

Mehmet II's Campaign to Italy (1480-1481)

II. Mehmet'in İtalya Seferi (1480-1481)

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Abstract: Mehmet II's military campaign to Italy was the first and the last attempt at conquest on the coast of the Adriatic Sea. Different views have been asserted about the political, military and economic reasons for the conquest of Italy between the years 1480-1481. In this study, Mehmet II's understanding of Emperorship and the effects of his policy of religion on his campaign to Italy were researched. With the conquest of Istanbul, Mehmet II started to use the title “*The Protector of Orthodox Christians and the Emperor of Eastern Rome*”. With his military campaigns to Italy, Mehmet II aimed at being the ruler of the Catholic world and of ancient Rome. After the conquests in the Balkans, Mehmet II reached the coast of the Adriatic Sea. He aimed at conquering Italy which was the centre of the Roman and the Catholic world at that time. In order to reach his goal he charged Ahmed Gedik Pasha with this task. With the conquest of Otranto, Italy began to be conquered. However, with the death of Mehmet II, in 1481 the conquest of Italy was not realised.

Keywords: Italy, Mehmet II, Gedik Ahmet Pasha, Otranto

Özet: II. Mehmet'in İtalya seferi, Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun Adriyatik Denizi'nin karşı kıyılarına yaptığı ilk ve son fetih girişimidir. 1480-1481 tarihleri arasındaki İtalya seferinin, siyasi, askerî ve ekonomik gerekçeleri konusunda farklı görüşler ileri sürülmüştür. Bu çalışmada, II. Mehmet'in imparatorluk anlayışıyla din politikasının, İtalya Seferi'ne etkileri ele alınmıştır. İstanbul'un fethiyle birlikte Ortodoks Hristiyanlarının koruyucusu ve Doğu Roma İmparatoru sıfatını kullanmaya başlayan II. Mehmet, İtalya seferiyle de Katolik dünyasının ve antik Roma'nın hâkimi olmayı hedeflemiştir. Bu amaçla Balkanlarda gerçekleştirilen fetihlerle Adriyatik kıyısına ulaşan II. Mehmet için yeni hedef Roma ve Katolik dünyasının merkezi İtalya'dır. Bu amacına ulaşmak için Gedik Ahmet Paşa görevlendirilmiş, Otranto'nun fethiyle birlikte İtalya ele geçirilmeye başlanmış; ancak II. Mehmet'in ölümü İtalya'nın fethinin yarım kalmasına sebep olmuştur.

Anahtar sözcükler: İtalya, II. Mehmet, Gedik Ahmet Paşa, Otranto

The historical realities underlying the fact that the Ottomans transformed into a massive empire only 150 years after they emerged in northwestern Anatolia toward the end of the 14th century have not been completely illuminated. This because the strategies and policies followed during this period, although they constituted the basis of Ottoman expansion and sovereignty until the middle of the sixteenth century, triggered the decline of the empire. Undoubtedly, the transforming of a powerful state into an expansive empire took place during the reign of Mehmet II (1451-1481). In fact, in the second year of his reign, Mehmet's conquest of Istanbul (May 29, 1453) was of vital importance since it revealed that he had much greater ambitions. The conquest of Istanbul was not only Mehmet II or the Ottomans' project but also of the Turks' who arrived in Anatolia from the 11th century. We can argue that this aim became an essential and ultimate

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purpose of the Ottomans taking into account the regions they had been conquering and deploying in (Eroğlu, 2007, 117-131).

Furthermore, we cannot limit our approach to the policy followed for the conquest of Istanbul by assuming that it was merely a dream of conquering the Byzantine capital. Because analyzing the conquest of Istanbul is extremely important to understanding post-conquest Ottoman policies.

The Rumelian conquests launched by Ottoman Prince Suleiman Pasha during the reign of Orhan Bey gained much greater importance and a new phase with the conquest of Istanbul. With this phase, the Ottoman expansion reached along the Adriatic coast after the conquest of Albania in the last quarter of the 15th century. Generally, the expansion of the Ottoman Empire is discussed in terms of it growing larger and the seizure of all the Christian states/statelets standing against it, mainly in terms of the geographic continuity of the conquests. Thus, the expedition to Italy, which is the main focus of this study, has been considered as a natural consequence of the Ottomans' reaching the Adriatic coast and the geographic continuity of the conquests. It is remarkable that the matter is reflected in the Ottoman sources in this manner. For instance, Hoca Saadettin, author of the Ottoman chronicle called Tacü't-Tevarih, attributes Mehmet's expedition to Italy to the fact that Gedik Ahmet Pasha, who was appointed to conquer Avlonya (Vlorë) in order to eliminate the resistance in Albania, asked for permission to conquer Polya (Apulia) since it was adjacent to the Avlonya district and Hoca Saadettin further explains that Gedik Ahmet Pasha was granted permission as well as funds, troops and naval forces to conquer Otranto (Hoca Saadettin, 1979, 164-165). Şerafettin Turan claims that İdrisî Bidlisî shares the same opinion but Hammer suggests that Mehmet the Conqueror was encouraged to launch this expedition by the Venetians (Ibn Kemal, 1991, 507). According to Hoca Saadettin, the reason why the Ottoman troops attacked Italy was the fact that Gedik Ahmet Pasha wanted to seize the opposite coasts of the Adriatic Sea acting in accordance with the notion of continuity of the conquest.

On the other hand, a quick look through the Ottoman chronicles reveals that Mehmet's expedition to Italy is not mentioned comprehensively in the chronicles. It is a matter of debate to claim that the chronicles do not provide detailed information about the campaign because they did not attach importance to the conquest of Otranto. On the other hand, we need to focus on the reasons why the Ottoman sources remain silent about the expedition to Italy and the conquest of Otranto while they provide profound information about seizure of even a small town in the Balkans or Anatolia.

M. Neşri (1995, 839) mentions the expedition to Otranto in a few words: "*Hünkar, Gedik Ahmet Paşa'yı Polya'ya gönderdi. Ve Gedik Ahmet, Poyla vilayetine ehl-i İslamdan mübalağa adam geçürüb, birkaç pare kale feth etti. Ta Hünkar ahirete nakl edince Polya'da kalıp hayli fütuhlar ede başladı*". The information in Oruç Bey (*Oruç Bey Tarihi*, 1972, 129), Lütfî Pasha (1341, 190) and other anonymous Ottoman chronicles (*Anonim Osmanlı Kroniği*, (1299-1512), 2000, 130, *Anonim Tevârih-i Al-i Osman*, 1992, 118) is no more detailed or different from this. Moreover, Tursun Bey (1977, 180), a contemporary historian to Mehmet II, provides very little information about the expedition to Italy in his book called *Tarih-i Ebu'l-Feth*: "*Binaberin ma'na Gedik Ahmet Paşa'yı sene erbâ'in ve semânîne ve semânî mi'e tarihinde, azim tonanma ile Pulya ceziresine saldı. Varup, bi-inâyeti'l-lah ve bi-himmeti Sultanı zıllu'llah, nefsi kal'a-i Pulya'yı -ki madend-i kal'a-i Konstantiniyye'dür- kahr ile fet itti ve çok memleketini zapt itti. Ma'abid-i asnâm mesâcid-i İslâm olub penç nevbet-i Muhammedî 'aleyhi efdalü's-selâm çalındı*". As an exception, Ibn Kemal (1991, 507-520), unlike other chronicles, provides detailed information about the expedition to Italy.

Although it did not receive an adequate echo in the Ottoman chronicles, we should analyze the political and military aspects of the period that ended with the conquest of the opposite coast

wrote an article on the subject, suggests some opinions about the reasons why Mehmet II launched the Italian campaign. According to him, Albania was not the only country having Adriatic coasts. Epirus, which mostly lies today in modern Greek territory, was then an important location since it had a coast on the Adriatic Sea and overlooked the Gulf of Otranto. Therefore, it was crucial to capture Epirus for it was connecting the east and west. Another significance of this location was its dominance of the Gulf of Otranto. That made the province of Epirus a primary target to be held for the expansion of a new power in the Balkans or Italy. Whoever held this location could have the control over the straits and the opposite side. The Ottomans intended to seize and use Epirus as a shield against potential Christian attacks. K. Giakoumis (2002, 373-374) further claims that the Italian campaign was only a part of Mehmet's much greater ambitious plans. Therefore, it was inevitable that Italy became a natural target of Ottoman conquests after the occupation of the Balkan coasts of the Adriatic Sea.

On the other hand, İnalçık considers that the Italian campaign was launched because Mehmet II set his sights on new territories to extend Ottoman sovereignty after he had strengthened the empire's hegemony over Rumelia and Anatolia, reached the River Danube in Balkans and who made it the northern border from Belgrade to the Black Sea, and expanded the eastern borders to the River Euphrates. According to him, it was posing a serious threat for Ottoman sovereignty that the Venetians were still holding the Morea and the Albanian coast and some points in the Aegean, the Hungarian ruled Belgrade and northern Bosnia, Moldavian Prince Stephen the Great had strength over the Black Sea and the lower Danube. At the same time, the Knights of Rhodes, by order of the Pope, maintained their position as outpost for a crusade. In fact, the Pope, preparing to go to France, had called for aid by all the states in the western Christian world. For all the above reasons, Mehmet II regarded the Italian campaign as a necessary action to be taken (İnalçık, 2004, 34).

In addition to the above reasons, the fact that Leonardo, ruler of the islands near Epirus and paying tax to the Ottomans every year, married the Princess of Naples without obtaining permission from the Ottomans is suggested as one of the reasons why the Italian campaign was launched (Uzunçarşılı, 1994, vol. II-135, Tansel, 1999, 219).

The aforementioned remarks merely explain the political and military motives of the expedition to Italy. However, these political and military reasons should not prevent us from seeing another side to the conquest. This because, Mehmet II declared himself protector of the Orthodox Church and of millions of Orthodox Christians just after he had conquered Istanbul in 1453 so that he could legitimize his rulership over the Christian citizens under Ottoman rule. In addition, Mehmet II adopted a policy where he neither allowed religious or ethnic discrimination between Jewish and Christian citizens under his rule nor granted privilege to either one. However, he attached some priorities to certain groups in the treatment of non-Muslim minorities as they had political, social and economic effects over the fundamental interests of the empire and the people. The most prominent of these groups were Armenians, Serbians and Ottoman Greeks (Rum). Thus, a clear, certain and systematic policy conducted with non-Muslim minorities became definite during the reign of Mehmet II (Ercan, 2004, 9).

On the other hand, Mehmet was trying to make Istanbul the religious center of the Orthodox Christian world. After the conquest, scattered Orthodox Greeks re-organized, Gennadios II Scholarios was appointed patriarch and designated as the spiritual leader as well as the ethnarch of all the Orthodox Christians in the Empire. During this period, the Orthodox Christians in Egypt, Syria, Palestine, Cyprus and Russia as well as in Rumelia and Anatolia came under the spiritual and administrative jurisdiction of the Patriarchate (Ercan, 2001, 103-104).

Besides, in a similar way, Mehmet aimed to establish a legitimate rule over the Catholics with the Ottoman conquest of the Balkans. In that way, he could have captured and given

and debates between east and west for 700 years was actually consummated when this sequence of events took place (Kaçar, 30 Kasım 2006, Radikal Gazetesi).

It is noteworthy that, although the Christian world was suffering from this permanent schism, they managed to maintain the Spirit of Crusade and took a stand against the Ottoman military campaigns launched to seize Christian Balkan lands. The papacy in Rome played a major role in establishing the Spirit of Crusade against the Ottomans. The Christian world put the schism aside and acted together through crusader spirit to defend against the Ottoman campaigns launched on either Catholic or Orthodox countries. It is recorded that the Battle of Kosovo (1389), Battle of Nicopolis (1396), Battle of Varna (1444) and Second Battle of Kosovo (1448) were regarded as Crusades called by the Pope against the Ottoman Turks. Without doubt, the underlying reasons for these battles were not religious but political. In fact, the Orthodox-Catholic alliance established by so-called religious motives was a military and political alliance aiming to halt the Ottoman expansion in the Balkans.

In conclusion, having conquered Istanbul and transformed his state into a multilingual, multireligious and multicultural empire through the correct policy he had adopted, the Muslim-Ottoman Emperor Mehmet II launched the Italian campaign to capture Rome and to take control of the Catholic Church. Perhaps, in this way, the Great Schism might have been settled and the Christian world could have moved forward to reconciliation. Mehmet II intended to retain control over the spiritual leadership of the Catholic world through capturing Italy as well as keeping the Orthodox Christians under his rule. Because, the main purpose of Ottoman world domination was to gather different religions, languages and ethnic structures under "*Osmanlılık İdeolojisi (The Ideology of Ottomansim)*" (Eroğlu, 2006, 37-51).

Further, with the conquest of Istanbul, Mehmet II claimed the title of Emperor of the Roman Empire because he thought of himself as the heir to the throne of the Roman Empire. As a matter of fact, if we evaluate the reactions of the Christian world in this respect, which were reflected in the Christian sources, Mehmet's Italian campaign had different implications from those recorded in the Ottoman sources. Whereas, the wording of the Italian campaign in the Ottoman chronicles is full of Islamic patterns and concepts. One of the explanations for this tendency we can provide is that Muslims tended to reflect their reactions in a significant Islamic manner of expression while non-Muslim citizens gained an increasing socio-economic significance in Mehmet's multilingual, multinational and multicultural empire model. In fact, authors of chronicles with a background in Islamic tradition reflected their reactions in a clear manner (Eroğlu, 2007, 245-262).

As concluding remarks, we can suggest that the real motives underlying Mehmet's Italian campaign, as well as the political, military and economic reasons, embodied the possible outcome of the religion policies he adopted to create a world empire.

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