

Story 2096 (1988 Tape 16)

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city of Aydın  
Province

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Tamerlane<sup>1</sup> and Yıldırım Bayazıd<sup>2</sup> in Conflict<sup>3</sup>

In his march westward Tamerlane laid siege to the Turkish city of Sivas. Because the fortress of Sivas was so strongly built and so bravely defended, it took Tamerlane quite a while to capture it, and in the process of doing so, he lost a considerable number of soldiers. For some time, every attempt to penetrate the fortress ended in bitter failure, and those repeated losses demoralized his troops. Tamerlane spent all of his time trying to find a means of capturing this Turkish stronghold. One day he gathered all of his commanders around him and gave

<sup>1</sup>Tamerlane (1336-1405) was a Turkic-Mongolian conqueror. The Turks called him Timur or Timur Lenk (Timur the Lame).

<sup>2</sup>Bayazıd I (nicknamed Yıldırım (Lightning), was the fourth Ottoman sultan, reigning from 1389 to 1402). He was the son and successor of Sultan Murat I.

<sup>3</sup>The narrator combines two unrelated tales about Tamerlane. The second tale concerns an incident shared by Tamerlane and Nasreddin Hoca (Turkey's most beloved comic folk character), a tale for which there are variants in ATON. We have, therefore, separated this tale by Güngör into two tales for ATON--Tales 2096 and 2097.

Story 2096

them this order: "Send some of your soldiers to the nearest forest to cut down many trees. Have the wood of those trees carried to a certain place which I shall indicate to you. At the same time, have some other soldiers dig a large pit before one side of the fortress at a place which I shall also indicate to you. While this work is going on, have the rest of your troops continue their attack against the Anatolian fortress.

The work ordered by Tamerlane was begun at once. Some of the soldiers cut down many trees and carried the wood back to the fortress. Other soldiers dug a large pit before the front of the fortress. Although the troops considered their work ridiculous, they nevertheless carried out the orders of their great khan.

Meanwhile the Ottoman sultan, Yıldırım Bayazıd, sent an envoy bearing a challenge to Tamerlane. The message said, "We shall meet you on the plains of Haymana,<sup>4</sup> near Ankara

Tamerlane responded, "I shall be there in a few weeks, but before that, I have work to be completed here at Sivas.

As soon as the envoy had left, Tamerlane called

<sup>4</sup>The battle did not actually occur at Haymana but at Çubuk, another kaza town of Ankara Province.

Story 2096

together his council of viziers. He said to them, "I am sure that we shall capture Sivas in a few days. Then we shall continue on our way westward and meet the Ottomans." The viziers stared at each other with doubt in their eyes. Because all their efforts to capture Sivas had failed, they had begun to think that that city was invincible.

Although the viziers questioned the accuracy of their khan's words, they said, "Very well! Let us continue our attack."

The soldiers assigned to labor instead of battle were now completing their tasks. When the great pit had been dug before the front wall of the fortress of Sivas, Tamerlane ordered his workers to throw into it all of the wood which they had brought from the forest. He then had that wood set on fire, and as the flames rose, they heated the stones of the wall to a very high temperature. Tamerlane then ordered his men to throw cold water on those hot stones. The sudden change in temperature cracked many of the stones, weakening the wall seriously.

While this strategy to break the wall of Sivas' fortress was being employed, the Emperor of Trabzon, an ally of Tamerlane, had doubts about its effectiveness.

Story 2096

He said to the people in his court, "Tamerlane must have lost his wits. What he is doing might drive a fox from its lair, but it will hardly defeat a powerful city like Sivas."

But Tamerlane knew what he was doing. When he observed that the walls of the fortress of Sivas were made of limestone, he remembered something he had learned much earlier in his life. He had been told that limestone could be dissolved if it were first heated and then plunged into cold water. It was that knowledge that enabled him to tell the Ottoman envoy with confidence that he would soon capture the city of Sivas <sup>5</sup>

After the siege of Sivas had ended in a victory for the invaders, Tamerlane led his forces to the plains of Haymana to engage the Ottoman army in battle. Yıldırım Bayazıd himself led the first counterattack against the invaders, a battle in which many of Tamerlane's troops were killed. When Tamerlane observed this, he decided to focus his drive against the sultan. "Aim your arrows and your spears at the legs of Bayazıd's horse. If we can bring down his horse, then we may be able to capture him and thus end the war immediately." While some of the

<sup>5</sup>Sivas fell in the year 1400.

## Story 2096

invaders made a frontal attack against Yıldırım Bayazıd, others slipped past him and with their swords hacked the backs of his horse's legs. Both the horse and its rider fell to the ground, and in this way Yıldırım Bayazıd was captured

To celebrate his military success, Tamerlane ordered that a splendid feast be given for his troops. While this feast was being prepared, Tamerlane visited Yıldırım Bayazıd at the place where he was being held captive. He said to the Ottoman sultan, "You are a great commander and a brave fighter. If my soldiers had not cut your horse's legs, we would never have captured you. As you know, however, in warfare one side wins and the other side loses. Fortunately for us, our side was victorious, and your side lost. Although you are a defeated commander, I came here to your tent to invite you to join a feast we shall have tonight. As a defeated commander, you are invited to that feast, and you are welcome to sit in my tent with me."

What Tamerlane called an invitation was really, of course, an order. That evening Yıldırım Bayazıd was taken to Tamerlane's court to participate in the celebration. While he was in Tamerlane's tent, he suddenly observed

## Story 2096

that his own wife, Despina, was serving kımız<sup>6</sup> to Tamerlane's officers. Yıldırım Bayazıd reached the depth of humiliation when he saw his dear wife being used as a slave girl. He could not live with that awareness. He had long worn a large hollow ring that was filled with poison, and he now decided to use that poison. After swallowing the poison stored in his ring, he died quickly.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Fermented mare's milk, a mildly alcoholic beverage commonly drunk in Central Asia.

<sup>7</sup>Along with historical facts about Tamerlane, there are also many quasihistorical accounts in the oral tradition. Some reports claim that Bayazıd did not die at Çubuk but that he became ill en route to Akşehir, one of the next cities that fell prey to Tamerlane's army. Another equivocal point concerns the conveyance in which the defeated sultan was carried. Some claim that he was carried in a cage, like a wild beast, so that he would be exposed to the eyes of the curious. Others counter this claim by saying that it was not a cage but a palanquin that was the means of transportation. This latter theory supports the allegation that the sultan was in bad health after his defeat.