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Constructing a Universal Ruler: Sultan Mehmet II and Hybrid Legitimacies of the Ottoman Empire

Baiquni Hasbi[1,*], Muhammad Akbar Angkasa[2]
[1,*]Universitas Islam Negeri Sultanah Nahrasiyah Lhokseumawe, Indonesia
[2]Marmara University, Turkiye
[*]Corresponding Author E-mail: baiquni@uinsuna.ac.id

Abstract

This study revisits the complex imperial identity of Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II (Muhammad al-Fatih), to challenge the conventional portrayal of his reign as exclusively Islamic. While modern Muslim communities in Indonesia and Turkiye celebrate him as an ideal Islamic hero, a closer reading of historical sources reveals a ruler whose legitimacy emerged from a deliberate synthesis of Islamic, Byzantine, and Persian traditions—an identity best described as Islamicate. Through a critical examination of Tursun Beg's Tarih-i Ebü'l-Feth, this study demonstrates how Intellectuals strategically wove together sacred, political and aesthetic symbols to construct Mehmed II's authority as a universal ruler rather than a merely Muslim conqueror. By unsettling the binary of Islamic versus Christian civilizations, this study situates Mehmet II within a broader, polycentric Islamicate world and highlights the continuing relevance of his hybrid legitimacy for rethinking pluralism and political identity in contemporary Muslim societies.

Keywords: Hybrid Identity, Islamicate, Mehmed II, Ottoman Empire, Tursun Beg.

INTRODUCTION

Mehmed II or Muhammad al-Fatih (r. 1451 – 1481) is among the most popular, venerated, and idealized Muslim rulers and perhaps the most unproblematic Ottoman Sultan in modern Muslims' view today. President Erdoğan, for instance, deliberately employed the victorious image of Mehmed al-Fatih during his 2016 party's campaign in Istanbul to elevate his popularity. During his 2016 electoral campaign, Erdogan was dubbed the "grandson of Fatih" while his crowd was the "grandchildren of Mehmed the conqueror" (Karakaya 2020, 105). About 10,000 Kilometers from Istanbul, Indonesian Muslims also share a similar view as their Muslim counterpart in Turkey. Indonesian Muslims celebrated Muhammad al-Fatih as the ideal Muslim hero. They believe that he is the symbol of Islamic glory and brilliance, a positive role model for Muslims today (Putra 2022). These perspectives, rather than relying on historical evidence, offer a romanticized and idealized portrayal of the Ottoman Empire and, by extension, Mehmed the Conqueror as an exemplary Islamic caliphate and caliph (see Al-Munyawi 2012; Siauw 2015). Such celebratory depictions, while emotionally resonant, flatten the complexity of Ottoman political thought and obscure how legitimacy was negotiated across multiple civilizational and religious traditions.

Additionally, Muslim intellectuals also tend to endorse such an unproblematic view of Mehmed II by depicting his conquest of Constantinople in 1453 merely as the great victory of Islam against the Christian-Byzantine Empire. Consequently, it reinforces a monolithic image of the Ottoman Empire and glosses over both the complexities and contradictions within the empire. It also often disregards the political and cultural pragmatism that characterized Mehmed II's rule, such as his admiration of Byzantine-Christian traditions and his patronage of both Muslim and non-Muslim intellectual traditions.

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More broadly, the narrative reinforces a simplistic 'clash of civilizations' trope pitting Muslims versus non-Muslims. Certainly, there were conflicts between Muslims and their Christian counterparts—owing to various political, social and not necessarily opposing religious differences—anywhere in the world throughout history. However, there were also numerous examples when Muslims and non-Muslims coexisted, worked on common objectives and even blended cultures and legacies, resulting in hybrid and multilayered identities and legacies (Hongxuan 2018; Makin 2016; Knaap 2014; Moin 2022; Baer 2021; Feener et al. 2021). Recognizing these shared spaces of coexistence is essential for understanding the pluralistic underpinning of Muslim societies, a theme that continues to resonate in today's global debates on religious tolerance and governance.

In his attempt to describe such a complex and multifaceted process and result, Hodgson introduces the term "Islamicate"—a more inclusive and protean term challenging the seemingly opposing and strict binary categories (Hodgson 1974). In the last two decades, Hodgson's framework of Islamicate has increasingly gained due recognition. The term serves as a framework that transcends the religious meanings of "Muslim" and "Islamic," focusing on broader intellectual, cultural and social influence, identity and practice within both Muslim and non-Muslim communities beyond the religious connotations (Hodgson 1974; Lawrence 2021). Muslim monarchs and empires, as growing consensus among historians and religious studies scholars has shown, embraced these Islamicate traditions and legacies to assert their legitimacy (see Moin 2012; Truschke 2017; Baer 2021; Hasbi 2024; Andaya 2016). In this light, Mehmed II was the prime figure highlighting the coexistence and blurring of the invisible line between Islam and Greco-Byzantine Christianity.

Historians working on the Ottoman Empire have collectively asserted that Mehmed II's character, identity and policies cannot be fully understood through an exclusively Islamic lens (Casale 2022; Necipoğlu 2012; Baer 2021; Raby 1983; 1982; Isom-Verhaaren 2014). Mehmed II, these scholars argue, was a multifaceted figure who aspired to be a universal ruler, integrating both Muslim and Christian-Roman traditions and legacies into his reign. Far from viewing the two traditions as contradictory, Mehmed II embraced them as complementary elements of his rule. In doing so, he contributed to the formation of a distinct Ottoman imperial identity that combined elements from multiple traditions. This scholarship certainly provides an insightful exploration of Mehmed II's complex personality, policies, and patronage before and after the conquest of Constantinople.

Moreover, Hali Inalcık's work on Mehmed II is foundational in shaping our understanding of the Sultan's administrative and military reforms that were central to consolidating Ottoman power during and after the 15th century. He examines in great detail the legal and fiscal mechanisms implemented by Mehmed II, illustrating the strategic governance that facilitated the integration of newly acquired territories and populations. Notably, Inalcık also delineates how these policies established a central authority that paralleled Byzantine governance while at the same time incorporating elements of Islamic legal practices. This duality in governance lays the groundwork for understanding Mehmed II's role as both a conqueror and a ruler who sought to legitimize his reign by aligning himself with the legacies of his predecessors (Inalcık 1960; 1990; Inalcik 1969). Similar to Inalcık, Raby (1982) and Necipoğlu (2012) similarly examined Mehmed II's syncretic imperial persona through his patronage of art and the architectural revitalization of Constantinople. They foreground Mehmed's agency as a patron and conqueror, framing his "paradoxical" identity as a product of top-down cultural appropriation. More recently, Casale (2022) also has explicated Mehmed II's ideological synthesis of *sulh-i kull* (universal peace) and *prisca theologia*, suggesting that Mehmed II's policy was comparable to that of Sultan Akbar of the Mughal Empire. Focusing on Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent (r. 1520 – 1566), Kaya Şahin (2023) similarly demonstrates how Ottoman universal monarchy evolved into a consciously hybrid model that balanced revelation with imperial pragmatism—underscoring the continuity of Mehmet II's vision.

Despite such keen attention to Mehmed II's multiple identities, however, less attention and focus have been paid to the deliberate discursive strategies employed by his officials to legitimize

Ottoman Sultans like Mehmed II and also his successor Bayezid II (r. 1481-1512) and consequently their new role as the heir of the Byzantine Empire.

This article diverges by centering on the intellectual labors such as Tursun Beg's *Tarih-i Ebü'l Fath* (1480), whose chronicles constructed Mehmed II's dual sovereignty as both *Pādishāh-i Cihān* (Universal King) and *caliph* during the reign of his successor, Bayezid II. Ottoman historians have considered Tursun Beg's *Tarih-i Ebü'l Fath* as one of the authoritative texts explicating the Ottoman imperial elite's narrative during the 15th century. Moreover, they have been used in a number of ways to shed light on Mehmed II's political life (Inan 2012; İnalcık 1977; Necipoğlu 1992).

In the following sections, we will explore the life of Tursun Beg and his *Tarih-i Ebü'l Fath,* and his attempt to construct Ottoman Sultans' legitimacy in the conquered lands of Constantinople. By interrogating the texts as sites of ideological negotiation—rather than mere reflections of the Ottoman sultans' will—this study reveals how Ottoman bureaucrats strategically constructed Islamicate legitimacies by weaving Byzantine, Islamic and Persian precedents into a cohesive Ottoman imperial narrative. In doing so, this study aims to unfold the Ottoman intellectual's attempt to construct the Ottoman Sultan's hybrid legitimacies and identities by blending multiple traditions and legacies beyond Islam, thus consequently complicating the often-reductive clashing narrative.

While this study remains grounded in fifteenth-century sources, its framework of hybrid legitimacy also speaks to broader questions of how Muslim polities historically negotiated difference. By situating Mehmet II within this Islamicate continuum, this article seeks to present Ottoman history legible not only to specialist but also to readers concerned with how Muslim polities accommodated diversity, coexistence and change.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Tursun Beg: A Man of Letter and Power

Tursun Beg, a pivotal intellectual in the 15th century, was surprisingly one among the most underexplored Ottoman intellectuals world. Except for Kemāl Pasha-zade, Tursun Beg's work was not known to the majority of the most famous Ottoman historians (İnalcık 1977, 55). Only after Halil Inalcik introduced and translated his work, and Mertol Tulun transliterated *Tarih-i Ebü'l Feth*, did Tursun gain recognition in modern scholarship.

Born after 1426 into a prominent bureaucratic family, Tursun Beg ibn Hamza Beg, grew up within the Ottoman elite's administrative networks. His father, Hamza Beg, held an important position within the Ottoman administrative hierarchy. His uncle, Cebe Ali Beg, was a governor of Bursa, while his grandfather, Firuz Beg, had distinguished himself through military service under Murad I and Bayezid I (İnalcık 1977, 56–64). These family connections, secured his early access to imperial circles but are relevant here mainly for understanding his proximity to power.

Tursun's career trajectory reveals a distinguished ascent through the ranks of Ottoman administrations. His education in Madrasa (Islamic school) equipped him with fundamental Islamic education. Here, he developed a profound understanding of Turkish, Arabic, and Persian, mastering the art of writing, rhetoric and history. These skills were essential not only for his later role in the empire's bureaucracy in the multilingual Ottoman state but also fueled his literary endeavors, including his most famous work, *Tarih-i Ebü'l Fath* (İnalcık 1977, 60). Thus, it is not surprising that he held several critical positions, including Secretary of the State Council (Dīvān Katībī), Chief Financial Officer for Anatolia (Ānādolū Defterdārī), and steward of the Chief Financial Officer of Anatolia (Ānādolū Defter Ketkhūdālīğī) (Tursun Beg 1977, 6). These appointments were not merely administrative posts but also represented intimate involvement in the mechanisms of imperial governance and knowledge production. Tursun's responsibilities ranged from managing the empire's vast financial affairs to

overseeing the registration of lands in Constantinople after its conquest in 1453. Such bureaucratic experience provided him with the vocabulary of law, justice, and statecraft that later permeated his historiography.

Additionally, he was present in various key military campaigns—such as during the siege of Constantinople, Mehmed II's first entry to the Hagia Sophia, the Belgrade campaign of 1456 and the Moldavian campaign of 1476—which further cements his proximity to the inner circle of Mehmet II. It also underscores his central role in documenting and participating in the Empire's most crucial endeavors (Kenan Inan 2011). In this light, he humbly acknowledged in *Tarih* that he was just a financial officer and secretary and did not originally consider himself a writer or historian. However, owing to his firsthand experience, witnessing events and acquiring knowledge directly from the field, he felt compelled to write *Tarih* as 'every vessel leaks what it contains.' For him, the book was also a 'manifestation of gratitude for the blessing and favors' as required in the Sharia (Tursun Beg 1977, xix). This self-effacing tone underscores his dual identity as bureaucrat and moral thinker, blending administrative realism with ethical reflection—a combination that defined his conception of legitimate rule.

His closest patron was Grand Vizier Mahmud Pasha, whom he served whom he served around 1446 until 1468. This relationship brought him into the inner political circle of Mehmet II and exposed him to the empire's strategic deliberations. Even after Mahmud Pasha's expulsion from the palace, Tursun maintained his position within the Ottoman administrative apparatus. He continued his participation in many major military campaigns under subsequent grand viziers and directly under Mehmed II (İnalcık 1977, 62). He poured such an exclusive experience with vivid description into his historical writing, *Tarih Ebü'l Feth.*

Tursun's career, however, was not without controversy. During the political turmoil following Mehmed II's death, he found himself implicated in the succession struggle between Bayezid II and Cem Sultan. According to the contemporary Ottoman historian Kemāl Paşazade, Tursun Beg initially sided with Cem Sultan but soon found out that he was on the losing side after Bayezid II triumphed. Following the victory, Bayezid II ordered the capture of Tursun at Yenişehir in 1481 (Kenan Inan 2011, 2). Fortunately, his life was spared, and he even got reinstated in service under the new sultan—probably a testament to his long-established reputation, the value placed on his administrative expertise and his resilience and adaptations in navigating the shifting power dynamics within the Ottoman court. This episode, therefore, though potentially damaging to his standing, did not prevent him from continuing his service under Bayezid II, for whom he would eventually compose his *Tarih* (Kenan Inan 2011).

Tarih-i Ebü'l Feth: A Panegyric for the Conqueror

Having explored Tursun Beg's background, we now turn to his work T*arih-i Ebü'l Feth,* which provides critical insights into Mehmet II's reign. Tursun *Tarih* was a seminal contribution to Ottoman historiography, representing not only a detailed and chronological account of events but also a sophisticated panegyric glorifying the reigns of both Mehmed II and his successor, Bayezid II. Tursun perhaps wrote it sometime after 1488, during his retirement in Bursa. The timing of *Tarih* was also momentous as it was composed at a moment when the Ottoman Empire faced internal instability after Mehmed II's death in 1481. The power struggle between Cem Sultan and Bayezid II caused tensions within the state, threatening its cohesion (İnalcık 1977, 60). Tursun, who was caught in the instability, leveraged his decades-long experience in the Ottoman administrative apparatus to compose a history that could stabilize the empire ideologically. He emphasized the continuity of Mehmed II's divinely sanctioned rule as it passed to his successor, Bayezid II. Tursun's attempt, Halil Inalcık observed, aligned well with the broader trend wherein Bayezid II commissioned new histories to counterbalance earlier

narratives that might have undermined Ottoman supremacy vis-à-vis rival Islamic dynasties like the Mamluk (İnalcık 1977, 67).

The book attempts to immortalize the reigns of Mehmed II and Bayezid II while simultaneously offering guidance for future rulers—parallel to the genre *mirrors for princes*. He weaved a narrative that transcended strict religious paradigms by situating the Ottoman sultans within broader universalist frameworks of governance, justice, and divine favor. Personally, however, he explicitly states in the introduction that his primary motivation was gratitude toward Mehmed II for the opportunities bestowed upon him. Simultaneously, he subtly appeals to Bayezid II's patronage, acknowledging his poverty and hoping for material rewards (İnalcık 1977, 67; Tursun Beg 1977, 8).

Structurally, Tursun's book deviates from the conventional historical narrative by adhering to a literary tradition traceable to the Timurid historiographical model such as Juwainī's Tārīkh-i Cihāngūṣā, Nizāmaddīn Shāmī and Sharafaddīn Yazdī. The book begins with an introductory section that celebrates the Ottoman dynasty, particularly Murad II, the military campaigns, including those against Qaraman, the construction of Boğazkesen castle, and the phenomenal conquest of Constantinople in 1453. The narrative, then, continues with the reconstruction of Constantinople and numerous other military expeditions to expand Ottoman influence across the Balkans and Anatolia. The latter part of the *Tarih* chronicle includes events from Bayezid II's early reign. It closes with the expedition against the Mamluk in 1488 (Inan 2012).

Tursun Beg masterfully synthesized diverse written source materials, oral traditions, and personal experiences or common knowledge (İnalcık 1977, 68), thus contributing to its unique historical perspective. He did not systematically cite his sources, but his frequent references to *kütüb-i Hikemiyye* (Philosophical books) or use other phrases such as *kütüb-i mu'teberede gördüğümüz üzere* (as we have seen in the respected books), *hikayet ederler ki* (They narrate that), indicates a deliberate engagement with established philosophical and historical texts of the era. Among those texts it is Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī's Aḥlāq-i Naṣīrī and Nizām-i 'Arūdī Samarqandī's Chahār Maqālah that prominently identifiable in the Tursun's *Tarih* (Inan 2012, 77). This implies that Tursun Beg, just like any other Muslim intellectuals in different regions such as in the Sultanate of Aceh, were connected and part of what John Voll describes as a "Special World-system." Islam as a special world system is a discourse-based network of interactions centered on shared Islamic teaching and identity rather than economic exchange (Voll 1994). Thus, it is not surprising that Tursun's *Tarih*, written in the 15th century, shared overlapped themes or used similar references to Jauharī al-Bukhārī's Taj al-Ṣalātīn written in the early 16th-century Sultanate of Aceh (al-Bukhari 1999). Both Jauhari and Tursun discussed a vision of ideal kingship rooted in justice, piety, and the protection of subjects (*re'āyā*)—themes borrowed directly from various prominent classical Islamic politics (Inan 2006, 126; Weststeijn 2017). Additionally, Tursun relied on oral testimony, especially when discussing Mahmud Pasya, whom he respected deeply. For instance, he consistently defends Maḥmūd Pasya's decisions, and he avoided discussing Maḥmūd Pasya's execution (İnalcık 1977, 64).

Furthermore, for Tursun, events described in the *Tarih* functioned as exemplary rather than providing comprehensive chronological events. He often downplayed or omitted details that could tarnish the Sultans' image while emphasizing occurrences that bolstered their prestige. For example, Mehmed II's failed siege of Belgrade in 1456 is portrayed as a victory, with Janos Hunyadi's death presenting signs of the Sultan's ultimate success. Also, military victories are often framed as divine interventions, reinforcing the religious legitimacy of Ottoman rule and the Sultan's adherence to proper governance (Inan 2006, 127). Such selective narration serves as both a historical record and an ideological reinforcement of Ottoman authority and legitimacy, especially in newly conquered territories. Additionally, as Halil Inalcik suggests, the selective narrative was significant in boosting the image of the Ottoman against its rivalry between Mamluk and Persian states in the East. Thus, such writing technique underscores his role as a historian-cum-propagandist, shaping perceptions of Ottoman power through carefully curated anecdotes (Inan 2006, 126; İnalcık 1977, 67).

To sum up, Tursun Beg's *Tarih-i Ebü'l Feth*, immortalizing the reigns of Mehmed II and Bayezid II, laid the groundwork for a complex ideological framework upon which future Ottoman historians would build. Tursun drew from on classical Islamicate political thought to depict an ideal kingship rooted in justice and piety. As we will discuss in more detail below, his work reflects a sophisticated blend of various Islamicate—Muslim and non-Muslim—legacies, universalist governance ideals, and strategic omissions that together forge a vision of Ottoman authority transcending simple religious dichotomies. In doing so, he revealed the nuanced ways in which Islamicate legacies were adapted and reimagined by Muslims in various regional contexts, including the work of later intellectual like Jauhari al-Bukhari in the Sultanate of Aceh, Southeast Asia.

Constructing Hybrid Imperial Legitimacy

As briefly discussed above, Tursun Beg designed *Tarih-i Ebü'l Fath* not as a mere historical account but as a treaties on political legitimacy, reinforcing Ottoman Sultans' divine right to rule and their status as the successor to the Roman Emperor. Thus, Mehmed II's victory over the Byzantine Empire was not simply military but symbolic—the culmination of an imperial mission to reclaim and transform the Roman legacy. This dual sovereignty—both as the caliph of Islam and the new leader of the former Roman empire—pervades the work, making it not only a reflection of Mehmed's political strategies but also a deliberate attempt to construct Ottoman imperial identities that blended Islamic, Byzantine, and even Persian influences. Specifically, Tursun's *Tarih* provides an ideological framework that positions Mehmed II, the Sultan, as the rightful heir to universal legacies that incorporate not only Islamic sovereignty but also the remnants of the Byzantine Empire and even earlier pre-Islamic historical figures such as Alexander the Great, Persian Kings, and the Roman Emperors.

Ebü'l Feth, Hilafet, Mu'jizāt-ı Muḥammad, Nizām-i 'Ālem and 'Alī bin Abī Ṭālib

Tursun Beg's title, 'Tarih-i Ebü'l Feth,' signifies that Mehmed II's conquest of Constantinople was much more than a military achievement. Rather, it encompasses a symbolic connection between the Ottoman sultan and divine authority. The word *Feth* connects Mehmed II to a famous prophecy from Prophet Muhammad. The prophecy claims, 'Verily, you shall conquer Constantinople. What wonderful leader will her leader be, and what a wonderful army will that army be!' Thus, according to the hadith, as Mehmed II successfully defeated the Byzantines, then he was the predicted 'Blessed Prince.' More specifically, Tursun elaborated that Mehmed II's victory was 'one of the miracles of Muhammad (Mu'cizât-ı Muhammed) peace be upon him).' His victory, Tursun continued, 'silenced the tolling of church bells and the ringing of chimes. The breath of Islam caused those distant lands to embrace the flourishing gardens of religion and state, bringing smiles to the face of faith and governance'(Tursun Beg 1977, 205). Here, Tursun opined that Mehmed II's miraculous victory was parallel to the miraculous act attributed to the Prophet Muhammad. He framed the conquest as a miraculous event, much like the miracles of the Prophet, which signifies divine favor and intervention. Moreover, the metaphor of silencing church bells could be understood as the end of Byzantine Christian hegemony, as church bells were a prominent feature of Christian public life and power. In contrast, the imagery of Islam as 'breath' bringing life to distant lands conveys the renewal of culture and governance.

In addition to *Ebü'l Feth*, *Hilafet* (Ar. Ḥilāfah) was also another related title Tursun Beg used to describe Mehmed II. Since the beginning of his book, Tursun already invoked the concept of caliph by quoting the Quranic verse that 'God will make upon the earth a successor (Quran 2:30)…the continuity of this decree is proven by the fact that in every age and every era, a renowned king exists as a clear and decisive proof"(Tursun Beg 1977, 3). Here, Tursun established Mehmed II as a figure of universal significance. *Feth* and *Hilafe* directly connected Mehmed II to the two fundamental sources of Islamic legitimacy, the Quran and Hadith. On top of that, Tursun also embedded the noble story of Ali bin Abi

Ṭalib, the central figure in Sunni, Syiah and Sufi, to highlight Sultan Mehmed II's noble character. He narrated that during a battle, 'Alī bin Abī Ṭālib overpowered a polytheist who then spat on him. Instead of striking the final blow to the polytheist, Ali restrained himself, realizing that acting out of anger would satisfy personal vengeance rather than divine will. This act exemplified true forbearance and self-control despite provocation (Tursun Beg 1977, 21). The titles Feth, Hilafe and the story of 'Alī bin Abī Ṭālib collectively invoke the idea that Mehmed II was the noble leader chosen by Allah, prophesied by Prophet Muhammad to fulfill a divine mission. In other words, Sultan Mehmed II was not an ordinary political leader but a sacred king acting under the divine guidance of Allah.

Sacred kingship was a worldwide political concept employed by pre-modern rulers—Muslim and non-Muslim alike. Thus, the concept was not unique to the Ottomans but was adapted to fit their specific cultural and religious milieu. Muslim empires in the Middle East, Mesopotamia area, and Southeast Asia employed this concept to legitimize their ruler. According to Moin, sacred kingship involves rulers appealing to divine sanction or proximity to the sacred. It fused spiritual and temporal power by integrating messianic aspiration and Sufi-inspired sainthood with sovereign rule (Moin 2012; Moin and Strathern 2022). The two titles, thus, constructed a multifaceted image of Mehmed II as a ruler whose authority was both temporal and spiritual, grounded in divine sanction and universal in scope. This view is implied in the phrase Nizām-i 'Ālam (world order), a phrase specifically used by Tursun Beg in the introduction (Tursun Beg 1977, 3).

For Tursun, the Nizām-i 'Ālam was a divine law of nature, not just a societal construct. The ruler, chosen by God's will, was the agent responsible for safeguarding this universal order. Moreover, God created humans as social beings who naturally cause disruptions or disorder in this world. In this light, the ruler's role was to fix the disruption and restore the world order. Mehmed II's kingship, in Tursun's view, therefore, was the divine remedy positioning him not just as political authority but as a divine grace. The legitimacy of the ruler was thus intertwined with their sacred duty to maintain this world order, which was seen as essential for the survival and cohesion of society (Hagen 2005). At a glance, Tursun's ascription of the titles and prominent Muslim figures to Mehmed II may reinforce our modern assumption that the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople only meant the victory of Islam over other non-Muslims, particularly the Byzantine Christian empire. Nonetheless, for Tursun Beg and the Ottoman Sultans, the victory meant more than just that. This was evidence, as we will delve deeper below, both in Tursun's *Tarih* and also in Mehmed II's policy when converting the Byzantine imperial church into an Ottoman imperial mosque.

Iskandar-i Cihāngīrūn, Kisrā, Cemşid

In addition to the Muslim's figure and titles, Tursun also ascribed pre-Islamic figures—Alexander the Great (İskender-i Cihāngīrūn), Khosrow (Kisrā), and Jamshid (Cemşid)—and universal titles such as Pādishāh-i Cihān and Sulṭānū'l-Barrayn, Hâkânü'l-Bahreyn for Mehmed II. These figures and titles served as cultural bridges between Persian, Islamic and Greco-Roman traditions. Such invocation, thus, aimed to establish that Sultan Mehmed II's sovereignty was for all Ottoman new subjects regardless of their ethnicity or religion and also to express the aspiration of the Ottoman sultans to universal rule, integrating diverse traditions and legacies into their reigns.

Tursun started his *Tarih* with Quranic verses explicating the dialogue between Prophet Muhammad and his followers questioning Zulkarnain or Alexander the Great (Q. 18: 83) (Tursun Beg 1977, 3). Later in the text, Tursun also ascribed the title Sulṭānū'l-Barrayn, Ḥākānū'l-Bahrayn, which translates Sultan of the Two Lands, Emperor of the Two Seas, respectively (Tursun Beg 1977, 33, 185). The parallel between Mehmed II and Alexander became even more vivid when Tursun claimed that Mehmed II possessed Alexander's merciful character. Based on a *hikayet,* Tursun reported, Alexander forgave a criminal even when his advisor advised him otherwise. It was reported that Alexander responded to the adviser, "but if I were you, I wouldn't have killed him…I choose mercy over

punishment" (Tursun Beg 1977, 20). In a later part of the *Tarih*, when Sultan Mehmed II failed to conquer the Albanian (Arnavud) people, Tursun said, "Even Alexander the Great could not enter this land" to maintain the powerful image of Mehmed II after the defeat (Tursun Beg 1977, 142–43). These parallels between Mehmed II and Alexander the Great served as a critical strategy to align Sultan Mehmed II with the archetype of a world conqueror who unites East and West. The titles and story reflect Mehmed II's noble character—merciful—yet was prowess, powerful and had dominion over both land and sea, symbolizing his universal sovereignty.

Muslim intellectuals have generally accepted that Alexander the Great or Iskandar Zulkarnaen is a Muslim figure. However, recent literary scholar Su Fang Ng (2014) argues that he was a figure whose image has been reinterpreted and appropriated across different empires regardless of their religious identities and traditions. Both in the Middle East and in Southeast Asia, Alexander's figure has been adapted into local legacies and was not tied to a singular religious or cultural identity. Thus, instead of a clash of cultures or strictly limiting him to a specific cultural or religious context, Alexander the Great, as Ng argues, functions as a universal figure or a "global souvenir." Ottoman Muslims translated, adapted and Islamized the history of Alexander the Great from Greek into Persian and Arabic and Malay Muslims, perhaps in the 14th or 15th century, translated and adopted the story into the Malay language as well (Ng 2014)(Ng 2019, chap. 2)

In several places in the *Tarih*, Tursun also wrote "Hamdu li'llâh ki var şâhumuzun Adl-i Kisrâ vü devlet-i Cemşîd" (Tursun Beg 1977, 17, 30), roughly translated as "Praise be to God, for we have the justice Khosrow and the power of Jamshid." Kisra (Khosrow or Anushirwan) and Cemşid (Jamshid) were two other pre-Islamic Persianate figures who encapsulated Tursun's beg strategy of blending Persianate ideals with Ottoman sovereignty to construct Mehmed II's hybrid legitimacy. Khosrow was a renowned Persian King. Here, Khosrow represented the ideal of justice and noble rule in Persian history. Next to Khosrow, Jamshid refers to a legendary king from Persian mythology and literature, particularly prominent in Ferdowsi's epic poem, the Shahnameh (book of Kings). The power of Jamshid was a crucial component. Jamshid was depicted not only as a wise and just ruler but also as a monarch who possessed extraordinary supernatural powers (Brookshaw 2015). Similar to invoking Alexander the Great, by correlating Mehmed II with Khosrow's justice and invoking Jamshid's power alongside Khosrow, Tursun situated Mehmed II within a mythical and historical continuum that transcends the immediate Ottoman context. In doing so, he linked Mehmed II to the grandeur and authority of ancient Persian kingship. This conflation underscored both Mehmed II's justice and prosperity and also aligned him with the cosmic and esoteric dimensions associated with these legendary figures. Thus, Tursun Beg elevated Mehmed II's image from a mere empire to a universal ruler.

Moreover, Tursun's attempt to elevate Mehmed II's figure did not stop at comparing equally with the Khosrow and Jamshid. In highlighting Mehmed II's prosperity, Tursun claimed that Mehmed II was better than other known emperors. He had built a "lofty palace, the likes of which neither Khosrow, nor Caesar (Kayser-i), nor the Chinese Emperor (Fağfur) ever saw." Its garden, Tursun continued, "was a paradise-like…, where the arrangement of trees and the intertwining branches of grapevines resembled the celestial order of the heavens and the beauty of the Pleiades"(Tursun Beg 1977, 73). Through these associations with pre-Islamic Persian figures, Tursun Beg strategically positioned Mehmet II as a universal ruler who embodied justice, prosperity, and divine favor, synthesizing diverse traditions under his sovereignty.

Hagia Sophia: from Imperial Church to Imperial Mosque

In addition to the figures above, Hagia Sophia was another significant symbol that asserted the Ottoman Sultans' legitimacy as the new ruler in Constantinople and international politics. Tursun Beg's

Tarih provides insights into how both Tursun and Mehmed II admired Hagia Sophia. Right after his victory, Mehmed II entered the Byzantine Imperial church. Tursun vividly described in Tarih that they admired the Christian imagery, such as the Virgin Mary and Christ Pantocrator, two central pieces of the church. Its marble floors, he wrote, mirrored a starry sky when viewed from below and a stormy sea from above. The designers of the Church 'have carved with such precision…the lifelike majestic human figure with fragments of golden and colored glass, which appears to face the viewer from whichever direction it is observed,' he wrote. More surprisingly, Tursun claimed that Mehmed II wanted to ascend to the domed surface, like Rūḥu'llāh ṭabāqat-i chārmīn-i āsumānā (spirit of God ascends to the fourth layer of the heavens) (Tursun Beg 1977, 64). Rūḥu'llāh was a common reference to Prophet Isa or Jesus used by Muslim monarchs, thus directly aligning the Ottoman Sultan to the central figure of the Hagia Sophia church.

The conversion of Hagia Sophia from a church into a mosque declared and asserted Mehmed II's Muslim identity onto the majority of Christian subjects in the newly conquered lands. However, his subsequent policy *vis-à-vis* the now imperial Mosque of Hagia Sophia also reflected a continuity with Byzantine-Christian traditions. Instead of eliminating the Christian heritage in Hagia Sophia, Mehmed II opted to preserve it, enhancing the already complex Ottoman imperial identities and legacies. Mehmed II reconsecrated the Hagia Sophia mosque by adding Islamic symbols, including calligraphy, alongside existing Christian elements. Certainly, several Byzantine and Christian icons were removed from the building—the statue of Justinian, the Byzantine King, Christian relics, icons, the bell from its bell tower and the cross at the summit of its dome. However, contrary to popular belief today, Mehmed II did not cover the vivid Christian mosaics in the Hagia Sophia. He left it as it were. It was not until the early 17th century, during the reign of Sultan Ahmet I, that the images began to be covered, a process that took an additional two centuries. This means that despite few dissenting voices, Muslims worshipping in the Hagia Sophia mosque were not bothered by the Christian iconography (Necipoğlu 1992, 213; Yosmaoglu 2021, 238). Additionally, as if to reaffirm the continuity between Byzantine Christian and Islamic tradition, a Quranic verse about the piety of the Virgin Mary was placed at the upper section of Hagia Sophia's mihrab, complementing the Christian mosaic above it. This approach of complementing religious symbols might have communicated shared Abrahamic traditions to his subjects, reflecting Mehmed II's universal vision.

CONCLUSION

As opposed to today's Muslims' popular simplified discourse, Mehmed II's legacy is far more intricate than the narrative of a Muslim conqueror. As Tursun Beg elaborated in the 15th century, Ottoman Sultans crafted a synthesis of diverse traditions to assert their legitimacy, challenging the monolithic portrayal of the Ottoman Empire as a purely Islamic empire. Mehmet II's approach to governance offers a model for understanding how diverse traditions can coexist within a single imperial framework. This vision was not only about politics, but it was also simultaneously deeply spiritual, as evidenced by strategic policies and patronage of both Islamic and non-Islamic intellectual traditions.

One of the most salient aspects of Mehmet II's approach was that he recognized the interconnectedness of the microcosm of the Ottoman Empire with the macrocosm of the divine order. It was displayed in his symbolic actions, such as the conversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque, not as an erasure of Byzantine heritage but as an integration of both spiritual legacies. Tursun Beg's *Tarih* also confirms such an approach. It presented Mehmed II as the rightful heir to a universal tradition that blended religious and political elements from across cultures. As shown above, the *Tarih* chronicles the Sultan's dual sovereignty—both as caliph and as a successor to the Roman emperors—hence positioning him as a ruler sanctioned by both divine and historical forces.

The pattern of synthesis explored in this article illuminate not a vanished past but an enduring principle of Muslim polities—its enduring ability to integrate diverse intellectual and cultural forms

without dissolving religious identity. Mehmet II's hybrid legitimacies also call us to reconsider the conventional narrative of Islamic expansion. His conquest of Constantinople and reign was not just about the dominance of Islam over Christianity but also about forging hybrid imperial identities that embraced pluralism. From this view, his empire became a model of cultural coexistence, where diverse traditions and legacies were not a threat to a Muslim emperor. Rather, Mehmed II acknowledged and actively incorporated the multiple traditions into the imperial identity.

Today, when questions of identity, religious authority, and global order again shape Muslim political discourse, Mehmet II's example offers a historically grounded alternative to exclusionary models of sovereignty. His reign demonstrates that Islamic governance could be both faithful to revelation and open to translation across cultures. The Ottoman practice of hybrid legitimacy thus stands as an early articulation of a pluralist ethic—one that acknowledges the tapestry of world cultures while seeking unity through justice. This argument offers a compelling challenge to today's popular perceptions, encouraging a more nuanced view of leadership, governance, and religious identity for Muslims in the modern world.

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