

The Crucible of Empire: A Definitive Analysis of the Ottoman Interregnum, 1402–1413

Introduction: The Day the Empire Died

The Thunderbolt Falls

On a sweltering summer day, July 20, 1402 (some sources cite July 28), the rapidly expanding Ottoman Empire, which had become the terror of southeastern Europe and a rising power in the Islamic world, was brought to the brink of annihilation.¹ On the plains of Çubuk, near Ankara, the formidable army of Sultan Bayezid I, known as *Yıldırım* ("the Thunderbolt") for the speed of his campaigns, met the forces of the Turco-Mongol conqueror Timur, or Tamerlane.³ Bayezid, the victor of the great Crusade of Nicopolis in 1396 and the besieger of Constantinople, was at the zenith of his power.¹ Yet, his campaign against Timur was marked by a series of catastrophic miscalculations. Lured into a confrontation, Bayezid rejected his generals' advice to adopt a defensive posture. Instead, he marched his army through the punishing midsummer heat, arriving at the battlefield exhausted and thirsty.¹ Timur, a military genius of unparalleled skill, had outmaneuvered him completely, secretly marching to the rear of the Ottoman forces and, in a decisive tactical move, diverting the Çubuk creek, the Ottoman army's only source of water.¹ The ensuing Battle of Ankara was a disaster of historic proportions for the Ottomans. The battle began with a large-scale Ottoman attack, but it quickly faltered under a hail of arrows from Timurid horse archers.⁴ The Ottoman army, already weakened by fatigue and thirst, began to disintegrate from within. The Black Tatar regiments and, crucially, the *sipahis* (provincial cavalry) from the recently conquered Anatolian beyliks, saw in Timur a kindred Turkic leader and deserted Bayezid's cause en masse, switching their allegiance on the battlefield.¹ While Bayezid's Serbian Christian vassals, led by Stefan Lazarević and clad in heavy plate armor, fought with ferocious loyalty that earned Timur's admiration, they could not turn the tide.⁴ Bayezid, commanding his loyal Janissaries at the center, fought valiantly but was ultimately overwhelmed.⁷ He fled into the mountains with a small retinue but was pursued, surrounded, and captured.¹ For the first and only time in its long history, a reigning Ottoman

Sultan was taken prisoner by an enemy.² Bayezid would die in captivity months later, his end shrouded in tales of humiliation.¹

Timur's Aftermath

Timur's objective in Anatolia was not permanent conquest. His primary ambitions lay to the east, towards China.⁷ For him, the Ottoman state was a threat to his western flank that needed to be neutralized.⁵ His victory at Ankara achieved this perfectly. In the aftermath, he marched through western Anatolia, even capturing the Christian Knights' stronghold of Smyrna, but his most significant act was political deconstruction.⁴ He systematically dismantled the centralized state that Bayezid had built, restoring to power the Turkmen princes of the Anatolian beyliks—Karaman, Germiyan, Aydın, and others—whom Bayezid had previously annexed.¹ By fracturing Anatolia into a patchwork of rival principalities, Timur ensured that no single power could challenge him from the west.⁵ He even confirmed Bayezid's son, Mehmed Çelebi, as ruler over a rump Ottoman territory in northern Anatolia, but this was a grant to a vassal, not a recognition of an empire.⁹

The Fetret Devri

The defeat at Ankara and Timur's subsequent restructuring of Anatolia plunged the Ottoman realm into an eleven-year period of civil war known in Turkish history as the *Fetret Devri*, or the Interregnum Period.⁹ Lasting from July 20, 1402, to July 5, 1413, this was a time of profound dynastic warfare among four of Bayezid's surviving sons.¹¹ The conflict was bloody, socially divisive, and politically complex, involving a dizzying array of internal factions and external powers.¹² It was a period when the very existence of the Ottoman state hung in the balance, threatening a "total collapse of the empire".⁴

This report posits that the Ottoman Interregnum, far from being a mere decade of chaos, was a crucible that tested the fundamental structures of the nascent Ottoman state. It was a violent and existential crisis that forced a resolution to the question of succession, redefined the empire's military and political identity, and ultimately produced a more resilient, centralized state under its "second founder," Mehmed I. The Interregnum was not an interruption of Ottoman history but the furnace in which the classical Ottoman Empire was forged.⁷

Table 1: Chronological Overview of the Ottoman Interregnum (1402-1416)

Year	Key Event(s)	Ruling Prince(s) in Rumelia	Ruling Prince(s) in Anatolia
1402	July 20/28: Battle of Ankara. Bayezid I is captured by Timur.	Süleyman Çelebi escapes to Edirne.	İsa Çelebi establishes rule in Bursa; Mehmed Çelebi in Amasya.

1403	March-May: Mehmed defeats İsa at the Battles of Ermeni-beli and Ulubad.	Süleyman consolidates power in the Balkans.	Mehmed occupies Bursa. İsa flees.
1404	Süleyman crosses into Anatolia, captures Bursa and Ankara.	Süleyman controls Rumelia and West Anatolia.	Mehmed controls Central and East Anatolia.
1405-1410	Period of strategic stalemate between Süleyman and Mehmed.	Süleyman Çelebi	Mehmed Çelebi
1410	Mehmed sends Musa Çelebi to attack Rumelia. Battle of Kosmidion; Süleyman defeats Musa.	Süleyman Çelebi	Mehmed Çelebi
1411	February 17: Süleyman's army defects; he is captured and executed. Musa besieges Constantinople.	Musa Çelebi	Mehmed Çelebi
1412	Mehmed crosses into Rumelia with Byzantine aid but is repulsed by Musa.	Musa Çelebi	Mehmed Çelebi
1413	July 5: Battle of Çamurlu. Mehmed, aided by Serbs and Byzantines, defeats and kills Musa.	Mehmed I	Mehmed I
1413-1421	Reign of Mehmed I as sole Sultan. The Interregnum officially ends.	Mehmed I	Mehmed I
1415-1416	Mustafa Çelebi ("Düzmece Mustafa") is released and leads a brief rebellion.	Mehmed I	Mehmed I
1416	Mustafa's rebellion is suppressed; he is given refuge by the	Mehmed I	Mehmed I

	Byzantines.		
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Sources: ²

Part I: The Sons of Bayezid: A War for a Shattered Throne

The eleven-year civil war was fundamentally a conflict between the sons of Bayezid I, each with his own power base, political vision, and claim to the fragmented inheritance. Understanding their individual characters and strategies is essential to comprehending the complex course of the Interregnum.

Section 1: The Thunderbolt's Legacy: The Contenders and Their Claims

The Law of the Steppe

The primary catalyst for the Interregnum was the traditional Turkic and Central Asian principle of succession, which starkly contrasted with the later, more rigid Ottoman system.⁶ According to this tradition, sovereignty was considered the collective property of the ruling dynasty. Consequently, any male member of the royal family—any son of the Sultan—was viewed as a legitimate potential heir to the throne.⁶ This system, which had served nomadic empires well, proved disastrous for a sedentary state, as it provided the legal and cultural justification for each of Bayezid's sons to claim the throne for himself, transforming a dynastic crisis into a full-blown civil war.⁶

Süleyman Çelebi, the Rumelian Emir

As the eldest surviving son, Süleyman Çelebi initially held the strongest position. Having escaped the disaster at Ankara, he established his capital in Edirne, the heart of the Ottoman domains in Europe (Rumelia).⁹ From there, he ruled over Thrace, Macedonia, northern Greece, and the recently conquered Bulgarian lands.⁹ Süleyman's reign was characterized by a distinctly European orientation. He engaged in extensive diplomacy with the Byzantine Empire under Manuel II Palaiologos and with the maritime republic of Venice, seeking to stabilize his western frontier.⁵ His court was known for its splendor and luxury, a style that appealed to the established elites but gradually alienated the rugged frontier warriors (

ghazis) who formed the backbone of Ottoman military power.⁶ Significantly, surviving coins minted by Süleyman bear the title "Emir Suleyman b. Bayezid" (Emir Süleyman, son of Bayezid), rather than the more assertive "Sultan".⁹ This may reflect a tacit acknowledgment of Timurid suzerainty or a political vision of himself as a regional ruler—first among equals—rather than the sole, absolute sovereign of a reunified empire.

İsa Çelebi, the Anatolian Warlord

İsa Çelebi, another of Bayezid's sons, attempted to seize the traditional Ottoman heartland in Anatolia. He established himself as an independent ruler in Bursa, the first Ottoman capital and a city of immense symbolic importance.⁹ His claim represented a bid to control the dynasty's origins and its core Turkish territories. However, historical sources describe him as an "unfortunate and weak person," despite being a prince of some character.¹⁶ His brief and ultimately failed struggle against his brother Mehmed for control of western Anatolia constituted the first bloody chapter of the civil war, demonstrating that the Anatolian core would be fiercely contested.⁹

Musa Çelebi, the Radical Populist

Musa Çelebi's trajectory was the most volatile. Initially captured at Ankara alongside his father, he was later released by Timur into the custody of the Germiyanid bey.⁹ After being freed at Mehmed's request, he first acted as his brother's lieutenant in the campaign against Süleyman in Rumelia.⁹ However, once he gained a foothold, he broke away and pursued his own radical agenda. Musa's rule was defined by a fierce, populist ideology that appealed directly to the disaffected *ghazis*, Turkmen nomads, and the urban poor.⁷ He implemented harsh policies against the Christian vassal states and the established Ottoman aristocracy who had supported Süleyman.⁷ His intense hostility towards the Byzantine Empire culminated in a determined siege of Constantinople, an act that directly mirrored his father's ambitions but also alienated a potential ally.⁹ Musa represented a revolutionary, socially radical vision for the Ottoman state, one rooted in a strict interpretation of *ghazi* ethos and a rejection of the diplomatic accommodations favored by Süleyman.

Mehmed Çelebi, the Anatolian Strategist

The eventual victor, Mehmed Çelebi, began his campaign from a seemingly less advantageous position. He carved out a kingdom for himself in the central Anatolian province of Rûm, with his capital at Amasya.⁹ From this Anatolian power base, he methodically built a coalition of support. Unlike his brothers, he cultivated deep ties with the very groups that had formed the

foundation of the early Ottoman state: the powerful Anatolian Turkmen notables, the influential Muslim religious orders, and the urban artisan guilds (*ahî*).⁵ His claim was not just military but also social and political. His strategic genius was matched by his clear-sighted ambition. From the outset, Mehmed was the only one of the brothers to consistently mint coins bearing the title "Sultan".⁹ This was a powerful act of political propaganda, signaling that his goal was not mere regional autonomy but the complete reunification of the empire under his sole, absolute authority. In a pragmatic early move, some of his coins even included Timur's name, a likely attempt to secure his flank by acknowledging the conqueror's suzerainty while he consolidated his own power against his brothers.¹⁵

Mustafa Çelebi, the Phantom Prince

A fifth son, Mustafa Çelebi, remained a ghost during the main phase of the Interregnum. He had been captured at Ankara with Bayezid and taken by Timur to his capital in Samarkand.⁶ His absence removed a potential contender from the immediate struggle but also created a lingering and destabilizing threat. His eventual re-emergence after Mehmed's victory would briefly restart the civil war and pose a serious challenge to Mehmed's successor, Murad II.⁶ This later challenge led Ottoman chroniclers loyal to the ruling line to brand him *Düzmece Mustafa*—"Mustafa the Impostor"—in an effort to delegitimize his claim.¹⁶

Table 2: Comparative Profile of the Sons of Bayezid I

Attribute	Süleyman Çelebi	İsa Çelebi	Musa Çelebi	Mehmed Çelebi
Primary Power Base	Rumelia (Edirne)	Western Anatolia (Bursa)	Rumelia (Edirne, after 1411)	Central Anatolia (Amasya)
Key Allies	Byzantine Empire, Venice, Christian Vassals, Old Aristocracy	Byzantines (briefly), Karamanids	<i>Ghazi</i> Warriors, Turkmen Nomads, Urban Poor	Anatolian Notables, <i>Ahi</i> Guilds, Religious Orders, Serbia, Byzantium (later)
Political Ideology/Style	European-oriented, diplomatic, aristocratic, accommodationist	Regional Anatolian warlordism	Radical populist, anti-Christian, aggressive <i>ghazi</i> ethos	Centralizing, strategic, coalition-builder, pragmatic
Numismatic Title	<i>Emir</i>	None survived	<i>Musa b. Bayezid</i>	<i>Sultan</i>
Ultimate Fate	Executed after his army defected to Musa (1411)	Defeated and executed by Mehmed's agents (c. 1406)	Defeated and executed by Mehmed after the Battle of Çamurlu (1413)	Victor; reunified the empire as Sultan Mehmed I (d. 1421)

Sources: ⁵

Section 2: The Interregnum's Bloody Phases: A Narrative of the Civil War

The eleven-year conflict unfolded in four distinct phases, marked by shifting alliances, strategic maneuvers, and decisive, bloody encounters that determined the fate of the dynasty.

Phase I (1402–1405): The Anatolian Scramble

Immediately following the Battle of Ankara, the struggle for the throne began in the Ottoman heartland of Anatolia. While Süleyman secured Rumelia, Mehmed from Amasya and İsa from Bursa clashed for control of the core territories.⁹ This initial phase was defined by Mehmed's military superiority. In a series of engagements in the spring of 1403, notably the Battles of Ermeni-beli and Ulubad, Mehmed's forces decisively defeated İsa's.⁹ İsa fled, seeking refuge first with the Byzantines in Constantinople and later with the Karamanids.⁹ His struggle ended ignominiously around 1406 when he was ambushed and strangled in a bathhouse (*hamam*) in Eskişehir by agents loyal to Mehmed.⁶ With İsa eliminated, Mehmed was the master of Anatolia. This victory, however, prompted the intervention of the eldest brother. In March 1404, Süleyman crossed the Dardanelles with a large army, captured Bursa and later Ankara, and established a frontier with Mehmed's domains, initiating a new and more dangerous stage of the war.⁹

Phase II (1405–1410): The Strategic Stalemate

The direct confrontation between Süleyman and Mehmed led not to immediate, decisive battle, but to a prolonged stalemate lasting roughly five years.⁹ Süleyman controlled the wealthy European provinces and the western Anatolian coast, while Mehmed held the vast interior of Anatolia.¹⁴ This period was a cold war, characterized by consolidation, diplomacy, and the building of alliances for the future showdown. Both princes understood that the next phase would be for the entire empire, and they prepared accordingly. This long pause in major fighting allowed both sides to recover their strength and resources, but it also allowed resentments to fester, particularly within Süleyman's camp.¹⁴

Phase III (1410–1411): The Rumelian Gambit

The stalemate was broken by a brilliant strategic maneuver from Mehmed. Unable to defeat Süleyman's larger army in a direct confrontation in Anatolia, he instead chose to attack his brother's power base. He dispatched his brother Musa, now freed from captivity, across the Black Sea with a small force to foment rebellion in Rumelia.⁹ This proxy war was perfectly calculated. Musa's radical *ghazi* message found fertile ground among the frontier warriors who were disaffected with Süleyman's luxurious court and his friendly relations with Christian powers.⁷ The gambit forced Süleyman to abandon his Anatolian campaign and rush back to Europe to defend his capital.⁹ The contest between Süleyman and Musa was short but sanguinary. Süleyman initially gained the upper hand, defeating Musa at the Battle of Kosmidion outside Constantinople in 1410.⁹ However, Musa's populist appeal proved overwhelming. In 1411, as Musa advanced on Edirne, Süleyman's army, reflecting the deep discontent of the military class, defected to Musa en masse.⁹ Süleyman was forced to flee but was captured by villagers and executed on February 17, 1411, on Musa's orders.⁶ With Süleyman's death, Musa became the undisputed master of the Ottoman territories in Europe.

Phase IV (1411–1413): The Final Act

Musa's victory left only two contenders: himself in Rumelia and Mehmed in Anatolia. However, Musa's rule quickly proved to be tyrannical and politically inept. His aggressive policies alienated not only the Christian vassals but also the Ottoman military and administrative elite who had previously supported him.⁷ His decision to renew the siege of Constantinople was a fatal error. The Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Palaiologos, who had been Süleyman's ally, promptly switched his allegiance and called upon Mehmed for protection.⁹ This provided Mehmed with the legitimacy and, crucially, the naval support needed to cross the straits and take the fight to his brother. Mehmed forged a powerful coalition, securing the vital assistance of the Serbian Despot Stefan Lazarević and his formidable heavy cavalry.⁶ The final battle of the Interregnum was fought on the Plain of Çamurlu, near modern-day Samokov, Bulgaria, on July 5, 1413.⁶ The battle was fiercely contested. At one point, Musa personally charged and killed Hassan, the Agha of Mehmed's Janissaries, who was attempting to persuade Musa's troops to defect.⁹ However, the tide turned in Mehmed's favor due to the superior fighting of his allies and key defections from Musa's ranks by disgruntled noblemen.⁶ Musa's army was defeated. He fled the battlefield but was captured and, following the now-established pattern, strangled.⁹ With the death of his last rival, Mehmed Çelebi was the sole surviving son of Bayezid and the undisputed Sultan of a reunified, if deeply scarred, Ottoman Empire.

Section 3: The Architect of Victory: Mehmed Çelebi's Path to Power

Mehmed's ultimate triumph was not a matter of luck but the result of superior strategy,

political acumen, and a clearer vision for the future of the Ottoman state. He outmaneuvered and outlasted his brothers by building a more durable and broader base of support.

Strategic Patience and Coalition Building

Throughout the eleven-year struggle, Mehmed demonstrated a remarkable capacity for strategic patience, a quality his more impulsive brothers lacked.⁷ He consolidated his Anatolian power base before challenging Süleyman directly. His decision to unleash Musa on Rumelia was a masterstroke of indirect warfare, weakening his strongest rival without risking his own forces. This patience was coupled with an exceptional talent for coalition-building. He understood that military might alone was insufficient. His power was built on a foundation of alliances with the Anatolian Turkish aristocracy, the urban guilds, and the religious establishment—the very sinews of the Ottoman state in Asia.⁵ When the situation demanded it, he proved just as adept as Süleyman at forming pragmatic alliances with Christian powers, securing the critical support of the Byzantine navy and the Serbian army for his final campaign against Musa.⁶ This ability to bridge the Muslim-Christian and Anatolian-Rumelian divides was something none of his brothers could achieve.

Legitimacy and Propaganda

From the very beginning, Mehmed positioned himself not as a regional warlord but as the rightful heir to the entire empire. His consistent use of the title "Sultan" on his coinage was a clear and constant declaration of his intent to restore imperial unity.⁹ This stood in stark contrast to his brothers' more modest or inconsistent titles. Furthermore, as the work of historian Dimitris Kastritsis has shown, the Interregnum was also a war of narratives.¹² The earliest examples of Ottoman historical writing emerged from the courts of the rival princes, each seeking to legitimize their cause.¹⁸ Mehmed's court, in particular, produced chronicles that were designed to justify his actions, portraying his fratricide not as a naked power grab but as a necessary, if tragic, step to end the civil war and save the state.¹⁸ He was not just conquering his brothers; he was crafting the official story of his victory.

The Second Founder

Upon his final victory at Çamurlu, Mehmed I (reigned 1413–1421) faced the monumental task of reconstruction. He is rightly hailed in Ottoman history as the *İkinci Kurucu*, the "second founder" of the empire.⁶ His eight-year reign was not defined by the dramatic conquests of his father or his great-grandson, but by the painstaking and less glamorous work of political and administrative restoration.⁷ He re-established the vassal system in Serbia and Bulgaria, pacified the frontiers, and began the long process of re-absorbing the independent Anatolian

beyliks.⁵ His reign was dedicated to stitching a shattered realm back together, establishing the stable, centralized foundation upon which his successors would build a world power.⁷

The civil war was thus more than a simple succession dispute; it was a contest between competing conceptions of the Ottoman state. Süleyman's model was a loosely-held, Balkan-centric empire reliant on vassals and diplomacy. Musa's was a radical, fanatical *ghazi* state driven by perpetual holy war. Mehmed's victorious model was a synthesis: an empire that drew its legitimacy and core strength from its Turkish and Islamic roots in Anatolia but which governed a multi-ethnic, multi-religious domain in Europe through a centralized administration. He used the Anatolian power base to conquer the Rumelian one, and in doing so, created a more integrated and durable imperial structure than either of his brothers had envisioned.

Part II: The Empire Adrift: The State of the Ottoman Realm (1402–1413)

The eleven-year war between Bayezid's sons was fought over a political entity that had been fundamentally broken. The Battle of Ankara did not merely weaken the Ottoman Empire; it shattered its central authority, reversed its territorial gains, and threw its military and social structures into chaos.

Section 4: The Fractured State: Political and Territorial Disintegration

The Shattering of Unity

The capture of Sultan Bayezid I was a decapitating blow to the highly centralized state he had constructed. With the Sultan gone, central authority evaporated overnight.⁸ The empire, which a day before had stretched from the Danube to the Euphrates, ceased to exist as a unified polity. It was immediately fragmented into the personal domains of the warring princes.¹¹ This political disintegration was absolute. The state fractured into at least three major competing zones: Süleyman's European realm based in Edirne, İsa's short-lived territory around the old capital of Bursa, and Mehmed's Anatolian kingdom in Amasya.⁹ There was no longer a single Ottoman Empire, but rather several competing Ottoman statelets, each with its own capital, army, and foreign policy.

The Return of the Beyliks

The most dramatic consequence of Timur's victory in Anatolia was the resurrection of the Turkish principalities, or beyliks.¹ In the decades prior to 1402, Bayezid I had aggressively pursued a policy of annexation, forcibly absorbing the territories of his Turkish neighbors like Karaman, Germiyan, Aydın, Saruhan, and Mentеше.²² Timur systematically reversed these conquests, restoring the native dynasties to their thrones.⁵ This act rolled back decades of Ottoman expansion in Anatolia and recreated a complex and hostile political landscape.²² The restored beyliks, particularly the powerful Karamanids of Konya, were determined to preserve their newfound independence and actively worked to prevent any single Ottoman prince from reunifying the state.⁵ They became key players in the civil war, frequently allying with one brother against another to keep the Ottomans divided and weak, and posing a constant threat on the eastern flank of Mehmed's Anatolian domain.²²

Table 3: Status of Major Anatolian Beyliks After the Battle of Ankara

Beylik	Pre-1402 Status	Post-1402 Status	Role in Interregnum
Karamanids	Annexed by Bayezid I (1397)	Restored by Timur	Primary Turkish rival to the Ottomans; sought to prevent reunification.
Germiyanids	Annexed by Bayezid I (1390)	Restored by Timur	Initially hostile, later became a key ally and father-in-law to Mehmed I.
Aydinids	Annexed by Bayezid I (1390)	Restored by Timur	Fought against Mehmed I's attempts to re-establish Ottoman authority.
Sarukhanids	Annexed by Bayezid I (1390)	Restored by Timur	Resisted Ottoman reunification efforts.
Menteshe	Annexed by Bayezid I (1391)	Restored by Timur	Resisted Ottoman reunification efforts.
Candarids (Isfendiyarids)	Vassalized by Bayezid I	Remained largely autonomous	Played a complex diplomatic game, allying with different princes.
Erzincan	Annexed by Bayezid I (1399)	Restored by Timur	Acted as a buffer state in the east.

Sources: ¹

The Balkan Exception

In stark contrast to the political fragmentation and chaos in Anatolia, the Ottoman position in the Balkans (Rumelia) proved remarkably resilient.¹⁴ Timur's armies never crossed the Dardanelles, leaving the Ottoman European territories physically untouched.⁵ While some peripheral territories like Thessaloniki, Macedonia, and Kosovo were temporarily lost or fell under the control of local vassals who asserted greater autonomy, the core of Ottoman administrative and military power in Thrace, with its capital at Edirne, remained intact.²⁴ The primary reason for this survival was the inability of the Christian powers of Europe to capitalize on the Ottoman collapse. Weakness, internal divisions, and a focus on other conflicts prevented the organization of a major, unified Crusade that might have decisively expelled the Ottomans from the continent.⁵ This stark divergence—a shattered Anatolia versus a relatively stable Rumelia—is one of the most crucial features of the Interregnum. Paradoxically, the empire's very collapse in Asia may have saved its burgeoning presence in Europe. The civil war completely absorbed the attention and resources of the Ottoman princes for over a decade, preventing any new expansionist campaigns but also forestalling a coordinated European counter-attack. The Ottoman foothold in the Balkans was allowed to survive and solidify by default while its enemies failed to seize their greatest opportunity.

Section 5: The Sinews of War: The Ottoman Military in Crisis and Conflict

The Post-Ankara Army

The professional Ottoman army that had conquered much of the Balkans was effectively destroyed at Ankara.²⁹ The defections of the Anatolian *sipahis* and Tatar auxiliaries deprived the dynasty of its main cavalry force.¹ The princes were forced to rebuild their military strength from the loyalist remnants. The most important of these were the Janissaries, the elite household infantry corps composed of converted Christian slaves (*devşirme*). As the personal troops of the Sultan, their loyalty was to the dynasty itself, and they formed a disciplined, professional core for the armies of all the contenders.⁶ Alongside them were the irregular *ghazi* bands on the frontiers and the armies provided by Christian vassals, who became indispensable components of Ottoman military power during the civil war.⁶

A War of Factions and Vassals

The military campaigns of the Interregnum were defined by this new, composite nature of the armies and by constantly shifting loyalties. The support of the Janissary corps was a coveted

prize, often tipping the balance of power.⁹ The Turkic notables and *ghazi* warriors, who had been alienated by Bayezid's centralizing policies, re-emerged as a powerful political and military faction. Their support was crucial for Musa's rise in Rumelia and formed the bedrock of Mehmed's power in Anatolia.⁶ Perhaps most striking was the critical role played by Christian vassal troops. The Serbian knights under Stefan Lazarević, with their heavy armor and disciplined charges, were arguably the most effective heavy cavalry in the region.⁴ They fought first for Süleyman and later provided the decisive military edge for Mehmed at the Battle of Çamurlu, highlighting the pragmatic, multi-ethnic nature of Ottoman warfare in this period.⁶

The experience of the Interregnum had a profound and lasting impact on the Ottoman military-political structure. The mass desertion of the freeborn Turkish *sipahis* at Ankara was a traumatic event that demonstrated the conditional loyalty of the old Turkic military aristocracy.⁵ In contrast, the Janissaries, as slaves of the Sultan with no other social ties, proved to be a far more reliable instrument of power. While the victor, Mehmed I, had to balance the interests of the Turkish notables who helped him win, his successor, Murad II, would systematically build up the power and prestige of the *devşirme* system and the Janissary corps precisely to counteract the influence of the old Turkish elite.⁵ The Interregnum, therefore, can be seen as the crisis that broke the political dominance of the traditional Turkic warrior class and accelerated the transformation of the Ottoman state from a frontier principality led by *ghazis* into a centralized empire reliant on a loyal, slave-based military and administrative class.

Nature of the Conflict

While the Interregnum was a long and bloody affair, it was not a period of constant, empire-wide warfare. The conflict was episodic, characterized by distinct campaigns and decisive battles separated by long periods of stalemate and political maneuvering.¹⁴ The fighting was primarily a struggle for political control between elite factions, not a total war aimed at the systematic destruction of the land and its people. Territory often changed hands with little resistance as local garrisons and notables shifted their allegiance to whichever prince appeared to be gaining the upper hand.¹⁴ This prevented the complete exhaustion of the state's resources and helps explain why the empire was able to recover with such surprising speed after 1413.

Section 6: An Economy of Survival: Society and Livelihood in the Fetret Devri

Anatolian Devastation vs. Balkan Stability

The socio-economic impact of the Interregnum was, like its political effects, geographically uneven. Timur's campaign of 1402–1403 was a whirlwind of destruction across Anatolia. His armies pillaged the countryside and sacked major cities, causing a severe breakdown of the social and economic order.¹ This initial devastation was compounded by a decade of intermittent warfare between the princes, which further disrupted agricultural production and trade. In contrast, Rumelia, having been spared Timur's invasion, likely enjoyed a greater degree of economic stability, at least until the destructive conflict between Süleyman and Musa from 1410 to 1411.¹⁴

Trade and Urban Life

The collapse of central authority and the political fragmentation of Anatolia would have had a chilling effect on commerce. The security of the great caravan routes, which the early Ottomans had protected, vanished.³¹ Merchants would have faced a bewildering and dangerous landscape of competing warlords and shifting borders. Urban life in Anatolia, especially in cities like Bursa and Ankara that became battlegrounds, undoubtedly suffered. However, the fabric of society did not completely unravel. Enduring local institutions, particularly the powerful urban artisan guilds (*ahî*) and the extensive network of religious endowments (*vakıfs*), provided a critical measure of social and economic continuity.⁵ These organizations managed local markets, provided social services, and maintained a degree of order in the absence of state power. Their deep roots in Anatolian society made them a vital political constituency, and their ultimate support for Mehmed's cause was instrumental in his project of restoring a unified, stable state.⁵

The Agrarian Base

The Ottoman state was built upon an agrarian economy, with its primary source of revenue and military manpower deriving from the land.³¹ The *timar* system, which granted the revenues of a piece of land to a cavalryman in exchange for military service, was the backbone of the provincial army and administration.³⁴ The Interregnum threw this system into chaos. With no single Sultan to grant or confirm land holdings, the *timar* holders' loyalties were divided, and the system of revenue collection and military mobilization broke down.³⁵ The movement of armies across the countryside would have led to the requisitioning of crops and livestock and the flight of peasants from the land, reducing agricultural output.³⁵ However, the fact that Mehmed I and his successor Murad II were able to restore the

timar system and the state's finances relatively quickly suggests that the agrarian base of the empire, while severely damaged, was not irrevocably destroyed.⁵ The fundamental productivity of the land and the peasant population endured, awaiting the return of political stability to be harnessed once more.

Section 7: The Vulture's Game: External Powers and the Interregnum

The collapse of Ottoman power created a political vacuum that neighboring states eagerly sought to exploit, not to destroy the Ottomans entirely, but to manage the crisis to their own advantage.

The Byzantine Strategy of Survival

For the Byzantine Empire, the Battle of Ankara was a miraculous deliverance. On the verge of being conquered by Bayezid's siege, the empire was granted an unexpected reprieve.²⁷ The shrewd and experienced Emperor Manuel II Palaiologos proved to be a master of diplomacy throughout the Interregnum. His strategy was not to attempt to reconquer lost territory but to ensure the Ottoman state remained divided and weak for as long as possible.¹¹ He skillfully played the sons against one another, offering refuge and alliances to whichever prince suited his interests at the moment. He allied with Süleyman, gave shelter to a defeated İsa, and, in the final phase, provided Mehmed with the crucial naval transport and military support needed to defeat Musa.⁶ By helping to prolong the civil war, the Byzantines bought themselves another fifty years of existence.

Serbia's Crucial Role

The Serbian Despotate, under Stefan Lazarević, occupied a unique position. Though technically an Ottoman vassal, Serbia acted as a significant and semi-independent military power during the Interregnum.⁶ The Serbian heavy knights were renowned for their discipline and combat effectiveness, making them highly sought-after allies.⁴ Like the Byzantines, Stefan Lazarević navigated the treacherous politics of the civil war with great skill, lending his military might to different princes at different times. His decision to back Mehmed in the final struggle against Musa was a decisive factor in the outcome of the war, demonstrating that even in its moment of greatest weakness, the Ottoman political sphere still drew in and depended upon its Christian vassals.⁶

Venice and the Beyliks

Other regional powers also pursued their own interests amidst the chaos. The Republic of Venice, the dominant naval and commercial power in the eastern Mediterranean, engaged diplomatically with the rival princes to secure its trading privileges and protect its maritime routes.⁵ In Anatolia, the restored beyliks, especially the Karamanids, represented the most direct opposition to Ottoman reunification. They viewed the Interregnum as their chance to permanently break free from Ottoman domination and reclaim their status as the primary Turkish power in the region, posing a persistent military and political challenge to Mehmed throughout the civil war and well into his reign.⁵

Conclusion: The Second Founding: Legacy and Consequences of the Interregnum

The victory of Mehmed Çelebi at the Battle of Çamurlu on July 5, 1413, brought an end to eleven years of devastating civil war. However, winning the war was only the beginning. The task facing Mehmed I was one of complete political, military, and social reconstruction. The consequences of this formative period would shape the Ottoman state for centuries to come.

Reunification and Restoration

Mehmed I's reign was defined by the immense challenge of reunification. He was not a conqueror in the mold of his father; he was a restorer, a consolidator, a man who had to painstakingly stitch a shattered realm back together.⁵ His immediate priorities were to re-establish central authority over a realm where it had ceased to exist. This involved not only eliminating rival claimants but also suppressing internal rebellions that had festered during the chaos, most notably the socio-religious revolt led by Sheikh Bedreddin.³⁸ Furthermore, the specter of his brother Mustafa, who re-emerged in 1415-1416 to challenge his rule, served as a constant reminder of the fragility of his victory.⁶ Mehmed spent his reign pacifying the Balkans, re-imposing vassalage on local rulers, and beginning the long and arduous process of once again subjugating the independent Anatolian beyliks.⁵

The Legacy of Fratricide

The Interregnum stands as the most extreme and terrifying example of the destructive potential of the traditional Turkic laws of succession within a sedentary empire.⁹ The eleven-year conflict, which nearly destroyed the state, burned a deep trauma into the Ottoman political consciousness.⁷ It demonstrated with brutal clarity that for the empire to function and survive, power could not be shared. There could only be one, undisputed ruler.

This grim lesson arguably provided the political and psychological justification for the later Ottoman practice of institutionalized royal fratricide. The execution of a new Sultan's brothers, while seen as cruel, came to be viewed as a tragic necessity to prevent the far greater catastrophe of another *Fetret Devri*.¹¹

A Forged Empire

The Ottoman state that emerged from the ashes in 1413 was fundamentally different from the one that had been shattered at Ankara in 1402. The experience of defeat and civil war had forged a new kind of empire. It was more cautious in its foreign policy, as seen in Mehmed's focus on consolidation rather than new adventures.⁵ It was institutionally more centralized, having learned the dangers of over-reliance on semi-independent Turkish notables. And it was increasingly reliant on the *devşirme* system and the Janissary corps as a military and administrative force whose loyalty was solely to the Sultan's person, a direct response to the disloyalty of the Turkish *sipahis* at Ankara.⁵

The Interregnum was the ultimate test of the Ottoman state's viability. That it survived at all is a testament to the strength of its core institutions in Rumelia and the political genius of Mehmed I. The crisis delayed the empire's greatest triumph—the conquest of Constantinople—by half a century.³⁷ Yet, in doing so, it ensured that the state which eventually achieved that victory was more resilient, more centralized, and more powerful than it had ever been before. The Ottoman Interregnum was not merely an interruption in the empire's rise; it was the violent crucible in which the classical Ottoman Empire was truly forged.

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