The Ottoman Empire

By Eman M. Elshaikh

The Ottoman Empire stretched across Asia, Europe, and Africa beginning in the late thirteenth century. Centuries later, its growth slowed and it transformed in many ways.

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Transformations and new directions

The Ottoman Empire was founded in 1299 by a Turkish leader. It was based in modern-day Turkey. The Ottomans also conquered much of the Balkan peninsula. This includes modern-day Albania, Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia.

The empire began to expand and gain power in the 1400s, especially after it conquered Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul) in 1453. Constantinople became the capital of the Ottoman Empire.

Much of this success was a result of the Ottoman military, which included an elite force called the Janissaries. They were young male Christian slaves captured during wars. The Janissaries were raised in the Islamic faith and trained as soldiers from an early age. When they grew up they became administrators, bodyguards to the Ottoman leader—called a sultan—or part of the military. The Ottomans also had advanced weapons that used gunpowder.

The Ottoman Empire reached its greatest size in the late 1600s and lasted until 1922. It was one of the largest and most long-lasting empires in world history. At its greatest extent, the empire extended to three continents: Europe, Asia and Africa.

Transformations and new directions

The 1700s was a period of change for the Ottoman Empire. It lost (and gained back) some important territories. Ottoman leaders began to focus on keeping the territories it had. The borders of the empire became clearer.

The political structure started to shift around this time, too. The Ottoman leaders, called sultans, lost some of the power. The empire’s system of government officials became stronger. Power was less centralized. This stood in contrast to Europe at the time. Most European monarchs had absolute power over their territories and subjects.

Central authority still mattered, but the balance had shifted. Local leaders worked with the sultan to manage the vast empire.

An empire of nations

The Ottoman Empire did not have a single identity unifying all of its peoples. This is due to its massive size. It was multi-ethnic and multi-religious.

Islam did play a central role in the empire, however. The Ottoman state based its authority on religion. The sultans (Ottoman leaders) claimed the title of Caliph and acted as Islamic religious leaders. For the most part, Christians and Jews had relatively lower social rank than Muslims. The empire did allow them to have their own communities called millets. The millet structure allowed Christians and Jews to control their own religious and civil affairs.
Ottoman hierarchies

Generally, religious scholars and members of the government and military had the most social power. The lower classes included merchants, farmers, and sailors. Though they had the least official power, they produced much of the empire’s goods and revenues (through taxes).

Religious, gender, and economic differences could affect a person’s social rank. People also were able to move up in class based on their own ability. In fact, even enslaved in the Ottoman military could rise through the ranks.

Women were dependent on the men in their families for money and social position. Islamic law granted women certain rights, like the ability to divorce and inherit money. Women were allowed to start institutions like schools and mosques. Religion was also used to limit women’s power. Some interpretations of Islam were used to justify keeping women at home.
The Ottomans and the world

The Ottoman Empire bordered numerous states on multiple continents. It had tense relationships with some of them. The Safavid Empire was another Islamic empire located to the east in modern-day Iran. The Ottomans and Safavids clashed over their beliefs about Islam.

At the same time, the Ottoman state often collaborated with other European powers. They also wanted to imitate European models. For example, Ottomans enlisted European military advisors to modernize their military. Ottoman leaders felt that recent military defeats were due to their less technically advanced militaries.

The Ottoman state also looked to Europe for new ideas and technologies. As the 1700s began, Ottoman elites became more connected to global cultural movements. The printing press allowed translations of European and Asian works to reach intellectuals in the Ottoman Empire. Ottoman elites brought in more foreign goods such as art and food.

This was also a time where the Ottoman Empire began to lose some of its power and influence. For centuries, it had been at the center of trade between Europe, and Asia. It grew rich as goods passed along trade routes known as the Silk Road. New sea routes made it possible for goods to bypass the Silk Road. With less trade passing through its land, Ottoman power faded.
Sources


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The author of this article is Eman M. Elshaikh. She is a writer, researcher, and teacher who has taught K-12 and undergraduates in the United States and in the Middle East and written for many different audiences. She teaches writing at the University of Chicago, where she also completed her master’s in social sciences, focusing on history and anthropology. She was previously a World History Fellow at Khan Academy, where she worked closely with the College Board to develop curriculum for AP World History.

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