CHAPTER 1

The Empire in the Making: Construction and Early Critiques

The emergence of what was to become the Ottoman Empire is one of the most fascinating stories of state-making we know, and discussions surrounding its features and character have been some of the liveliest in the Ottomanist field. Whatever the exact nature of the early Ottoman emirate, its development was, by any measure, spectacular.¹ The first emir, Osman son of Ertoğrul (d. 1324?), seems to have risen around the year 1299 to become a chieftain of settlers and raiders under vague Seljuk suzerainty in the region of Bithynia. Osman's success in raiding and in battle gave his son Orhan (d. 1362) a stable base from which he was able to conquer a number of important Byzantine towns in the region, including Proussa (Bursa, 1326), Nikaia (Iznik, 1331), and Nikomedia (Izmit, 1337). Moreover, Orhan's armies took advantage of an earthquake (at Kallipoli/Gelibolu, in 1354) to cross to Europe, where they played an active role in the struggles between the contenders to the Byzantine throne and, as a result, gained territories and towns such as Didymoteichon (Dimetoka, 1359 or 1361). Under Orhan's successor, Murad I (d. 1389), the state (by now increasingly endorsing the traditions and institutions of its Islamic predecessors) annexed territories of both the fellow-Muslim emirates of Anatolia (Germiyan, c. 1375; part of Karaman in 1387) and the Christian states of the Byzantine Empire (Adrianople/Edirne, c. 1369; Thessaloniki, 1387; Verroia, c. 1385) and Serbia (Nish, 1386). A major role in this process was played by warlords and the heads of large families, such as Evrenos and Mihaloğulları, who seem to have actually governed their own conquests in the Balkans, under Murad's nominal suzerainty. In the Ottoman victory at the decisive battle of Kosovo (1389) Murad was killed, but his son Bayezid I established Ottoman suzerainty in the area of the Balkans that had formed Bulgaria and southern Serbia (crushing a Hungarian-led crusade at Nicopolis in 1396) and then annexed many of the Turkoman principalities of Anatolia, occupying Konya (1397) and Sivas (1398). Bayezid, however, met his end at the hands of Timur; at the battle of Ankara (1402), his Anatolian vassals deserted him and he died a prisoner of

the Chagatay conqueror. This looked like the end of the one-century old state, as Bayezid’s four sons, Süleyman, Mehmed, Isa, and Musa engaged in a long civil war that only ended in 1413, with Mehmed as sole ruler of the remaining Ottoman territories. Following this, Mehmed managed to see off his Anatolian and Venetian enemies, as well as a much-debated series of internal revolts led by Musa’s judge, Şeyh Bedreddin, and a millenarian preacher, Börklüce Mustafa. As a result of his successes, upon his death in 1421 the Ottoman borders were on the Danube in the north and the Adriatic in the west. His son and successor, Murad II, recovered all the Anatolian territories lost in the aftermath of the defeat at Ankara, captured Thessaloniki from Venice for a second time in 1430, and conquered new territories in Anatolia and on the Adriatic and Ionian coasts. Somewhat unexpectedly, he abdicated in 1444 in favor of his son Mehmed, but the perceived danger posed by a new crusade made him return only a few months later, defeating the Hungarians and their allies at Varna, on the Black Sea coast. After his death in 1451, he was again succeeded by his son, Mehmed II the Conqueror, almost the first act of whom was the conquest of Constantinople/Istanbul, which was to be the new capital of the empire. Mehmed’s vision and state was very different to those of his fourteenth-century ancestors: what had begun as a semi-tribal confederation of warlords was now an organized settled state with a highly elaborate hierarchy and protocol and an apparatus formed of scholars and statesmen (who had already formed their own family dynasties) that was ready to articulate a theory of Mehmed’s imperial vision.

The spectacular expansion of the early Ottomans demands an explanation, and many theories have been put forward. Originating as a small emirate in what used to be the Seljuk borderlands, the Ottomans had one significant advantage over the other emirates that filled the power vacuum created by the Mongol invasion of 1243: theirs was situated on the frontline with the lands of the infidels, Byzantium, and thus offered splendid prospects for a life of plundering, on the one hand, and religious fervor, on the other. And indeed, it is the precise nature of the balance between these two factors that forms the focus of much scholarly debate on the origins of the Ottomans. This debate, initiated by Fuad Köprülü (who was, in turn, answering the claims of Gibbons regarding the strong Byzantine character of the early Ottomans) and his face-value acceptance of the tribal origin of Osman’s people from a branch of the Oğuz tribes, led to Paul Wittek’s famous “gazi thesis”. Wittek surmised that Osman’s tribal nucleus gathered together a group of warriors of various backgrounds, all of whom were motivated by the spirit of gaza or “the Holy War”, i.e. the prospect of war against the neighboring Byzantines. The ensuing debate might have been based on a misunderstanding, as if Wittek had meant a kind of Muslim