

The Ottoman Empire

After the capture of Constantinople, the Ottomans went on to build one of the largest empires in history. At its height in the 1600s, the Ottoman Empire controlled Southwest Asia, coastal North Africa, and large parts of Europe.



Origins and Expansion The Ottomans were a Muslim tribal group that emerged in northwestern Anatolia in the late 1200s. They traced their origins to Turkish nomads who had migrated from Central Asia centuries before. They took their name from Osman, a powerful warrior chief who united various tribes and began a campaign of conquest in 1299.

By the early 1300s, the Ottomans were expanding into Byzantine territory. They took the towns and cities south of Constantinople, then crossed into Europe. By 1400, they had captured much of the Balkan Peninsula. They suffered a setback when Timur Lang, the last of the Mongol conquerors, seized a large part of Anatolia in 1402. But they rebounded, and in 1453 took Constantinople. They renamed it Istanbul and made it their capital.

The Ottoman sultan, or ruler, who captured Constantinople was Mehmet II, also known as the Conqueror. Under Mehmet and his successors, the Ottomans continued to expand the empire. They took the rest of the Balkans, including Greece, and the lands around the Black Sea. They occupied Mesopotamia and portions of Arabia, Palestine and Syria, Egypt, and North Africa. They seized Hungary in 1526 and almost captured Vienna. Many of these conquests took place under their greatest sultan, Suleyman I. Known as Suleyman the Magnificent, he ruled from 1520 to 1566.

By the mid-1600s, the Ottomans ruled an empire nearly the size of ancient Rome. They controlled rich agricultural lands and prosperous trading cities, which brought great wealth to the empire. They also occupied the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, giving them claim to leadership of the Muslim world. They had achieved their conquests by building a powerful military, which made effective use of field cannons and armed infantry. And they maintained their empire by creating a strong, efficient government.

Organization of the Empire The Ottoman state was highly centralized. All power flowed from the sultan, who governed as an absolute ruler. For six centuries, the royal family of Osman kept the throne, passing it down through male members of the family. There was no clear line of succession, however. The sultan's heirs had to fight for power. So when one of them gained the throne, he typically had his brothers and other male relatives killed or imprisoned to prevent challenges to his rule.

The sultan sat at the top of a large political structure. Directly beneath him was the grand vizier, the chief minister in charge of the government. The grand vizier met with other ministers and military leaders in a governing council called the divan. Beneath these high officials lay a large bureaucracy of lesser officials who served the government at all levels. A network of provincial governors managed the conquered territories and linked them to the central government in Istanbul.

The Ottoman bureaucracy was a merit-based system. Most officials gained office based on their abilities, not their social position. Such a system is called a **meritocracy**. Other states, notably China, developed similar systems. In the Ottoman state, however, many of the top officials were captives. These captives, most of them Christians, were taken from conquered lands in Anatolia and the Balkans. They were brought to Istanbul, where they were converted to Islam and trained for a life in government service.

To ensure a steady supply of captives for government service, the Ottomans levied a tax called the *devshirme*. This tax required conquered regions to provide a regular allotment of children to serve the sultan. Many of the boys were trained for military service. They became part of an elite fighting force called the **janissaries**. Because of their training and allegiance to the state, the janissaries were renowned as the best soldiers in the world.

The brightest and most capable captives, however, were groomed for government office. The most successful became ministers, judges, and governors. One famous example was Ibrahim Pasha, the son of a Greek fisherman who was sold into slavery and entered the household of Suleyman the Magnificent. He later married the sultan's sister and became the grand vizier, second in power only to the sultan.

The Ottomans divided society into two broad classes: the rulers and the ruled. The rulers were members of the military and governing class, which included both Muslims and non-Muslims. They did not pay taxes. The people being ruled included taxpaying commoners, such as farmers, artisans, and merchants.

A Diverse Society Ottoman society was ethnically diverse, with large numbers of Greeks, Serbs, Bulgarians, Romanians, Armenians, Turks, and Arabs. The Ottomans were generally tolerant of different cultures and religions. They allowed Orthodox Christians and Jews to practice their faith, subject to certain restrictions and special taxes. Although second-class citizens, non-Muslim groups were organized in separate communities that were given the right to manage their own religious affairs.



The Ottomans were less tolerant of Shi'a Muslims. As Sunnis, they saw the Shi'a as a challenge to their authority and often persecuted them. They also waged long and vicious wars with the Safavid Empire of Persia. The Safavids were a Shi'a state that bordered the Ottomans to the east.

Under Suleyman, the Ottomans developed a strong legal code. This code was based on Shari'a, or Islamic law. But the code also included non-Islamic provisions for situations that were not covered by Shari'a. Suleyman's law code provided a uniform legal system regardless of people's social and religious origins. For that reason, he was also known as the Lawgiver.

A Gradual Decline Suleyman's reign was the high point of the Ottoman Empire. After his death in 1566, Ottoman power gradually declined.



One early blow occurred in 1571 at the Battle of Lepanto. This naval battle off the coast of Greece pitted the Ottoman navy against a combined European fleet. The Europeans dealt the Ottomans a stinging defeat, their first major loss in battle. The Ottomans recovered and even conquered more lands. But they were dealt another harsh blow in 1683, when they again failed to take Vienna, the capital of Austria's Hapsburg Empire. By this time, the Ottoman's image of invincibility had been shattered.

In addition, a series of increasingly weak and corrupt sultans led the Ottoman Empire in its final centuries. One reason for this weakness may have been the Ottoman policy of imprisoning possible heirs to the throne, which included the sons of the reigning sultan. As prisoners, these contenders to the throne did not receive the education or training they needed to rule the empire. Those who eventually rose to power mismanaged the empire, and the central government lost power and authority.

The Ottomans also suffered from economic problems. By the 1600s, European countries had developed new sea trade routes to Asia that bypassed the traditional land routes across Ottoman territory. This reduced the amount of revenue the Ottomans could earn from trade. An influx of silver from the new American colonies also lowered the value of the Ottoman currency and caused inflation.

The Ottoman rulers took steps to modernize in the late 1700s. The sultans and their ministers adopted reforms in an effort to strengthen the economy and government. But by this time the empire was shrinking. At the same time, Europe was growing more powerful. The Ottoman Empire survived until the early 1900s, but was finally dissolved in 1923, after World War I.

1. Describe the achievements of Osman and Mehmet.
2. Why were the Ottomans so effective at gaining and controlling a large empire?
3. How did the Ottomans choose who would be sultan? What was the first thing the sultan did to maintain his power?
4. How was the empire organized?
5. Explain the meritocracy. How is it similar to the civil service exams used to select government officials in China?
6. Who were the janissaries? How were they chosen?
7. How did the Ottomans treat people of other religions? How did they treat non-Sunni (Shi'a) Muslims?
8. How did the Battle of Lepanto and the losses in Austria lead the empire into a period of decline?
9. How did weak sultans contribute to the decline of the Empire?
10. How did economic issues contribute to the decline of the empire?