

A Sublime Empire: Ottoman Rule on Land and Sea

By Bennett Sherry

The Ottoman Empire lasted more than 600 years. The lands it controlled were spread over three continents. This great and lasting success was due to the empire's military strength, but also to its political structure.

940L

A booming empire

In 1453, the Ottoman sultan Mehmet II seized control of Constantinople. That mighty city was the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire. The Ottoman Empire was already a major power in the eastern Mediterranean by then. But its conquest of Constantinople was a significant new victory. It kicked off two centuries of further expansion. By the middle of the sixteenth century, the Ottoman Empire was one of the world's most powerful. It stretched from the Indian Ocean, across the Mediterranean, and into Eastern Europe.

Constantinople is the city we now know as Istanbul. Today, it is the largest city in Turkey. In 1453, it was ruled by the Byzantine Emperor. Mehmet II wanted Constantinople to be his capital. One of the stories told about the Ottoman defeat of Constantinople concerns 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, 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. Or at least that's the way the story goes.

More recently, historians have begun to question this story. It makes it sound as if the Ottoman Empire was technologically less advanced than Europe. But this isn't really true. Turkish cannon-makers were quite skilled. In fact, by the 1400s, the Ottomans were masters of gunpowder.



A European depiction of the siege of Constantinople by the forces of Mehmet II. Notice the large cannons pointed at the walls. © Getty.

The Ottoman Empire began its expansion in 1299. It lasted until 1922. That's a run of 623 years.[1] The empire reached its greatest power under the sultan Suleiman the Magnificent, who reigned from 1520 to 1566. In addition to conquering Mesopotamia and much of North Africa, Suleiman occupied large portions of Eastern Europe.

Why was the Ottoman Empire so successful? Gunpowder and trade are part of the answer, but so is political organization.

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

Empire and the enslaved

The Ottoman Empire is named after its founder, Osman. He was the chief of a Turkish tribe that migrated west across Eurasia and finally settled in Anatolia. By the 1400s, the Ottoman armies had become some of the mightiest of their time. This was in large part thanks to the Ottoman mastery of gunpowder technology. In the century after Mehmet II seized Constantinople, Ottoman armies conquered North Africa, the Levant, Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Balkans.

The Ottomans owed their success to more than just guns, however. The empire thrived because of capable leaders and an unusual political structure. At the peak of their power, the sultans reigned supreme, unchallenged by a nobility. In Europe, nobles owned huge amounts of land and had the loyalty of the people living on it. By contrast, the Ottoman Empire lacked a permanent land-owning 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. He relied on local governors, rather than nobles, to manage his far-flung lands.



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



A map of the Ottoman Empire in 1550. By WHP, CC BY-NC 4.0. Explore full map here.

The Ottoman Empire expanded very quickly. 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. Many eventually won not only their freedom, but positions of great power. Indeed, many members of the Ottoman ruling class had once been enslaved themselves. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, several enslaved women became consorts, wives, and mothers of sultans. They often had 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 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 outstanding service, some were granted lands. However, when they died, these lands could not be passed on to their children. Instead, they were returned to the sultan.



A portrayal of Janissaries in battle at a siege. © Getty.

The Ottoman Empire found strength in the great variety of its people. Part of this diversity came from the importation of enslaved people. However, many people voluntarily migrated to the Ottoman lands. For example, many European Jews fleeing mistreatment in Europe sought the sultan's protection. Many of these refugees became officials in the Ottoman government. This diversity strengthened the Ottoman Empire and helped create an age of innovation.

Ottoman networks

With territory on three continents, the empire was a crossroads. 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 religious. Each time a new sultan came to power, he also claimed the title of caliph—leader of Sunni Islam. Selim I strengthened his claim by conquering Egypt and the holy cities of Mecca and Medina in 1517. The sultan's role as caliph placed the Ottoman Empire at the heart of Sunni Islam. Each year, millions of Muslim pilgrims made their way through the empire on their Hajj (pilgrimage) to Mecca.

The Ottoman Empire's control of trade and its importance for Islam brought great wealth and knowledge to Istanbul. As a result, both the arts and the sciences blossomed.

Unanticipated outcomes

The Ottoman Empire remained a major military, economic, and religious power throughout this period. However, some of the very systems that made the empire so powerful also created problems. 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. Eventually, these well-armed, elite soldiers wanted more power and rights. Because they had guns, they didn't need to ask nicely. Their numbers grew rapidly as the empire expanded. As early as the 1600s, some sultans found themselves at the mercy of their janissaries when the soldiers revolted to demand better pay and more rights. Several sultans were overthrown, held captive, or killed. By the 1700s, the janissaries had evolved into the very type of aristocracy the devshirme had been designed to avoid. The land they held was now being passed from parent to child, rather than returned to the sultan. But despite these internal problems and repeated wars with European states and the Persian Safavid Empire, the Ottomans retained their great power well into the 1700s.



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. © Getty.

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A portrayal of janissaries in battle at a siege. Getty images.

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. © Royal Geographical Society via Getty Images.

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