

Origins of the Turks

The Ottomans originated in the steppes of Central Asia. They migrated westward, to Asia Minor, which is now Turkey during the 1200s. The Ottomans were vassals of the Seljuk Turks, but they established their own state, under Osman I in 1280 and gained power during the 1300s and 1400s.

The Ottoman state was run by the sultan. His ministers were viziers, or high ranking officials, and the sultan ruled with the help of provisional governors called *beys*, or knights. As time passed, the Ottoman sultans centralized their empire, controlling it from the capital, Istanbul. In the 1500s, the sultan claimed the status of caliph, which gave him religious and political authority. Another important group is the Ulema. They are Muslim scholars that were engaged in the several fields of Islamic studies. They are best known as the arbiters of *sharia*, that is, the *Islamic law*.

The Ottoman Military

During the 1500s and 1600s, the Ottoman Empire was at its military and organizational peak. As one of the Islamic world's three "gunpowder empires," Ottoman Turkey was innovative in its military technology and had powerful armies and navies. During the 1400s, the sultans had begun to incorporate gunpowder artillery, or cannons into their armies. The sultans also supplemented the traditional cavalry with elite soldiers called janissaries. Janissaries were specifically recruited at childhood from conquered Christian communities. They were converted to Islam and raised to be loyal to the sultan. Although they were essentially slaves, they were given many privileges. They received advanced training as modern infantry, and they were equipped with new gunpowder weaponry.

Ottoman Military Conquests

The Ottoman Empire under a series of aggressive sultans had moved into the Balkans by the late 1300s, and its navies gained hegemony over the eastern Mediterranean. One of the greatest military triumphs of the Ottoman Empire was the destruction of the Byzantine Empire in 1453. After seizing Constantinople, the Ottomans turned it into his new capital, Istanbul.

Further conquests followed during the late 1400s and early 1500s. Selim I moved the empire into North Africa and conquered Egypt. He also declared himself caliph. The Ottomans began to take control of important coastal ports in Tripoli, Tunis and Algiers. Ottoman forces also pushed further into Europe.

The most successful thrust into Europe came under the leader Suleiman I, also known as Suleiman the Magnificent (1520-1566). He is considered the greatest Ottoman sultan. Suleiman resumed the conquering nature of the previous rulers. He attacked territories of Romania, Hungary, and Austria's Holy Roman Empire. While attacking these areas the Ottomans took control over parts of Europe that stretched across southeastern Europe. However, Suleiman is not only known as a conqueror, he was also a patron of the arts. During his reign the Ottoman Turks went through a golden age and they became one of the more advanced areas in the world.

Women in the Ottoman Empire

Women played several important roles in Ottoman society. The sultan's mother or the queen mother ran the household and was also involved in diplomatic relations with foreign officials. The queen mother also controlled the marriage alliances. Outside the imperial family, women were not seen in public in Istanbul or any other major cities. However, they did have the right to own property and retain property after marriage. Women also took part in the urban real estate market through male agents. They sold inherited shares of their fathers' estate, bought and sold real estate, and founded religious endowments. They were also allowed to testify for themselves in court.

Religion and Politics

Also during the 1500s and early 1600s, the Ottomans proved efficient in governing their large territory as well as their diverse population. The Ottomans did not just rule over the Sunni Muslims, but also members of the Shiite minority. They also governed Jews, Orthodox Christians, Catholic and Protestants. The diverse empire also housed a variety of languages especially Turkish, Arabic, and Persian. Both for political and economic reasons, the sultans practiced religious tolerance. Non-Muslims were allowed to convert to Islam if they wanted to, but were never forced to. They did not have equal rights, they were not permitted to serve in the military, and they had to pay a special head tax. Also each religious group was grouped into an administrative unit called a millet or nation; there was a Jewish millet, an Orthodox Christian millet, and so on.

The sultan's position was hereditary; however it did not always go to the eldest son. This practice was largely due to the fact that the sultan did not marry. The sultan fathered his children with a number of enslaved concubines. These concubines lived in a sacred place known as a harem. A concubine whose son was chosen to become heir was known as the queen mother, and enjoyed a great deal of influence in the sultan's life. When a new sultan came to power he often killed his brothers to eliminate competition.

The Fall of the Ottoman Empire

There are numerous reasons for the decline of the Ottoman Empire. The dominating reason is that neighbor powers had grown stronger over the centuries. They had built stronger institutions, introduced modern arms, infrastructure and administration. On the Ottoman side, however, many things had frozen in old structures; development on Ottoman territories was limited.

More than that, Ottoman institutions were often not working as smoothly as they used to. The sultans since Suleiman had often been less apt to their role. They were men of little ability, and poorly trained. The trade routes running through the empire were no longer as important for Europe, and this yielded less income. This weakened the economy significantly. The population had grown big and had become less controllable for the weak rulers of the empire and many places revolted. Major trading cities had become weaker. By the time of the 19th century, the European mock name that was given to the empire was correct: The sick man of Europe, mainly because it was struggling to survive.

	List important facts and terms for each section.
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Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq: *The Turkish Letters*

Ogier was a nobleman in the service of the King of Austria and Hungary. He spent a few years in the court of Suleiman the Magnificent and these letters tell of his accounts.

“Against us stands Suleiman, that foe whom his own and his ancestor’s exploits have made so terrible, he tramples the soil of Hungary with 200,000 horses, he is at the very gates of Austria, threatens the rest of Germany, and brings in his train all the nations that extend from our borders to those of Persia. The army he leads is equipped with the wealth of many kingdoms. Of the three regions, into which the world is divided (Asia, Europe and Africa), there is not one that does not contribute its share toward our destruction...

The Turkish monarch going to war takes with him over 40,000 camels and nearly as many baggage mules, of which a great part, when he is invading Persia, are loaded with rice and other kinds of grain. These mules and camels also serve to carry tents and armor, and likewise tools and munitions for the campaign. These territories which bear the name of Persia,...are less fertile than our country, and even such crops as they bear are laid waste by the inhabitants in time of invasion in hopes of starving out the enemy, so that it is very dangerous for any army to invade Persia if it is not furnished with abundant supplies, which the Ottomans were...

No nation in the world has shown greater readiness than the Turks to avail themselves of the useful inventions of foreigners, as is proved by their employment of cannons and mortars, and many other things invented by Christians...By using these weapons the Turks have proven to be very capable of adapting to new technologies and using them to become very powerful.”

1. What does this excerpt say about the Ottoman military?
2. What makes the Ottomans so successful in times of war?
3. Why is this account important to people in Europe?