

[Page One](#)**The Ottomans: From Frontier Warriors To Empire Builders****Author: Robert Guisepi**[Page Two](#)**Date: 1992**[Page Three](#)[Ottoman Society](#)

For centuries before the rise of the Ottoman dynasty in the 13th and 14th centuries, Turkic-speaking peoples from central Asia had played key roles in Islamic civilization as soldiers and administrators, often in the service of the Abbasid caliphs. In fact, the collapse of the Seljuk Turkic kingdom of Rum in eastern Anatolia in Asia Minor, following the invasion by the Mongols in



1243 described in Chapter 20, opened the way for the Ottomans' rise to power. The Mongols raided but did not directly rule Anatolia, which fell into a chaotic period of warfare between petty, would-be successor states to the Seljuk sultans. Turkic peoples, both those fleeing the Mongols and those in search of easy booty, flooded into the region in the last decades of the 13th century. One of these peoples, called the Ottomans after an early leader named Osman, came to dominate the rest, and within decades they had begun to build a new empire based in Anatolia.

By the 1350s, the Ottomans had advanced from their strongholds in Asia Minor across the Bosphorus straits into Europe. Thrace was quickly conquered and by the end of the century large portions of the Balkans had been added to their rapidly expanding territories. The Ottoman rise to power was severely, but only temporarily set back in 1402, when the armies of Timur swept into Anatolia and defeated the Ottoman sultan Bayazid at Angora. For nearly a decade thereafter the region was torn by civil war between Bayazid's sons, each hoping to occupy his father's throne. The victory of Mehmed I led to the reunification of the empire and new conquests in both Europe and Asia Minor.

In moving into Europe in the mid-14th century, the Ottomans had bypassed rather than conquered the great city of Constantinople, long the capital of the once-powerful Byzantine Empire. By the mid-15th century, the Ottomans, who had earlier alternated between alliances and warfare with the Byzantines, were strong enough to undertake the capture of the well-fortified city. For seven weeks in the spring of 1453, the army of Mehmed II, "The Conqueror," which numbered well over 100,000, assaulted the triple ring of land walls that had protected the city for centuries. The undermanned forces of the defenders repulsed attack after attack until the sultan ordered his gunners to batter a portion of the walls with their massive siege cannon. Wave after wave of Ottoman troops struck at the gaps in the defenses that had been cut by the guns, overwhelmed the defenders, and raced into the city to loot and pillage for the three days that Mehmed had promised as their reward for victory.

In the two centuries after the conquest of Constantinople, the armies of a succession of able Ottoman rulers extended the empire into Syria and Egypt,

across North Africa, thus bringing under their rule the bulk of the Arab world. The empire also spread through the Balkans into Hungary in Europe, and around the Black and Red Seas. The Ottomans also became a formidable naval power in the Mediterranean Sea. Powerful Ottoman galley fleets made it possible to capture major island bases on Rhodes, Crete, and Cyprus; to drive the Venetians and Genoese from much of the eastern Mediterranean; and to threaten southern Italy with invasion on a number of occasions. From their humble origins as frontier vassals, the Ottomans had risen to become the protectors of the Islamic heartlands and the scourge of Christian Europe. As late as 1683, Ottoman armies were able to lay siege to the capital of the Austrian Habsburg dynasty at Vienna. Even though the Ottoman Empire was in decline by this point in time and the threat the assault posed to Vienna was far less serious than a previous attack in the early 16th century, the Ottomans remained a major force in European politics until the late 19th century.

### **A State Geared To Warfare**

Befitting an empire that had been founded and extended to spread Islam through the waging of the jihad, or holy war, military leaders played a dominant role in the Ottoman state and the economy of the empire was geared to warfare and expansion. The Turkic cavalymen, who were chiefly responsible for the Ottomans' early conquests from the 13th to the 16th centuries, gradually developed into a warrior aristocracy. They were granted control over land and peasant producers in annexed areas for the support of their often sizeable households and numerous military retainers. From the 15th century onward, members of the warrior class also vied with religious leaders and administrators drawn from other social groups for control of the ever-expanding Ottoman bureaucracy. As the power of the warrior aristocracy shrank at the center, they sought to build up regional and local bases of support that inevitably competed with the sultans and central bureaucracy for revenue and labor control.

A considerable portion of the economic resources that the Ottoman sultans managed to control themselves was funneled into maintaining the massive armies required both to sustain expansion and protect the territories the Ottomans had won from rivals in all directions. From the mid-15th century, the imperial armies were increasingly dominated by infantry divisions made up of troops called Janissaries. Most of the Janissaries had been forcibly conscripted as adolescent boys in conquered areas, such as the Balkans, where the majority of the population retained its Christian faith. Sometimes the boys' parents had willingly turned their sons over to the Ottoman recruiters because of the opportunities for advancement that came with service to the Ottoman sultans. Though legally slaves, the youths were given fairly extensive schooling for the time and converted to Islam. Some of them went on to serve in the palace or bureaucracy, but most became Janissaries.

Because the Janissaries controlled the artillery and firearms that became increasingly vital to Ottoman success in warfare with both Christian and Muslim adversaries, they rapidly became the most powerful component in the Ottoman military machine. Their growing importance was another factor contributing to the steady decline of the role of the aristocratic cavalymen. Just like the mercenary forces that had earlier served the caliphs of Baghdad, the Janissaries eventually sought to translate military service into political influence. By the late 15th century they were deeply involved in court politics; by the mid-16th century they had the power to depose sultans and decide which one of a dying ruler's sons would mount the throne.

### **The Sultans And Their Court**

The sultans were nominally absolute monarchs, but even the most powerful sultan maintained his position by playing factions in the warrior elite off each other and the warriors as a whole against the Janissaries and other groups. Chief among the latter were the Islamic religious scholars and legal experts, who retained many of the administrative functions they had held under the Arab caliphs of earlier centuries. In addition to Muslim traders, commerce

within the empire was in the hands of Christian and Jewish trading groups, who as dhimmis, or "peoples of the Book," were under the protection of the Ottoman rulers. The sultans were also responsible for the prosperity of their subjects and for upholding Islamic law within their domains. Though they have often been depicted as brutal and corrupt despots in Western writings, the Ottoman sultans, especially in the early centuries of their sway, were frequently very capable rulers. Ottoman conquest often meant effective administration and tax relief for the peoples of areas annexed to the empire. This was true for the peasants throughout much of the Balkans, whose Christian overlords had oppressed them with excessive tax and service demands in the decades before the Ottoman takeover.

Like the Abbasid caliphs, the Ottoman sultans grew more and more distant from their subjects as their empire increased in size and wealth. In their splendid marble palaces and pleasure gardens, surrounded by large numbers of slaves and the many wives and concubines of their harems, Ottoman rulers followed elaborate court rituals based on those of earlier Byzantine, Persian, and Arab dynasts. Day-to-day administration was carried out by a large bureaucracy headed by a grand vizier (wazir in Arabic), the overall head of the imperial administration, who often held more real power than the sultan himself. Early sultans took an active role in political decisions and often personally led their armies into battle. Their sons were usually made provincial administrators or military commanders. This practice gave the potential successors to the ruler vital leadership training, and it does much to explain the high quality of many of the Ottoman monarchs until the late 16th century.

Like earlier Muslim dynasties, however, the Ottomans suffered greatly because they inherited Islamic principles of political succession that remained vague and contested. The existence of many talented and experienced claimants to the throne meant constant danger of civil strife. The death of a sultan could, and increasingly did, lead to protracted warfare among his sons. Defeated claimants sometimes fled to the domains of Christian or Muslim rulers hostile to the Ottomans, thereby becoming rallying points for military campaigns against the son who had managed to gain the throne. The uncertainty of succession and threat of civil strife led some of the early sultans to have all their brothers and other potential family rivals put to death at the time of their accession to the throne. The extent to which fratricide was practiced, however, was greatly exaggerated by the Ottomans' Christian adversaries. From about 1600, rival princes and other possible claimants to the throne were usually confined to the palace and harem, rather than being put to death.

#### Constantinople Restored And The Flowering Of Ottoman Culture

An empire that encompassed so many and diverse cultures from Europe, Africa, and Asia naturally varied greatly from one province to the next in its social arrangements, artistic production, and physical appearance. But the Ottomans' ancient and cosmopolitan capital at Constantinople richly combined the disparate elements of their extensive territories. Like the Byzantine Empire as a whole, Constantinople had fallen on hard times in the centuries before the Ottoman conquest in 1453. Soon after Mehmed II's armies had captured and sacked the city, however, the Ottoman ruler set about restoring its ancient glory. He had the cathedral of Saint Sophia converted into one of the grandest mosques in the Islamic world, and new mosques and palaces were built throughout the city, benefiting from architectural advances the Ottomans derived from the Byzantine heritage. Aqueducts were constructed from the surrounding hills to supply the growing population with water, markets were reopened, and the city's defenses were repaired. Each of the sultans who ruled in the centuries after Mehmed strove to be remembered for his efforts to beautify the capital. The most prominent additions were further mosques that represent some of the most sublime contributions of the Ottomans to Islamic and human civilization. The most spectacular of these was the Suleymaniye, built by one of the most successful of the sultans, Suleyman the Magnificent (1520-1566). Though it smacks a good deal of hometown pride, the following description by a 17th-century Ottoman chronicler of the reaction of some

**Christian visitors to the mosque conveys a sense of the awe that the structure still evokes:**

The humble writer of these lines once himself saw ten Frankish infidels skilful [sic] in geometry and architecture, who, when the door-keeper had changed their shoes for slippers, and had introduced them into the mosque for the purpose of showing it to them, laid their finger on their mouths, and each bit his finger from astonishment when they saw the minarets; but when they beheld the dome they tossed up their hats and cried Maria! Maria! and on observing the four arches which supported the dome . . . they could not find terms to express their admiration, and the ten . . . remained a full hour looking with astonishment on those arches. [One of them said] that nowhere was so much beauty, external and internal, to be found united, and that in the whole of Frangistan [Christian Europe] there was not a single edifice which could be compared to this.

In addition to the mosques, sultans and powerful administrators built mansions, rest houses, religious schools, and hospitals throughout the city. Both public and private gardens further beautified the capital, which Ottoman writers were inclined to compare to paradise itself. The city and its suburbs stretched along both sides of the Bosphorus, the narrow strait that separates Europe from Asia. Its harbors and the Golden Horn, a triangular bay that formed the northern boundary of the city, were crowded with merchant ships from ports throughout the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. Constantinople's great bazaars were filled with merchants and travelers from throughout the empire and places as distant as England and Malaya. They offered the seasoned shopper all manner of produce from the spices of the East Indies and the ivory of Africa to slaves and forest products from Russia and fine carpets from Persia. Coffeehouses - places where males gathered to smoke tobacco (introduced from America in the 17th century by English merchants), gossip, do business, and play chess - were found in all sections of the city and were pivotal to the social life of the capital. The coffeehouses also played a major role in the cultural life of Constantinople as centers where poets and scholars could congregate, read their latest works aloud, and debate about politics and the merits of each other's ideas.

Beneath the ruling classes a sizeable portion of the population of Constantinople and other Ottoman cities belonged to the merchant and artisan classes. The Ottoman regime closely regulated both commercial exchanges and handicraft production. Government inspectors were employed to ensure that standard weights and measures were used, to license the opening of new shops and regulate the entry of apprentice artisans into the trades, and to inspect the quality of the goods they produced. Like their counterparts in medieval European towns, the artisans were organized into guilds. Guild officers set craft standards, arbitrated disputes between their members, provided financial assistance for needy members, and even arranged popular entertainments, which were often linked to religious festivals. The guilds of Ottoman towns were much more closely supervised by government officials, and a wider array of occupational groups - including entertainers, prostitutes, and even ordinary laborers - were organized into guilds than was normally the case in Europe.

The early Ottomans had written in Persian, while Arabic remained an important language for works on law and religion throughout the empire's history. But by the 17th century the Turkish language of the Ottoman court had become the preferred mode of expression for poets and historians as well as the language of the Ottoman bureaucracy. In writing, as in the fine arts, the Ottomans' achievements have been somewhat overshadowed by those of their contemporary Persian and Indian rivals. Nonetheless, the authors, artists, and craftsmen of the Ottoman Empire have left a considerable legacy, particularly in poetry, ceramics, carpet manufacturing, and above all in architecture.

#### **The Problem Of Ottoman Decline**

Much of the literature on the Ottoman Empire concentrates on its slow decline from the champion of the Muslim world and the great adversary of Christendom to the "sick man" of Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries. This

approach provides a very skewed view of Ottoman history as a whole. Traced from its origins in the late 13th century, the Ottoman state is one of the great success stories in human political history. Vigorous and expansive until the late 17th century, the Ottomans were able to ward off the powerful enemies that surrounded their domains on all sides for nearly four centuries. The dynasty endured for over 600 years - a feat matched by no other in all human history.

From one perspective the long Ottoman decline, which officials and court historians actively discussed from the mid-17th century onward, reflects the great strength of the institutions on which the empire was built. Despite internal revolts and periodic conflicts with such powerful foreign rivals as the Russian, Austrian, Spanish, and Safavid empires, the Ottomans ruled into the 20th century. Yet centuries earlier the empire had reached the limits of its expansive power, and by the late 17th century the long retreat from Russia, Europe, and the Arab lands had begun. In a sense, some contraction was inevitable. Even when it was at the height of its power, the empire was too large to be maintained given the resource base that the sultans had at their disposal and the primitive state of transport and communications in the preindustrial era.

### Internal Weaknesses And Imperial Decline

The Ottoman state had been built on war and steady territorial expansion. As possibilities for new conquests ran out and lands began to be lost to the Ottomans' Christian and Muslim enemies, the means of maintaining the oversized bureaucracy and army shrank markedly. The decline in the effectiveness of the administrative system that held the empire together was signaled by the rampant growth of corruption among Ottoman officials. The venality and incompetence of state bureaucrats in turn prompted regional and local officials - in provinces where the population was predominantly European and Arab as well as those with a Turkish majority - to retain increasing amounts of revenue for their own purposes. Revenues that were retained at the local and regional level were, of course, lost to those who sought to run and defend the empire as a whole.

Poorly regulated by the central government, many local officials, who also controlled large landed estates, squeezed the peasants and the laborers who worked their lands for additional taxes and services. At times the oppressive demands of local officials and estate owners sparked rebellions. But more frequently they caused the hard-pressed peasantry to abandon their holdings and flee to those of less rapacious lords or to become vagabonds, bandits, or beggars in the cities. Both responses resulted in the abandonment of cultivated lands and social dislocations that further drained the resources of the empire.

From the 17th century on, the forces that undermined the empire from below were compounded by growing problems at the center of imperial administration. The practice of assigning the royal princes administrative or military positions, in order to prepare them to rule, died out. Instead, possible successors to the throne were kept like hostages in special sections of the palace, where they remained until one of them ascended the throne. The other princes and potential rivals were also, in effect, imprisoned for life in the palace. Though it might have made the reigning sultan more secure, this solution to the problem of contested succession produced monarchs far less prepared to rule than those in the formative centuries of the dynasty. The great warrior-emperors of early Ottoman history gave way, with some important exceptions, to weak and indolent rulers, addicted to drink, drugs, and the pleasures of the harem. In many instances the later sultans were little more than pawns in the power struggles between the viziers and other powerful officials, and the leaders of the increasingly influential Janissary corps. Because the imperial apparatus had been geared to strong and absolute rulers, the decline in the caliber of Ottoman emperors had devastating effects on the strength of the empire as a whole. Civil strife increased and the discipline and leadership of the armies on which the empire depended for survival deteriorated.

### **Military Reverses And The Ottoman Retreat**

Debilitating changes within the empire were occurring at a time when challenges from without were growing rapidly. The Ottomans had made very effective use of artillery and firearms in building their empire. But their addiction to huge siege guns and the Janissaries' determination to block all military changes that might jeopardize the power they had been able to gain within the state caused the Ottomans to fall farther and farther behind their European rivals in the critical art of waging war. With the widespread introduction of light field artillery into the armies of the European powers in the 17th century, Ottoman losses on the battlefield multiplied rapidly and the threat they posed for the West began to recede.

On the sea the Ottomans were eclipsed as early as the 16th century. The end of their dominance was presaged by their defeat by a combined Spanish-Venetian fleet at Lepanto in 1571. Though the Ottomans had completely rebuilt their war fleet within a year after the battle and soon launched an assault on North Africa that preserved that area for Islam, their control of the eastern Mediterranean had been lost. Even more ominously, in the decades before Lepanto, the Ottomans and the Muslim world had been out-flanked by the Portuguese seafarers down and then around the coast of Africa. The failure in the early 1500s of the Ottomans and their Muslim allies in the Indian Ocean to drive the Portuguese from Asian waters proved far more disastrous than Ottoman defeats in the Mediterranean.

Portuguese naval victories in the Indian Ocean revealed the obsolescence of the Ottoman galley fleets and Mediterranean-style warships more generally. The trading goods, particularly spices, that the Portuguese carried back to Europe around Africa enriched the Ottomans' Christian rivals. In addition, the fact that a sizeable portion of the flow of these products was no longer transmitted to European ports through Muslim trading centers in the eastern Mediterranean meant that merchants and tax collectors in the Ottoman Empire lost critical profits and revenues. As if this were not enough, from the late 16th century on, large amounts of silver flowed into the Ottomans' lands from mines worked by Amerindian laborers in the Spanish possessions of the New World. This sudden influx of bullion into the rather rigid and slow growing economy of the Ottoman Empire set off a long-term inflationary trend that further undermined the finances of the empire.

Several able sultans took measures to shore up the crumbling imperial edifice in the 17th century. The collapse of the Safavid dynasty in Persia and conflicts between the European powers at this time also gave the Ottomans hope that their earlier dominance might be restored, but their reprieve proved temporary. With the scientific, technological, and commercial changes occurring in Europe and the overseas expansion that these innovations had made possible, the Ottomans were falling at an accelerating rate behind their Christian rivals in most areas of endeavor, but most critically in trade and making war. The sense the Ottomans inherited from their Arab, Persian, and Turkic predecessors that little of what happened in Europe was important prevented them from taking seriously the revolutionary changes transforming western Europe. The intense conservatism of powerful groups like the Janissaries and, to a lesser extent, the religious scholars reinforced this fatal myopia. Through much of the 17th and 18th centuries, these groups proved able to block most of the Western-inspired innovations that reform-minded sultans or their advisors sought to introduce. As a result of this narrow and potentially dangerous view, the isolated and increasingly fossilized Ottoman imperial system proved incapable of checking the forces that were steadily making for its dismemberment.

### **Abbasid Comparisons And The Ottoman Achievement**

We have encountered many of the forces that led to the decline of the Ottoman Empire in earlier Islamic history. In fact, in many ways the Ottoman decline seems to be a replay of the earlier fall of the Abbasid caliphate. At the center of both empires, the forces that sapped their strength included the

decreasing ability and reduced powers of the rulers, court intrigues and succession disputes, the growing involvement of mercenary soldiers in politics, and bureaucratic corruption. Away from the capitals at Baghdad and Constantinople, revolts by peasants and townsmen oppressed by the landed classes, the loss of territory to internal rebels, and defeats in wars by foreign powers all contributed to imperial decline.

Though these parallels are striking, they should not blind us to crucial differences between the two cases. These differences arise in part from changes in the international and domestic conditions that each dynasty, which were widely separated in time, had to face. The growing military and economic competition of European rivals, for example, had much more to do with the Ottoman decline than the Abbasid, in which (despite the Crusades) the Europeans did not play a critical role. But they also suggest that the Ottomans had learned a good deal from Abbasid mistakes and improved considerably upon their predecessors' performance.

To begin with, the real power of the Ottoman rulers persisted much longer than that of the Abbasid caliphs - two to three centuries as opposed to three or four generations. In part this was due to the higher caliber of the early Ottoman sultans, which can be traced to the better training that the princes of the royal house were given in the first phase of Ottoman history. In addition, the Ottoman bureaucracy was larger, better organized, and more dedicated than its Abbasid counterpart. It was therefore better able to administer effectively the various parts of the empire and funnel resources to the central government, at least in the early centuries of Ottoman rule. The Ottoman military machine was much better prepared, disciplined, and led than the motley alliance of forces that had brought the Abbasids to power. In the early centuries of Ottoman expansion, a military elite from a single ethnic stock, committed to a common project of religious expansion, directed military operations and discouraged infighting. By contrast, the Abbasid alliance soon broke apart, with Sunni fighting Shi'a and individual commanders seeking to create their own kingdoms. In both cases mercenary forces, which were employed to strengthen the military establishment, became deeply embroiled in politics. But the Janissaries were, initially at least, more effectively controlled by the Ottoman rulers. They also took much longer to become a major political force than the Turkic mercenaries who threatened the Abbasid throne soon after they first entered the service of the caliphate.

Interestingly, the greater political and military success of the Ottomans did not translate into a higher level of intellectual or artistic achievement. Though the Abbasid dynasty was weaker and far less expansive than the Ottoman, its reign witnessed a burst of creativity in the arts, sciences, and philosophy that has seldom been matched by any human society. Though the Ottomans made significant contributions to Islamic architecture, literature, and various crafts, their accomplishments lacked the range, originality, and sheer magnitude of those of the Abbasid age. In the broadest sense, the Ottoman legacy was one in which the restoration and preservation of the Islamic heritage was foremost. For centuries, Ottoman power brought a high level of internal peace and protection from outside invaders to the Islamic heartlands. But the price of security was an inflated bureaucracy and military establishment that proved both an increasing burden for peasants and merchants and a major barrier to creativity and innovation. With the Muslims' old adversaries, the Europeans, forging ahead, the price paid would prove a very high one indeed.

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