

The Second Founder: Sultan Mehmed I and the Restoration of the Ottoman Empire, 1413-1421

Introduction: The Phoenix from the Ashes of Ankara

The meteoric rise of the Ottoman state in the 14th century came to a catastrophic halt on July 28, 1402. On the plains near Ankara, the formidable army of Sultan Bayezid I, known as *Yıldırım* (the Thunderbolt), was decisively crushed by the Turco-Mongol conqueror Timur, or Tamerlane.¹ The battle was a disaster of unparalleled magnitude for the Ottomans; Bayezid himself was captured, a humiliation from which he would not recover, dying in captivity the following year.¹ In the aftermath, Timur dismembered the Ottoman realm, restoring independence to the various Anatolian Turkish principalities, or beyliks, that Bayezid had forcibly annexed.⁵ What remained of the Ottoman territories was partitioned among three of Bayezid's surviving sons, igniting an existential crisis for the dynasty.⁵ This period, lasting just under 11 years from 1402 to 1413, is known as the Ottoman Interregnum or *Fetret Devri* (Interregnum Period).¹ It was a brutal civil war that pitted brother against brother, nearly erasing the century-old Ottoman state from history.⁹ From this crucible of chaos and fratricide, one prince, Mehmed Çelebi, would emerge victorious. His reign as Sultan Mehmed I (1413–1421) was not defined by the sweeping conquests of his predecessors or successors, but by the painstaking and pragmatic task of reconstruction. For this achievement, he is known to history as "The Restorer" and, more significantly, as the "second founder" of the Ottoman Empire.¹¹ Mehmed I's success lay not in radical innovation but in a combination of strategic patience, diplomatic acumen, and a conservative focus on restoring the proven institutions of the pre-Ankara state. He inherited a shattered realm on the brink of dissolution and bequeathed a reunified and stabilized empire, thereby laying the indispensable foundation for the imperial golden age that would follow.

Table 1: Key Events of the Ottoman Interregnum and the Reign of Mehmed I (1402-1421)

Date	Event	Significance
July 28, 1402	Battle of Ankara	Ottoman army is destroyed by Timur; Sultan Bayezid I is captured.
1403	Death of Bayezid I in captivity	Triggers the full-scale civil war among his sons.

1403	Battles of Ermeni-beli and Ulubad	Mehmed Çelebi defeats his brother İsa Çelebi, securing Bursa.
c. 1406	Death of İsa Çelebi	İsa is killed by Mehmed's agents, eliminating one rival.
1410	Battle of Kosmidion	Süleyman Çelebi defeats Musa Çelebi near Constantinople.
February 17, 1411	Death of Süleyman Çelebi	Süleyman's army defects; he is captured and executed on Musa's orders.
July 5, 1413	Battle of Çamurlu	Mehmed, allied with Byzantium and Serbia, decisively defeats and kills Musa.
1413	Official Accession of Mehmed I	The Ottoman Interregnum ends; Mehmed I is the sole ruler of a reunified empire.
1414-1415	Campaigns against Anatolian Beyliks	Mehmed begins re-subjugating the Karamanids and other principalities.
1415	Conquest of Wallachia	Wallachia is reduced to vassal status, reasserting Ottoman authority in the Balkans.
1416	Sheikh Bedreddin Revolt	A major socio-religious uprising challenges Mehmed's authority but is suppressed.
May 29, 1416	Battle of Gallipoli	The new Ottoman fleet is destroyed by the Republic of Venice.
May 26, 1421	Death of Mehmed I	The sultan dies in Edirne, leaving a restored and stable empire to his son, Murad II.

Part I: The Restorer Sultan: A Portrait of Mehmed I

Section 1: The Crucible of Civil War: The Rise of Mehmed Çelebi (1402-1413)

The decade following the Battle of Ankara was the most perilous in Ottoman history. The struggle for the throne was a complex and fluid conflict, defined by shifting alliances, betrayals, and brutal warfare. Mehmed's ultimate triumph was a testament to his political sagacity and strategic patience as much as his military skill.

1.1 The Shattered Inheritance: The Post-Ankara Political Landscape

In the immediate aftermath of Timur's departure, the remnants of the Ottoman state were fractured into three competing principalities. The eldest surviving son, Süleyman Çelebi, established his authority in the European provinces of Rumelia, with his capital at Edirne. He held the most developed and resource-rich part of the empire and enjoyed the support of the Christian vassals.¹ A second brother, İsa Çelebi, took control of the old Anatolian capital of Bursa, the symbolic heart of the dynasty.⁵ Mehmed, the youngest of the main contenders, was left with a smaller, less prominent kingdom in north-central Anatolia, centered on Amasya.¹ This initial distribution of power placed Mehmed at a distinct disadvantage, far from the main centers of wealth and power in Bursa and Edirne.

1.2 A War of Brothers: Strategy, Diplomacy, and Survival

From his base in Amasya, Mehmed embarked on a methodical campaign to eliminate his rivals. His first target was his brother İsa in nearby Bursa. After a series of engagements, including the Battles of Ermeni-beli and Ulubad in 1403, Mehmed defeated İsa, forcing him to flee.¹ İsa was later hunted down and killed in a bathhouse by Mehmed's agents, securing Mehmed's control over the Anatolian heartland.¹

This victory, however, brought him into direct conflict with his more powerful brother, Süleyman, who crossed the straits from Europe with a large army. Süleyman invaded Anatolia, capturing Bursa in March 1404 and Ankara later that year, forcing Mehmed into a strategic retreat.¹ Faced with a superior force, Mehmed demonstrated a remarkable capacity for long-term strategic thinking. Rather than risk a decisive and likely losing battle in Anatolia, he sought to undermine Süleyman's power at its source. He successfully petitioned for the release of their brother, Musa Çelebi, who had been captured at Ankara and was held in the custody of the Germiyanid bey.¹ Mehmed then armed Musa with a small force and dispatched him across the Black Sea to Thrace to challenge Süleyman in his own European heartland.⁷ This maneuver was a masterclass in proxy warfare. Mehmed understood that Süleyman's strength was rooted in his control of Rumelia. By introducing a rival claimant directly into that territory, he forced Süleyman to abandon his Anatolian campaign and return to Europe to defend his base.¹ Mehmed effectively turned his own weakness—his distance from the European power center—into a strategic advantage, using Musa to destabilize his strongest rival without bearing the full military or financial cost of the conflict himself. This demonstrated a sophisticated grasp of grand strategy that was crucial to his survival and

eventual success.

1.3 The Final Contest: The Defeat of Musa and the Unification of the Throne

The conflict between Süleyman and Musa in the Balkans was short but bloody. Initially, Süleyman had the upper hand, defeating Musa at the Battle of Kosmidion in 1410.¹ However, Süleyman's increasingly decadent lifestyle and reliance on Christian vassals alienated many of his Turkish commanders. In 1411, his army defected to Musa at Edirne, and Süleyman was captured and strangled on Musa's orders.¹ With Süleyman eliminated, Musa became the ruler of the Ottoman domains in Europe.

Musa, however, proved to be an aggressive and unpredictable ruler. He pursued a radical policy of confiscating lands from the established Turkish nobility and launched a siege of Constantinople, as the Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Palaiologos had been an ally of his defeated brother Süleyman.¹ This aggression proved to be a fatal miscalculation. It alienated not only the Byzantine emperor but also other key regional powers and powerful factions within the Ottoman elite, who saw Musa as a disruptive and dangerous force.⁷

Mehmed seized this diplomatic opening. He positioned himself as the sole candidate capable of restoring order and stability. Responding to a call for aid from Emperor Manuel II, Mehmed's forces garrisoned Constantinople, protecting the city from his own brother's army.¹ This act was a diplomatic masterstroke, signaling to all parties that he valued stability and alliances over reckless conquest. He further cemented his position by securing the support of the powerful Serbian Despot, Stefan Lazarević.⁵ On July 5, 1413, the armies of the two remaining brothers met at the Battle of Çamurlu in Serbia. Bolstered by his Christian allies and the support of the Ottoman establishment, Mehmed's forces won a decisive victory.¹ Musa fled but was soon captured and, like his brothers before him, strangled.⁸ After eleven years of civil war, Mehmed Çelebi was the sole surviving son of Bayezid I and the undisputed sultan of a reunified Ottoman state.¹ He had won not only by defeating his brothers on the battlefield but by winning the diplomatic war, convincing the key regional powers that he was the only guarantor of peace.

Section 2: The Architect of Legitimacy: Character, Piety, and Governance

Having reunified the empire through force and diplomacy, Mehmed I faced the equally daunting task of restoring the legitimacy of the Ottoman dynasty, which had been shattered by defeat and fratricide. His eight-year reign was a deliberate and systematic project of re-establishing the moral and political authority of the sultanate.

2.1 The Persona of the Restorer

Mehmed cultivated a public persona that stood in stark contrast to the chaos of the preceding decade. Ottoman and contemporary historians describe him as fair, brave, valiant, and kind, noting that he treated all his subjects, Muslim and Christian, with equity.¹⁴ While he was a proven warrior with the scars of more than 24 campaigns, his reign was characterized by a policy of relative restraint, particularly in the Balkans.⁵ This projection of a just, pious, and peace-oriented ruler was a crucial political tool. It helped to rebuild the "social contract" between the dynasty and its diverse subjects, assuring them that the era of internal strife was over and that a predictable, stable order had returned. By embodying the classical virtues of an ideal Islamic sovereign, Mehmed was restoring not just the state's territories but its very right to rule.

2.2 Instruments of Sovereignty: Coinage, Titles, and Court

From early in the civil war, Mehmed asserted his claim to ultimate sovereignty through powerful symbols. Most significantly, he was the only one of Bayezid's sons to mint coins bearing the title "Sultan".¹ His brothers, including the powerful Süleyman, used the lesser title of "Emir" on their coinage, signifying a claim to regional authority rather than supreme imperial power.¹ This numismatic evidence provides a clear window into Mehmed's unyielding ambition and his early conception of himself as the sole legitimate heir to his father's throne. Upon his final victory, he crowned himself sultan in the European capital of Edirne, solidifying his control over both the Anatolian and Rumelian halves of the empire.¹¹ His common epithet, *Çelebi*, meaning "noble-born" or "gentleman prince," further reinforced his status as a cultured and legitimate ruler, distinct from the warlords of the frontier.¹¹

2.3 The Pragmatic Ruler: Justice and Administration

Mehmed's governance was defined by pragmatism. His focus was on reinstating central authority and ensuring the loyalty of the military and administrative classes who were the pillars of the state.¹² His fair treatment of Christian populations was not simply a matter of personal tolerance but a calculated policy to secure the stability of the vast and diverse Balkan provinces, which had been a key power base for his rivals.¹⁵ He understood that the empire's recovery depended on the cooperation of all its subjects. By eschewing grand foreign adventures in favor of internal consolidation, he signaled to all that his priority was the well-being and security of the realm itself.¹⁷ This careful, methodical approach to governance was essential for healing the deep wounds of the Interregnum and re-establishing the administrative machinery of the empire.

Section 3: The Patron Prince: Dynastic Renewal through Art and

Architecture

Beyond politics and administration, Mehmed I used art and architecture as powerful tools to declare the restoration of Ottoman power and legitimacy. His most significant act of patronage, the magnificent complex in Bursa, served as a potent symbol of dynastic resilience and cultural supremacy.

3.1 The Green Complex of Bursa: A Statement in Stone and Tile

Commissioned by Mehmed I around 1412, near the end of the civil war, the Yeşil Külliye (Green Complex) in Bursa stands as the crowning architectural achievement of his reign.¹⁸ The complex includes the Yeşil Cami (Green Mosque), the Yeşil Türbe (Green Tomb, where Mehmed I is buried), a *madrassa* (school), a public kitchen, and a bathhouse.¹⁸ The mosque itself is celebrated as a masterpiece of the early Ottoman architectural style, representing a definitive shift away from earlier Seljuk influences toward a new, distinctly Ottoman aesthetic.¹⁸ Its construction, overseen by the vizier Hacı İvaz Pasha, was a major state project, intended to signify the return of stability, wealth, and imperial confidence.¹⁸

3.2 Art as Political Declaration: Timurid Influence and Ottoman Identity

The decorative program of the Green Complex reveals a deeper political narrative. The stunning interior tilework, which gives the mosque its name, bears inscriptions attributing the work to "the masters of Tabriz" and an artist named Mehmed el-Mecnun.¹⁸ Tabriz was a major cultural center within the Timurid sphere of influence, and the techniques and styles used in the mosque—such as black-line tiles and intricate mosaics—show a clear connection to the art of Timur's court.¹⁸

This was a deliberate and highly symbolic choice. The Ottoman dynasty had been nearly destroyed and profoundly humiliated by Timur. By hiring elite craftsmen from the heart of the Timurid cultural world to build his own dynastic monument, Mehmed I was making a powerful statement. He was demonstrating that the Ottoman state had not only survived the Timurid storm but had recovered to a point of such strength and sophistication that it could now appropriate and master the artistic language of its former conqueror. The Green Mosque thus functions as a monument to overcoming a collective trauma. It transforms a style associated with Ottoman defeat into a testament to Ottoman rebirth, resilience, and cultural supremacy. It declared that the Ottomans, not the fading Timurids, were the true heirs to the legacy of high Islamic civilization in the region.

Part II: The Ottoman Empire Reborn: State and Society, 1413-1421

With the throne secured, Mehmed I turned his full attention to the monumental task of rebuilding the Ottoman state. His short reign was characterized by a series of carefully calibrated military, administrative, and political initiatives designed to consolidate his power, suppress internal dissent, and restore the fundamental institutions of the empire.

Section 4: Forging Unity from Chaos: The Consolidation of the Realm

The most immediate threats to the newly reunified empire came from within. The Anatolian beyliks, freed by Timur, were reluctant to return to Ottoman vassalage, and the social and political dislocations of the civil war had created fertile ground for rebellion.

4.1 The Anatolian Question: Re-subjugating the Beyliks

One of Mehmed's first priorities was to reassert Ottoman authority in Anatolia. The Battle of Ankara had reversed decades of Ottoman expansion, and powerful principalities like the Karamanids, the Germiyanids, and the coastal beyliks of Aydin and Menteshe had re-emerged as independent actors.⁶ Mehmed pursued a methodical policy of re-subjugation through a series of campaigns between 1414 and 1417.¹¹ His approach was notably cautious. Rather than seeking immediate and total annexation, which could have provoked a unified resistance or intervention from Timur's successors in the East, he often reduced the beyliks to tributary or vassal status.¹⁷ This strategy allowed him to re-establish Ottoman suzerainty over most of western and central Anatolia, including the powerful Karamanid principality, without overextending his still-recovering military forces.⁵

4.2 The Bedreddin Revolt: A Challenge to the New Order

A more profound challenge to Mehmed's rule emerged in 1416 with the revolt of Sheikh Bedreddin.²³ Bedreddin was not a mere provincial rebel; he was a charismatic Sufi theologian and an eminent jurist who had served as the chief military judge (*kadiasker*) under Mehmed's brother, Musa.²⁴ His movement was fueled by a radical social and religious ideology that preached the communal ownership of property and the equality of Muslims and Christians, doctrines that directly threatened the hierarchical, orthodox Sunni foundation of the Ottoman state.²³

The rebellion drew support from a wide cross-section of society's dispossessed: Turcoman

nomads, frontier warriors (*ghazis*) who had lost their land grants, former soldiers loyal to Musa, religious students, and Christian peasants.²³ Coordinated uprisings erupted across the empire, from Karaburun on the Aegean coast to Dobruja in the Balkans, posing a serious threat to the new regime.²³

The Bedreddin revolt can be seen as the ideological ghost of the Interregnum. It represented a continuation of the conflict between the centralized, orthodox vision of the state that Mehmed was building and the more heterodox, egalitarian, and populist forces that had flourished on the frontier and found a champion in Musa.²³ Mehmed's response was swift and brutal. He dispatched his Grand Vizier, Bayezid Pasha, who systematically crushed the uprisings. Bedreddin was eventually captured and, after a trial, hanged in the marketplace of Serres in 1420.¹¹ By so decisively eliminating this movement, Mehmed was not just putting down a rebellion; he was making a definitive statement about the future character of the Ottoman Empire, cementing its path as a centralized, hierarchical state and suppressing the alternative visions that had emerged from the chaos of the civil war.

Section 5: Rebuilding the Pillars of Empire: Administration, Military, and Economy

The long-term survival of the reunified state depended on the restoration of its core institutions. Mehmed I's reign was a period of intense, if unglamorous, administrative and military reconstruction.

5.1 The Central Apparatus: The Divan and the Grand Vizierate

The central government's primary administrative body, the Imperial Council or *Divan-ı Hümayûn*, was revitalized to manage the affairs of the state.²⁹ This council, comprising the leading military, judicial, and financial officials, was the heart of the Ottoman bureaucracy.³⁰ Crucial to the stability of this restoration was the figure of Grand Vizier Bayezid Pasha. Having saved the young Mehmed from the field of Ankara, Bayezid Pasha served as his most trusted advisor and chief minister for the entirety of his reign (1413-1421).¹¹ His long and loyal tenure provided essential continuity and experience at the highest level of government, allowing the sultan to focus on military and diplomatic challenges while the day-to-day administration of the empire was in capable hands.

5.2 The Provincial Backbone: The Restoration of the Timar System

The foundation of Ottoman military power and provincial governance was the *timar* system, a complex structure of land grants awarded to cavalymen (*sipahis*) in exchange for military service.³² The Interregnum had thrown this system into disarray, as rival princes seized and

redistributed lands to their own followers. A key task for Mehmed's administration was the painstaking process of conducting new land surveys and re-issuing *timar* grants to loyal soldiers.³⁰ This process, which historians date to the period immediately following his victory in 1413, was vital for re-establishing state control over the countryside, securing agricultural tax revenues, and rebuilding the large provincial cavalry force that formed the bulk of the Ottoman army.³²

5.3 The Sultan's Army: Reasserting Control over the Janissaries

The Janissaries, the elite slave-infantry corps of the sultan, had emerged from the Interregnum as a powerful and potentially king-making political force. Their defection from Süleyman to Musa in 1411 had been a decisive moment in the civil war.¹ Mehmed understood the necessity of ensuring this corps' absolute loyalty to the throne. His reign saw a massive overhaul and professionalization of the Janissaries, reinforcing their discipline and re-establishing them as an instrument of the sultan's will, rather than independent political actors.³⁴ This restoration of military discipline laid the groundwork for the Janissaries' future role as the shock troops of Ottoman expansion.¹²

5.4 Economic Recovery: Securing Land, Taxes, and Trade

The eleven years of civil war had devastated the empire's economy, disrupting agriculture, draining the treasury, and fracturing vital trade routes.³⁵ Mehmed's economic policy was fundamentally one of recovery and stabilization. The re-imposition of the *timar* system was the most critical step, as it secured the state's primary revenue stream: taxes on agricultural production.³⁷ The political reunification of Anatolia and the Balkans under a single, stable authority allowed for the secure reopening of overland trade routes that had been perilous for over a decade.¹⁷ Mehmed's policies were not about creating a new economic model but about meticulously repairing the pre-1402 system. This conservative approach was a pragmatic recognition of the empire's fragility. Radical innovation would have been destabilizing; what the empire needed was a return to the proven structures that had fueled its initial rise. This careful reconstruction provided the solid economic and institutional foundation upon which his successors, particularly his grandson Mehmed II, could build a truly global empire.¹²

Section 6: A Cautious Colossus: Foreign Policy in a Post-Timurid World

Mehmed I's foreign policy was a direct reflection of his domestic priorities. With the empire still fragile and its resources depleted, his primary goal was to secure his newly reunified borders and avoid costly foreign entanglements that could jeopardize his consolidation of

power.

6.1 A Delicate Détente: Managing the Byzantine Relationship

The relationship with the Byzantine Empire under Emperor Manuel II Palaiologos was a model of political pragmatism. Mehmed owed a significant debt to Manuel, whose naval and diplomatic support had been crucial in the final campaign against Musa.⁵ After his victory, Mehmed honored the agreements made, maintaining a peaceful and even cordial relationship with Constantinople.⁷ He reportedly referred to the emperor as his "father," promising to be his subject and servant.⁷ This détente, however, was built on a foundation of mutual suspicion. The Byzantines continued to harbor Ottoman pretenders, including Mehmed's nephew Orhan, as a potential check on his power. When Mehmed uncovered a Byzantine plot to use Orhan against him, he acted decisively, having his nephew blinded in the traditional Byzantine manner for dealing with political threats.¹¹ The relationship was thus a careful balancing act: peaceful coexistence punctuated by the constant threat of intrigue.

6.2 Restoring Hegemony in the Balkans: Vassalage and Limited Campaigns

In the Balkans, Mehmed pursued a policy of what has been described as "relative restraint".⁵ He explicitly promised his Christian neighbors that he would not embark on new, large-scale European adventures, a clear departure from his father's aggressive expansionism.¹⁷ His goal was to restore the pre-Ankara status quo. He focused on re-establishing Ottoman suzerainty over states that had broken away during the Interregnum. A campaign in 1415 successfully reduced Wallachia back to vassal status, and he made limited territorial gains in Albania in 1417.⁵ His actions against the Kingdom of Hungary were primarily limited to raids rather than full-scale invasions, designed to reassert Ottoman dominance without provoking a major European crusade, a risk the recovering empire could not afford.⁵

6.3 The Venetian Challenge: Naval Power and the Battle of Gallipoli (1416)

The most significant foreign policy challenge of Mehmed's reign came from the sea. As he began to rebuild the Ottoman fleet to project power in the Aegean, he came into direct conflict with the era's dominant maritime power, the Republic of Venice.⁴² Ottoman attacks on Venetian shipping and possessions in 1414-1415 led to a brief but decisive war.⁴³ The conflict culminated on May 29, 1416, at the Battle of Gallipoli, the main Ottoman naval base. The Venetian fleet, commanded by Pietro Loredan, annihilated the new Ottoman navy, killing its admiral and capturing most of its ships.¹¹

This crushing defeat was a stark reminder of the empire's limitations and likely reinforced Mehmed's cautious strategic posture.¹¹ It demonstrated that while the Ottomans were

rebuilding their formidable land army, they were no match for Venice's centuries-old naval supremacy. The battle effectively confirmed Venetian control of the Aegean for the next several decades and underscored the wisdom of Mehmed's overarching foreign policy: to prioritize internal stability and avoid conflicts with powerful external foes until the empire had fully recovered its strength.

Conclusion: The Legacy of the Second Founder

The reign of Sultan Mehmed I, lasting a mere eight years from 1413 to 1421, was one of the most consequential in the six-century history of the Ottoman Empire. He ascended the throne not through orderly succession but by clawing his way to victory through a decade of brutal civil war that had left the state in ruins. His legacy, therefore, is not measured in miles of conquered territory or grand new monuments, but in the very survival and restoration of the empire itself.

Mehmed inherited a fragmented collection of warring principalities, a depleted treasury, a fractured military, and a dynasty whose legitimacy was in tatters. Through a combination of astute diplomacy, strategic patience, and ruthless determination, he systematically eliminated his rivals and reunified the Ottoman lands in Anatolia and the Balkans. His domestic policy was a masterclass in pragmatic reconstruction. He focused on restoring the core institutions—the central bureaucracy of the Divan, the provincial *timar* system, and the disciplined loyalty of the Janissaries—that had been the bedrock of the empire's initial success. His foreign policy was equally prudent, characterized by a cautious restraint that prioritized consolidation over expansion, securing his borders while avoiding conflicts that could threaten his fragile new order.

By the time of his death in 1421, he had bequeathed to his son, Murad II, a coherent, stable, and administratively sound empire. The painstaking work of Mehmed I created the necessary precondition for the great age of conquest that followed. Without his meticulous restoration, the celebrated achievements of his grandson, Mehmed II—most notably the conquest of Constantinople in 1453—would have been inconceivable. He was, in the truest sense of the title, the second founder of the Ottoman Empire, the phoenix who ensured his dynasty would rise from the ashes of Ankara.

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