Late in 1437, perhaps after the death of King Sigismund of Hungary, Murad addressed his court: “Who from among my subjects knows the roads of Hungary?” Ali Bey, the marcher lord of Vidin, replied:1 “My sultan! If you would be so generous, let me, your slave, answer your call. I will investigate all the roads and counties.” Murad asked Ali Bey to take the armies of Rumelia and Anatolia with him, but the marcher lord replied that his own akinji raiders were sufficient. After one month of looting and pillaging he reported back to the sultan, “My sultan! Hungary is a most glorious kingdom and befits you. Is it not shameful that an infidel should be lord of this kingdom?” The sultan replied in response: “May God assist us! And he thus resolved to cross over into Hungary.”2

The passage above presents in rather dramatic style the Ottoman decision to annex Serbia and begin direct aggression against Hungary.3 The reasons for this decision are the topic of this chapter. Political developments were among the immediate causes, four of which deserve mention. The first two occurred in Europe outside Ottoman borders—the Council of Florence and Sigismund’s death; the latter two were the result of developments within the empire and in Asia—changes in the Imperial Council

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1 This scene appears in Aşıkpaşazâde, p. 131. Although the sultan’s and Ali Bey’s words are not to be taken literally, the underlying sense of the episode is clear. There is some controversy as to when Ali Bey’s raid took place. Some Ottoman sources state that it happened in 1440 (Friedrich Giese, ed., Die altosmanischen anonymen Chroniken, part 1, Text und Variantenverzeichnis (Breslau, 1922)), and during this year there were indeed raids on Hungarian territory by Ali Bey and others. This has led some historians who rely primarily on Giese’s work and the translation into Hungarian by Thúry to date the above speech to 1440 and see it as a diversionary tactic for the siege of Belgrade. Yet Aşıkpaşazâde clearly states that the event took place just prior to Murad’s assault in 1438, which makes more sense given later events.

2 Aşıkpaşazâde, p. 131. It should be noted here that Ali Bey himself suffered a humiliating defeat from the Hungarians in the summer of 1437 near Smederevo while the Hungarians were returning from their raid on Kruševac. His encouraging words may have been motivated as much by vengeance as bravado. See chapter three.

3 Bartolomeo di Giano, writing from Constantinople, goes even further in his letter from 1438, stating that Murad “swore, even vowed to his god, that he will not be calmed by any offer of peace until the call of Muhammad is sung in all of Hungary.” Migne, vol. 158, p. 1062.
and the resolution of challenges to Ottoman power in Anatolia. There were two ongoing contextual factors that were equal in importance to the political events above. The first was the Ottoman dynastic myth, i.e. the sultan’s conception of himself as the leader in expanding the borders of Islam into Europe. From the sultan on down the military class felt compelled to wage war on infidel Christian lands, and it was easy for those favoring war to tap into this compulsion in order to steer Ottoman policy in a more expansionist direction. The second was Ottoman institutions. A policy of greater centralization meant a corresponding increase in the sultan’s centralized civil and military bureaucracy. These positions were staffed in large part by Slaves of the Porte. The primary source of these slaves was cross-border raiding into Christian territory, undertaken by the sanjak governors of Rumelia, and particularly by a subgroup of these known as the marcher lords. As we shall see, the political changes that occurred and the institutions governing these changes were complexly interwoven. The pages below do their best to untangle this and clarify as much as possible the complex phenomena that resulted in a change of Ottoman expansionist policy, fully wrought by the end of 1437.

The Reign of Murad II

At its inception, the Ottomans comprised but one “beylik” among many other Turkish principalities in Anatolia. Their rapid rise to primacy in the peninsula was due in large part to their geographical position, specifically their position on the border with Byzantium. In the dynamic cauldron that was late fourteenth-century Anatolia—comprised of Seljuks, other Turkic migrants, Byzantine Greeks and Mongols all vying for primacy—it was Osman’s zeal for waging ghaza against the Byzantine infidels that distinguished him and his men from their peers. Ghaza, or holy war, gave Osman a sanctioned pretext for seizing more and more land from the Byzantines, and for rallying around himself a band of followers motivated not only by the material benefits derived from military expansion but also by a sense of religious and divine purpose.

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4 In Arabic the word is written غزوة which in modern Turkish transliteration is ğaza, or plural ğazâvât. The term itself refers to the campaigns waged by Mohammed and his followers in the first years of Islam. It is synonymous in this period with the more familiar term of jihad, and the Ottomans used the terms interchangeably.  