



A Sublime Empire: Ottoman Rule on Land and Sea

Bennett Sherry

The Ottoman Empire lasted six centuries and conquered territory on three continents. It owed its success to military strength but also to an innovative political structure.



A booming empire

The Ottoman Empire started with a bang. This was one of the world's great "gunpowder empires," and it deserved the name. When the Ottoman sultan Mehmet II marched through the gates of Constantinople in 1453, the Ottoman Empire was already a major power in the eastern Mediterranean. But its conquest of Constantinople—the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire, once thought to be impregnable—was a symbol of Ottoman strength that launched two centuries of conquests. By the middle of the sixteenth century, the Ottoman Empire was one of the world's most powerful, stretching from the Indian Ocean, across the Mediterranean, and into Eastern Europe.

In 1453, the city we now know as Istanbul was Constantinople (now it's Istanbul, not Constantinople).¹ It was ruled by the Byzantine Emperor, whose empire had shrunk to pretty much just the city of Constantinople, and Mehmet II wanted it to be his capital. One of the stories told about the Ottoman siege of Constantinople described a Hungarian man named Master Orban, who built cannons. He first offered his services to the Byzantine Empire, but the emperor turned him away. Then, the story goes, he approached Sultan Mehmet II, offering to design and build a new, enormous cannon that could finally break the walls of Constantinople. The sultan agreed, and with Orban's enormous guns, the Ottomans finally conquered the city. That's the story, anyway.



Say "hello" to my little friend. A bombard cannon of the kind used in the siege of Constantinople in 1453. By Cuneyt Turksen, CC BY 3.0.

More recently, historians have gotten skeptical of this narrative that conveniently makes the Ottoman Empire seem like it was inferior to Europe as early as the fifteenth century. Was it "behind" European technology? Hardly. Sure, the Ottomans, like every other major European power at the time, brought gunpowder experts from across Europe. But Turkish cannon-makers were quite skilled, and several worked alongside Orban—who was killed when his own cannon exploded during the siege. In fact, by the fifteenth century, the Ottomans were masters of gunpowder, exchanging their own innovations with those of European engineers.

The Ottoman Empire began its expansion more than a century and a half before it reached Constantinople—in 1299—and it would influence the course of world affairs until 1922. That's a run of 623 years². It reached its greatest power under the sultan Suleiman the Magnificent (r. 1520–1566). That title sounds like quite a brag, but Suleiman worked for it. In addition to conquering Mesopotamia and much of North Africa, he occupied large portions of Eastern Europe and laid siege to the Hapsburg capital of Vienna. The interesting titles of Ottoman sultans give a

¹ Your teacher probably knows a song with these lyrics, but if you don't, look it up on Spotify or YouTube or whatever.

² Keep in mind that the United States, today, is about 240 years old.

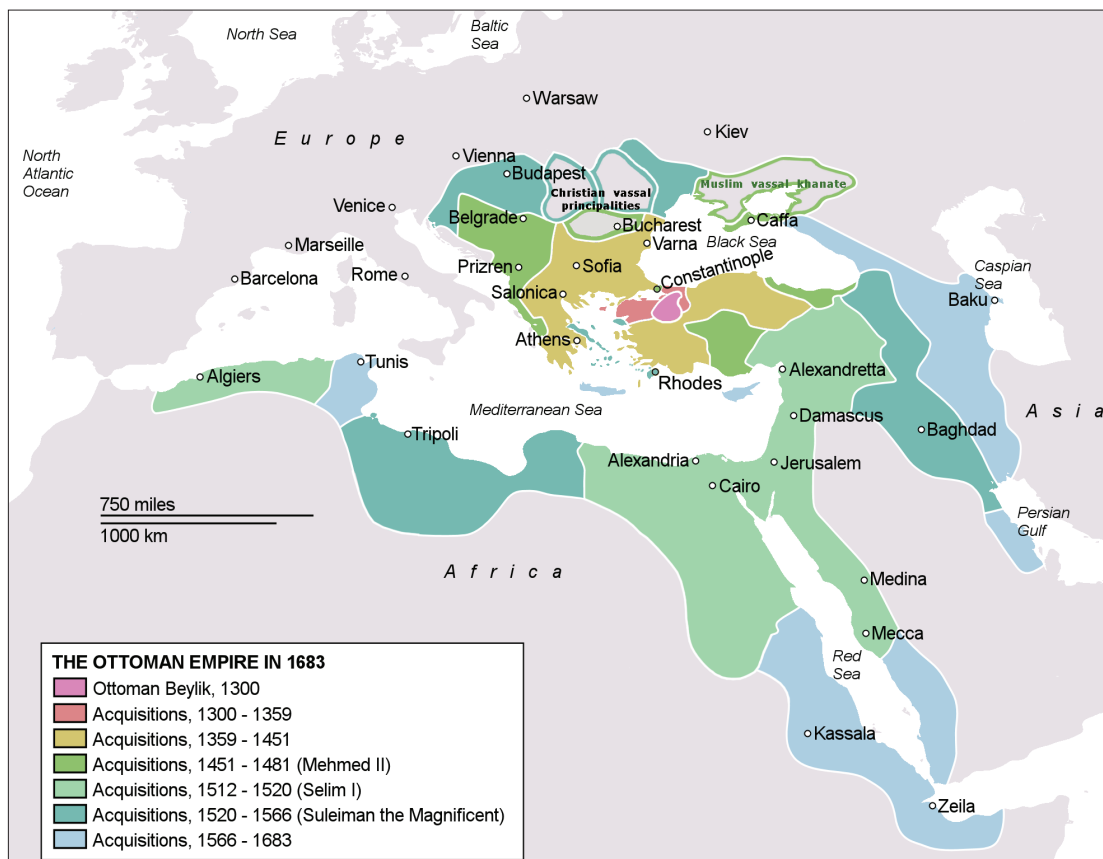
sense of how their subjects remembered them. For example: Osman I (the Warrior), Mehmet II (the Conqueror), Selim I (the Strong), Selim II (the Blonde / the Drunk). Why were some sultans so powerful? Why was the empire so successful? Gunpowder and trade are part of the answer, but so is political organization.

Empire and the enslaved

The Ottoman Empire is named after its founder, Osman, who was chief of a Turkish tribe that migrated west across Eurasia and finally settled in Anatolia. Despite some early setbacks, by the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Ottoman mastery of gunpowder technology made their armies some of the most dominant of the time. In the century after Mehmet II conquered Constantinople and remade it as Istanbul, Ottoman armies conquered North Africa, the Levant, Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Balkans. Though they are remembered as a land-based empire, the Ottomans flexed their power at sea, too. Their navies challenged Spain and Venice for dominance in the Mediterranean, and their fleets in the Indian Ocean often frustrated Portuguese attempts to control the Red Sea and Persian Gulf.



A portrait of Suleiman the Magnificent. A brilliant general and ruler, in addition to his impeccable taste in hats. Public domain.



A map of the Ottoman Empire at its greatest extent. Public domain.

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The Ottomans owed their success to more than just guns and ships. The empire thrived because of capable leaders and an innovative political structure. At the peak of their power, the sultans reigned supreme, unchallenged by a nobility or bureaucracy. Unlike Europe, where nobles owned huge amounts of land and had the loyalty of the people living on it, the Ottoman Empire lacked a permanent aristocracy. This meant that Turkish nobles could not raise armies and challenge the sultan. While some families did grow wealthy and powerful, the Ottoman system was designed to limit the power held by the aristocratic class. Power was centralized in the hands of the sultan, who relied on provincial governors to manage his far-flung territories. A robust legal system helped the sultans and their agents ensure efficient taxation and administration. Promotion in the empire was, for the most part, based on merit. Indeed, many members of the Ottoman ruling class were formerly enslaved.

The Ottoman Empire expanded rapidly. Expansion meant a lot of wars, and that meant a lot of prisoners of war. Millions of these prisoners and enslaved people purchased from Europe or Africa were imported to the empire. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, several enslaved women became consorts, wives, and mothers of sultans, exerting a great deal of influence on the government.

The Ottomans also forced Christian families in the Balkans to sell their children into the service of the sultan. This system was called the *devshirme*. The empire took the boys from their families and converted them to Islam. They trained the boys, and the best became government officials or *janissaries*—the sultan's elite corps of soldiers. Trained from a young age, these soldiers and officials were fiercely loyal to the sultan. In reward for exemplary service, some were granted lands, which, when they died could not be passed on to their children but were instead returned to the sultan.

The Ottoman Empire found strength in diversity. Part of this diversity came from the importation of enslaved people, but many people voluntarily migrated to the Ottoman lands. For example, many European Jews sought the sultan's protection, fleeing persecution in Europe. Many of these refugees became officials in the Ottoman government. The many Christian and Jewish communities in the empire were permitted to maintain a level of self-governance if they paid taxes and remained loyal to the sultan. Its diversity strengthened the Ottoman Empire and stimulated an age of innovation.



[A portrayal of the devshirme as young boys](#) are collected and registered for service. Public domain.

Ottoman networks

With territory on three continents, the empire was a crossroads. Turkish was the language of the military and government, but Arabic was the language of religion, and Persian poetry echoed through the halls of Istanbul's palaces. Merchants from the Indian Ocean carried valuable spices and luxury goods to the markets of Istanbul. The Ottomans controlled the trade routes linking Europe to the Indian Ocean.

The Ottoman Empire was an Islamic empire, and the sultans' leadership was both political and spiritual. Each time a new sultan came to power, he also claimed the title of caliph—leader of Sunni Islam. Selim I reinforced his claim by conquering Egypt and the holy cities of Mecca and Medina in 1517. The title of caliph unified the empire behind the sultans in their wars against Christian states and against the Shia Safavid Empire. The sultan's role as caliph placed the Ottoman Empire at the heart of Sunni Islam. Each year, millions of Muslim pilgrims from across Africa and the Indian Ocean made their way through the empire on their Hajj (pilgrimage) to Mecca.

The expansion of the Ottoman Empire during the sixteenth century created a diverse empire that controlled some of the most important routes of trade and religion in the world. These connections brought great wealth and knowledge to Istanbul, generating magnificent cultural achievements in art and architecture as well as new innovations in science, medicine, and navigation.



A fragment of the world map made by Piri Reis in 1513. It was the first Ottoman map to depict the Americas. Notice the coasts of West Africa and South America. Public domain.

Unanticipated outcomes

The Ottoman Empire remained a dominant military, economic, and religious power in the Mediterranean Sea and Indian Ocean throughout this period. However, some of the very systems that made the empire so efficient and powerful also created problems that cracked the foundations of Ottoman power. As mentioned above, Ottoman success depended on a system of slavery in which boys were taken from their families, forced to convert, and given guns. You probably noticed the flaw in this plan. Eventually, these well-armed, elite soldiers wanted more power and rights. And they had guns, so they didn't need to ask nicely. Their numbers grew rapidly as the empire expanded. As early as the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, several sultans found themselves at the mercy

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of their janissaries when the elite soldiers revolted to demand better pay and privileges. Several sultans were overthrown, held captive, or killed in janissary revolts. By the eighteenth century, the janissaries had evolved into the type of aristocracy—with land being passed from parent to child, rather than returned to the sultan—that the devshirme had been designed to avoid. But despite these internal problems and repeated wars with European states and the Persian Safavid Empire, the Ottomans retained their position of dominance well into the eighteenth century.

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Cover image: Calligraphic Galleon, dated A.H. 1180/ A.D. 1766–67, by 'Abd al-Qadir Hisari. The hull of this sailing ship comprises the names of the Seven Sleepers and their dog. The tale of the Seven Sleepers, found in pre-Islamic Christian sources, concerns a group of men who sleep for centuries within a cave, protected by God from religious persecution. Both hadith (sayings of the Prophet), and tafsir (commentaries on the Qur'an) suggest that these verses from the Qur'an have protective qualities. Public domain <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/454611>

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