

The Restorer: Sultan Mehmed I and the Reforging of the Ottoman Empire (1413-1421)

Introduction: From the Ashes of Ankara

On the eve of the 15th century, the Ottoman state, under the energetic and aggressive leadership of Sultan Bayezid I, had reached a zenith of power. Through a series of rapid campaigns, Bayezid had forged a centralized empire stretching from the Danube to the Euphrates, annexing Turkish principalities (*beyliks*) in Anatolia and crushing a Crusader army in the Balkans.¹ This expansion, however, brought the Ottomans into direct conflict with another formidable power: the Central Asian conqueror Timur (Tamerlane). The collision of these two expansionist forces culminated in the Battle of Ankara on July 28, 1402, a cataclysmic event that shattered the Ottoman state.³ The Ottoman army was annihilated, and Sultan Bayezid himself was captured, dying in captivity the following year.³

The defeat at Ankara precipitated the immediate decentralization and collapse of the centralized Ottoman state, ushering in an eleven-year period of dynastic warfare known as the *Fetret Devri*, or the Interregnum (1402-1413).³ This was not merely a pause in dynastic rule but a bloody and socially divisive chapter of Ottoman history in its own right, a period of such profound crisis that it brought the empire to the brink of total dissolution.⁵ Timur deliberately engineered this collapse by dismembering the empire, restoring the lands of the annexed Anatolian beyliks to their former rulers and dividing the remaining Ottoman territory among four of Bayezid's surviving sons: Süleyman, İsa, Mûsa, and Mehmed.⁴ This act ignited a fratricidal war for the throne that would consume the Ottoman realm for over a decade. From this crucible of chaos, one prince, Mehmed Çelebi, would emerge victorious. Sultan Mehmed I, through a masterful combination of patient military strategy, astute diplomacy that leveraged the self-interest of his rivals' allies, and a sophisticated program of political legitimation, successfully navigated the turmoil of the Interregnum to reunite the Ottoman state. His reign (1413-1421), though brief, was not merely a restoration of the pre-1402 status quo but a fundamental reforging of the Ottoman polity. He established a more resilient foundation that enabled the imperial expansion of his successors, earning him the enduring historical title of the "second founder" (*ikinci kurucu*) of the Ottoman Empire.¹¹

Part I: The Crucible of Civil War: The Ascent of Mehmed Çelebi (1402-1413)

The Ottoman Interregnum was a period of extreme political complexity, involving multiple internal factions, foreign powers, and a constantly shifting map of alliances and territorial control.⁵ The path to reunification was a grueling, eleven-year struggle that tested the military and political acumen of all four of Bayezid's sons.

The Post-Ankara Political Landscape (1402-1403)

In the immediate aftermath of the Battle of Ankara, Timur systematically dismantled Bayezid's Anatolian empire, restoring the beyliks of Karaman, Aydın, Menteşe, Germiyan, and Saruhan to their former ruling families.² This action erased decades of Ottoman conquest in Anatolia and confined the dynastic struggle to the core Ottoman lands. The sons of Bayezid scrambled to secure what territory they could:

- **Süleyman Çelebi**, the eldest, fled the battlefield with the Grand Vizier Çandarlı Ali Pasha and the state treasury, establishing himself in the European province of Rumeli with his capital at Edirne.⁴
- **İsa Çelebi** asserted control over the old capital of Bursa and the surrounding region in western Anatolia.⁴
- **Mehmed Çelebi**, the youngest of the main contenders, was saved from the battlefield by his tutor and future Grand Vizier, Bayezid Pasha, and retreated to his provincial governorship in Amasya, where he established a secure but isolated power base.⁴

Süleyman, fearing a potential invasion from Timur and needing to secure his rear against his brothers, immediately entered into negotiations with the Christian powers. In the resulting Treaty of Gallipoli (February 1403), he made significant concessions to the Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Palaiologos, Venice, and Genoa. He ceded strategic territories, including the vital port of Thessaloniki and coastal lands on the Marmara and Black Seas, and, most humiliatingly, released the Emperor from his obligation to pay tribute.² This treaty underscored the desperate weakness of the Ottoman position and the degree to which foreign powers could now intervene in dynastic politics.

The Anatolian Struggle: Mehmed vs. İsa (1403-1406)

While Süleyman consolidated his rule in Europe, the primary conflict played out in Anatolia between Mehmed and İsa. Operating from Amasya, Mehmed patiently built his strength. He first proposed that he and İsa divide Anatolia between them, but İsa, holding the prestigious capital of Bursa, refused.⁴ The inevitable clash came at the Battle of Ulubat. Mehmed's forces

were victorious, and he entered Bursa in 1404, declaring himself the sovereign of Ottoman Anatolia.⁴

İsa fled to Constantinople, becoming a pawn in the larger dynastic game. Süleyman, now recognizing Mehmed as his principal rival, provided İsa with an army to retake Anatolia. However, the people of Bursa remained loyal to Mehmed, and İsa's attempt failed. After seeking further alliances with other Anatolian beys, İsa made a final, unsuccessful bid for power. He was eventually captured and strangled by Mehmed's men in 1406, his body brought to Bursa for burial.⁴ With this victory, Mehmed eliminated his first rival and solidified his control over the Ottoman heartland in Anatolia.

The Grand Gambit: Unleashing Mûsa on Rumeli (1409-1411)

Mehmed's success in Anatolia prompted a direct response from Süleyman, who crossed the straits with a powerful army, captured Bursa and Ankara, and forced Mehmed to retreat to his Amasya stronghold.² Outmatched in a direct confrontation, Mehmed executed a brilliant and decisive strategic maneuver. He located his other brother, Mûsa Çelebi, who had been released from Timurid captivity and was residing with the Karamanoğlu bey, and dispatched him to Rumeli in 1409. The plan was for Mûsa, with support from Wallachia, to open a second front and challenge Süleyman in his own European territories.⁴

The gambit worked perfectly. Mûsa's arrival in the Balkans rallied support from disgruntled frontier lords and Christian vassals, including the Serbs and Wallachians.⁴ The threat to his capital forced Süleyman to abandon his successful Anatolian campaign and rush back to Edirne. This withdrawal allowed Mehmed to reoccupy Bursa and Ankara unopposed.⁴ In Rumeli, after a series of battles where allegiances shifted dramatically, Mûsa's forces eventually cornered Süleyman as he tried to flee to Constantinople. He was captured and executed in February 1411.⁴ Mûsa promptly declared himself the new Sultan in Edirne.

The Final Confrontation: Mehmed vs. Mûsa (1411-1413)

With İsa and Süleyman dead, the eleven-year struggle entered its final phase between the two remaining brothers. Mûsa, however, quickly proved to be a harsh and erratic ruler. He broke his pact with Mehmed and launched aggressive campaigns against his erstwhile allies, Serbia and the Byzantine Empire, going so far as to besiege Constantinople.⁴ His appointment of the radical mystic Sheikh Bedreddin as his chief military judge (

kazasker) further alienated the traditional Ottoman military and religious establishment.⁴

Mûsa's aggressive policies drove his former supporters directly into Mehmed's camp. Emperor Manuel II, the Serbian Despot Stefan Lazarević, and influential Rumelian frontier commanders like Gazi Evrenos Bey all allied with Mehmed, viewing him as the more stable and predictable alternative.⁴ Aided by the Byzantine fleet, which ferried his troops across the straits, Mehmed

launched his final campaign into Rumeli.⁴ The decisive battle was fought on July 5, 1413, in the Çamurlu plain near modern-day Sofia, Bulgaria. Mûsa's army, abandoned by many of its commanders, was defeated. Mûsa was captured while trying to flee and was executed.⁴ With the death of his last brother, Mehmed Çelebi became the sole and undisputed ruler of the reunited Ottoman domains, formally ending the

Fetret Devri.¹¹

Year(s)	Key Events	Anatolia (Controlling Prince/Faction)	Rumeli (Controlling Prince/Faction)	Key Alliances/Treaties
1402	Battle of Ankara; Bayezid I captured by Timur.	Timur restores beyliks. İsa takes Bursa; Mehmed takes Amasya.	Süleyman flees to Edirne.	-
1403	Süleyman signs Treaty of Gallipoli. Mûsa defeats İsa for Bursa.	İsa retakes Bursa from Mûsa. Mehmed consolidates in Amasya.	Süleyman consolidates power.	Süleyman makes major concessions to Byzantium, Venice, Genoa.
1404-1406	Mehmed defeats İsa at Ulubat, takes Bursa (1404). İsa, backed by Süleyman, fails to retake Bursa. İsa is killed (1406).	Mehmed becomes master of Anatolia.	Süleyman remains in control.	Süleyman supports İsa against Mehmed.
1406-1409	Süleyman crosses into Anatolia, takes Bursa and Ankara, pushes Mehmed back to Amasya.	Süleyman controls Western Anatolia; Mehmed holds Amasya region.	Süleyman is largely absent.	-
1409-1411	Mehmed sends Mûsa to Rumeli. Mûsa gains support, forces Süleyman to return. Süleyman is defeated and killed (Feb 1411).	Mehmed re-takes Bursa and Ankara.	Mûsa defeats and kills Süleyman, takes control.	Mehmed allies with Mûsa. Mûsa allies with Wallachia and Serbia.
1411-1413	Mûsa attacks Byzantium and	Mehmed controls all of Anatolia.	Mûsa's support base erodes due	Byzantium and Serbia shift

	Serbia, alienating his allies. Mehmed allies with Byzantium and Serbia.		to his harsh rule.	allegiance from Mûsa to Mehmed.
1413	Mehmed, with Byzantine and Serbian aid, defeats and kills Mûsa at the Battle of Çamurlu (July 5).	Mehmed	Mehmed	Mehmed I becomes sole ruler.

The survival of the Ottoman dynasty through this period of near-total collapse can be attributed significantly to the strength of its institutions in Rumeli. While Timur's invasion effectively reversed a generation of Ottoman conquests in Anatolia by restoring the Turkish beyliks, the Ottoman administrative and military presence in the Balkans proved far more resilient.¹ The economic resources and military manpower of the European provinces sustained the warring princes and provided the ultimate foundation from which the state could be rebuilt.¹ The fact that Edirne, not the old capital of Bursa, served as the center of power for Süleyman, Mûsa, and finally Mehmed underscores the westward shift in the empire's center of gravity and the critical role Rumeli played in its restoration. Furthermore, the civil war itself acted as a catalyst for a crucial development in Ottoman political culture: the birth of an official historiography. The unprecedented act of fratricide on such a scale required a new form of justification beyond the traditional legitimacy derived from holy war (*ghaza*). Works composed in Mehmed I's court were deliberately crafted to legitimize his victory and justify his actions against his brothers, marking the beginning of a state-sponsored literary tradition aimed at shaping historical memory to serve dynastic interests.⁵

Part II: The Architect of Restoration: Domestic Policy and State Consolidation

Emerging as the victor in 1413, Mehmed I faced the monumental task of governing a state ravaged by more than a decade of civil war and social upheaval.¹⁷ His eight-year reign was defined by a deliberate and systematic policy of consolidation, centralization, and legitimation, aimed at restoring internal order and rebuilding the institutional foundations of the empire.

Re-establishing Central Authority

The primary objective of Mehmed I's domestic policy was to reinstate effective central authority over a fragmented realm.¹⁶ He moved to secure the loyalty of the military and administrative elites who had been divided during the Interregnum, establishing a more organized and disciplined state apparatus.¹⁶ In the Balkans, he initially pursued a policy of "relative restraint," restoring the vassal system rather than attempting immediate, large-scale annexations, a pragmatic approach that allowed him to secure his European frontiers while focusing on more pressing issues.⁹

A key, and perhaps the most consequential, institutional development of his reign was the formal implementation of the *devşirme* system. This practice involved the levy of Christian boys from the Balkan provinces, who were then converted to Islam and trained for service in the elite Janissary corps or the palace administration.¹⁸ While its origins are debated, sources indicate that the system was put into practice during Mehmed's reign to supplement the *pençik* system (which entitled the sultan to one-fifth of war captives).²¹ The *pençik* had become an unreliable source of manpower during the Interregnum due to the lack of major foreign conquests. The *devşirme*, by contrast, provided a regular and systematic supply of soldiers and officials—known as *kapıkulları* (slaves of the Porte)—whose loyalty was exclusively to the person of the sultan, not to regional or tribal interests.²¹ This was a direct institutional response to the unreliability of the Turkish notable families, whose allegiances had shifted frequently during the civil war, and it became a cornerstone of Ottoman centralization for centuries to come.

Economic and Social Recovery

Mehmed's reign was a period of deliberate peace and reconstruction, allowing the battered provinces of Anatolia and Rumeli to heal the wounds of the long conflict.¹⁶ His policies aligned with the fundamental economic priority of the Ottoman state: ensuring the provisioning of the capital, major cities, and the army to maintain political stability and social order.²⁴ The restoration of central authority was a prerequisite for the recovery of agriculture and trade, the twin pillars of the state's tax revenue.¹⁹

To facilitate this recovery and to project an image of a pious, just, and benevolent ruler, Mehmed I became a significant patron of public works.²⁶ He commissioned the construction of mosques, *madrasas* (schools), and *imarets* (refectories for the poor) in the empire's major cities, particularly Bursa and Edirne.¹¹ These projects not only fulfilled crucial social and religious functions but also stimulated local economies through construction and employment, visibly demonstrating the return of stability and prosperity under his rule.

Legitimacy in Stone and Tile: The Political Significance of the Yeşil Külliye

The crowning achievement of Mehmed I's reign and the most potent symbol of his program of restoration is the Yeşil Külliye (Green Complex) in the former capital of Bursa.²⁸ Commissioned by the sultan and constructed between 1412 and 1424 under the supervision of his trusted vizier Hacı İvaz Pasha, the complex was a sophisticated instrument of political legitimation.²⁸ The complex was a deliberate and powerful statement symbolizing the "rebirth of the Ottoman rule" after the devastation of the Interregnum.³² Its architectural grandeur and the unparalleled quality of its tilework were intended to demonstrate that the restored dynasty was not merely a shadow of its former self but was capable of producing artistic and architectural marvels that surpassed those of the pre-Ankara era.³⁵ This "boastful rhetoric of the buildings" was a calculated projection of power and stability that stood in stark contrast to the political fragility Mehmed had inherited.³⁶ In a highly unusual architectural choice, the Green Tomb (*Yeşil Türbe*), Mehmed's mausoleum, was built on a hill overlooking the mosque. This has been interpreted as a conscious political message to "friend and foe" that the Ottoman dynasty was "still standing" tall despite its recent trials.³⁵ The complex also served to legitimize Mehmed's rule in the wake of the fratricidal civil war and to counter criticisms of his relative youth.³⁶ Architecturally, it consciously referenced earlier Ottoman and even frontier *ghazi* traditions, thereby visually asserting dynastic continuity and Mehmed's rightful place as the heir to his father, Bayezid I.³⁶ The artistic program of the complex was equally significant. The magnificent tile decorations were created by a group of artisans known as the "Masters of Tabriz," who brought with them the sophisticated techniques and aesthetics of the Timurid-Persian world.²⁸ The adoption of this "International Timurid-Turkmen style" was a profound political act.³⁶ By appropriating and mastering the artistic language of the very empire that had nearly destroyed them, Mehmed I was visually asserting the Ottoman state's own imperial status and cultural sophistication on an international stage. This architectural patronage was not simply a matter of aesthetics; it was a form of political warfare and a key component of his strategy for state-building.

Part III: Trials of a New Order: Internal Threats to the Sultanate

Mehmed I's victory in 1413 brought unity but not absolute stability. His reign was immediately tested by two major internal rebellions that exposed the deep social, religious, and political fissures that the Interregnum had widened. These challenges revealed that the consolidation

of the Ottoman state was far from complete.

The Rebellion of Sheikh Bedreddin (1416)

The most formidable internal threat to Mehmed's rule came from Sheikh Bedreddin, a charismatic and highly respected Islamic scholar and mystic who had served as Mûsa Çelebi's chief military judge (*kazasker*).¹¹ The rebellion he inspired was a complex socio-religious movement with deep roots in the turmoil of the preceding decades.

Bedreddin's ideology was a form of populist, syncretic Sufism that was deeply subversive to the emerging Ottoman state orthodoxy. He preached the "oneness of being," a doctrine that advocated for the communal ownership of property and the equality of all people, including Muslims and Christians, arguing that social and religious divisions were artificial barriers to unity with God.¹⁴ This message found a receptive audience among the diverse populations who felt disenfranchised by the centralizing Ottoman state. The rebellion was fueled by the widespread economic misery and social dislocation that followed the Timurid invasion and the civil war.⁴¹ Bedreddin became the figurehead for a heterogeneous coalition that included nomadic Turcomans resentful of state control, Christian peasants, dispossessed soldiers who had lost their land grants (

timars) after Mûsa's defeat, and disgruntled frontier lords.¹⁴

In 1416, the movement erupted into open revolt on two fronts simultaneously. In western Anatolia, Bedreddin's disciples Börklüce Mustafa and Torlak Kemal led uprisings in the regions of Karaburun and Manisa. At the same time, Bedreddin himself, having fled his exile in Iznik to Wallachia, raised the standard of revolt in Dobruja in the Balkans.¹⁴ The coordinated nature of these uprisings posed a serious challenge to Mehmed's authority.¹⁴ The Ottoman response was swift and brutal. The Grand Vizier Bayezid Pasha was dispatched to Anatolia, where he crushed the revolts with merciless force. Börklüce Mustafa and thousands of his followers were executed.¹⁴ Bedreddin's own rebellion in the Balkans was quickly suppressed. He was captured, brought before the Sultan in Serres, and, after a summary trial, was hanged in the marketplace in 1420.¹⁴ The violent suppression of this movement marked a definitive moment in Ottoman history, solidifying the state's commitment to Sunni orthodoxy and its intolerance of popular movements that challenged its political and religious authority.

The Pretender: The "Düzmece" Mustafa Affair (1415-1417)

Concurrent with the Bedreddin revolt, Mehmed faced a dynastic challenge from his brother, Mustafa Çelebi. Mustafa had been captured at the Battle of Ankara and taken to Samarkand by Timur.¹¹ He re-emerged around 1415, claiming his rightful share of the Ottoman throne. To undermine his legitimacy, Mehmed's government launched a propaganda campaign, branding him

Düzmece Mustafa—"Mustafa the Impostor".⁴⁵ Despite this, modern historians largely concur

that he was a genuine son of Bayezid I and thus a legitimate claimant to the throne.⁴⁵ Mustafa's challenge was sustained by a network of foreign and domestic support. He was backed by the Timurid ruler Shahrukh, the Anatolian beyliks of Karaman and Candar, and the Voivode of Wallachia, all of whom saw an opportunity to weaken the newly reunified Ottoman state.⁴⁵ Most critically, Mustafa sought and received refuge from the Byzantine Emperor Manuel II in the city of Thessaloniki.¹¹ The Byzantines, continuing their policy of playing Ottoman princes against one another, used Mustafa as a strategic pawn to exert pressure on Mehmed.⁴⁵

Mehmed I responded with a multifaceted strategy. He besieged Thessaloniki to compel the Byzantines to surrender his brother while simultaneously continuing his propaganda campaign.⁴⁵ However, with the Sheikh Bedreddin rebellion raging, he could not afford a prolonged, multi-front conflict. He therefore shifted to a diplomatic solution. In late 1416 or early 1417, Mehmed reached a formal agreement with Emperor Manuel II. In return for a substantial annual payment of 300,000

akçe, the emperor agreed to hold Mustafa in custody on the island of Lemnos for the duration of Mehmed's life.¹¹ This pragmatic arrangement effectively neutralized the immediate threat, though it ensured that Mustafa would remain a latent danger, one that would re-emerge to plague Mehmed's son and successor, Murad II.

These two rebellions were not isolated incidents but symptoms of the fundamental, unresolved tensions within the early 15th-century Ottoman polity. The Bedreddin revolt represented the deep ideological chasm between the centralizing, Sunni-orthodox state and the syncretic, heterodox culture of the Turcoman nomads and frontier warriors.⁴³ The Mustafa affair highlighted the inherent instability of the Ottoman succession system, which lacked a clear rule of primogeniture, and the state's continued vulnerability to foreign manipulation of rival princes.¹¹ These internal and external threats were deeply intertwined; domestic opponents sought foreign aid, and foreign rivals exploited domestic weaknesses. Mehmed's success lay in his ability to de-escalate the dynastic threat through diplomacy in order to concentrate overwhelming military force against the social rebellion, demonstrating a sophisticated grasp of strategic priorities.

Part IV: A World of Rivals and Allies: Foreign Policy and Diplomacy

Mehmed I's foreign policy was a direct and deliberate response to the catastrophes of the preceding decade. His approach was characterized by caution, pragmatism, and a primary focus on securing the empire's borders to create the peaceful conditions necessary for internal consolidation.¹⁶ This marked a significant departure from the relentless, multi-front expansionism of his father, Bayezid I.

Pragmatism and Peace: Relations with the Byzantine Empire

The cornerstone of Mehmed's foreign policy was his relationship with the Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Palaiologos.¹³ Mehmed owed a significant political debt to Manuel, whose naval and diplomatic support had been crucial in the final campaign against Mûsa Çelebi.⁹ Upon securing the throne, Mehmed honored this alliance. He confirmed the terms of the 1403 treaty that his brother Süleyman had signed, acknowledging Byzantine sovereignty over Thessaloniki and other territories and formally ending the payment of tribute.⁴⁵

This policy of peace was a strategic necessity. It secured his European flank, neutralized a potential source of intrigue, and allowed him to concentrate his resources on reunifying Anatolia and suppressing internal rebellions.¹⁶ The relationship was remarkably cordial for a time, with sources recording a meeting where Mehmed boarded the emperor's ship to dine with him, a sign of considerable mutual trust.⁴⁵ However, the dynamic was complex. Manuel continued to skillfully exploit Ottoman weaknesses, most notably by harboring the pretender Mustafa and using him as leverage until a financial settlement was reached.¹¹ The relationship was a blend of genuine cooperation and calculated self-interest on both sides. In a final testament to this complex bond, Mehmed, on his deathbed, arranged to send two of his younger sons as nominal hostages to Constantinople to ensure Manuel's support for the succession of his chosen heir, Murad II.¹¹

Contest for the Aegean: The Venetian Naval Conflict (1416)

While Mehmed sought peace on land, his reign witnessed the first major naval war between the Ottomans and the Republic of Venice.⁵⁵ The conflict was sparked in 1414-1415 by raids conducted by the Ottoman fleet against Venetian shipping and island possessions in the Aegean, including the Duchy of Naxos and the colony of Negroponte (Euboea).⁵⁶

In response, Venice dispatched a fleet under the command of Pietro Loredan. The decisive engagement occurred on May 29, 1416, off the coast of Gallipoli, the main Ottoman naval base. The Battle of Gallipoli was a catastrophic defeat for the nascent Ottoman navy. The Venetian fleet, technologically and tactically superior, destroyed its Ottoman counterpart, killed the Ottoman admiral, and captured a large number of ships and sailors.¹¹

The battle decisively confirmed Venetian naval supremacy in the Aegean for the next several decades.⁵⁶ However, its immediate political impact was limited. Mehmed, focused on consolidation, was not prepared for a protracted and costly naval war. A peace treaty was eventually concluded in 1419, which restored Venetian trading privileges.⁵⁶ The defeat at Gallipoli was a sobering lesson that underscored the limits of Ottoman power at sea and reinforced Mehmed's overarching policy of avoiding unnecessary conflicts with major European powers while his state was still recovering.

Securing the Frontiers: The Balkans and Anatolia

Mehmed's policies in Anatolia and the Balkans were distinct, tailored to the different strategic realities of each region.

- **The Balkans:** In Europe, he focused on re-establishing Ottoman suzerainty through the vassal system, a cost-effective method of securing the frontier without direct and expensive occupation.⁶¹ He conducted a campaign in 1416 that reduced Wallachia to a tributary state and made territorial gains in Albania in 1417.⁹ He maintained his alliance with Serbia, which had been instrumental in his victory over Mûsa.¹⁸ This approach created a buffer zone of dependent states, ensuring stability on his western border while minimizing military commitment.
- **Anatolia:** In contrast, Mehmed's primary military efforts were directed at the direct re-annexation of the Turkish beyliks. He brought the principalities of Aydın, Menteşe, and Saruhan back under Ottoman rule.¹⁸ He launched campaigns that reduced the powerful Karamanid emirate, based in Konya, to submission and also subjugated the Candar (Jandarid) emirate in northern Anatolia.⁹ This policy was essential for reuniting the Turkish heartland of the empire, restoring the territorial integrity that had been lost in 1402, and securing his eastern flank from powerful rivals like the Karamanids.¹⁸

This deliberate reversal of his father's policies reveals a profound lesson learned from the disaster at Ankara. Where Bayezid had pursued relentless and simultaneous expansion, Mehmed prioritized, compartmentalized, and de-escalated conflicts. His reign marks a significant maturation in Ottoman statecraft, where the ruler was not just a *ghazi* warrior but also a shrewd statesman for whom diplomacy and political calculation were primary instruments of power.¹³

Conclusion: The Legacy of the Second Founder

Death and Succession (1421)

Sultan Mehmed I's reign of restoration came to an end on May 26, 1421, in Edirne. At the age of approximately 35, he died, according to various sources, either from a stroke, a cerebral hemorrhage, or injuries sustained in a hunting accident.⁹

The memory of the *Fetret Devri* loomed so large that his court took extraordinary measures to prevent another succession crisis. His death was kept secret from the public and the army for 40 days, allowing time for his designated heir, the 17-year-old Murad II, to travel from his provincial governorship in Amasya and securely ascend the throne in Bursa.¹¹ This elaborate concealment, the first of its kind in Ottoman history, was a direct legacy of the trauma of the

Interregnum and a testament to the court's deep-seated fear of a renewed civil war.⁶⁷ Despite these precautions, Murad II's accession was immediately challenged by the pretender Mustafa, who was released by the Byzantines, and by his own younger brother, Küçük Mustafa, demonstrating the persistent fragility of the dynastic line.⁶⁸

Final Assessment: The Second Founder (İkinci Kurucu)

The title "second founder," widely applied to Mehmed I by both contemporary and modern historians, is a fitting tribute to the magnitude of his achievement.¹¹ At the beginning of his struggle for the throne in 1402, the Ottoman state was a ruin—a collection of warring principalities on the verge of extinction, its Anatolian heartland lost, and its sultan a captive.³ By his death in 1421, Mehmed had resurrected the empire. He had reunified Anatolia and Rumeli under a single, central authority and restored its territory to nearly its pre-Ankara borders.⁹

He did not simply inherit a state; he rebuilt it from its foundations. He ended the civil war, re-established a functioning administration, suppressed powerful internal revolts that threatened the state's social and political fabric, and secured the empire's borders through a pragmatic and cautious foreign policy.¹⁶ His role was so pivotal that historians have compared him to the Prophet Noah, who saved believers with his ark from the flood of destruction that had engulfed the world.²³

Enduring Impact

Mehmed I's most crucial legacy was the stable, reunified, and revitalized state he bequeathed to his son, Murad II.¹⁶ His eight-year reign of consolidation was the essential prerequisite for the great expansionist phase of Ottoman history that followed. Without Mehmed's patient reconstruction, the subsequent conquests of Murad II in the Balkans and, ultimately, the capture of Constantinople in 1453 by his grandson, Mehmed II, would have been inconceivable.¹⁶

He transformed the trauma of the Interregnum into a series of institutional and political lessons that would shape the classical Ottoman Empire. His reign saw the beginning of a pivotal shift away from a state reliant on the *ghazi* ethos and the often-fickle loyalty of Turkish notables toward a centralized, bureaucratic empire built upon a new slave elite (*kapıkulları*) created through the *devşirme* system. He demonstrated the critical importance of diplomacy and narrative legitimation as tools of statecraft. The "second founding" was therefore not just a political restoration but an ideological and structural evolution, establishing the resilient framework that would allow the Ottoman Empire to endure for another five centuries.

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The Restorer: Sultan Mehmed I and the Reforging of the Ottoman Empire (1413-1421)

Introduction: From the Ashes of Ankara

On the eve of the 15th century, the Ottoman state, under the energetic and aggressive leadership of Sultan Bayezid I, had reached a zenith of power. Through a series of rapid campaigns, Bayezid had forged a centralized empire stretching from the Danube to the Euphrates, annexing Turkish principalities (*beyliks*) in Anatolia and crushing a Crusader army in the Balkans.¹ This expansion, however, brought the Ottomans into direct conflict with another formidable power: the Central Asian conqueror Timur (Tamerlane). The collision of these two expansionist forces culminated in the Battle of Ankara on July 28, 1402, a cataclysmic event that shattered the Ottoman state.³ The Ottoman army was annihilated, and Sultan Bayezid himself was captured, dying in captivity the following year.³

The defeat at Ankara precipitated the immediate decentralization and collapse of the centralized Ottoman state, ushering in an eleven-year period of dynastic warfare known as the *Fetret Devri*, or the Interregnum (1402-1413).³ This was not merely a pause in dynastic rule but a bloody and socially divisive chapter of Ottoman history in its own right, a period of such profound crisis that it brought the empire to the brink of total dissolution.⁵ Timur deliberately engineered this collapse by dismembering the empire, restoring the lands of the annexed Anatolian *beyliks* to their former rulers and dividing the remaining Ottoman territory among four of Bayezid's surviving sons: Süleyman, İsa, Mûsa, and Mehmed.⁴ This act ignited a fratricidal war for the throne that would consume the Ottoman realm for over a decade. From this crucible of chaos, one prince, Mehmed Çelebi, would emerge victorious. Sultan Mehmed I, through a masterful combination of patient military strategy, astute diplomacy that leveraged the self-interest of his rivals' allies, and a sophisticated program of political legitimation, successfully navigated the turmoil of the Interregnum to reunite the Ottoman state. His reign (1413-1421), though brief, was not merely a restoration of the pre-1402 status quo but a fundamental reforging of the Ottoman polity. He established a more resilient foundation that enabled the imperial expansion of his successors, earning him the enduring historical title of the "second founder" (*ikinci kurucu*) of the Ottoman Empire.¹¹

Part I: The Crucible of Civil War: The Ascent of

Mehmed Çelebi (1402-1413)

The Ottoman Interregnum was a period of extreme political complexity, involving multiple internal factions, foreign powers, and a constantly shifting map of alliances and territorial control.⁵ The path to reunification was a grueling, eleven-year struggle that tested the military and political acumen of all four of Bayezid's sons.

The Post-Ankara Political Landscape (1402-1403)

In the immediate aftermath of the Battle of Ankara, Timur systematically dismantled Bayezid's Anatolian empire, restoring the beyliks of Karaman, Aydın, Menteşe, Germiyan, and Saruhan to their former ruling families.² This action erased decades of Ottoman conquest in Anatolia and confined the dynastic struggle to the core Ottoman lands. The sons of Bayezid scrambled to secure what territory they could:

- **Süleyman Çelebi**, the eldest, fled the battlefield with the Grand Vizier Çandarlı Ali Pasha and the state treasury, establishing himself in the European province of Rumeli with his capital at Edirne.⁴
- **İsa Çelebi** asserted control over the old capital of Bursa and the surrounding region in western Anatolia.⁴
- **Mehmed Çelebi**, the youngest of the main contenders, was saved from the battlefield by his tutor and future Grand Vizier, Bayezid Pasha, and retreated to his provincial governorship in Amasya, where he established a secure but isolated power base.⁴

Süleyman, fearing a potential invasion from Timur and needing to secure his rear against his brothers, immediately entered into negotiations with the Christian powers. In the resulting Treaty of Gallipoli (February 1403), he made significant concessions to the Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Palaiologos, Venice, and Genoa. He ceded strategic territories, including the vital port of Thessaloniki and coastal lands on the Marmara and Black Seas, and, most humiliatingly, released the Emperor from his obligation to pay tribute.² This treaty underscored the desperate weakness of the Ottoman position and the degree to which foreign powers could now intervene in dynastic politics.

The Anatolian Struggle: Mehmed vs. İsa (1403-1406)

While Süleyman consolidated his rule in Europe, the primary conflict played out in Anatolia between Mehmed and İsa. Operating from Amasya, Mehmed patiently built his strength. He first proposed that he and İsa divide Anatolia between them, but İsa, holding the prestigious capital of Bursa, refused.⁴ The inevitable clash came at the Battle of Ulubat. Mehmed's forces were victorious, and he entered Bursa in 1404, declaring himself the sovereign of Ottoman

Anatolia.⁴

İsa fled to Constantinople, becoming a pawn in the larger dynastic game. Süleyman, now recognizing Mehmed as his principal rival, provided İsa with an army to retake Anatolia. However, the people of Bursa remained loyal to Mehmed, and İsa's attempt failed. After seeking further alliances with other Anatolian beys, İsa made a final, unsuccessful bid for power. He was eventually captured and strangled by Mehmed's men in 1406, his body brought to Bursa for burial.⁴ With this victory, Mehmed eliminated his first rival and solidified his control over the Ottoman heartland in Anatolia.

The Grand Gambit: Unleashing Mûsa on Rumeli (1409-1411)

Mehmed's success in Anatolia prompted a direct response from Süleyman, who crossed the straits with a powerful army, captured Bursa and Ankara, and forced Mehmed to retreat to his Amasya stronghold.² Outmatched in a direct confrontation, Mehmed executed a brilliant and decisive strategic maneuver. He located his other brother, Mûsa Çelebi, who had been released from Timurid captivity and was residing with the Karamanoğlu bey, and dispatched him to Rumeli in 1409. The plan was for Mûsa, with support from Wallachia, to open a second front and challenge Süleyman in his own European territories.⁴

The gambit worked perfectly. Mûsa's arrival in the Balkans rallied support from disgruntled frontier lords and Christian vassals, including the Serbs and Wallachians.⁴ The threat to his capital forced Süleyman to abandon his successful Anatolian campaign and rush back to Edirne. This withdrawal allowed Mehmed to reoccupy Bursa and Ankara unopposed.⁴ In Rumeli, after a series of battles where allegiances shifted dramatically, Mûsa's forces eventually cornered Süleyman as he tried to flee to Constantinople. He was captured and executed in February 1411.⁴ Mûsa promptly declared himself the new Sultan in Edirne.

The Final Confrontation: Mehmed vs. Mûsa (1411-1413)

With İsa and Süleyman dead, the eleven-year struggle entered its final phase between the two remaining brothers. Mûsa, however, quickly proved to be a harsh and erratic ruler. He broke his pact with Mehmed and launched aggressive campaigns against his erstwhile allies, Serbia and the Byzantine Empire, going so far as to besiege Constantinople.⁴ His appointment of the radical mystic Sheikh Bedreddin as his chief military judge (

kazasker) further alienated the traditional Ottoman military and religious establishment.⁴

Mûsa's aggressive policies drove his former supporters directly into Mehmed's camp. Emperor Manuel II, the Serbian Despot Stefan Lazarević, and influential Rumelian frontier commanders like Gazi Evrenos Bey all allied with Mehmed, viewing him as the more stable and predictable alternative.⁴ Aided by the Byzantine fleet, which ferried his troops across the straits, Mehmed launched his final campaign into Rumeli.⁴ The decisive battle was fought on July 5, 1413, in the

Çamurlu plain near modern-day Sofia, Bulgaria. Mûsa's army, abandoned by many of its commanders, was defeated. Mûsa was captured while trying to flee and was executed.⁴ With the death of his last brother, Mehmed Çelebi became the sole and undisputed ruler of the reunited Ottoman domains, formally ending the *Fetret Devri*.¹¹

Year(s)	Key Events	Anatolia (Controlling Prince/Faction)	Rumeli (Controlling Prince/Faction)	Key Alliances/Treaties
1402	Battle of Ankara; Bayezid I captured by Timur.	Timur restores beyliks. İsa takes Bursa; Mehmed takes Amasya.	Süleyman flees to Edirne.	-
1403	Süleyman signs Treaty of Gallipoli. Mûsa defeats İsa for Bursa.	İsa retakes Bursa from Mûsa. Mehmed consolidates in Amasya.	Süleyman consolidates power.	Süleyman makes major concessions to Byzantium, Venice, Genoa.
1404-1406	Mehmed defeats İsa at Ulubat, takes Bursa (1404). İsa, backed by Süleyman, fails to retake Bursa. İsa is killed (1406).	Mehmed becomes master of Anatolia.	Süleyman remains in control.	Süleyman supports İsa against Mehmed.
1406-1409	Süleyman crosses into Anatolia, takes Bursa and Ankara, pushes Mehmed back to Amasya.	Süleyman controls Western Anatolia; Mehmed holds Amasya region.	Süleyman is largely absent.	-
1409-1411	Mehmed sends Mûsa to Rumeli. Mûsa gains support, forces Süleyman to return. Süleyman is defeated and killed (Feb 1411).	Mehmed re-takes Bursa and Ankara.	Mûsa defeats and kills Süleyman, takes control.	Mehmed allies with Mûsa. Mûsa allies with Wallachia and Serbia.
1411-1413	Mûsa attacks Byzantium and Serbia, alienating	Mehmed controls all of Anatolia.	Mûsa's support base erodes due to his harsh rule.	Byzantium and Serbia shift allegiance from

	his allies. Mehmed allies with Byzantium and Serbia.			Mûsa to Mehmed.
1413	Mehmed, with Byzantine and Serbian aid, defeats and kills Mûsa at the Battle of Çamurlu (July 5).	Mehmed	Mehmed	Mehmed I becomes sole ruler.

The survival of the Ottoman dynasty through this period of near-total collapse can be attributed significantly to the strength of its institutions in Rumeli. While Timur's invasion effectively reversed a generation of Ottoman conquests in Anatolia by restoring the Turkish beyliks, the Ottoman administrative and military presence in the Balkans proved far more resilient.¹ The economic resources and military manpower of the European provinces sustained the warring princes and provided the ultimate foundation from which the state could be rebuilt.¹ The fact that Edirne, not the old capital of Bursa, served as the center of power for Süleyman, Mûsa, and finally Mehmed underscores the westward shift in the empire's center of gravity and the critical role Rumeli played in its restoration. Furthermore, the civil war itself acted as a catalyst for a crucial development in Ottoman political culture: the birth of an official historiography. The unprecedented act of fratricide on such a scale required a new form of justification beyond the traditional legitimacy derived from holy war (*ghaza*). Works composed in Mehmed I's court were deliberately crafted to legitimize his victory and justify his actions against his brothers, marking the beginning of a state-sponsored literary tradition aimed at shaping historical memory to serve dynastic interests.⁵

Part II: The Architect of Restoration: Domestic Policy and State Consolidation

Emerging as the victor in 1413, Mehmed I faced the monumental task of governing a state ravaged by more than a decade of civil war and social upheaval.¹⁷ His eight-year reign was defined by a deliberate and systematic policy of consolidation, centralization, and legitimation, aimed at restoring internal order and rebuilding the institutional foundations of the empire.

Re-establishing Central Authority

The primary objective of Mehmed I's domestic policy was to reinstate effective central authority over a fragmented realm.¹⁶ He moved to secure the loyalty of the military and administrative elites who had been divided during the Interregnum, establishing a more organized and disciplined state apparatus.¹⁶ In the Balkans, he initially pursued a policy of "relative restraint," restoring the vassal system rather than attempting immediate, large-scale annexations, a pragmatic approach that allowed him to secure his European frontiers while focusing on more pressing issues.⁹

A key, and perhaps the most consequential, institutional development of his reign was the formal implementation of the *devşirme* system. This practice involved the levy of Christian boys from the Balkan provinces, who were then converted to Islam and trained for service in the elite Janissary corps or the palace administration.¹⁸ While its origins are debated, sources indicate that the system was put into practice during Mehmed's reign to supplement the *pençik* system (which entitled the sultan to one-fifth of war captives).²¹ The *pençik* had become an unreliable source of manpower during the Interregnum due to the lack of major foreign conquests. The *devşirme*, by contrast, provided a regular and systematic supply of soldiers and officials—known as *kapıkulları* (slaves of the Porte)—whose loyalty was exclusively to the person of the sultan, not to regional or tribal interests.²¹ This was a direct institutional response to the unreliability of the Turkish notable families, whose allegiances had shifted frequently during the civil war, and it became a cornerstone of Ottoman centralization for centuries to come.

Economic and Social Recovery

Mehmed's reign was a period of deliberate peace and reconstruction, allowing the battered provinces of Anatolia and Rumeli to heal the wounds of the long conflict.¹⁶ His policies aligned with the fundamental economic priority of the Ottoman state: ensuring the provisioning of the capital, major cities, and the army to maintain political stability and social order.²⁴ The restoration of central authority was a prerequisite for the recovery of agriculture and trade, the twin pillars of the state's tax revenue.¹⁹

To facilitate this recovery and to project an image of a pious, just, and benevolent ruler, Mehmed I became a significant patron of public works.²⁶ He commissioned the construction of mosques, *madrasas* (schools), and *imarets* (refectories for the poor) in the empire's major cities, particularly Bursa and Edirne.¹¹ These projects not only fulfilled crucial social and religious functions but also stimulated local economies through construction and employment, visibly demonstrating the return of stability and prosperity under his rule.

Legitimacy in Stone and Tile: The Political Significance of the Yeşil Külliye

The crowning achievement of Mehmed I's reign and the most potent symbol of his program of restoration is the Yeşil Külliye (Green Complex) in the former capital of Bursa.²⁸ Commissioned by the sultan and constructed between 1412 and 1424 under the supervision of his trusted vizier Hacı İvaz Pasha, the complex was a sophisticated instrument of political legitimation.²⁸ The complex was a deliberate and powerful statement symbolizing the "rebirth of the Ottoman rule" after the devastation of the Interregnum.³² Its architectural grandeur and the unparalleled quality of its tilework were intended to demonstrate that the restored dynasty was not merely a shadow of its former self but was capable of producing artistic and architectural marvels that surpassed those of the pre-Ankara era.³⁵ This "boastful rhetoric of the buildings" was a calculated projection of power and stability that stood in stark contrast to the political fragility Mehmed had inherited.³⁶ In a highly unusual architectural choice, the Green Tomb (*Yeşil Türbe*), Mehmed's mausoleum, was built on a hill overlooking the mosque. This has been interpreted as a conscious political message to "friend and foe" that the Ottoman dynasty was "still standing" tall despite its recent trials.³⁵ The complex also served to legitimize Mehmed's rule in the wake of the fratricidal civil war and to counter criticisms of his relative youth.³⁶ Architecturally, it consciously referenced earlier Ottoman and even frontier *ghazi* traditions, thereby visually asserting dynastic continuity and Mehmed's rightful place as the heir to his father, Bayezid I.³⁶ The artistic program of the complex was equally significant. The magnificent tile decorations were created by a group of artisans known as the "Masters of Tabriz," who brought with them the sophisticated techniques and aesthetics of the Timurid-Persian world.²⁸ The adoption of this "International Timurid-Turkmen style" was a profound political act.³⁶ By appropriating and mastering the artistic language of the very empire that had nearly destroyed them, Mehmed I was visually asserting the Ottoman state's own imperial status and cultural sophistication on an international stage. This architectural patronage was not simply a matter of aesthetics; it was a form of political warfare and a key component of his strategy for state-building.

Part III: Trials of a New Order: Internal Threats to the Sultanate

Mehmed I's victory in 1413 brought unity but not absolute stability. His reign was immediately tested by two major internal rebellions that exposed the deep social, religious, and political fissures that the Interregnum had widened. These challenges revealed that the consolidation

of the Ottoman state was far from complete.

The Rebellion of Sheikh Bedreddin (1416)

The most formidable internal threat to Mehmed's rule came from Sheikh Bedreddin, a charismatic and highly respected Islamic scholar and mystic who had served as Mûsa Çelebi's chief military judge (*kazasker*).¹¹ The rebellion he inspired was a complex socio-religious movement with deep roots in the turmoil of the preceding decades.

Bedreddin's ideology was a form of populist, syncretic Sufism that was deeply subversive to the emerging Ottoman state orthodoxy. He preached the "oneness of being," a doctrine that advocated for the communal ownership of property and the equality of all people, including Muslims and Christians, arguing that social and religious divisions were artificial barriers to unity with God.¹⁴ This message found a receptive audience among the diverse populations who felt disenfranchised by the centralizing Ottoman state. The rebellion was fueled by the widespread economic misery and social dislocation that followed the Timurid invasion and the civil war.⁴¹ Bedreddin became the figurehead for a heterogeneous coalition that included nomadic Turcomans resentful of state control, Christian peasants, dispossessed soldiers who had lost their land grants (

timars) after Mûsa's defeat, and disgruntled frontier lords.¹⁴

In 1416, the movement erupted into open revolt on two fronts simultaneously. In western Anatolia, Bedreddin's disciples Börklüce Mustafa and Torlak Kemal led uprisings in the regions of Karaburun and Manisa. At the same time, Bedreddin himself, having fled his exile in Iznik to Wallachia, raised the standard of revolt in Dobruja in the Balkans.¹⁴ The coordinated nature of these uprisings posed a serious challenge to Mehmed's authority.¹⁴ The Ottoman response was swift and brutal. The Grand Vizier Bayezid Pasha was dispatched to Anatolia, where he crushed the revolts with merciless force. Börklüce Mustafa and thousands of his followers were executed.¹⁴ Bedreddin's own rebellion in the Balkans was quickly suppressed. He was captured, brought before the Sultan in Serres, and, after a summary trial, was hanged in the marketplace in 1420.¹⁴ The violent suppression of this movement marked a definitive moment in Ottoman history, solidifying the state's commitment to Sunni orthodoxy and its intolerance of popular movements that challenged its political and religious authority.

The Pretender: The "Düzmece" Mustafa Affair (1415-1417)

Concurrent with the Bedreddin revolt, Mehmed faced a dynastic challenge from his brother, Mustafa Çelebi. Mustafa had been captured at the Battle of Ankara and taken to Samarkand by Timur.¹¹ He re-emerged around 1415, claiming his rightful share of the Ottoman throne. To undermine his legitimacy, Mehmed's government launched a propaganda campaign, branding him

Düzmece Mustafa—"Mustafa the Impostor".⁴⁵ Despite this, modern historians largely concur

that he was a genuine son of Bayezid I and thus a legitimate claimant to the throne.⁴⁵ Mustafa's challenge was sustained by a network of foreign and domestic support. He was backed by the Timurid ruler Shahrukh, the Anatolian beyliks of Karaman and Candar, and the Voivode of Wallachia, all of whom saw an opportunity to weaken the newly reunified Ottoman state.⁴⁵ Most critically, Mustafa sought and received refuge from the Byzantine Emperor Manuel II in the city of Thessaloniki.¹¹ The Byzantines, continuing their policy of playing Ottoman princes against one another, used Mustafa as a strategic pawn to exert pressure on Mehmed.⁴⁵

Mehmed I responded with a multifaceted strategy. He besieged Thessaloniki to compel the Byzantines to surrender his brother while simultaneously continuing his propaganda campaign.⁴⁵ However, with the Sheikh Bedreddin rebellion raging, he could not afford a prolonged, multi-front conflict. He therefore shifted to a diplomatic solution. In late 1416 or early 1417, Mehmed reached a formal agreement with Emperor Manuel II. In return for a substantial annual payment of 300,000

akçe, the emperor agreed to hold Mustafa in custody on the island of Lemnos for the duration of Mehmed's life.¹¹ This pragmatic arrangement effectively neutralized the immediate threat, though it ensured that Mustafa would remain a latent danger, one that would re-emerge to plague Mehmed's son and successor, Murad II.

These two rebellions were not isolated incidents but symptoms of the fundamental, unresolved tensions within the early 15th-century Ottoman polity. The Bedreddin revolt represented the deep ideological chasm between the centralizing, Sunni-orthodox state and the syncretic, heterodox culture of the Turcoman nomads and frontier warriors.⁴³ The Mustafa affair highlighted the inherent instability of the Ottoman succession system, which lacked a clear rule of primogeniture, and the state's continued vulnerability to foreign manipulation of rival princes.¹¹ These internal and external threats were deeply intertwined; domestic opponents sought foreign aid, and foreign rivals exploited domestic weaknesses. Mehmed's success lay in his ability to de-escalate the dynastic threat through diplomacy in order to concentrate overwhelming military force against the social rebellion, demonstrating a sophisticated grasp of strategic priorities.

Part IV: A World of Rivals and Allies: Foreign Policy and Diplomacy

Mehmed I's foreign policy was a direct and deliberate response to the catastrophes of the preceding decade. His approach was characterized by caution, pragmatism, and a primary focus on securing the empire's borders to create the peaceful conditions necessary for internal consolidation.¹⁶ This marked a significant departure from the relentless, multi-front expansionism of his father, Bayezid I.

Pragmatism and Peace: Relations with the Byzantine Empire

The cornerstone of Mehmed's foreign policy was his relationship with the Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Palaiologos.¹³ Mehmed owed a significant political debt to Manuel, whose naval and diplomatic support had been crucial in the final campaign against Mûsa Çelebi.⁹ Upon securing the throne, Mehmed honored this alliance. He confirmed the terms of the 1403 treaty that his brother Süleyman had signed, acknowledging Byzantine sovereignty over Thessaloniki and other territories and formally ending the payment of tribute.⁴⁵

This policy of peace was a strategic necessity. It secured his European flank, neutralized a potential source of intrigue, and allowed him to concentrate his resources on reunifying Anatolia and suppressing internal rebellions.¹⁶ The relationship was remarkably cordial for a time, with sources recording a meeting where Mehmed boarded the emperor's ship to dine with him, a sign of considerable mutual trust.⁴⁵ However, the dynamic was complex. Manuel continued to skillfully exploit Ottoman weaknesses, most notably by harboring the pretender Mustafa and using him as leverage until a financial settlement was reached.¹¹ The relationship was a blend of genuine cooperation and calculated self-interest on both sides. In a final testament to this complex bond, Mehmed, on his deathbed, arranged to send two of his younger sons as nominal hostages to Constantinople to ensure Manuel's support for the succession of his chosen heir, Murad II.¹¹

Contest for the Aegean: The Venetian Naval Conflict (1416)

While Mehmed sought peace on land, his reign witnessed the first major naval war between the Ottomans and the Republic of Venice.⁵⁵ The conflict was sparked in 1414-1415 by raids conducted by the Ottoman fleet against Venetian shipping and island possessions in the Aegean, including the Duchy of Naxos and the colony of Negroponte (Euboea).⁵⁶

In response, Venice dispatched a fleet under the command of Pietro Loredan. The decisive engagement occurred on May 29, 1416, off the coast of Gallipoli, the main Ottoman naval base. The Battle of Gallipoli was a catastrophic defeat for the nascent Ottoman navy. The Venetian fleet, technologically and tactically superior, destroyed its Ottoman counterpart, killed the Ottoman admiral, and captured a large number of ships and sailors.¹¹

The battle decisively confirmed Venetian naval supremacy in the Aegean for the next several decades.⁵⁶ However, its immediate political impact was limited. Mehmed, focused on consolidation, was not prepared for a protracted and costly naval war. A peace treaty was eventually concluded in 1419, which restored Venetian trading privileges.⁵⁶ The defeat at Gallipoli was a sobering lesson that underscored the limits of Ottoman power at sea and reinforced Mehmed's overarching policy of avoiding unnecessary conflicts with major European powers while his state was still recovering.

Securing the Frontiers: The Balkans and Anatolia

Mehmed's policies in Anatolia and the Balkans were distinct, tailored to the different strategic realities of each region.

- **The Balkans:** In Europe, he focused on re-establishing Ottoman suzerainty through the vassal system, a cost-effective method of securing the frontier without direct and expensive occupation.⁶¹ He conducted a campaign in 1416 that reduced Wallachia to a tributary state and made territorial gains in Albania in 1417.⁹ He maintained his alliance with Serbia, which had been instrumental in his victory over Mûsa.¹⁸ This approach created a buffer zone of dependent states, ensuring stability on his western border while minimizing military commitment.
- **Anatolia:** In contrast, Mehmed's primary military efforts were directed at the direct re-annexation of the Turkish beyliks. He brought the principalities of Aydın, Menteşe, and Saruhan back under Ottoman rule.¹⁸ He launched campaigns that reduced the powerful Karamanid emirate, based in Konya, to submission and also subjugated the Candar (Jandarid) emirate in northern Anatolia.⁹ This policy was essential for reuniting the Turkish heartland of the empire, restoring the territorial integrity that had been lost in 1402, and securing his eastern flank from powerful rivals like the Karamanids.¹⁸

This deliberate reversal of his father's policies reveals a profound lesson learned from the disaster at Ankara. Where Bayezid had pursued relentless and simultaneous expansion, Mehmed prioritized, compartmentalized, and de-escalated conflicts. His reign marks a significant maturation in Ottoman statecraft, where the ruler was not just a *ghazi* warrior but also a shrewd statesman for whom diplomacy and political calculation were primary instruments of power.¹³

Conclusion: The Legacy of the Second Founder

Death and Succession (1421)

Sultan Mehmed I's reign of restoration came to an end on May 26, 1421, in Edirne. At the age of approximately 35, he died, according to various sources, either from a stroke, a cerebral hemorrhage, or injuries sustained in a hunting accident.⁹

The memory of the *Fetret Devri* loomed so large that his court took extraordinary measures to prevent another succession crisis. His death was kept secret from the public and the army for 40 days, allowing time for his designated heir, the 17-year-old Murad II, to travel from his provincial governorship in Amasya and securely ascend the throne in Bursa.¹¹ This elaborate concealment, the first of its kind in Ottoman history, was a direct legacy of the trauma of the

Interregnum and a testament to the court's deep-seated fear of a renewed civil war.⁶⁷ Despite these precautions, Murad II's accession was immediately challenged by the pretender Mustafa, who was released by the Byzantines, and by his own younger brother, Küçük Mustafa, demonstrating the persistent fragility of the dynastic line.⁶⁸

Final Assessment: The Second Founder (İkinci Kurucu)

The title "second founder," widely applied to Mehmed I by both contemporary and modern historians, is a fitting tribute to the magnitude of his achievement.¹¹ At the beginning of his struggle for the throne in 1402, the Ottoman state was a ruin—a collection of warring principalities on the verge of extinction, its Anatolian heartland lost, and its sultan a captive.³ By his death in 1421, Mehmed had resurrected the empire. He had reunified Anatolia and Rumeli under a single, central authority and restored its territory to nearly its pre-Ankara borders.⁹

He did not simply inherit a state; he rebuilt it from its foundations. He ended the civil war, re-established a functioning administration, suppressed powerful internal revolts that threatened the state's social and political fabric, and secured the empire's borders through a pragmatic and cautious foreign policy.¹⁶ His role was so pivotal that historians have compared him to the Prophet Noah, who saved believers with his ark from the flood of destruction that had engulfed the world.²³

Enduring Impact

Mehmed I's most crucial legacy was the stable, reunified, and revitalized state he bequeathed to his son, Murad II.¹⁶ His eight-year reign of consolidation was the essential prerequisite for the great expansionist phase of Ottoman history that followed. Without Mehmed's patient reconstruction, the subsequent conquests of Murad II in the Balkans and, ultimately, the capture of Constantinople in 1453 by his grandson, Mehmed II, would have been inconceivable.¹⁶

He transformed the trauma of the Interregnum into a series of institutional and political lessons that would shape the classical Ottoman Empire. His reign saw the beginning of a pivotal shift away from a state reliant on the *ghazi* ethos and the often-fickle loyalty of Turkish notables toward a centralized, bureaucratic empire built upon a new slave elite (*kapıkulları*) created through the *devşirme* system. He demonstrated the critical importance of diplomacy and narrative legitimation as tools of statecraft. The "second founding" was therefore not just a political restoration but an ideological and structural evolution, establishing the resilient framework that would allow the Ottoman Empire to endure for another five centuries.

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