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Ottoman Empire (1301-1922)

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Introduction The Ottoman Empire

The Ottoman Empire was the one of the largest and longest lasting Empires in history.

It was an empire inspired and sustained by Islam, and Islamic institutions.

It replaced the Byzantine Empire as the major power in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The Ottoman Empire reached its height under Suleiman the Magnificent (reigned 1520-66), when it expanded to cover the Balkans and Hungary, and reached the gates of Vienna.



The Great Mosque in Damascus, Syria ©

The Empire began to decline after being defeated at the Battle of Lepanto (1571) and losing almost its entire navy. It declined further during the next centuries, and was effectively finished off by the First World War and the Balkan Wars.

One legacy of the Islamic Ottoman Empire is the robust **secularism** of modern Turkey.

At its peak it included:

- Turkey
- Egypt
- Greece
- Bulgaria
- Romania
- Macedonia
- Hungary
- Palestine
- Jordan
- Lebanon
- Syria
- Parts of Arabia
- Much of the coastal strip of North Africa

Why was the Empire successful?

The recipe for success

There were many reasons why the Ottoman Empire was so successful:

- Highly centralised
- Power was always transferred to a single person, and not split between rival princes
 - The Ottoman Empire was successfully ruled by a single family for 7 centuries.
- State-run education system
- Religion was incorporated in the state structure, and the Sultan was regarded as "the protector of Islam".
- State-run judicial system
- Ruthless in dealing with local leaders
- Promotion to positions of power largely depended on merit
- Created alliances across political and racial groups
- United by Islamic ideology
- United by Islamic warrior code with ideal of increasing Muslim territory through **Jihad**
- United by Islamic organisational and administrative structures
- Highly pragmatic, taking the best ideas from other cultures and making them their own
- Encouraged loyalty from other faith groups
- Private power and wealth were controlled
- Very strong military
 - Strong slave-based army
 - Expert in developing gunpowder as a military tool
 - Military ethos pervaded whole administration

Origin

After Baghdad fell to the Mongols, the Seljuks declared an independent Sultanate in east and central Asia Minor.

In 1301, Uthman, an Uzbek of the Ottoman clan, overthrew the Seljuk aristocracy and proclaimed himself the Sultan of Asia Minor.

Rule of force

At first the rule of the Ottoman Sultans was insecure. To consolidate their Empire the Ottoman Sultans formed groups of fanatical fighters - the orders of the Janissaries, a crack infantry group of slaves and **Christian converts** to Islam.

The Ottomans inflicted a series of defeats on the declining Christian Byzantine Empire and then quickly expanded westward.

Constantinople Constantinople

Constantinople was the heart of the Byzantine Empire. It became the capital of the Ottoman Empire when it was conquered in 1453 by the Ottoman Sultan Mehmet II.

Mehmet slaughtered many of the population and forced the rest into exile, later repopulating the city by importing

people from elsewhere in Ottoman territory.

Mehmet renamed Constantinople Istanbul – the 'city of Islam' – and set about rebuilding it, both physically and politically, as his capital.



Sultan Suleymaniye Mosque, Istanbul, Turkey ©

Economics

Istanbul became not only a political and military capital, but because of its position at the junction of Europe, Africa, and Asia, one of the great trade centres of the world. Another important city was Bursa, which was a centre of the silk trade.

Some of the later Ottoman conquests were clearly intended to give them control of other trade routes.

Among the goods traded were:

- Silk and other cloth
- Musk
- Rhubarb
- Porcelain from China
- Spices such as pepper
- Dyestuffs such as indigo

The economic strength of the Empire also owed much to Mehmet's policy of increasing the number of traders and artisans in the Empire.

He first encouraged merchants to move to Istanbul, and later forcibly resettled merchants from captured territories such as Caffa.

He also encouraged Jewish traders from Europe to migrate to Istanbul and set up in business there. Later rulers continued these policies.

The siege of Constantinople

When Sultan Mehmet II rode into the city of Constantinople on a white horse in 1453, it marked the end of a thousand years of the Byzantine Empire. Earlier attempts to capture the city had largely failed – so why did the Ottomans succeed this time? What effect did the fall of Constantinople have on the rest of the Christian world?

Roger Crowley, author and historian; Judith Herrin, Professor of Late Antique and Byzantine Studies at King's College London; and Colin Imber, formerly Reader in Turkish at Manchester University discuss these questions.

Effects of the fall of Constantinople

The capture of Constantinople ended the Byzantine Empire after 1100 years. The effect of this on Christian Europe was enormous.

One unexpected effect was that many scholars fled from the new empire and went to Italy, where they were influential in sparking off the Renaissance, and increasing trade with the east.

Although the **Pope** demanded a crusade to recapture Istanbul from the Muslims, the Christian nations failed to

produce an army for him, and no attempt to retake the city was made.

The Muslim dominance of the trading centre of the former Constantinople increased the pressure on Western nations to find new ways to the East by going westwards. This eventually led to the expeditions of Columbus, Magellan, and Drake.

Other religions

The millet system

Non-Muslim communities were organised according to the *millet* system, which gave minority religious/ethnic/geographical communities a limited amount of power to regulate their own affairs - under the overall supremacy of the Ottoman administration.



The first **Orthodox Christian** millet was established in 1454. This brought Orthodox Christians into a single community under the leadership of the Patriarch who had considerable authority given to him by the Sultan. Armenian Christian, Jewish and other millets followed in due course.

Churches were converted into mosques ©

Some millets paid tax to the state as *dhimmis*, while others were exempted because they were seen to be performing services of value to the state.

The devshirme system

Non-Muslims in parts of the empire had to hand over some of their children as a tax under the *devshirme* ('gathering') system introduced in the 14th century. Conquered Christian communities, especially in the Balkans, had to surrender twenty percent of their male children to the state.

To the horror of their parents, and Western commentators, these children were converted to Islam and served as **slaves**.

Although the forced removal from their families and conversion was certainly traumatic and out of line with modern ideas of human rights, the devshirme system was a rather privileged form of slavery for some (although others were undoubtedly ill-used).

Some of the youngsters were trained for government service, where they were able to reach very high ranks, even that of Grand Vezir. Many of the others served in the elite military corps of the Ottoman Empire, called the Janissaries, which was almost exclusively made up of forced converts from Christianity.

The devshirme played a key role in Mehmet's conquest of Constantinople, and from then on regularly held very senior posts in the imperial administration.

Although members of the devshirme class were technically slaves, they were of great importance to the Sultan because they owed him their absolute loyalty and became vital to his power. This status enabled some of the 'slaves' to become both powerful and wealthy. Their status remained restricted, and their children were not permitted to inherit their wealth or follow in their footsteps.

The devshirme system continued until the end of the seventeenth century.

Life under Mehmet

After battles between Muslims and Christians, churches were converted into mosques and mosques into churches

according to who was the winner.

Although Mehmet converted many churches into mosques, he did not suppress the Christian faith itself. There were practical reasons for this:

- Christians were the largest group of the population and coexistence was likely to be more efficient than conflict
- The institutions of the church provided a machine for implementing Mehmet's rule

But Mehmet was also influenced by the Islamic rule that Muslims should show respect to all religions.

Mehmet not only tolerated the Christians, he made special efforts to attract Jews to Istanbul. This was attractive to the Jews, who had previously been persecuted by the Orthodox Christian Church.

The non-Muslim communities (millets) were controlled by the Sultan acting through their religious leaders. These communities were given their own parts of towns in which to live and worship. They were given a great deal of freedom to lead their lives according to their particular faiths, and so were largely supportive of their Muslim overlords.

After Mehmet

Mehmet II died in 1481, and he nominated his eldest son Bayezid as the new Sultan. The **Shi'a** Muslims in the Ottoman Empire revolted in favour of Bayezid's brother Jem. The Janissaries suppressed the revolt and from then on became very important in Ottoman politics.

With Janissary support Bayezid's son Selim laid the foundations for a world Ottoman Empire based entirely on the despotism of the Sultan. The Shi'as were ruthlessly suppressed and they retreated to Persia, joining with the local groups of Shi'a and eventually forming their own state under the Safavid Shahs.

Fratricide

Sultan Selim introduced the policy of fratricide (the murder of brothers).

Under this system whenever a new Sultan ascended to the throne his brothers would be locked up. As soon as the Sultan had produced his first son the brothers (and their sons) would be killed. The new Sultan's sons would be then confined until their father's death and the whole system would start again.

This often meant that dozens of sons would be killed while only one would become Sultan.

In the later centuries of Ottoman rule, the brothers were imprisoned rather than executed.

Sultan and court

The Sultan's life

The Sultans lived in the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul.



Main entrance to the Topkapi Palace, Istanbul, Turkey ©

The Sultan's life was run by rituals copied from the Byzantine court. For example, the Sultan wore his silk robes once and then they were discarded. (Many now are preserved in the Topkapi Museum.)

The Topkapi Palace held many objects which were used to give legitimacy to the Ottomans and reinforce the Sultan's claim to be leader of all Muslims. The most important of these was the mantle of the Prophet **Muhammad** and his standard and footprint. These were brought from Egypt when Cairo fell to the Ottomans.

It was in the Harem that the Sultan spent his life. Every inhabitant of the 230 small dark rooms in the Topkapi palace was his to command. The number of concubines often exceeded a thousand and came from all over the world. The only permanent male staff consisted of eunuchs.

Access to the Sultan meant power. But no one was to be trusted. The Sultan moved every night to avoid assassination. Favoured males were promoted to rule places far away like Syria; males not in favour could be locked up inside the palace.

The harem was a paradox, since it was a feature of the Ottoman Empire (and other Islamic states) yet contained much that was not permissible in Islam. The harem was extravagant, decadent, and vulgar. The concentration of wealth, suffering and injustice toward women was far from the ideals of marriage and married life in Islam.

Despite this, the harem could bring benefits to a family who had a woman in the harem. It meant patronage, wealth and power; it meant access to the most powerful man in the Empire - the Sultan.

Influences and Structure

Although the Ottoman Empire was widely influenced by the faiths and customs of the peoples it incorporated, the most significant influences came from Islam.

The ruling elite worked their way up the hierarchy of the state madrassahs (religious schools) and the palace schools. They were trained to be concerned with the needs of government and to be mindful of the restrictions of Islamic law.

In its structure the ruling elite reflected a world of order and hierarchy in which promotion and status were rewarded on merit. Thus birth and genealogy, aristocracy or tribe became almost irrelevant to success in the system. Only one post, that of the Sultan, was determined by birth.

Suleiman - a golden age The Golden Age of Suleiman

The Ottoman Empire reached the peak of its power during the rule of Selim's son, Suleiman the Magnificent (ruled 1520 -66) and his grandson Selim II (1566 - 74).

Suleiman came to the throne as one of the wealthiest rulers in the world. His strength owed much to the work his father Selim had done in stabilising government, removing opposition, frightening (but not successfully conquering) the **Safavid Empire** of Iran into adopting a non-aggression policy, and conquering the Mamluk empire of Egypt and Syria.

These conquests, which united the lands of Eastern Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean under a single ruler, brought a time of peace and stability, under which the Empire flourished.

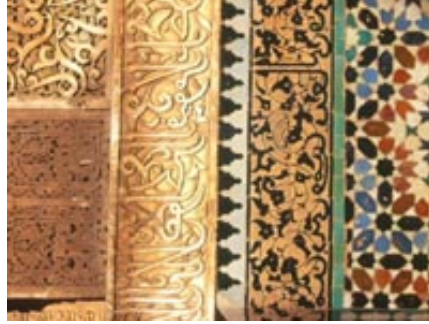
Suleiman had no internal rivals for power. His father had seen to that by executing his own brothers and their sons, and all 4 of Suleiman's brothers.

The Ottoman Empire now included so much of the territory where Islam was practiced, and so many of the Islamic holy places, that Suleiman was widely regarded as the religious leader of Islam, as well as the earthly ruler of most Muslims.

The wealth and stability of the Empire at this time attracted the top Muslim brains of the period, and craftsmen,

artists, intellectuals and writers were eager to move to Istanbul.

Suleiman was named 'The Magnificent' by the Europeans, but his own people called him 'The Lawgiver'.



The Empire attracted Muslim artists and craftsmen ©

Short-termism

Ottoman rulers had a very short-term policy. They rejected the idea of developing territory and investing in it for gain at some time in the future; land and peoples were exploited to the point of exhaustion and then more or less abandoned in favour of new ground.

This policy meant that the Ottoman Empire relied on continuous expansion for stability. If it did not grow, it was likely to collapse.

Decline

The power of the empire was waning by 1683 when the second and last attempt was made to conquer Vienna. It failed. Without the conquest of Europe and the acquisition of significant new wealth the Empire lost momentum and went into a slow decline.

Several other factors contributed to the Empire's decline:

- The European powers wanted to expand
- Economic problems
 - Competition from trade from the Americas
 - Competition from cheap products from India and the Far East
 - Development of other trade routes
 - Rising unemployment within the Empire
- Ottoman Empire became less centralised, and central control weakened
- Sultans being less severe in maintaining rigorous standards of integrity in the administration of the Empire
- Sultans becoming less sensitive to public opinion
- The low quality Sultans of the 17th and 18th centuries
- The ending of the execution of Sultan's sons and brothers, imprisoning them instead
 - This apparently humane process led to men becoming Sultan after spending years in prison - not the best training for absolute power

Soon the very word Turk became synonymous with treachery and cruelty. This led Turks like Kemal Ataturk, who was born late in the nineteenth century, to be repelled by the Ottoman Turkish political system and the culture it had evolved. Seeing little but decay and corruption, he led the Turks to create a new modern identity.

The empire officially ended on the 1st November 1922, when the Ottoman sultanate was abolished and Turkey was declared a republic. The Ottoman caliphate continued as an institution, with greatly reduced authority, until it too was abolished on the 3rd March 1924.



Kemal Ataturk created a new modern identity ©

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