political factions moved rapidly to secure their preferred candidate.

Karamani Mehmed Pasha was killed during the resulting upheaval, while the Janissaries rallied in favor of Bayezid.

The man who had created laws to prevent the Ottoman succession from destroying the empire could not prevent that struggle from beginning almost immediately after his death.

The new Sultan would be Bayezid II, but Cem would not surrender.

His struggle with his brother would eventually draw European powers into Ottoman dynastic politics and create a crisis that lasted for years.

The World After Mehmed

The death of Mehmed II did not bring an end to Ottoman expansion.

In many ways, his death marked the transition from the formative stage of the empire into the era of its great imperial consolidation.

Bayezid II inherited a state that was far larger and more centralized than the one his grandfather had ruled.

Constantinople had become the permanent center of Ottoman government.

The Byzantine political world had disappeared.

The Ottoman state possessed territory on both sides of the Black Sea approaches and controlled much of the Balkans and Anatolia.

Its navy had become a serious Mediterranean power.

Its bureaucracy had become increasingly sophisticated.

Its legal system had been more systematically organized.

Its cultural institutions were expanding.

The empire Mehmed left behind was
therefore not merely larger.

It was structurally different.

He had created a political system capable of
supporting further expansion.

The Significance of Constantinople

Perhaps Mehmed's greatest achievement was the transformation of Constantinople.

The city he conquered in 1453 was diminished and impoverished compared with the great imperial metropolis of earlier centuries.

The city that emerged under Ottoman rule became something else.

It became the center of an empire that would eventually stretch from Central Europe to the

Arabian world and from North Africa to the
Caucasus.

Its population increased, markets expanded,
mosques, schools, palaces, and
administrative institutions multiplied.

Greek, Armenian, Jewish, Muslim, and other
communities lived within the same imperial
city.

The city therefore became neither simply
Byzantine nor simply Ottoman in the sense of
erasing its past.

It became a layered imperial capital.

The Ottoman rulers inherited its Roman
geography.

They inherited its Byzantine architectural
traditions.

They inherited its commercial connections
and its religious importance.

Then they transformed all of these things into
the foundations of their own empire.

Mehmed's Legacy as a Ruler

Mehmed's legacy is difficult to summarize because he represented several different types of ruler at once.

He was a conqueror, a strategist, a lawgiver, a builder, an administrator, an imperial ideologue, a patron of scholars and artists.

He was also capable of extraordinary ruthlessness.

The contradiction is important.

Mehmed did not build his empire despite his willingness to use violence.

He built it partly through that willingness.

The conquest of Constantinople caused immense suffering.

The wars that followed did the same.

His treatment of political opponents could be severe.

His approach to dynastic succession was brutal.

Yet the institutions he created also outlived him and helped the Ottoman Empire become

one of the most durable imperial states in
history.

Mehmed's Legal Legacy

The legal and administrative structures associated with Mehmed became especially influential.

His kanunnâme helped formalize the relationship between the Sultan, government officials, taxation, and subjects.

Later Ottoman rulers modified these arrangements, but Mehmed's work provided a foundation for the development of Ottoman imperial law.

This was important because empire required predictability.

A Sultan could conquer a territory in a single campaign.

He could not govern it permanently through military force alone.

Governance required many aspects.

Mehmed understood this.

His greatest institutional achievement was therefore not any particular legal clause.

It was the creation of a system in which imperial authority could be transmitted

through institutions rather than relying
entirely upon the personality of one ruler.

Mehmed's Cultural Legacy

The cultural legacy of the Sultan was equally significant.

Ottoman architecture reached a new level of ambition during his reign.

Scholarship flourished at the court.

The city became a center of intellectual exchange.

Artists from the Islamic world and Europe encountered one another.

The Sultan's interest in classical antiquity encouraged the study of Greek and Roman history.

Mehmed's court therefore became one of the places where different intellectual traditions met.

This aspect of his reign deserves emphasis because the conquest of Constantinople is often described as a dividing line between civilizations.

In reality, Mehmed's court was deeply interconnected with several civilizations at once.

The Sultan wanted to inherit the Byzantine past while remaining unmistakably Ottoman and Muslim.

He wanted the prestige of Rome while ruling through an Islamic imperial tradition.

He wanted European artistic techniques while maintaining the authority of the Ottoman court.

His empire was built through this mixture.

Mehmed and Rome

Perhaps the most extraordinary part of Mehmed's legacy was his claim to the Roman imperial inheritance.

He did not regard Constantinople as merely a trophy.

He saw it as the seat of an empire.

The portraits and medals commissioned during his reign reveal a ruler interested in how he would be remembered by the outside world. His association with Roman and

Byzantine imperial imagery was deliberate.

The Metropolitan Museum's interpretation of

his portrait medal explicitly notes that

Mehmed associated himself with the

emperors of ancient Rome and Byzantium.

This reveals the scale of his ambition.

The Ottoman dynasty had begun on the

frontier.

Mehmed wanted it to be understood as an

imperial dynasty.

Osman had created a state.

Mehmed wanted to inherit a civilization.

The Conqueror and His Enemies

Mehmed's enemies also became part of his legacy.

Constantine XI became remembered as the last Byzantine emperor.

Giovanni Giustiniani became associated with the defense of Constantinople.

Vlad III became the legendary enemy of the Ottoman Sultan.

Uzun Hasan became the eastern rival defeated at Otlukbeli.

Venice became the maritime opponent
against whom Mehmed fought for sixteen
years.

The story of Mehmed's reign therefore cannot
be separated from the people who resisted
him.

They reveal the scale of the world he
confronted.

And they also show why his success was so
remarkable.

He was not conquering helpless states one
after another.

He was fighting kingdoms, republics, princes,
emperors, rival Muslim powers, crusading
coalitions, and entrenched political
institutions.

He repeatedly faced opponents who
possessed formidable resources of their own.

He won often enough to transform the
political geography of an entire region.

The Last Image of Mehmed

There is something fitting about the final image of Mehmed II.

He was once a twelve year old boy who inherited the Ottoman throne, lost effective control of it, and returned to Manisa.

At nineteen, he inherited the Sultanate for the second time.

He then spent the next three decades transforming himself and the state around him.

He destroyed an empire that had existed for more than a thousand years and built a new imperial system within its capital.

By the time he died in 1481, the Ottoman Empire had become something that Osman could never have imagined when he ruled his small frontier principality.

Mehmed had not merely captured Constantinople.

He had changed what the Ottoman state was capable of becoming.

And the empire he left behind was about to
enter an even greater age.

The son of Murad II was dead.

The empire of Mehmed II was only beginning.

- **Conclusion**

Mehmed II was born into a dynasty that had not yet become the empire it would eventually be.

His ancestors had begun on the frontier of Anatolia.

They had fought Byzantine rulers.

They had crossed into Europe.

They had established themselves in the Balkans.

They had survived the disaster of Ankara.

They had rebuilt their state.

By the time Mehmed was born, the Ottoman
Empire was already powerful.

But the defining city remained outside its
control.

Constantinople stood as both a political
obstacle and an imperial prize.

The boy who grew up in Edirne and Manisa
would eventually become the ruler capable of
removing that obstacle.

Yet the conquest of Constantinople was only one part of his achievement.

Mehmed did not simply capture the city.

He rebuilt it.

And strengthened the government around the Sultan.

He developed military institutions, codified political regulations, expanded into Anatolia and the Balkans.

He conquered Trebizond and challenged Venice.

His ambitions reached far beyond the walls
he had conquered in 1453.

At the same time, the story of Mehmed
cannot be separated from the people who
opposed him.

Constantine XI represents the final stand of
the Byzantine state.

Giovanni Giustiniani represents the
determination of the defenders who fought to
keep Constantinople alive.

Vlad III represents resistance on the Ottoman frontier and the brutal reality of politics in the Balkans.

The Venetian Republic represents the commercial and maritime world that Mehmed challenged.

Uzun Hasan represents the eastern powers that refused to accept Ottoman supremacy.

Their struggles reveal that Mehmed was not moving through an empty world.

He was fighting against established political systems.

He defeated many of them, absorbed others
and negotiated with the remaining.

And in doing so he changed the balance of
power across an enormous part of the known
world.

The most remarkable thing about Mehmed
may therefore be that his greatest
achievement was not the destruction of
something old.

It was the creation of something new.

The Byzantine Empire had ended.

The Ottoman Empire had begun a new imperial phase.

Constantinople had fallen.

Its imperial life had not ended.

It had changed hands and changed identity.

The Roman city became the Ottoman capital.

The frontier dynasty became an imperial house.

The young prince who had once lost his throne became one of the most powerful rulers of the fifteenth century.

His story began before he was born, with the rise of the Ottoman dynasty and the long decline of the Byzantine Empire.

It continued through his education, his first failed reign, his return to power, and his preparations for the conquest of Constantinople.

It reached its most famous moment when the walls finally fell on 29 May 1453.

It continued through decades of war, diplomacy, construction, scholarship, and political transformation.

And it ended in 1481 when Mehmed died on campaign, leaving behind an empire that no longer resembled the state inherited by his grandfather.

The world after Mehmed would continue to change.

His empire would expand under Bayezid II.

It would become a dominant power under Selim I and reach an extraordinary height under Suleiman.

It would also survive for centuries after them.

That endurance is perhaps the final measure
of Mehmed's success.

He did not merely win his lifetime.

He altered the future of the state he ruled.

He left behind a capital that would remain
one of the world's great cities.

He left behind institutions that would govern
an enormous empire.

He left behind an imperial vision that would
shape Ottoman identity.

And he left behind a name that history would
remember long after the army that marched
behind him had disappeared.