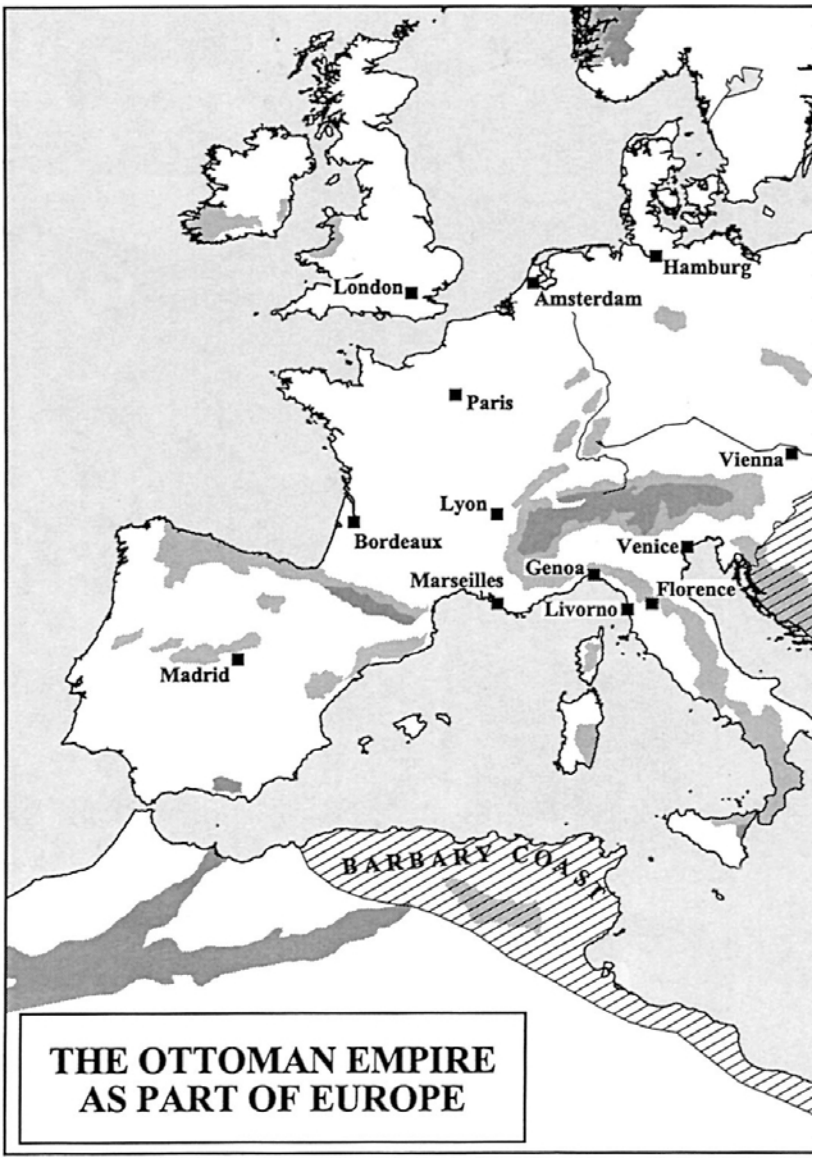
1 Introduction: Ottomancentrism and the West

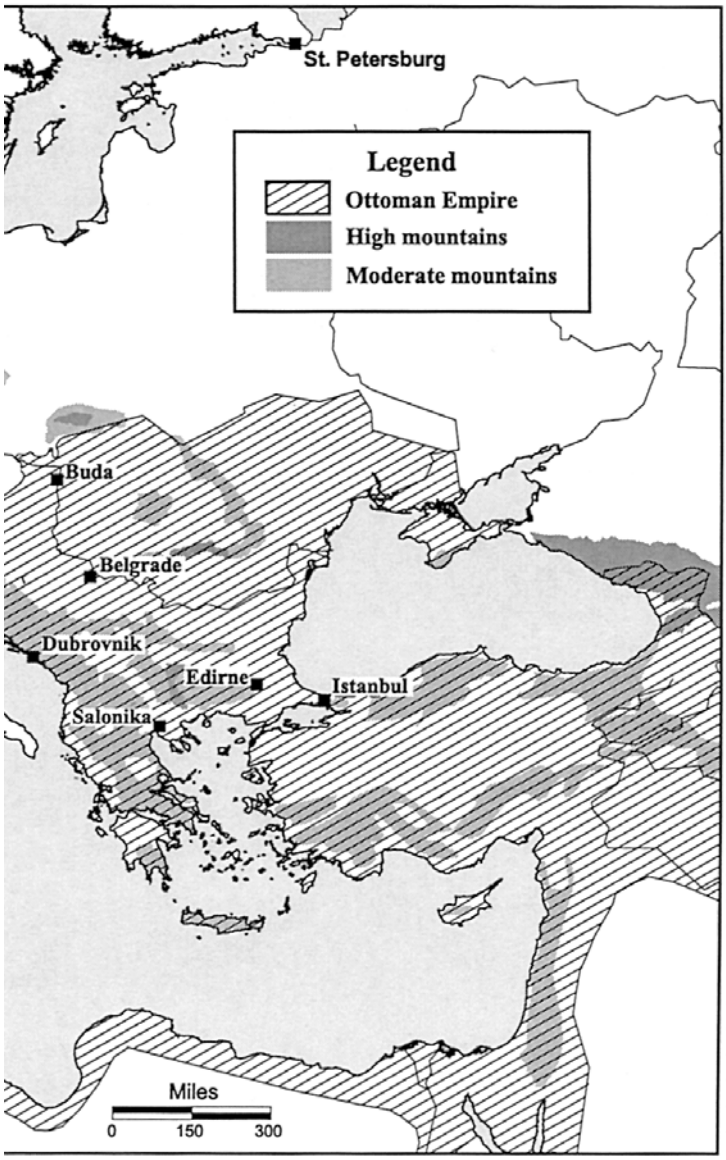
One chapter in a recent history of the Ottomans begins with the assertion that "the Ottoman Empire lived for war."[1] This statement constitutes a concise précis of a damaging and misleading stereotype, long pervasive in both Europe and the United States. Pursuing this thesis of an acute Ottoman militancy, the author explains that "every governor in this empire was a general; every policeman was a janissary; every mountain pass had its guards, and every road a military destination." Not only were officials also soldiers, this account declares, but "even madmen had a regiment, the *deli*, or loons, Riskers of their Souls, who were used, since they did not object, as human battering rams, or human bridges." Indeed, according to this same writer, it was "outbreaks of peace [that] caused trouble at home, as men clamoured for the profit and the glory." Although these and similar observations strictly speaking may not be wholly false, they certainly are partial (*deli* in modern Turkish indeed suggests "loony" or "deranged"; in Ottoman Turkish, however, a more accurate translation would be "brave" or even "heroic"), dangerously credible, and confirm long-lived Western assumptions that the Ottoman state was thoroughly and relentlessly martial. Even more misleadingly, they imply that such militarism was somehow peculiarly foreign and contrary to Western norms.

The truth is that such portrayals not only privilege a single aspect of a rich and varied world, but also could describe virtually any state in early modern Europe. Did the early modern Habsburg state, the French state,

[1] Jason Goodwin, *Lords of the horizons: a history of the Ottoman Empire* (London, 1998), p. 65. In general, though, this is among the most readable and sympathetic of such texts. Indeed, at times it reads like an apologetic, a tone that makes Goodwin's stress on Ottoman militarism all the more salient. The notion stands at the very core of other books. In his *The Ottoman impact on Europe* (New York, 1968), p. 77, for example, Paul Coles writes: "From the point of their first entrance into history as a nomadic war-band, the Ottomans were carried from one triumph to the next by a ruthless dedication to conquest and predation. . . . The perpetual search, in Gibbon's phrase, for 'new enemies and new subjects' was not a policy, weighed against alternatives; it was a law of life, the principle that animated what had now become a large and complex society."



Map 1



or the English state somehow *not* live for war? Were the sheriffs of England not also both policemen and soldiers? Were Peter the Hermit, who led a group of peasants against seasoned *delis*, others who led Christian children on suicidal crusades, and numerous Christian extremists not just as fanatically committed to their faith as were frenzied Ottoman soldiers? Bayezid I may or may not have proclaimed "For this was I born, to bear arms," as the same recent text avows.[2] Is it any less likely, however, that Bayezid's contemporaries in late feudal Europe would have uttered the same words? Many of the protagonists in William Shakespeare's history plays espouse soldierly virtues. Some, such as Coriolanus (even though his proud spirit in the end defeated him), certainly seemed born for war, and others, such as Henry V, seemed to become "kingly" only through the vehicle of war. Voltaire, perhaps cynically but certainly baldly, states that "the first who was king was a successful soldier. He who serves well his country has no need of ancestors," a sentiment that Sir Walter Scott seconds: "What can they see in the longest kingly line in Europe, save that it runs back to a successful soldier?"[3] Should we then believe that the Habsburg Charles V or the French Francis I were less bellicose than their Ottoman contemporary Süleyman (the Magnificent and Lawgiver)? The Ottoman state and society certainly was distinctive (what polity is not?). It was not, however, exceptional in its militarism, in its brutality, or, as others have claimed, in its misogyny or its sexual appetites, and it simply buys into Christian and Western legends to proclaim that such characteristics were somehow distinctly Ottoman.[4]

The existence of such Eurocentric mythologizing in scholarship is almost axiomatic.[5] Particularly in the last four centuries – the conventionally labeled ages of European exploration, European expansion, European imperialism, and European retreat – especially western Europe has imagined itself politically, philosophically, and geographically at the

[2] Goodwin, *Lords of the Horizons*, p. 66.

[3] François Marie Arouet de Voltaire, *Mérope, a tragedy*, by Aaron Hill, adapted for theatrical representation (London, 1795), Act I, sc. 3; and Sir Walter Scott, *Woodstock* (New York, 2001), Ch. 28.

[4] The idea of an innate Ottoman military prowess persists to the present day, in the United States as well as Europe. On which see John M. VanderLippe, "The 'Terrible Turk': the formulation and perpetuation of a stereotype in American foreign policy," *New Perspectives on Turkey* 17(1997): 39–57.

[5] On which see Thierry Hentsch, *Imagining the Middle East*, trans. Fred A. Reed (Montreal, 1992), pp. 1–48 and *passim*. The very idea of Eurocentrism also may be anachronistic for the early modern era, since Europe is a cultural and secular rather than a geographic notion and neither Christian nor Muslim imagined a "European" culture before the eighteenth century (see M. E. Yapp, "Europe in the Turkish mirror," *Past and Present* 137[1992]: 134–55). There is, of course, a strong tendency to associate Europe with Christianity.

center of the world. Europeans and neo-Europeans in America and elsewhere have routinely judged art, literature, religion, statecraft, and technology according to their own authorities and criteria.[6] It remains to this day a common conviction that few have measured up to these standards – certainly not the Ottomans with their menacing and seemingly "demonic religion" and "savage nomadic ways." The academy no less than governments and the press has reflected this condescension, a coalition of points of view that has led to an almost irresistible temptation to view the globe "downward" from Paris and London or more recently Washington and New York. In this schema the Ottoman Empire joins the ranks of the "others" – exotic, inexplicable, unchanging, and acted upon by the powers of ruling authorities in Europe.

Such an attitude has been aptly designated as "orientalist" and has predisposed some historians to consider not only the Ottoman Empire but also other societies and ideas deemed "non-western" as peripheral to the concert of European states and their cultural satellites. In the Ottoman case as in others, scholars have tended to emphasize those aspects of society that are distinct from Europe. They have stressed that the Ottomans' ethnicity, language, religion, and even organizational aptitude differed from the European standard. All too often, implicit in this fixation on divergence is an assumption of inferiority, of uncivilized savagery (such as the conventional if hackneyed argument that plunder was the exclusive stimulus for Ottoman empire-building). As Said has pointed out: "Not for nothing did Islam come to symbolize terror, devastation, the demonic, hordes of hated barbarians. For Europe, Islam was a lasting trauma." He perhaps too categorically specifies that "until the end of the seventeenth century the 'Ottoman peril' lurked alongside Europe to represent for the whole of Christian civilization a constant danger, and in time European civilization incorporated that period and its lore, its great events, figures, virtues, and vices, as something woven into the fabric of life." This author further argues that "like Walter Scott's Saracens, the European representation of the Muslim, Ottoman, or Arab was always a way of controlling the redoubtable Orient, and to a certain extent the same is true of the methods of contemporary learned Orientalists."[7]

Certainly, as Said contends, many within European society grew to dread the Ottoman giant to its east. Nevertheless, this attitude was not fixed; nor did it ever become nearly as hegemonic as he suggests.[8] Not

[6] The British treatment of India is a celebrated case, on which see Jyotsna G. Singh, *Colonial narratives, cultural dialogues: "discoveries" of India in the languages of colonialism* (London and New York, 1996).
[7] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1978), pp. 59–60.
[8] On which see Hentsch, *Imagining the Middle East*.

only must one generally differentiate the attitudes of northern from Mediterranean Europe, but those western Europeans who experienced the Ottoman Empire first-hand often regarded it with respect, albeit with some apprehension. Furthermore, political philosophers who read these travelers' thoughtful texts, such as Guillaume Postel and Jean Bodin, helped nourish an esteem for many Ottoman institutions through their own writings. Nevertheless, the proclivity of historians to envisage the Empire as ignoble and antithetical to "refined" Western standards undoubtedly has obscured the nuances of Ottoman civilization as well as the many common elements between it and the rest of Europe.

Europe viewed from afar

We are not compelled to view the world from such a western-European perspective. The physical world has neither apex nor nadir, and it makes just as much geographic sense, to take an equally arbitrary case, to study the Far West (western Europe) from the viewpoint of the Near West (the Ottoman Empire) as it does to foreground the successor states of Christendom. If we imagine Istanbul rather than Paris at the middle of the world, Ottoman relations with the rest of Europe assume a startling character.

Historians customarily describe the Turkoman incursions into Anatolia and the Balkans as barbarian plunderings; however, one can just as easily imagine them as the foundation for a new and liberating empire. The fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans is typically portrayed as a catastrophe for western civilization; however, one might as readily see in the change of regime the rebirth of a splendid city long severed from its life-giving hinterlands.[9] The Ottoman conquest of the Balkans is often imagined as a suspension of that region's history, the immobilization of a society imprisoned for several centuries in the "yoke" of an exogenous and ungodly conqueror. With a change of perspective, however, one might regard the societal commingling and cultural blending that accompanied the infusion of Ottoman civilization into Europe as an explosion of vigor and creativity. The Ottoman Empire conventionally has been seen as a persecutor of Christians, but one might judge it instead a

[9] The very nomenclature for this city is muddied by rival claims to it (most powerfully, Greek versus Turkish). We will here refer to Ottoman Constantinople (also sometimes called "Byzantium") as Istanbul, even though the Ottomans themselves seem to have continued to use the term "Constantinople," but in a rather specific meaning. They usually referred by it to the old city together with all its suburbs (Eyüb, Galata, and Üsküdar), and used "Istanbul" more in reference to the city within the Byzantine walls (on which see Daniel Goffman, *Britons in the Ottoman Empire, 1642–1660* [Seattle, WA, 1998], pp. 33–35). For the sake of simplicity, this book will call the city "Constantinople" when discussing its Byzantine period and "Istanbul" when discussing its Ottoman one.

haven for runaways from a fiercely intolerant Christian Europe. After all, whereas in the Ottoman world there were thousands of renegades from Christendom, one almost never discovers in Christian Europe converts from Islam.[10]

Such an Ottomancentric perspective would reveal a relationship in which the ideological walls that seemed to divide Christian Europe from the Ottoman Empire instead become the framework to a rich and intricate representation. This is not to deny that a chasm existed at the ideological level; at least at the societal level, there never has been an enduring rapprochement between the Christian and Islamic worldviews. Nevertheless, a host of common interests always counterbalanced this doctrinal abyss.

The great spiritual divide

The historiography of Ottoman relations with the rest of Europe typically features religion. This focus makes sense given the historical consciousnesses of the two civilizations. On the one hand the Ottoman rulers recast their state from a nomadic and frontier principality into the primary heir to a religious foundation that had raised its edifice on previously Byzantine and Latin territories. This ability to remake its ideology by drawing upon Islam's Arab and expansionist heritage helped to give the Ottoman Empire its celebrated resilience, flexibility, and longevity. In contrast, those states with which the Ottomans shared the early modern Mediterranean world – whether Byzantine, Latin, or Habsburg – used religious ideology to legitimize their own regimes and to mobilize their populations in their struggles against Islam.

It thus makes good sense to highlight religion as a fundamental building block of civilizations that predated the Ottoman, Venetian, and Habsburg hegemonies. After all, early modern Europe emerged from a Christian ecumene that had helped define and grant legitimacy to a medieval Europe that presided over several crusades against Islam. Although the transformations of the Renaissance and the Reformation shook that world to its core, Christian Europe – particularly in its relations with non-Christian societies – continued to cast its existence in terms of a "universal" faith. The most visible manifestation of this obsession was the late Crusades, which continued to sputter well into the fifteenth century ("holy" alliances endured even longer) and whose nemesis and anticipated final victim was meant to be the Ottoman polity.

[10] On this topic, see Peter Lamborn Wilson's intriguing *Pirate utopias: Moorish corsairs and European renegadoes* (Brooklyn, NY, 1995); and, for the specific example of England, Nabil Matar, *Turks, Moors, and Englishmen in the Age of Discovery* (New York, 1999).

The Ottoman Empire, meanwhile, surfaced as an amalgam of many cultures and traditions. Its legitimacy, however, also was rooted in a "universal" belief – the faith of Islam, which normatively at least came to condemn change (*bida'*) itself. Because the sultans conceived of themselves and their society as Muslim and of their state as Islamic, each monarch had to comply, or appear to comply, with the laws of his faith (the Shariah). Every innovation demanded a justification in terms of the doctrines of Islam. The strictures of the religion manifested themselves in myriad ways, guided the maturation of Ottoman society, and limited the direction of Ottoman expansion.

The early Ottomans for example may have considered themselves "*gazi*" warriors, who justified bloodshed through faith.[11] Such a self-image would have demanded an unrelenting onslaught against the infidel and at the same time made it awkward to attack even the most troublesome rival Islamic state unless the government could demonstrate clear and unambiguous cause. The actuality seems to differ from this reconstruction. While the *gazi* credo would have justified Ottoman strikes against Byzantine borderlands, the Ottoman conquests also produced a subject people who were more and more non-Muslim. The new state had to learn and practice tolerance in order to survive. It recast the Shariah as it did so.

The spiritual bases of Christian Europe and the Muslim Ottoman Empire were remarkably similar. Unlike other major religions such as Hinduism or Taoism, Islam and Christianity are rooted in essentially the same Near Eastern and unitary doctrine. It is thus not only reasonable – but quite fruitful – to conceive and study a "Greater Western World" which encompassed the followers of both Jesus and Muhammed. This similarity, however, does not connote harmony. Just as siblings often fight with appalling brutality, the very resemblance and historical proximity of the two faiths created a bitter rivalry. This hostility is depicted forcefully in Christian and Muslim representations of the biblical tale of Isaac and Ismael. In the Judeo-Christian version, God asks Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, his son by his wife Sarah, in order to prove his faith. In the Islamic version, however, it becomes Ismael, Abraham's elder son by his maid-servant Hagar, who is to be sacrificed. In other words, for Christians, the younger brother is the pivotal character in this story, but for Muslims the elder brother is the key figure.[12] It is not that Muslims repudiate the tradition that Isaac became the patriarch for the Hebrew people. The Qur'an

[11] This image is under attack, however, to the degree that a new synthesis may be emerging that largely repudiates it. See Chapter 2 below.
[12] See Carol L. Delaney, *Abraham on trial* (Princeton, 1998).

does insist, however, that Ismael serves a similar, and consequently historically central, role for the Arab people. Two branches of the same tree, the religions constituted aggressive monotheisms, and they fiercely repudiated, persecuted, and negated rival creeds, most particularly each other. It is through this prism of sanguine arrogance that scholarship has routinely viewed, portrayed, and artificially divided the Ottoman from the rest of the European world.

The Euro-Ottoman symbiosis

In some ways, then, Ottoman and other European communities were hostile to each other. This temperament is explicitly and vividly displayed in the battles of Kosovo and Varna, the investment of Constantinople, the assault against Malta, the sieges of Vienna, and countless other aggressions. In other ways, however, the two civilizations were more symbiotic, seeming almost to converge in some arenas. Such intersections of character and purpose have been too little studied. They are most visible, perhaps, in the economic sphere, in which trade within the Mediterranean basin served to bind the two worlds, operating not only through the "spices" that Europeans coveted and long could gain only from Ottoman cities, but also, and especially after the sixteenth century, through bulkier commodities such as dried fruits, cottons, and grains.

Although western Europeans were the more eager to sustain and develop commercial relations because the Islamic world distributed the desired goods of Asia, it was the Ottoman rendering of the role of the non-Muslims in an Islamic society that fashioned the link. Late medieval European Christians often managed relations with the "other," particularly the Jew and the Muslim, by vigorous persecution and expulsion. The Ottomans handled their "others" less violently by asserting a theoretical Muslim superiority – signified by a head-tax upon non-Muslims and certain often symbolic sumptuary restrictions – and simultaneously practicing a nearly absolute but effective disregard in which the various religions, ethnicities, and aliens within the empire co-existed and commingled virtually at will.

Paradoxically this cultural convergence, in which the Ottomans integrated non-Muslims into the economic life of the community, is best articulated along the political and commercial frontiers, where Ottoman warriors simultaneously engaged in endemic conflict with Byzantine, Hungarian, Venetian, and Habsburg forces and fraternized with fellow Christian inhabitants. Particularly upon the military marches that for centuries demarcated first Byzantine and Ottoman Anatolia and then the Catholic and Ottoman Balkans, each side accommodated and even

1 This frontispiece juxtaposes the Habsburg emperor with the Ottoman sultan. Unlike many such depictions, there is no suggestion here of nobility versus malevolence. Both monarchs look regal and carry emblems of office; the *matériel* of war illustrated in the upper corners – battle axe, drum, and pistol for the emperor's armies and scimitar, bow and arrow, and pistol for the sultan's – are both neutrally rendered. Boissard, *Vitae et icones sultanorum turcico*.

assimilated the other's techniques and cultures.[13] Societies promptly accommodated whichever state ruled over them, warriors crept back and forth across a divide that proved remarkably porous, and, surprisingly,

[13] Cemal Kafadar has cogently argued such a symbiosis in *Between two worlds: the construction of the Ottoman state* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1995), especially pp. 19–28. See also