

1

ON THE FRONTIER OF TWO EMPIRES

IN THE SUMMER OF 1532, SIX YEARS AFTER the Battle of Mohács, a great encounter almost took place. The rulers of two empires both approaching their zeniths, Sultan Süleyman I of the Ottoman Empire and Holy Roman emperor Charles V of the Habsburg Empire (along with his brother, Ferdinand I, king of Hungary), had their troops stationed in Kőszeg (Güns) and Wiener Neustadt, awaiting the military clash between the two most powerful men in the world. But the battle did not ensue. The unusual standoff was nevertheless symbolic. It was the final sign that the medieval Kingdom of Hungary, which had covered the whole area of the Carpathian Basin, was a thing of the past and that Hungary had been conclusively pushed to the frontier of two empires. For both great powers, the road leading to this series of conflicts in the Danube basin had been a long one.

The empire of the Ottoman dynasty, founded by Sultan Osman I (c. 1280–1324/26), was one of the fastest-growing states in world history and also one of the longest lasting (surviving until shortly after the First World War). Tradition holds that the Ottoman Turkish principality was born in the 1280s to the southeast of Bursa, in what is today northwest Turkey, from a mere four hundred tents of a Turkmen tribe fleeing the Mongol invaders in Central Asia. Over the space of a century, the small principality grew into a more significant state, and within two centuries it would become a major power. Finally, by the early sixteenth century, it became one of the world's greatest empires (see map 1).

The Ottomans primarily had their clever flexibility and marriage policy to thank for their quick rise to such heights, though they were assisted by good luck and sometimes cruel innovations guaranteeing the dominance of the ruling family and state power, such as fratricide. A military and bureaucratic elite emerged, drawn from the slave (Turkish *kul*) class, the institution of the janissaries, the promotion of Muslim religious leaders to official government posts, and other sources. In addition, they were highly effective in adopting and further refining elements of the state apparatus (tax system, public administration, etc.) of their enemies, particularly the Seljuk Turks and Byzantium, which helped the Ottoman state thrive. They also recognized that it would be more advantageous to expand into the divided Balkan peninsula, which they first set foot on in 1354, than into Asia Minor. By 1369, Osman's descendants were already in charge of Edirne (in today's northwest Turkey), and as auxiliary troops of the Bulgarian and Serbian princes, they soon found themselves embattled with the armies of the Hungarian kings Louis I of Anjou and Sigismund of Luxembourg, who intervened in the conflicts of the South Slav states.