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AN EVALUATION OF BAYEZID’S POLITICAL AND STRATEGIC MISTAKES IN THE ROUT OF ANKARA IN 1402

SÜLEYMAN DEMIRÇI

Introduction

One of the most important events in the Middle Ages was emergence of Timur’s Empire between 1370 and 1405, culminating in the battle of Ankara between Timur and Bayezid in 1402. Tamerlane is more correctly called by his Turkish name, Temur; the Western version of his name comes from the Persian Temuri language, or “Temur the lame”. He was probably born in 1336 near Samarkand (Manz 1990:1) in Transoxiana, which was then part of the Changhatayid Khanate in which Timur grew up.

In the 1360s, there was a struggle in the former territory of Chingish Khans’s second son, Chaghatayid, whose land was located close to the Isik Kul and Ili river, and included the Muslim territory of Central Asia. By this time, the various groups within the territory had made themselves independent under their own chiefs; this situation continued until Timur’s assumption of power in 1370 (Hookham 1962:103).

When Timur became master of Transoxiana in 1370, he regarded himself as the inheritor and maintainer of the Chaghatayid central Asian empire. He therefore kept his armies on the move throughout his life, either in Mongolia, Desthi Kipchak, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Iran, India or Anatolia. In this paper, I shall explain the defeat of Sultan Bayezid I at the battle of Ankara in 1402. I will firstly outline the general situation in Anatolia before Timur’s invasion; I will then address the correspondence between Timur and Bayezid. Following

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this, I will discuss Timur’s agreement with the Tatars, followed by a brief explanation of the military strategies of both armies during the battle of Ankara. I will then discuss Bayezid’s political and strategic mistakes.

The General Situation in Anatolia before Timur’s Invasion

After the death of Murad I at the Battle of Kosovo I, Bayezid I² had ascended to the Ottoman throne in 1389. In the following years, he crossed the Bosphorus and launched a campaign against the numerous western Anatolian Turkish emirates:

- The Emirate of Karaman, centred around Konya, Larenede and Ermenek, was under pressure from the Ottomans and Kadi Burhaneddin Ahmed.
- Kadi Burhaneddin Ahmed’s principality, was based in Sivas and Kayseri. There was a running conflict between the Ottomans and Kadi Burhaneddin for the domination of Karamanids and Central Anatolia.
- The Emirate of Mutahhartan, around Erzincan and Kemah, which faced attacks firstly from Kadi Burhaneddin and later from the Ottomans.
- In Eastern Anatolia, there were both Black Sheep and White Sheep Turkomans, as well as in Maraş and Elbistan Dulgadirids.
- In Western Anatolia, there were Germiyan, based in Küthahya; Saruhan, based in Manisa; and Aydin, based at Teke.
- In Northern Anatolia, there were Candarogullari, based in Sinop and Kastamonu, and the Commenus ‘Empire’, based in Trabzon.

In 1380 the most powerful state competing with the Ottomans in this region was that of the Mamluks, whose territory stretched from the Nile to Malatya. There was no political unity in Anatolia, and the Ottomans tried to unify these principalities under their rulership. For this purpose, Bayezid I annexed the Western Anatolian Turkish principalities, namely Aydin, Saruhan, Menteşe and Germiyan in 1390.

In addition to this, he had handed over his suzerainty to the Karamanids in the same year. In a very short period of time, the Ottomans thus became one of the most powerful principalities in Anatolia and in Rumelia.

However, at the same time, Timur’s power was increasing more quickly than Bayezid’s. Indeed, Timur was propelled by the grand idea of re-establishing the ex-Ilkhanid Empire on the same territories, including Anatolia. After Timur’s assumption of power in 1370, his conquests extended to Anatolia’s earlier borders, while during a five-year campaign in the West, he took Baghdad from Sultan Ahmed Jelayir in 1393, who fled to Cairo, causing Timur to move north-west in the direction of the main routes into Syria. This gave great concern to Barquq, Sultan of the Mamluks. After the fall of Baghdad, Barquq had given sanctuary to the fugitive Sultan Ahmed Jelayir, and considering the evaluation of Timur’s future movements, he had re-equipped him with reinforcements (Hookham 1962:152) which helped Sultan Ahmed in re-taking Baghdad.

While Timur was in Baghdad, he sent letters to the Emirate of Erzincan, the Karamanids, the Dulgadirid Turkomans, Kadi Burhaneddin Ahmed and the Mamluks, demanding their submission to him (Yücel 1991:12).

According to Hookham, during a three-year campaign Mutahhartan, lord of Erzincan, had gone to Timur’s court and accepted his suzerainty because he did not wish to place this territory under the rule of Kadi Burhaneddin Ahmed. Timur’s letter to Mutahhartan had given him an opportunity to save his emirate who again declared his loyalty to Timur: the Karaman had suffered, whether under Kadi Burhaneddin or from the Ottomans. As soon as the letter arrived, Alaaddin Ali, Lord of Karamanids, saw an opportunity to defend himself against both the Ottomans and Kadi Burhaneddin Ahmed. Alaaddin Ali, in his letter, tried to persuade Timur to invade either Anatolia or Syria, and had given a promise that if Timur came to Anatolia, he would join Timur’s forces himself; he also added that if Timur came to Syria he would send his son, Mohammed, with reinforcements for him (Yücel 1991:12).

The Dulgadirid Turkomans had also replied positively to Timur’s letters because, as mentioned earlier, they were suffering from Mamluk pressure. Timur was not interested only in Iran, Iraq and Syria but also in Desthi Kipchak, whose khan was Tokhtamis. He understood that no
one could afford to challenge Timur’s power without entering into an
alliance. Therefore, after the fall of Baghdad in 1393, he sent an envoy
to the Egyptian Sultan and offered him an alliance against Timur. The
proposal was accepted. The ambassadors of the Ottoman Sultan
Bayezid of Asia Minor then arrived, sending funds in support of
Barquq’s effort against Timur. At that time, while in Damascus, Barquq
received the other envoys from Kadi Burhaneddin Ahmed, who were
marching from Asia Minor. Kadi Burhaneddin Ahmed had felt himself
threatened by Timur’s advance during a five-year campaign in Persia,
Simultaneously, Timur had sent an ambassador to Barquq, but this did
not stop him moving in a north-western direction. Timur’s main envoy
to Cairo, Atilmis, was held prisoner, and the other envoys were killed.
Despite the killing of these envoys, Timur demanded that the Mamluks
send a further letter to Cairo, which contained warning and threats:

“We have done all our duty unto you, since we have sent an
embassy unto you; So kill not those now sent, as you did those
who first to you went, lest you as is your wont violate custom and
precedent and disobey him who is over all the world
omnipotent”.3

Timur, meanwhile, had sent another ambassador to Kadi
Burhaneddin Ahmed. He was again offering his sovereignty but it was
refused and Kutlusah, Timur’s second ambassador was forced to stay in
Sivas. After that, Kadi Burhaneddin sent an envoy to the Egyptian
Sultan in order to inform of this situation (Yücel 1989:12). Thus, a
regional alliance was established: on one side, there was Timur, the
Karamanids, Dulqadirid Turkomans and Mutahhartan. On the other,
Tokhtamis, Barquq, Bayezid I and Kadi Burhaneddin Ahmed.

Although Timur had sent the letters to the regional powers, he
did not wait for a reply but instead continued his movement towards
Kirkuk, Mosul, Mardin and Diyar-i Bekr (Amid) arriving at Aladag
(north of lake Van) in the Spring of 1394 (Aka 1991:20). From Aladag,
he marched toward Sivas, which at that time was under the rule of Kadi
Burhaneddin. But when he came to Erzurum, he suddenly marched
towards Tokhtamis instead of Sivas, because, according to the logics of

3 Hookham 1962:151-152. Quoted in Ibn Arabsah (Sanders 1936).
the regional alliance, both Tokhtamis and Barquq could attack him when he was engaged in Anatolia (Aka 1991:20). While the alliance was in place, Timur hesitated to continue marching into both Syria and Anatolia. Timur was very much aware of the political danger to him in these circumstances: first of all, he decided to eliminate one of the most powerful member of the alliance, Tokhtamis, and it was the for this reason that he changed his direction when he was in Anatolia in 1394. The following year, he made his final campaign against the Golden Horde, where lived descendants of Chingis Khan’s eldest son Cuci. It was second time that Timur had come to Desthi Kipchak and this time he defeated Tokthamis at the battle of Terek in 1395. As a result of this battle, the regional alliance lost one of its most powerful members, a situation that Timur had desperately tried to avoid. After this campaign, Timur had to devise future strategies for neutralizing Anatolia and Syria. According to modern Turkish historians, Uzunçarşılı and Aka, his intentions were made clear in the letter which he sent to Bayezid proclaiming his victory.¹

In 1398, Kadi Burhaneddin Ahmed, who was the ruler of Sivas, Kayseri, Tokat, Nişar and Kirşehir, was killed by Kara Yüük Osman, the chief of the White Sheep Turkomans under the authority of Kadi Burhaneddin, in the east. After this act, Kara Yüük Osman laid siege to Sivas and the notables of the city called on Bayezid for help. He saw it as an opportunity and despatched one of his sons, Süleyman, with a defensive force, driving Kara Yüük into the mountains. Thus Sivas was annexed (Imber 1990:41). The regional alliance had lost another of its other powerful members.

Shortly afterwards, Barquq, the Sultan of Egypt, died and Ferej, a ten-year old child, ascended to the throne of the Mamluks.² After the death of Sultan Barquq, Bayezid I captured Malatya from the Mamluks. Now the Ottomans’ territory reached as far east as Sivas (Imber 1990:41), and Bayezid became a potential danger for Timur’s ally, Mutahharten. As a result of both Timur’s and Bayezid’s movements, the former lords of the Anatolian principalities, as well as some local powers in Azerbaijan and Iraq tried to use these powers against each other as a way of surviving on their own territories (Imber 1990:41). As Imber pointed out, “according to contemporary sources, after the defeat

¹ For further information see. Hookham 1962, chapters 7 and 8, pp. 142-162.
² More on this information see. Yücel 1989.
Kara Yülük went to Timur’s court in Azarbayjan and kissing his hand and began to urge him invade the country” (Imber 1990:52). Imber, using contemporary sources, continued his explanations, saying that “The imprecations of Kara Yülük and Mutahharten had given Timur a pretext to invade” (Imber 1990:52).

In the summer of 1400, Timur was in Azarbaijan, from where he marched to Sivas, the old Kadi Burhaneddin capital captured by Bayezid only a short time before, and took the city, slaughtering all the defenders. In Ibn Arabsah’s words, “Timur buried alive all who had come out to him, and ordered the city to be pillaged, pulled down and ruined.” When Bayezid was informed that Timur was marching upon him, he sent his eldest son, Süleyman, to bring immediate help to Sivas, but it was too late (Imber 1990:53). After the destruction of Sivas, Timur, instead of continuing his westwards, moved to consolidate his position in the south, advancing into Mamluk Syria. In Syria, he routed the Mamluk army several times and then turned back to Baghdad, re-captured it in August 1401 from Sultan Ahmed Jelayir, who had fled to Anatolia (Gibbons 1916:249; Uzunçarşılı 1972, vol. 1:305-307).

While Timur was in Syria, Bayezid I moved back into eastern Anatolia and retook Sivas; he also captured Erzincan from Timur’s ally, Mutahharten. The purpose of Bayezid’s movement eastwards was to seek a strategic advantage before Timur returned. After capturing the castle of Kemah, Bayezid, according to Ottoman chronicles, deported Mutahharten’s wife and treasures to Bursa as hostage. In Imber’s words, “he provided Mutahhertan with personal grief as a motive for inciting Timur” (Imber 1990:20). In addition, Bayezid had given sanctuary in Anatolia to the fugitive leader of the Black Sheep Turkomans, Kara Yusuf, and to Ahmed Jelayir. Furthermore, Kayseri, Aksaray and Kütahya were given to them as a Yarlig for their expense.

The Correspondence between Timur and Bayezid I

After the taking of Baghdad, Timur sent a letter to Bayezid. According to contemporary historian, Ibn Arabsah, this concerned Sultan Ahmed and Kara Yusuf.

“They had both escaped the might of his swords and that they

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6 Imber 1990:52. Quoted in Ibn Arabsah (Sanders 1936).
were the cause of havoc and destruction of cities and ruin of men. Seize them, throw them into prison and put them to death, wherever you find them; and beware of opposing our command, since all the grip of our power would fall up on you. For you have already heard the fate of enemies and the examples displayed in their case and what has fallen up on them from us when they resisted and opposed and already it is clear to you how we dealt with them and you do not need much talk between ourselves and you, much less combat and battle, when we have already given you plain argument and already set examples before you.”.

In addition, according to modern Turkish historian, Uzunçarşılı, Timur had insisted on the several points: The former Emirates, which had been abolished and whose lords had fled to Timur’s court, should be re-established; One of Bayezid’s sons should be sent to Timur’s court as a hostage; Bayezid I should become Timur’s vassal and finally, that Timur’s name should be read in the Friday prayer, (khutbe) (Uzunçarşılı 1972:305-307). As soon as Bayezid read Timur’s letter, he refused his demands and sent his own envoys with a reply. In order to express his contempt for Timur, Bayezid put his own name first in letters of gold, and Timur’s name underneath in small black letters. (Gibbons 1916:246) Moreover, he wrote it as provocatively as he could:

“I know that this speech will rouse you to invade our countries, but if you should not come, may your wives be condemned to triple divorce, but if I flee from you, when you invade my countries and decline to fight with you, then may my wives be utterly condemned to that triple divorce”.

According to traditional Turkish thought, the mention of women is a crime and grave offence, so much so that they do not even pronounce the word “woman”. Timur, therefore, had an opportunity for attacking Bayezid, but it was not the real reason for his invasion. As mentioned above, when Bayezid had annexed the emirates of western and northern Anatolia at the beginning of his reign, all the lords were supplicant to Timur. Above all, Timur was claiming suzerainty over all

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1 Ibn Arabsah (Sanders 1936:170-173).
2 Ibn Arabsah (Sanders 1936:170-173).
the rulers in Anatolia as the sole representative of the ex-Ilkhanids.

**Timur’s Agreement with the Tatars**

Before Timur’s invasion of Anatolia, he made a secret agreement with the Tatars who had settled in Anatolia, after the defeat of the Seljuk army at the Battle of Kösedağ by the Ilkhanids in 1243. After the victory of Nicopolis, the prestige of the Sultan had increased in the Islamic World; indeed, Timur was very much aware of the rise in Ottoman power. Thus it was necessary for Timur to take all necessary precautions before meeting the Ottoman forces in Anatolia. According to Ibn Arabsah, he wrote to Fazil, Lord of Tatars, saying that:

“Your nobility is also mine and your race joined with mine and our countries with yours; we have the same ancestors, we are all shoots and branches of the same tree and your last king was Artana who died in the faith and the greatest king in the realms of Rum was your least servant why should be slaves of a man who is a son of slaves set free by Ali Seljuk?9 ... Yet at least you should be like your fathers, ruler of these countries, holding the ramparts of the forts, and sitting on their hump, stretching your hands into them and holding their halter; and this aim will be accomplished, when this war has been fought out by you and the racecourse made level for us by remaining Bayezid from the midst; but when the air is clear of the adversary and watering places made clear for me in these countries but now outwardly you will be Bayezid, inwardly with us, until at our invasion you separate and slide over to our army”.10

In the early summer of 1402, Timur took up his winter quarters in the high plains of Karabagh, and then marched through Erzurum to Erzincan, and laid siege to Kemah. This fortress fell. Meanwhile, Sultan Bayezid was laying seige to Constantinople. When Bayezid was informed of Timur’s movement, he suspended the blockade of the city and assembled all available forces in Anatolia in the city of Bursa (Hookham 1962:240). Moreover, he requested reinforcements from the

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10 Ibn Arabsah (Sanders 1936:178-179).
Egyptian Sultan, Ferej. It was refused because Bayezid had captured Mamluk Malatya (Hookham 1962:224). He was the Ilkhanids' representative in Anatolia but in time had become independent in central Anatolia, making Sivas the capital.  

The Armies' Marches and the Battle of Ankara

While Timur's forces marched into Anatolia through the defiles and valleys around Tokat, to the north-west of Sivas, Bayezid I was assembling his army in Bursa. He then moved on Ankara. There, some of his statesmen, according to Ibn Arabshah, suggested that it would be better for him to wait for Timur at the watered camping ground. However, Bayezid rejected this idea. Instead, he left a garrison there and continued east with all speed to cut off Timur's advance. This was one of Bayezid's most important mistakes, as will be discussed below. When Timur was informed Bayezid's movements, he made a rapid departure from Sivas, but instead of taking the route to Tokat, he struck south-west, keeping to the left bank of the Kızılrmak river leading towards Ankara. After six days of forced marches, Timur arrived at Kayseri with his army and camped for four days. After another four days' march, he arrived at Kırşehir, then after three more days of forced marches reached Ankara in July, 1402. Timur gave orders for immediate siege operations against the city (Göde 1995:249).

When Bayezid became aware of Timur's movement, he doubled back from Sivas, and, by a series of forced marches, reached Ankara. Timur stopped the siege against the city and both armies assembled on the plain of Çubuk. According to Ibn Arabshah, Bayezid's troops consisted of a high proportion of infantry. After the forced march, the general situation of the Ottoman army had deteriorated. (Göde 1995:249). In addition, all water points were taken by Timur's forces. In Ibn Arabshah's words, "The Tatar army reached Ankara refreshed. However, the Ottoman army had no opportunity to refresh themselves, perishing with distress and murdered by thirst." Ibn Arabshah describes both Timur's and Bayezid's armies in the battle field.

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11 On Artana see Göde 1995.
12 Ibn Arabshah (Sanders 1936:182).
Timur’s Army

“The right wing of Timur’s army was under the orders of prince Miranshah and Emir Shaykh Nuraldin, with advance guard commanded by Abu-bakr and Emir Jahan Shah. The left was commanded by Shahrukh and Khalil Sultan, supported by Emir Süleyman Shah with Sultan Hüseyin. The main army with their hordes was led by many nobles of hither and Central Asia, was commanded by Prince Muhammed Sultan. Timur, Lord of the fortunate conjunction, was supported by other princes. Timur’s army, including the war elephants, had received considerable reinforcements from Maveraunnahr.” (Hookham 1962:251).

Bayezid’s Army

“The right wing of Anatolian troops was commanded by Bazezid’s Christian brother-in-law and vassal, Lazarovic of Serbia, with reinforcements of Serbs. The left wing, under the orders of Süleyman Chelebi consisted of Macedonian troops backed by mounted Turks from Asia Minor. The Janissaries, some five thousand strong, formed the centre, under the command of Bayezid himself, and his three sons Musa, Isa and Mustafa. These were supported by contingents of sipahi cavalry. The cavalry reserves were under the command of Bayezid’s other son Mehmed Chlebi. (Hookham 1962:251).

The Battle of Ankara, 28th July 1402

When the respective wings engaged with each other, the Tatars, who had made a secret agreement with Timur, deserted Bayezid and joined Timur’s army.13 Aşikpashazade, one of the contemporary sources, described how the armies were assembled on the plain and drums beaten for the battle. As soon as the armies clashed, the Tatars deserted Bayezid according to the agreed plan, especially as Mutahharten Bey was the son of their own lord. In addition, when the troops (who had been levied from the annexed Anatolian emirates) saw their former Beys fleeing to Timur’s court, they returned to their own. Thus Bayezid

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lost more than half of his army at the very beginning of the battle. Furthermore, when Süleyman Chelebi saw the deeds of the Tatars, he left the battlefield and withdrew with some of Bayezid’s emirs; Mehmed Chelebi then also withdrew. In contrast with the betrayal of the Tatars and the troops from the former Anatolian principalities, the Serbian troops fought tenaciously until they saw that little hope remained. Only Bayezid and his Janissaries were left in the battlefield; they held out till nightfall. He then decided to flee but it was too late: he was encircled by Timur’s troops and taken captivity with two of his sons (Hookham 1962:252-253).

Bayezid’s Political and Strategic Mistakes

Bayezid’s political and strategic mistakes were numerous. Firstly, after the death of Kadi Burhaneddin Ahmed, Bayezid annexed the Kadi’s territory in 1398. In the following year, he continued his marches towards eastern Anatolia and took Malatya from the Mamluks, after he had learnt that Barquq had died, and that a ten-year old boy, Ferej, had ascended to the Mamluk throne. This seemed a perfect opportunity to capture the city. Thus Bayezid destroyed any possible alliance between Ottomans and Mamluks against Timur. As Hookham pointed out, a short time after the fall of Sivas, Bayezid sent an envoy to the Mamluk Sultan requesting cooperation against Timur’s invasion, but this proposal was refused by Ferej saying that: “he is no friend of ours, let him defend his own land. We will defend ours and our subjects.” If Bayezid had not taken Malatya from the Mamluks, perhaps Timur would have had to consider a possible alliance between the two, and thus drop his plans for invasion.

Secondly, after the capture of Sivas and Malatya, Bayezid had forced the lord of Erzincan, Mutahharten, to change his alliance. Mutahharten was Timur’s ally and in Bayezid’s eyes he was responsible for Timur’s destruction of Sivas in 1400. Therefore, Bayezid made a singular decision and sent his eldest son, Süleyman, to Mutahharten, whose wife was taken hostage to Bursa. Most of the modern Turkish historians agree that it was the most important of Bayezid’s political mistakes, for Timur saw it as a challenge and made war inevitable. Actually, the destruction of Sivas by Timur was a lesson to Bayezid in

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that he had now a fierce opponent, against whom he must now measure. As Gibbons said, “although Bayezid had two years of respite, he took no steps to placate Timur or to prepare adequately against an invasion. He went on blindly to his doom, and displayed none of the consummate diplomatic and military skill.”

Thirdly, according to Gibbons who used the letters of Timur and Bayezid in Arabic and Persian taken from the Feridun Bey collection, Bayezid could have used diplomatic language rather than being provocative by contemptuously putting his own name first in letters of gold and Timur’s name underneath in small black letters, thus increasing the hostility between the two leaders. (Gibbons 1916).

Bayezid also made several strategic mistakes. Firstly, when the news reached him that Timur’s forces were preparing to drive into Anatolia through the defiles and valleys around Tokat, he led his army to Ankara where his advisers suggested that it would be better to wait for Timur in this well-watered area. But he refused to do so and instead continued east, with all speed, to cut off Timur’s advance. For this purpose, he forced the army onwards, in the hot mid-summer sun. As a result, according to Ibn Arabsah, Bayezid’s infantry was exhausted. When Bayezid’s army reached Ankara, “the soldiers were suffering from sickness, and they had no opportunity to refresh themselves that perishing with distress and murdered by thirsty.”

Secondly, by putting the Tatars in the first line of fire, Bayezid made it almost inevitable that they would desert him. Bayezid should have taken into account their links with Timur. Thirdly, after the long forced march, the army was not ready for an offensive war. But in contrast, Bayezid took the offensive rather than waiting for Timur to attack, which was unnecessary given that Bayezid had the advantage of being able to choose his position.

Conclusion

The rout of Ankara in 1402 has a very close link with Bayezid’s strategic mistakes. After the death of Sultan Murad on the battlefield in 1389, Bayezid ascended to the Ottoman throne. In a very short time, he

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15 Gibbons 1916:246.
16 Ibn Arabsah (Sanders 1936:184).
17 Ibid.
created a centralized empire stretching from the river Danube to the Euphrates. At the same time, Timur had also increased his power even more quickly than Bayezid’s on the Anatolian borders. When the war became inevitable between the two, Bayezid assembled all available forces and marched eastwards expecting to meet Timur near Sivas, perhaps thinking that the latter would do what he had done before at the same city. Now it was necessary to repulse Timur before came into Anatolia. Bayezid, however, lost his strategic advantage, after forcing his troops to Sivas without meeting his opponent. Timur was informed by his agents, and changed his main route with the help of the former lords of the Principalities, who had fled to his court and arrived at Ankara. Meanwhile, when Bayezid became aware of Timur’s movement, he led the army back from Sivas to Ankara; the Ottoman soldiers were worn out even before the clashes. It is obvious that Bayezid’s mistakes in force-marching the army guaranteed Timur’s easy victory. If Bayezid had cancelled the clashes, Timur would, perhaps, have encountered the same difficulties in providing food for his army. Moreover, when the Timur forces came to Ankara, they had taken control of all the water supplies, leaving the waterless area to Bayezid’s army, already suffering of thirst and sickness. Instead of waiting for his troops to rest, Bayezid then made the very unwise decision of immediate battle. Also, the Tatars, who were in the Ottoman army, were put in the first line. When the armies clashed, they deserted and defected to Timur, playing an important role in his victory.

All of these strategic mistakes by Bayezid thus played a central role in the rout of Ankara.

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