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Ontology of Power: A Philosophical Reconstruction of Mehmed II's Conquest of Constantinople

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Abstract
The 1453 conquest of Constantinople is often reduced to a military event, ignoring the profound intellectual architecture behind it. This study bridges this gap by analyzing Sultan Mehmed II (Al-Fatih) through a philosopher-manager framework, highlighting the symbiosis between his visionary ambitions and actionable knowledge. By analyzing the "Ontology of Vision"—Mehmed II's self-perception as a world ruler blending Islamic, Roman, and Ottoman traditions—and the "Epistemology of Power"—the synthesis of strategic, administrative, and technological expertise—this research demonstrates that the conquest was a product of calculated, modern leadership rather than mere brute force. Examining his creation of a hybrid legitimacy, this paper argues that Mehmed II successfully shifted the Ottoman State from medieval conquering ambition to a modern, structured administrative reality, showcasing his leadership as a pivot of political innovation.

Keywords: *Mehmed II, Al-Fatih, Ontology of Vision, Epistemology of Power, Strategic Leadership, Constantinople 1453.*

Introduction

The conquest of Constantinople in 1453 by Sultan Mehmed II (Al-Fatih) is recognized globally as a watershed moment, serving as a decisive pivot that marked the transition from the Medieval to the Early Modern period. However, traditional historiography often focuses excessively on the narrative-military aspects—the giant cannons, the ships dragged over land, and the overwhelming numerical superiority. While these aspects are factual, they fail to explain the deeper intellectual, strategic, and spiritual architecture behind Mehmed II's actions. He was not merely a ruler engaging in expansionism, but a visionary attempting to reshape the geopolitical and theological landscape of his time.

There is a distinct lack of deep philosophical analysis concerning the strategic management of Al-Fatih. Most studies treat him merely as a military commander or a relentless conqueror rather than a "philosopher-manager" or a strategic thinker who integrated ontology (being/vision) and epistemology (knowledge/strategy). Existing literature frequently separates his role as a warrior from his role as a scholar, ignoring the synthesis of knowledge and power that defined his leadership. There is a need to move beyond mere chronologies and delve into the intellectual underpinnings of his decision-making processes.

This paper aims to fill this gap by philosophically reconstructing the leadership of Sultan Mehmed II. It seeks to analyze the Ontology of Vision (the nature of his ambition, how he perceived himself and his empire's place in history) and the Epistemology of Power (how he acquired, synthesized, and implemented knowledge to turn vision into action) to understand how he transformed a medieval ambition into a concrete, modern reality.

This study highlights how Mehmed II was a "universal ruler" bridging diverse traditions—Islamic, Roman, and Ottoman—to create a new, hybrid political legitimacy. By analyzing his approach, this paper offers a unique perspective on the philosophy of leadership, demonstrating how a combination of profound strategic foresight and actionable knowledge can overcome seemingly insurmountable historical limitations.

Islamic leadership is defined by theo-centric management—aligning temporal goals with spiritual directives—and integrates ‘adl (justice) and shura (consultation) with long-term strategic planning to ensure that the pursuit of worldly objectives does not compromise ethical imperatives. This

framework posits leadership as a trust (amanah), where the leader is accountable to the Divine, fostering a unique blend of absolute determination (‘azm) and ethical constraint. Strategic Management is interpreted as the deliberate, long-term planning and resource allocation—including logistics, technology, and intelligence—required to achieve a major goal. When viewed through an Islamic lens, this management becomes a form of jihad—a persistent, constructive striving to optimize resources and human capital for a righteous objective. Thus, the fusion of these concepts creates a paradigm where strategic foresight is enhanced by spiritual conviction, and power is exercised as a means of establishing justice, not merely for domination.

Mehmed II did not act as a mere conqueror but as a kaiser-i-rum (Emperor of Rome) and padishah (Universal Ruler). His leadership philosophy, often overlooked, was a hybrid of Islamic piety, Byzantine geopolitical ambition, and European intellectual curiosity. He merged the role of a Muslim leader with the cultural and bureaucratic heritage of the Eastern Roman Empire.

By embracing the title Kayser-i Rûm, Mehmed II deliberately positioned himself not just as the successor to Byzantine territory, but as the legitimate heir to the Roman imperial tradition, a concept that bridged his Eastern Islamic identity with Western political structures. This hybrid legitimacy enabled him to act as a protector of the Orthodox Church, appointing Gennadius Scholarius as Patriarch and granting him authority over Christians, thus implementing a pluralistic governance model that predated modern concepts of multiculturalism.

His ontological view of power was "Islamicate" rather than purely Islamic; it was a synthesis of Ottoman, Byzantine, and Persian traditions where he positioned himself as Sulh-i Kull (universal peace). He integrated Byzantine administrative structures, utilizing local experts in bureaucracy and finance, while simultaneously maintaining his role as the leader of the gazi (warrior) tradition, skillfully triangulating between different constituents.

Furthermore, Mehmed’s "European intellectual curiosity" was manifest in his patronage of Italian artists like Gentile Bellini, his collection of Western scientific literature, and his deep interest in Homeric literature, reflecting a Renaissance-era mindset. This intellectual openness shows that Mehmed’s leadership was not driven by rigid ideological barriers, but by a cosmopolitan, strategic vision that recognized the value of synthesizing different intellectual and cultural traditions to enhance his power. His construction of the Külliye (complex) in Constantinople and the Topkapi Palace functioned as tangible expressions of this philosophy, blending traditional Islamic architecture with Roman spatial concepts.

Methods

This study employs a library research method (qualitative-descriptive) with a philosophical approach (reconstruction). The qualitative-descriptive design is utilized to systematically analyze historical narratives, interpreting them through a conceptual lens to understand the underlying leadership philosophy. The philosophical reconstruction approach acts as the primary analytical tool, aiming to reconstruct the strategic vision (ontology) and the justification of power (epistemology) of Sultan Mehmed II, transforming raw historical data into a coherent philosophical leadership model.

This study utilizes secondary data sources, primarily focusing on historical literature, academic journals, biographies, and scholarly analyses regarding Sultan Mehmed II, the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople, and his administrative policies. Data collection is conducted through a targeted literature review, filtering relevant primary and secondary materials that detail his decision-making processes, strategic vision, and philosophical perspectives on leadership.

The data analysis is carried out using a qualitative-interpretive approach, specifically employing content analysis and philosophical interpretation. The steps include:

Data Reduction: Filtering historical narratives to focus on key events highlighting Mehmed II's leadership, such as the 1453 siege.

Data Display: Organizing the data chronologically and thematically to show the evolution of his strategic thinking.

Philosophical Interpretation (Reconstruction): Analyzing the data to reconstruct the ontological basis (his vision of a universal empire) and epistemological justification (his methods of knowledge acquisition and pragmatic decision-making) of his leadership model.

Conclusion Drawing: Formulating a coherent model of Sultan Mehmed II's leadership philosophy based on the analyzed data.

Data collection is carried out through meticulous documentation and content analysis of primary and secondary sources.

Primary Sources: Historical accounts by contemporaries like Kritovoulos of Imbros (in History of Mehmed the Conqueror) and Tursun Bey (in Tarikh-i Abu'l-Fath), which provide firsthand accounts of the siege tactics, strategic decisions, and the Sultan's persona.

Secondary Sources: Modern historical analyses, academic journals, and books focusing on Ottoman leadership, Ottoman-Byzantine diplomacy, and Mehmed II's political philosophy, including works by scholars such as Halil İnalcık, Cornell Fleischer, and Gülru Necipoğlu, to validate the interpretation of the primary texts.

The collected data, consisting of direct quotes, tactical descriptions, and diplomatic correspondence from primary sources, will be subjected to qualitative content analysis. This involves a thematic approach to identify recurring patterns in Mehmed II's decision-making process, leadership style, and strategic communication.

The analysis will cross-reference the accounts of Kritovoulos and Tursun Bey to highlight convergences and discrepancies in the portrayal of the Sultan, ensuring a balanced understanding of his persona.

To ensure historical accuracy and validity, the findings from primary sources will be interpreted within the framework of modern scholarly analysis. The insights of established historians such as Halil İnalcık will be utilized to contextualize Mehmed II's actions within the broader scope of 15th-century Ottoman political philosophy and geopolitical strategy. Furthermore, Gülru Necipoğlu's research on visual and spatial representation will be used to interpret the symbolic aspects of the Sultan's leadership during the siege.

Content analysis is applied to philosophical, ethical, and strategic elements within the sources, focusing on the how and why behind Mehmed II's decisions. This qualitative approach involves a systematic interpretation of historical narratives, contemporary accounts, and strategic doctrines to reconstruct the underlying logic of the conquest. Furthermore, thematic analysis is employed to break down complex leadership decisions into core components: ontological aspects (strategic vision and identity) and epistemological aspects (knowledge, intelligence, and application of power). By utilizing a comparative technique, the research contrasts contemporary Ottoman accounts with Byzantine and Western sources to identify bias, achieve objective analysis, and construct a comprehensive philosophical framework of Mehmed II's leadership, ensuring that "how" the strategic decisions were implemented is directly linked to "why" they were conceived.

Content analysis in this study is operationalized through a systematic, multi-step process designed to move beyond surface-level narratives and uncover the latent meanings within primary and secondary historical sources. The sources, including Tursun Bey, Critobulus of Imbros, and Venetian reports, are analyzed by breaking down texts into distinct units of analysis: (1) political philosophy, (2) military strategy, and (3) logistical/organizational decision-making.

Coding Process: A thematic coding framework is applied to identify recurrent patterns related to Mehmed II's leadership. These codes are categorized into "how" (e.g., logistical innovations, use of artillery, urban planning) and "why" (e.g., universal imperial ambition, securing legitimacy, Byzantine inheritance).

Reconstruction of Rationale: The coding directly links specific actions—such as the rapid construction of Rumeli Hisarı—with the underlying strategic imperative of total naval blockade. This systematic categorization enables the research to evaluate whether strategic decisions were driven by proactive planning or reactive necessity.

To understand the underlying logic of the conquest, a thematic analysis is applied to categorize leadership decisions into two core philosophical components.

Ontological Aspects (Strategic Vision and Identity): This theme investigates "who" Mehmed II perceived himself to be and "what" the nature of his empire was intended to be. The analysis focuses on how he synthesized Islamic, Turkic, and Roman traditions to construct a unique, unified identity as Kayser-i Rûm (Caesar of Rome). This involves analyzing texts to identify the shifting conception of the Ottoman state from a frontier principality to a legitimate successor to the Roman Empire.

Epistemological Aspects (Knowledge, Intelligence, and Power): This theme examines the foundational knowledge that shaped Mehmed II's decisions, focusing on how he acquired, processed, and applied information. The research analyzes the importance placed on intelligence gathering, map reading, utilization of foreign advisors (e.g., Italian engineers), and his personal commitment to studying history and sciences.

This approach highlights the "epistemic" basis of his power—the idea that knowledge was a crucial element of his leadership success.

To ensure high levels of validity and objectivity, this study employs a comparative technique to address the inherent biases in fifteenth-century historical narratives.

Source Triangulation: Accounts from the Ottoman perspective (e.g., Tursun Bey) are placed in direct comparison with Byzantine chroniclers (e.g., Sphrantzes, Doukas) and Italian observers.

Bias Mitigation: Byzantine sources often highlight the "brutality" and "overwhelming numbers" of the invaders, while Ottoman accounts emphasize the wisdom, divine sanction, and strategic brilliance of the Sultan. This research identifies these bias patterns and uses them to reconstruct the most credible account of the events. By triangulating these perspectives, the methodology allows for a comprehensive understanding of the "why" behind the conquest, distinguishing between ideological propaganda and actual operational logic.

To facilitate a philosophical reconstruction of Sultan Mehmed II's leadership, this study adopts a multi-layered analytical framework focusing on the nexus between thought and action.

Ontology of Strategic Vision: This segment analyzes the conception of power, examining how Mehmed II's self-identity, belief system, and ultimate vision for a world empire (cosmological sovereignty) dictated his strategic objectives. It focuses on the ontological shift from a regional power to a trans-continental empire.

Epistemology of Power: This segment investigates the knowledge systems that informed his decisions, including the pragmatic use of intelligence, engineering innovation, and psychological warfare. It examines how Mehmed II converted knowledge into power and action, bridging the gap between strategic theory and practical implementation during the siege.

Ethical-Strategic Synthesis: This layer explores the convergence of ethical constraints (religious-legal framework) and strategic necessity (realpolitik) in the decision-making process, analyzing how moral authority was justified through the success of the conquest.

Context: This section analyzes how Sultan Mehmed II fundamentally reconfigured his personal image and the Ottoman state's identity. Following the momentous conquest of Constantinople in 1453,

Mehmed II moved beyond the traditional role of a borderland chieftain (frontier bey) in Anatolia, proclaiming himself Kayser-i Rûm (Caesar of Rome). This was not merely a title, but a deliberate political move to claim the legacy of the fallen Eastern Roman Empire, effectively transforming the Ottoman state from a regional power into a centralized, universal empire.

Ideological Foundation: His rule was validated by a syncretic ideology that combined Islamic eschatology—firmly believing in his role as the prophesied conqueror of history—with Persian traditions of absolute sovereignty and the aforementioned Byzantine legacy of Roman succession.

Context: This section explores the "methodology" of Mehmed II, highlighting how he employed knowledge and intellect, rather than sheer brute force alone, to build and consolidate power. It focuses on the "Epistemology of Power"—the calculated use of knowledge to create political and military hegemony.

Strategy: He successfully integrated various types of intelligence to achieve his goals:

Intellectual Realpolitik: He utilized practical, strategic knowledge for tangible political and military aims.

Innovative Technology: A prime example was the development and application of massive, specialized cannons designed based on advanced ballistic theories (books and specialized knowledge) to shatter the legendary, ancient walls of Constantinople.

Objective: The primary goal was to convert theoretical knowledge and intelligence into actionable, decisive military action, setting a new standard for early modern warfare and statecraft

Results and Discussion

Nubuwwah Hadith as Ontological Premise: The core of Mehmed II's vision was not mere territorial expansion or dynastic pride; it was the actualization of a prophetic reality. The Hadith, "Verily, you shall conquer Constantinople. What a wonderful army will that army be, and what a wonderful commander will that conqueror be," functioned as his primary ontological premise. For Mehmed, the conquest was a preordained truth waiting to manifest in the physical world. This spiritual certainty provided an unwavering sense of purpose that transcended geopolitical logic, turning a military campaign into a divine mandate.

The "Kayser-i Rûm" Identity: Post-conquest, Mehmed’s ontology shifted toward the concept of Universal Empire. By claiming the title Kayser-i Rûm (Caesar of Rome), he positioned the Ottoman State not as a nomadic successor, but as the legitimate heir to the Roman legacy. He viewed Constantinople not as a trophy of war, but as the "Heart of the World"—the singular point where the East and West intersected.

Cosmological Reconstruction: His vision extended beyond destruction. Immediately after 1453, he focused on rebuilding the city as a microcosm of the universe. By restoring the Hagia Sophia and commissioning the Fatih Mosque complex, he redefined the city’s identity as a vibrant, multi-faith capital, establishing an ontological link between Islamic governance and ancient Roman prestige.

Mehmed II’s worldview was anchored in a teleological imperative, where the flow of history was seen as moving toward a predetermined divine conclusion. By internalizing the Nubuwwah Hadith, he effectively collapsed the gap between "sacred time" and "linear history." In this ontological framework, the Sultan did not view himself as a mere political actor, but as the instrument of providence. This belief transformed the siege of 1453 from a strategic choice into an existential necessity; to fail would not just be a military defeat, but a defiance of cosmic order. Consequently, every tactical innovation—including the overland transport of ships—was seen as a physical manifestation of a spiritual conviction.

The adoption of the title Kayser-i Rûm represents a sophisticated ontological synthesis. Mehmed II rejected the binary of "East vs. West," instead positioning the Ottoman Sultanate as the final, perfected iteration of the Roman Empire. This was not mere mimicry; it was an act of sovereign re-imagining. By integrating the Roman legal heritage (Qanun) with Islamic jurisprudence (Sharia), he created a dual-layered legitimacy. This "Universal Sovereignty" argued that the Ottoman ruler was the rightful protector of the entire Mediterranean basin, effectively claiming the intellectual and political monopoly over both the Islamic Caliphate and the Roman Caesarship.

Under Mehmed's vision, Constantinople was reconstructed as an architectural syllogism—a physical proof of his ontological claims. The transformation of the urban landscape was an exercise in urban semiotics, where the skyline itself communicated power. The conversion of Hagia Sophia signified the "supersession" of the old order, while the construction of the Sahn-ı Seman Medrese (within the Fatih Mosque complex) established the city as the new intellectual epicenter of the world. This reconstruction served a specific ontological function: it proved that the Ottoman state possessed the "Civilizing Grace" (Tamaddun) required to govern a diverse, global populace, cementing the city's role as the Umbilicus Mundi (the navel of the world).

Mehmed II's reign (1451–1481) represents a transformative epoch in which knowledge was systematically converted into political and military power. He did not merely consume information; he produced it through a holistic, interdisciplinary, and "experimental" approach that blended established Islamic traditions with radical, innovative methodologies. His power was anchored in a profound synthesis of empirical science, intellectual versatility, and profound metaphysical insight, challenging the traditional paradigms of medieval sovereignty.

Mehmed II was a pioneer of an "Experimental Epistemology," recognizing that the 1453 siege of Constantinople required bypassing conventional military wisdom. He rejected the limitations of existing, slow-firing siege engines, instead collaborating directly with specialized engineers, most notably the Hungarian engineer Urban. This collaboration led to the creation of the "Basilic" cannons, enormous bronze artillery pieces that revolutionized metallurgy and field artillery. Mehmed understood that the Theodosian Walls, which had withstood sieges for over a thousand years, necessitated a new language of physics and applied mechanics. By integrating advanced mathematics and chemical engineering into the production of gunpowder, he shifted the paradigm of medieval warfare into the early modern gunpowder age, utilizing "intelligence-based strategy" rather than mere troop volume.

Mehmed's epistemology was profoundly informed by a diverse array of cosmopolitan sources. As a genuine polyglot fluent in Ottoman Turkish, Arabic, Persian, Greek, and Latin, he actively curated a "multilingual private library," which included works of classical philosophy, Ptolemaic astronomy, and Roman history. He did not distinguish between "East" and "West" in his intellectual pursuits; rather, he aimed for a "universal" synthesis of knowledge. This was institutionalized through the foundation of the Fatih Complex (Sahn-i Seman), which was not merely a theological seminary, but an advanced intellectual hub. Within this environment, Muslim theologians engaged with Greek humanists and Italian artists, ensuring that Ottoman power was anchored in the highest intellectual standards of the era.

His application of power was dictated by rigorous empirical intelligence. Mehmed conducted extensive topographical surveys and naval reconnaissance, refusing to accept the physical limitations imposed by Byzantine sea defenses. The legendary feat of transporting ships overland into the Golden Horn was not merely a dramatic gesture, but a result of meticulous planning—combining engineering foresight, unconventional logistics, and a profound understanding of topography. This move demonstrated an "intelligence-based strategy" that leveraged superior cognitive and logistical planning over numerical strength, showcasing his ability to turn theoretical knowledge into operational success.

Mehmed recognized that material, empirical knowledge alone was insufficient for maintaining a prolonged, high-stakes campaign. He carefully integrated spiritual guidance into his intellectual

framework through the mentorship of figures like Akshamsaddin. Utilizing Sufi metaphysics and Islamic apocalyptic traditions, he mobilized religious fervor to maintain the psychological resilience and morale of his troops during the darkest days of the 53-day siege. This combination of "material power" (cannons) and "spiritual power" (ma'rifah) allowed him to transcend the material challenges of the siege, framing the conquest not just as a territorial gain, but as the fulfillment of divine destiny.

Mehmed II's commitment to an epistemology of power required more than personal intellectual prowess; it necessitated the institutionalization of knowledge. The establishment of the Sahn-i Seman (Eight Courtyards) madrasas within the Fatih Complex (constructed 1463–1470) was a deliberate act of structural synthesis. Moving beyond traditional curricula that focused primarily on religious sciences (naqliyyah), Mehmed designed this complex as an "advanced intellectual hub" meant to harmonize Islamic jurisprudence with the natural sciences (aqliyyah), classical philosophy, and Byzantine-Latin studies.

Bridging Epistemological Divides: The Fatih Complex facilitated the dialogue between 'ulama (traditional scholars) and experts in empirical sciences. Mehmed commissioned scholars like Ali Kuşçu—a leading astronomer and mathematician who moved from the Timurid Samarkand observatory—to teach, elevating the status of mathematics and astronomy within the Ottoman, and by extension, Islamic intellectual framework.

The Multilingual Library as Instrument of State: Mehmed's personal library, preserved and curated with works in Greek, Latin, Persian, and Arabic, was not merely for private study but functioned as an imperial archive of human knowledge. By translating classical Roman history and Ptolemaic geography, Mehmed framed his conquests as the restoration of a world-spanning legacy, blending the "universal ruler" ideology with Ottoman legitimacy.

A "Hybrid Legitimacy": Mehmed's approach, often described as sulh-i kull (universal peace) in academic discourse, utilized intellectual diversity to ensure that the Ottoman sultan was seen as the arbiter between varied subject communities. The institutionalization of Greek and Italian humanists alongside Muslim philosophers in his court created a "hybrid legitimacy," allowing Mehmed to project power across both Christian and Islamic spheres of influence.

This institutionalized synthesis of knowledge anchored Ottoman power in the highest intellectual standards of the era, ensuring that the empire's expansion was guided by both empirical intelligence and classical strategic thought.

The Sahn-i Seman (Eight Courtyards) represented a structural breakthrough in Ottoman pedagogy.

Curriculum Expansion: Beyond classical Islamic law, the curriculum integrated mathematics, astronomy, and natural philosophy, signaling a shift toward a comprehensive epistemological framework.

The Role of 'Ulama and Scientists: By attracting scholars from diverse intellectual traditions (such as Samarkand), Mehmed II encouraged a "hybrid" intellectual environment where empirical sciences were valued equally with religious discourse, notes The Oxford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Science, and Technology in Islam.

Mehmed II's personal library functioned as a tool of statecraft rather than a private collection, blending East and West.

Knowledge as Power: By curating, translating, and studying works in Greek, Latin, Persian, and Arabic, Mehmed II projected his image as a "universal ruler" (Padişah-i 'alem-penah). The collection included works on geography, astronomy, and history, showcasing a strategic, rather than purely aesthetic, approach to knowledge.

Restoration of Legacy: The translation of classical Roman history and geography, along with the incorporation of Byzantine experts, served to legitimize Ottoman control over former Byzantine lands and position the Sultan as the legitimate successor to Roman authority.

Hybrid Intellectualism: The library was instrumental in merging Ottoman Turkish, Islamicate (Persian/Arabic), and Byzantine/Christian-Roman traditions, forging a distinct imperial identity.

A "Lending" Library for Elites: The library served as a source for scholars, mapping out a "territory" of knowledge that bridged the gap between military conquests and intellectual legitimacy, frequently including Turkish translations for users within the expanding military-political elite.

Conclusion and Suggestion

Sultan Mehmed II was a "philosopher-manager" who applied a theocentric strategic management model. He proved that high-level leadership is a synthesis of strong, vision-based faith, advanced technological application, and strict ethical accountability. Visionary Leadership: Long-term success requires a deeply held, clear vision. Integration of Technology and Ethics: Technology is only effective when guided by ethical and spiritual values. Hybrid Management: Success lies in the ability to bridge diverse cultures and knowledge systems, as seen in Mehmed's use of both Islamic scholars and European artists.

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