The Ottomans Build a Vast Empire

**MAIN IDEA**

**EMPIRE BUILDING**
The Ottomans established a Muslim empire that combined many cultures and lasted for more than 600 years.

**WHY IT MATTERS NOW**

Many modern societies, from Algeria to Turkey, had their origins under Ottoman rule.

**TERMS & NAMES**

- ghazi
- Ottoman
- sultan
- Timur the Lame
- Mehmed II
- Suleyman the Lawgiver
- devshirme
- janissary

**SETTING THE STAGE**

By 1300, the Byzantine Empire was declining, and the Mongols had destroyed the Turkish Seljuk kingdom of Rum. Anatolia was inhabited mostly by the descendants of nomadic Turks. These militaristic people had a long history of invading other countries. Loyal to their own groups, they were not united by a strong central power. A small Turkish state occupied land between the Byzantine Empire and that of the Muslims. From this place, a strong leader would emerge to unite the Turks into what eventually would become an immense empire stretching across three continents.

**Turks Move into Byzantium**

Many Anatolian Turks saw themselves as *ghazis* (GAH•zees), or warriors for Islam. They formed military societies under the leadership of an emir, a chief commander, and followed a strict Islamic code of conduct. They raided the territories of people who lived on the frontiers of the Byzantine Empire.

**Osman Establishes a State**
The most successful ghazi was Osman. People in the West called him Othman and named his followers Ottomans. Osman built a small Muslim state in Anatolia between 1300 and 1326. His successors expanded it by buying land, forming alliances with some emirs, and conquering others.

The Ottomans’ military success was largely based on the use of gunpowder. They replaced their archers on horseback with musket-carrying foot soldiers. They also were among the first people to use cannons as weapons of attack. Even heavily walled cities fell to an all-out attack by the Turks.

The second Ottoman leader, Orkhan I, was Osman’s son. He felt strong enough to declare himself sultan, meaning “overlord” or “one with power.” And in 1361, the Ottomans captured Adrianople (ay•dree•uh•NOH•puhl), the second most important city in the Byzantine Empire. A new Turkish empire was on the rise.

The Ottomans acted wisely toward the people they conquered. They ruled through local officials appointed by the sultan and often improved the lives of the peasants. Most Muslims had to serve in Turkish armies and make contributions required by their faith. Non-Muslims did not have to serve in the army but had to pay for their exemption with a small tax.
**Timur the Lame Halts Expansion** The rise of the Ottoman Empire was briefly interrupted in the early 1400s by a rebellious warrior and conqueror from Samarkand in Central Asia. Permanently injured by an arrow in the leg, he was called Timur-i-Lang, or **Timur the Lame**. Europeans called him Tamerlane. Timur burned the powerful city of Baghdad in present-day Iraq to the ground. He crushed the Ottoman forces at the Battle of Ankara in 1402. This defeat halted the expansion of their empire.

**Powerful Sultans Spur Dramatic Expansion**

Soon Timur turned his attention to China. When he did, war broke out among the four sons of the Ottoman sultan. Mehmed I defeated his brothers and took the throne. His son, Murad II, defeated the Venetians, invaded Hungary, and overcame an army of Italian crusaders in the Balkans. He was the first of four powerful sultans who led the expansion of the Ottoman Empire through 1566.

**Mehmed II Conquers Constantinople** Murad’s son **Mehmed II**, or Mehmed the Conqueror, achieved the most dramatic feat in Ottoman history. By the time Mehmed took power in 1451, the ancient city of Constantinople had shrunk from a population of a million to a mere 50,000. Although it controlled no territory outside its walls, it still dominated the Bosporus Strait. Controlling this waterway meant that it could choke off traffic between the Ottomans’ territories in Asia and in the Balkans.

Mehmed II decided to face this situation head-on. “Give me Constantinople!” he thundered, shortly after taking power at age 21. Then, in 1453, he launched his attack.
Mehmed’s Turkish forces began firing on the city walls with mighty cannons. One of these was a 26-foot gun that fired 1,200-pound boulders. A chain across the Golden Horn between the Bosporus Strait and the Sea of Marmara kept the Turkish fleet out of the city’s harbor. Finally, one night Mehmed’s army tried a daring tactic. They dragged 70 ships over a hill on greased runners from the Bosporus to the harbor. Now Mehmed’s army was attacking Constantinople from two sides. The city held out for over seven weeks, but the Turks finally found a break in the wall and entered the city.

Mehmed the Conqueror, as he was now called, proved to be an able ruler as well as a magnificent warrior. He opened Constantinople to new citizens of many religions and backgrounds. Jews, Christians, and Muslims, Turks and non-Turks all flowed in. They helped rebuild the city, which was now called Istanbul.

Ottomans Take Islam’s Holy Cities Mehmed’s grandson, Selim the Grim, came to power in 1512. He was an effective sultan and a great general. In 1514, he defeated the Safavids (su•FAH•vihdz) of Persia at the Battle of Chaldiran. Then he swept south through Syria and Palestine and into North Africa. At the same time that Cortez was toppling the Aztec Empire in the Americas, Selim’s empire took responsibility for Mecca and Medina. Finally he took Cairo, the intellectual center of the Muslim world. The once-great civilization of Egypt had become just another province in the growing Ottoman Empire.
Suleyman the Lawgiver

The Ottoman Empire didn’t reach its peak size and grandeur until the reign of Selim’s son, Suleyman I (SOO•lay•mahn). Suleyman came to the throne in 1520 and ruled for 46 years. His own people called him Suleyman the Lawgiver. He was known in the West, though, as Suleyman the Magnificent. This title was a tribute to the splendor of his court and to his cultural achievements.

The Empire Reaches Its Limits Suleyman was a superb military leader. He conquered the important European city of Belgrade in 1521. The next year, Turkish forces captured the island of Rhodes in the Mediterranean and now dominated the whole eastern Mediterranean.

Applying their immense naval power, the Ottomans captured Tripoli on the coast of North Africa. They continued conquering peoples along the North African coastline. Although the Ottomans occupied only the coastal cities of North Africa, they managed to control trade routes to the interior of the continent.

In 1526, Suleyman advanced into Hungary and Austria, throwing central Europe into a panic. Suleyman’s armies then pushed to the outskirts of Vienna, Austria. Reigning from Istanbul, Suleyman had waged war with central Europeans, North Africans, and Central Asians. He had become the most powerful monarch on earth. Only Charles V, head of the Hapsburg Empire in Europe, came close to rivaling his power.

Highly Structured Social Organization Binding the Ottoman Empire together in a workable social structure was Suleyman’s crowning achievement. The massive empire required an efficient government structure and social organization. Suleyman created a law code to handle both criminal and civil actions. He also simplified and limited taxes, and systematized and reduced government bureaucracy. These changes improved the lives of most citizens and helped earn Suleyman the title of Lawgiver.

The sultan’s 20,000 personal slaves staffed the palace bureaucracy. The slaves were acquired as part of a policy called devshirme (dehv•SHEER•meh). Under the devshirme system, the sultan’s army drafted boys from the peoples of conquered Christian territories. The army educated them, converted them to Islam, and trained them as soldiers. An elite force of 30,000 soldiers known as janissaries was trained to be loyal to the sultan only. Their superb discipline made them the heart of the Ottoman war machine. In fact, Christian families sometimes bribed officials to take their children into the sultan’s service, because the brightest ones could rise to high government posts or military positions.

As a Muslim, Suleyman was required to follow Islamic law. In accordance with Islamic law, the Ottomans granted freedom of worship to other religious communities, particularly to Christians and Jews. They treated these communities as millets, or nations. They allowed each millet to follow its own religious laws and practices. The head of the millets reported to the sultan and his staff. This system kept conflict among people of the various religions to a minimum.
Cultural Flowering  Suleyman had broad interests, which contributed to the cultural achievements of the empire. He found time to study poetry, history, geography, astronomy, mathematics, and architecture. He employed one of the world’s finest architects, Sinan, who was probably from Albania. Sinan’s masterpiece, the Mosque of Suleyman, is an immense complex topped with domes and half domes. It includes four schools, a library, a bath, and a hospital.

Art and literature also flourished under Suleyman’s rule. This creative period was similar to the European Renaissance. Painters and poets looked to Persia and Arabia for models. The works that they produced used these foreign influences to express original Ottoman ideas in the Turkish style. They are excellent examples of cultural blending.

The Empire Declines Slowly

Despite Suleyman’s magnificent social and cultural achievements, the Ottoman Empire was losing ground. Suleyman killed his ablest son and drove another into exile. His third son, the incompetent Selim II, inherited the throne.

Suleyman set the pattern for later sultans to gain and hold power. It became customary for each new sultan to have his brothers strangled. The sultan would then keep his sons prisoner in the harem, cutting them off from education or contact with the world. This practice produced a long line of weak sultans who eventually brought ruin on the empire. However, the Ottoman Empire continued to influence the world into the early 20th century.
Suleyman the Magnificent greatly expanded the Ottoman Empire from its base in modern Turkey, and the same ruler—also known as Suleyman the Lawgiver—brought tight imperial control and fair laws to his realm. Furthermore, this sultan sponsored a growth in the arts that rivaled the European Renaissance. He ruled for 46 years and was perhaps the most accomplished leader of the 1500s.

Suleyman was the son of Selim I, who ruled the Ottoman Empire from 1512 to 1520. Suleyman was an only son, which may have benefited him greatly. Under later sultans—including himself—the contest for power between the heirs often resulted in one or more of their deaths.

Spared this infighting, Suleyman was prepared for the crown. As a boy, he was given the task of governing two provinces. When his father died, the 26-year-old Suleyman already had 16 years of experience in government.

Suleyman quickly set out to increase the size of his kingdom. Ottoman military strength lay with the elite corps of soldiers called janissaries. These soldiers were recruited as young boys from conquered Christian territories and trained expressly for combat. Suleyman had to give the janissaries an outlet, so he turned these fierce troops on others.

Suleyman’s conquests were many. He made Hungary a puppet state by defeating it and putting his own ruler on the throne. In 1522, he captured the Greek island of Rhodes, taking the strong castle of the Knights Hospitalers—the last Christian remnant of the Crusades in the eastern Mediterranean. Europeans were amazed by his treatment of the captives. The knights themselves were allowed to leave the island with their weapons, and the common citizens were spared any violence.

However, in 1529 the Ottomans failed to capture Vienna, Austria, despite a long siege. Nevertheless, Suleyman later conquered lands from the Persian shahs to the east and won Egypt to the south. His navies took almost complete control of the Mediterranean Sea. These victories made the Ottoman Empire huge and wealthy.

Suleyman received about $80 million a year in income. In contrast, the king of France had a yearly income of only about $1 million. With this wealth, Suleyman lived a life of luxury that helped earn for him his reputation as the Magnificent.

However, Suleyman was most renowned as the Lawgiver. He gave an educated slave named Lutfi Pasa the task of compiling a new code of laws. It established standard penalties throughout the empire for such crimes as robbery and murder. It also sought to remove corruption from government and to ensure that local political officials rose on the basis of merit and not bribery. The sultan was a fair ruler. A Venetian once wrote that “provided he were well-informed, [Suleyman] did wrong to no one.”

Suleyman took other steps to improve his people’s lives as well. He rebuilt the water systems at Mecca and Jerusalem, the two holy sites visited each year by large numbers of pilgrims. He enhanced the beauty of Istanbul by building palaces and mosques. His chief architect was Pasha Sinan, a Christian slave who was so skilled that he designed over 300 structures, including mosques, schools, hospitals, palaces, and other buildings. Many of the minarets, the slender towers attached to mosques, and domes seen in Istanbul today date from Suleyman’s time.

In poetry, history, and science, Ottoman culture flourished as well. The geographer Piri Reis published books that contained maps with a current understanding of the known world. One of these showed the third voyage of Christopher Columbus, undertaken just two decades earlier.
NAME: __________________________________________________________ PER. ______

1. Which do you consider more significant to the Ottoman Empire: the accomplishments of Mehmed II or those of Selim the Grim? Explain your answer.

2. By what means did the early Ottomans expand their empire?

3. How powerful was the Ottoman Empire compared to other empires of the time?

4. Do you think that the Ottomans were wise in staffing their military and government with slaves? Explain your answer.

5. How did Suleyman’s selection of a successor eventually spell disaster for the Ottoman Empire?

6. Do you think that Suleyman’s religious tolerance helped or hurt the Ottoman Empire? Explain your answer.
1. To what extent was Suleyman fortunate that he was the only son of Selim I?

2. What preparations for ruling the empire was Suleyman given?

3. To what extent was the Janissary system effective? Explain your answer?

4. Why do you think Suleyman treated the knights he captured in the Holy Land with leniency?

5. Why does history judge monarchs who give laws (such as Hammurabi, Justinian, and Shotoku) “great”? Explain your answer.

6. How did the idea of fairness in the law help Suleyman’s rule?

7. What might be some reasons Suleyman worked hard to improve the lives of his subjects? Explain your answer. [YOU MAY ANSWER ON THE BACK]