

The Pre-Ottoman Conquest *of* Asia Minor

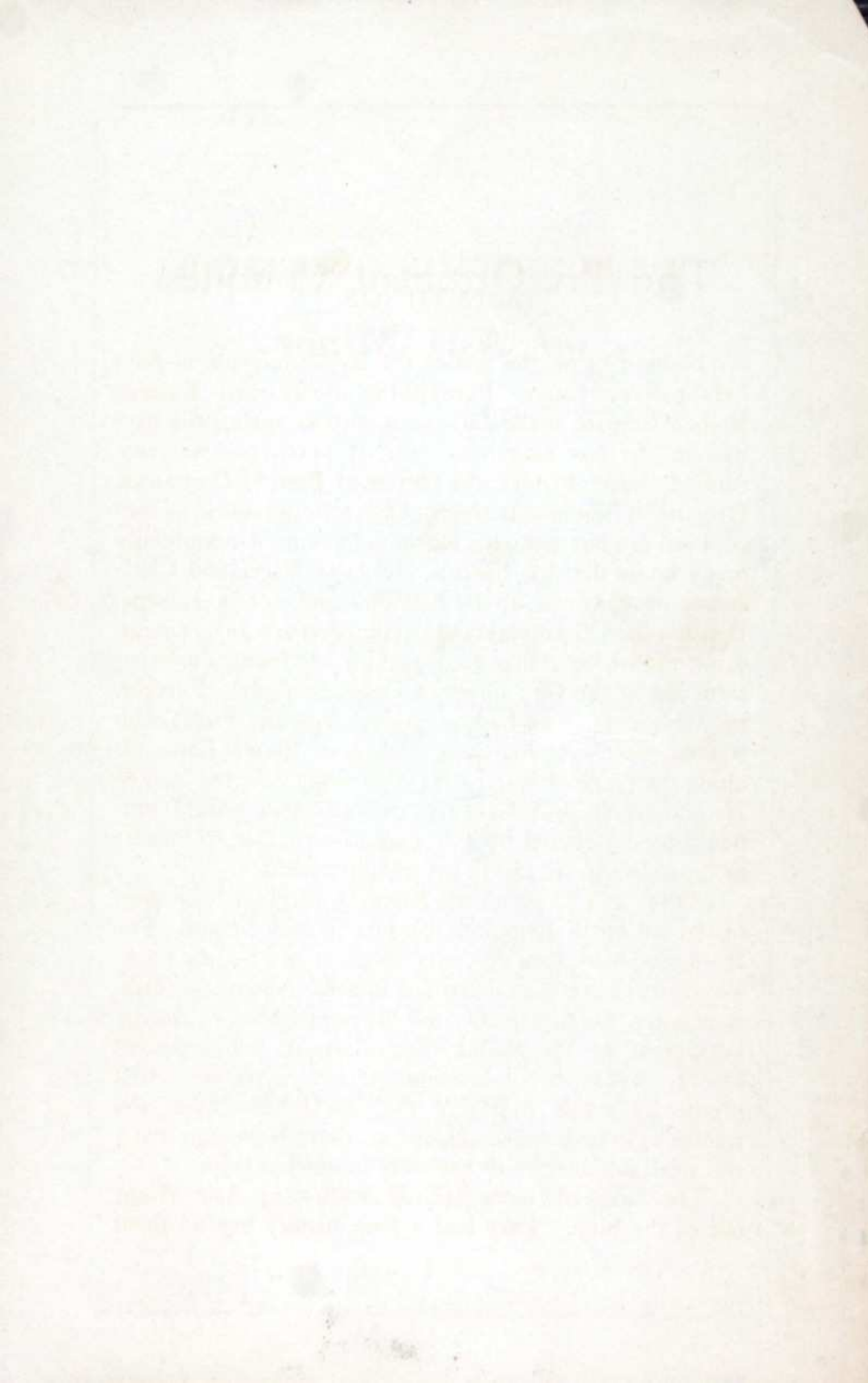
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THE PRE-OTTOMAN CONQUEST OF ASIA MINOR

To most of us, the end of the Byzantine rule in Asia Minor is very vague. Perhaps the glories of the Eastern Roman Empire as the European outpost against the barbarians stir our memories. Or, if perchance we have studied church history, the figures of John of Damascus, Gregory of Nazianzus and St. Chrysostom remind us that St. Paul did not make his journeys in vain. Undoubtedly many know that the historic creeds of Nicea and Chalcedon were drawn up in Anatolia and not in Europe. Possibly the Crusaders stand out more clearly in our memories, and we know that the First Crusade found Turks entrenched at the very doors of Constantinople. Further, the Crusaders (who had no quarrel with the Turk) who wished merely to march to Palestine, found Turks all along their line of march. If we wonder how the land of Nicene creeds and Gregory of Nazianzus should suddenly be dominated by a strange eastern race, followers of the crescent, we fail to get enlightenment.

As far as I know no one has ever developed the story of the fall of the Byzantine Empire in Asia Minor. The Byzantine historians say little about it, and Seljuk Turkish records have been destroyed in their subsequent interstate wars. So this theme, and the parallel one of the development of the Seljuk Turks, awaits some patient scholar, aided by industrious archeologists who will eventually make available the inscriptions from the wealth of Seljuk ruins. However, there is enough material available to give us the story in outline form.

The Turks of course did not swallow up Asia Minor out of the blue. They had a long history behind them

when they finally broke through the Byzantine defences. As early as 1400 B.C., Turkish peoples are mentioned by the Chinese and from that time on harried the Chinese river valleys, and are found today in many parts of western China. When the Chinese built the Great Wall to keep them out, the nomad pressure turned west and beat against the Slavic tribes, who beat against our Germanic forefathers, who in turn inundated the western Roman Empire. Sporadically the Turanians themselves, as under Attila the Hun, invaded the Eastern and Western Roman Empire, but they were always driven back. However, the Turks did occupy the district north of Persia, known today as Russian Turkestan, and from there conquered much of Persia. Then they came in touch with Islam, and the Western Turks were slowly Islamized. The Eastern Turks, however, remained Shamanists, and it is interesting to know that Ertogrul, founder of the Ottoman dynasty, was a pagan when he settled in Asia Minor next to the then Byzantine boundary. He might have become Orthodox Christian, but instead he became a Sunni Moslem.

Let us leave the Turks for a while and turn to Moslem history. The first Moslem caliphate period soon passed, and the kingdom of Damascus rose and fell. Finally Baghdad became the brilliant center of the Arab Empire under the Abbasids. From here was ruled a great empire of various races and languages bound by common allegiance to Islam. The luxury among the upper classes and the oppression among the lower classes, however, soon impaired the fighting qualities of its citizens. Then the Caliphs conceived the idea of developing a special guard of hard fighting Turks, brought as slaves from the eastern reaches of their kingdom. At this time the boundaries between Eastern Rome and Islam followed roughly the present-day Turkish boundary, though it fluctuated with the years, sometimes reaching farther north. So, by the latter years of the eighth century, when these guards were brought to Baghdad, it was quite near

to the edge of the Empire. They doubtless participated in raids over the Roman border, and early saw the beautiful valleys of Asia Minor, and considered how much better the country was than the steppes of Asia or the deserts of Arabia.

As the years passed, this guard became the real ruling power of the Abbasids, and had a city built for themselves at Samarra, north of Baghdad. Daughters of the guardsmen were taken into the harem and became mothers of Caliphs who were pro-Turks. All this time the pressure of the wandering nomad Turk was turned west, because the Chinese wall stopped his advances in the east. The Byzantine boundaries shunted most of the tribes south, though the Hungarians and Pecheneks passed into Europe to the north of the Caspian. Those going south were welcomed by their fellow countrymen in Baghdad, and they settled or grazed in Syria, Mesopotamia and Persia. There are still today many Turks in these three regions. If the Turkish guards had not strengthened the Abbasid army it is quite possible that the Byzantines in a period of strength might have reconquered the lands they had lost to the Arabs. Instead, the Turkish guards gradually surrounded Asia Minor with Turkish speaking immigrants.

From time to time Moslem raiders penetrated the Anatolian peninsula, sometimes going as far as the Bosphorus. In these raids the Turkish troops looked upon the land and saw it was good. It seems likely that peaceful Turkish shepherds may have gradually come into the uplands, much as Yuruk shepherds do today. Since they would not harm the farmers in the valleys they would be tolerated. As late as the trip of Marco Polo, he reported the Turks as living in the highlands and the Greeks and Armenians in the lowlands.

From the north, too, inroads came, and the Turkish Pechenek tribe was finally allowed to settle within the Empire, on the promise that they would prevent all other tribes from crossing the Danube. So the years passed on

to the date 1000 A. D. Between 950 and 1000 over a million Turks settled along the southern boundaries, but nowhere had the dyke given way. In fact a period of Byzantine strength came when the boundaries were extended southward and the Cilician plain reconquered.

But about 1000 A.D. a new power arose, the Seljuk Turkish kingdom with its capital in Persia, which conquered the whole Arab world. It was a time of Turkish expansion. Northern India was conquered by Mahmud of Ghazna in this same period.

The Byzantines did not seem to be aware of the unification of the Turks. If they did know of it, they greatly under-estimated the strength of the Seljuks. At that time Armenia constituted an eastern buffer state, but the Byzantines instead of strengthening it, proceeded to destroy it, thus eliminating the one barrier between themselves and this new power. The Empire was cursed with monopolies and high taxes. The border provinces however had been traditionally exempted from many of these extortions, and in return were supposed to maintain strong border guards. Now the border troops were dissolved, and the money previously devoted to their upkeep was spent on the palace feasts.

As soon as the border troops were withdrawn, the Turks living on the southern and eastern boundaries began to raid. They found no opposition, so the raids went deeper and deeper into the country. According to Ramsay, the Turks, like all nomads, wanted land for their flocks, so they killed off the population to insure themselves more grazing land. Commerce was destroyed, there was no one to pay taxes, it looked like the dissolution of the empire. The inhabitants of Constantinople had a superstitious belief in their own ability to avoid capture, but when Turks appeared across the Bosphorus they realized at last that the situation was desperate. The leading general of the day could not exercise his power, because the country was torn by factions and jealousies. The queen, a widow, married him to give him

supreme command, and he was given the title of Romanus Diogenes. He took the field personally, and by a series of brilliant victories drove the Turks out of the country, across the Taurus mountains. The Constantinopolitans sat back and said, "You see, we are invincible. The Empire can never be defeated."

But the Empire was in a bad way. The raiders had burned and killed. The Byzantine army had lived off the country. Money had been raised from all possible sources to finance the troops. The army included many Norman and French mercenaries who had to be paid. It even contained Turkish troops, some coming from the tribes guarding the Danube, others possibly from other Turkish settlers.

Romanus was not satisfied with these victories. There was a strong fortress called Manzikurt, north of Lake Van, still held by the Turks. This he felt he must capture. So, reorganizing his army, he marched east toward the Persian border. In the meantime Alp Arslan, sultan of the Seljuk Empire, had been alarmed by his defeats and by the approach of an invading force led by a man bearing the still fear-inspiring title of Romanus. So he gathered his forces from over all his vast domain, mostly men on horseback. He too marched for Manzikurt, but he did not want battle. He tried to arrange peace with Romanus, but the latter would not hear him. At last the chance had come to crush the main body of the Turks, and the Greeks intended to do so! The Byzantines were absolutely confident of victory. In fact they were so confident that they did not await their European mercenaries, who had remained at a distance, and never participated in the battle at all. So confident were they that one of Romanus' generals, wishing to be Emperor himself, chose this particular time to turn against him. Finally the Turkish "Oghoz" troops went over from Romanus to Alp Arslan—blood was thicker than Byzantine gold. All the old weaknesses of the Byzantines were in evidence. If they had conquered the Turks, with the ap-

proaching dissolution of the Seljukian Empire and the coming in of the Crusaders they might have held Asia Minor indefinitely. "If"—but they did not. They were overwhelmingly defeated, and Romanus Diogenes himself was taken a prisoner. One of the most important battles in the history of Islam was over, the backbone of Byzantium was broken, and Asia Minor was lost. The year 1075 marks one of the decisive battles of history.

In Constantinople, instead of some one coming to the front in this time of emergency, three people clamored for the title of emperor and engaged in civil war. All three bargained with the Turks and promised lands for Turkish help. With this sort of opposition, the Turks under a leader named Soliman rode straight west and within a year controlled the whole of Asia Minor from Persia to the Aegean (with a few notable exceptions). Soon after, they even put to sea and captured the islands of the Aegean, and later even invaded the mainland of Greece. These Turks in Greece became Orthodox Christians and blended with the population, as did the Pechenek tribes by the Danube. The invaders captured Smyrna. In twelve months the conquest of Asia Minor was accomplished. The speed with which the Turks worked amazes us. All the initiative of the various Greek cities and provinces had been strangled by the central government. Long years of misgovernment at last bore fruit. No local leadership was available at the hour of trial. It is possible that many of the common people welcomed the invaders on the theory that any government would be better than that of Constantinople.

In the twenty-two years between the Turkish conquest of Asia Minor and the Crusading invasion they consolidated and organized the country, so that it was a Turkish state with city populations and smoothly working government machinery. One is forced to believe that some Turks had come earlier by peaceful penetration as shepherds or traders, and had prepared the way for the armed forces. It seems impossible to believe they could have

established themselves so quickly had the land been entirely new to them. However, the Turks were probably a minority for some decades.

After taking Smyrna, they turned north and came to the walls of Constantinople. They were not prepared to besiege such a powerfully defended city, and so they proceeded to establish their capital in Nicea, only a few miles away. There they could pause, get their breath, and capture Constantinople at their leisure. At least, so it seemed. But if the Byzantines had been unaware of the Seljuk growth in Persia, so were the Turks unaware of the Crusading movement in Europe. The Crusaders were, however, on the move. One day a small rabble attacked them and were easily dispersed—nothing worth troubling about.

Then, without warning, in 1097 the "Iron Men" began to be ferried on Byzantine boats from Europe to Asia Minor. Without ado these silent forces from the unknown north marched the few hours' distance to Nicea, home of the Nicene creed and now the Turkish capital, and laid siege to it. Realizing that its fate was sealed, the sultan and many of his troops escaped. The city fell and was taken over by the wily Byzantine Emperor.

Then the Crusaders started on their hard march south to Antioch, the key to the Holy Land. The Turks, supposing they had come to conquer their kingdom, fell upon them near the present railroad junction of Eski Shehir, and were defeated in the battle of Dorelyum. Konia, another Turkish center, fell. But the Crusaders had not yet begun to think of states for themselves. They conquered and pressed on, leaving to the Byzantines all they won. Later their kingdoms to the south gave the Byzantines valuable buffer states. As they were marching overland, the Byzantine Emperor equipped a great fleet, sailed along the coast of Asia Minor, and recaptured the Aegean Islands, Smyrna and the whole of western Anatolia.

The Eastern Roman Empire had had given back to it nearly a third of its old domain. However, Europe paid

a big price for this gift. It is estimated that while 250,000 Crusaders left Constantinople for the long march over the plateaus of Turkey in the First Crusade, 30,000 arrived in Palestine, to assist in the siege of Jerusalem. European bones whitened the road followed by the crusading army, but the Turkish domination of western Asia Minor was delayed for two hundred and fifty years. In fact, Jean Ducas with a Greek fleet drove the Turks from Smyrna in 1097, and the Turks did not regain it permanently till 1419, over three hundred years later.

I shall not give the detail of the slow recapture of western Turkey. Scarcely had the Crusaders left Konia before the Turks reentered it. Then, using that for a base, they pushed slowly down the valleys, and across the ranges and plains, winning here and losing there, a long border warfare producing hatred and suffering.

The result was never in doubt. The various Crusades, the Latin kingdoms in the East, the Venetian and Genoese conquests for trading stations, all these postponed the collapse of decadent Constantinople. But the issue had been settled when rash Romanus Diogenes, far off by the Persian boundary, had failed to realize that his army and his generals were broken reeds not to be leaned upon, and had failed to make terms with Alp Arslan, Emperor of the Seljuks.

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