

Vigilance Through a Peaceful Transition

The Beginnings and Ascension of Süleyman I

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Süleyman I, also known as Süleyman the Magnificent, was the Ottoman sultan from 1520 to 1566¹. It is generally regarded that his reign was a golden age for the Ottoman Empire². He ascended to the throne at the age of twenty-six after his father had died, and he was regarded as well-trained for the position³. While historians tend to dwell on the wars he waged and what his reign looked like inside the Ottoman Empire, it is vital to consider the circumstances of his accession as well. The circumstances of Süleyman's accession to the Ottoman throne greatly influenced his rule, for not only did he have the usual past training, but he also lived through two accessions: His father's, which was hotly contested, and his own, which was not.

Süleyman did not ascend the throne as an inexperienced man, for he had served in two governorates before he became sultan. These positions allowed Süleyman to gain some experience in government. He was governor of Kefe, a province in eastern Crimea, from 1509⁴ to 1513, when he took up a similar position in Manisa, a province in western Anatolia, until his father's death in 1520⁵. These positions helped the young Süleyman learn to rule, and the sons of sultans obtaining governorates were not uncommon, as evidenced by Selim I's path to the sultanate after the death of his father, Bayezid II⁶. However, while Süleyman held similar roles as

¹ G. Veinstein, "Süleymān," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, and W.P. Heinrichs (Lieden: Brill), 2012.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_1114.

² Veinstein, "Süleymān," *Encyclopedia of Islam*.

³ Atıl Esin, *Süleymanname: the illustrated history of Süleyman the Magnificent* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1896), 91.

⁴ H. Erdem Çıpa, *The Making of Selim* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2017), 34.

⁵ Veinstein, "Süleymān," *Encyclopedia of Islam*.

⁶ Çıpa, *Making of Selim*, 33.

Selim did, there were some major discrepancies, for while their training was similar, their paths to the throne were much different.

The largest of the discrepancies between Süleyman's and Selim's accessions was that Selim had competition, and Süleyman did not. Selim I had two brothers, which caused stiff competition between the three, leading to twenty-five years of political maneuvering between the siblings until Selim overthrew his father, Bayezid II, in 1512⁷. The brothers' maneuverings generally consisted of each potential heir attempting to gain the best path to Istanbul⁸. In fact, Süleyman's first governorate was used as an attempt by Selim to obstruct one of his brother's path to the capital⁹. However, Selim's issues did not end when he deposed Bayezid II, for while his father was gone, one of his brothers, Ahmed, still contested the throne¹⁰. This caused factions to form around which brother was to be in charge¹¹. Thus, it is safe to assume that, especially in the first years of his reign, Selim was forced to do all he could to ensure his status. Moreover, Selim's seizure of the throne from his father was the first of its kind in the Ottoman Empire¹², which allowed future sons of sultans the option to overthrow their fathers if they wished. However, Süleyman's accession was much different from his father's, for there were no brothers to fight. In fact, between Mehmed II in 1451 and Mehmed III in 1595, Süleyman was the only sultan to gain the throne without committing fratricide¹³. Süleyman's accession consisted of him traveling to Istanbul after his father died on 22 September 1520, arriving on the thirtieth, and his

⁷ Çıpa, *Making of Selim*, 33-55.

⁸ Çıpa, *Making of Selim*, 37-38.

⁹ Çıpa, *Making of Selim*, 37-38.

¹⁰ Çıpa, *Making of Selim*, 58.

¹¹ Çıpa, *Making of Selim*, 62-107.

¹² Çıpa, *Making of Selim*, 69.

¹³ Colin Imber, "Government, Administration, and Law," in *The Cambridge History of Turkey*, ed. Suraiya N. Faroqhi and Kate Fleet, 1st ed., Vol. 2, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2012, 208.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/CHO9781139049047>.

accession ceremony the next day¹⁴. Unlike his father, Süleyman was able to gain the throne relatively easily. This allowed for a more unified empire because the empire was not divided into factions based on who will succeed the Selim I. However, it did not mean that Süleyman's accession was without conflict.

Süleyman's accession to the throne impacted his reign, or at the very least, it impacted the beginning of his reign. Because he did not have to fight to gain the throne, there was skepticism around whether or not he could fight effectively, which led to rebellions throughout the beginning of his rule¹⁵. The most prominent case is concerning Janberdi, an ex-Mamluk governor of areas in the Levant¹⁶. However, Süleyman responded, and Janberdi lost his head¹⁷. These rebellions, as well as the memory of how his father won the throne, likely affected how Süleyman I viewed his succession. When Mustafa, Süleyman's eldest son, became extremely popular to the point where he could usurp Süleyman, he was executed¹⁸. Leslie Peirce writes: "Süleyman may have been convinced of Mustafa's guilt. He may also have recognized that the prince, even if innocent of any plotting against his father, might nevertheless compromise his ability to rule effectively"¹⁹. Because Süleyman was vigilant, it seemed inevitable that if a possible successor got too powerful, they could usurp the throne, as Selim had done to Bayezid II. Thus, while Süleyman I had little competition and little military experience, he was prone to rebellions at the beginning of his reign. However, he was able to put these down and remained vigilant to usurpation throughout his reign, even if it meant executing his firstborn.

¹⁴ Esin, *Süleymanname*, 91.

¹⁵ Imber, "Government," *Cambridge History*, 211-212.

¹⁶ Leslie P. Peirce, *The Imperial Harem* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 57.

¹⁷ Peirce, *Imperial Harem*, 57.

¹⁸ Peirce, *Imperial Harem*, 56-83.

¹⁹ Peirce, *Imperial Harem*, 83.

Therefore, the circumstances of Süleyman's accession to the throne is vital in evaluating his reign, for living through his father's competitive accession made him vigilant to rebellion, especially considering that his accession was uncontested. Furthermore, his past training gave him knowledge of how to rule. Because Süleyman was uncontested, some doubted that he could rule effectively, which eventually led to rebellions. Moreover, he was forced to remember how his father got the throne, for one of his sons could replicate Selim's success, which led to his eldest son's execution. Also, considering how Süleyman's accession impacted his reign is important in considering how he is remembered. If his accession was different, his reign would have likely also differed. Therefore, it is essential to understand how and why Süleyman's accession happened the way it did.

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