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The Middle East: 1450–1750

Key Concepts

- The central event marking the Ottoman Empire's dominance of the Middle East during this period was its capture of Constantinople from the vanishing Byzantine Empire in 1453.
- Once established, the Ottoman Empire faced growing challenges from the emerging European powers of the period, which had far-ranging (and ultimately detrimental) effects on the empire's social structure, economic prosperity, and political stability.
- Like the Ottoman Empire, the Safavid Empire of Iran emerged during this period as something of a throwback, a land-based empire in an era when power and wealth came increasingly from naval might and sea trade.
- The global inflation caused by the sudden glut of New World silver in the world economy brought crisis to both the Ottomans and the Safavids by the 1700s. The Ottoman Empire would continue struggling to survive—until the early twentieth century—while the Safavid Empire had crumbled completely by 1750.

Key Terms

- anderun
- askeri
- devshirme system
- fatwa
- harem
- Isfahan
- Ismail
- Janissary
- mufti

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- qizilbash
- raya
- Shari'a
- Sufi

The rise of the Ottoman Empire is touched upon in Chapter 19 of *The Earth and Its Peoples*, 4th and 5th eds., but is covered in thorough detail in Chapter 20 of the 5th ed. Chapter 20 also discusses the Safavid Empire of Iran.

THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

Although the Turkic warrior Timur had briefly seized power in the region in the early 1400s, his death signaled the dawning of a new era in the Middle East: the formerly nomadic Turks who established the Ottoman Empire would come to dominate territory previously under Mongol and Timurid control, and they would build the largest Islamic empire since the Abbasid Caliphate. And when the Ottomans captured Constantinople in 1453, their influence was extended even farther, toward Europe, in an area once dominated by the Byzantine Empire. This victory was achieved by Sultan Mehmed II, known as "the Conqueror," who combined the strong military skills of Turkish warrior tradition with more innovative tactics. For example, he put gunpowder to use in huge cannon that broke through the walls that ringed Constantinople, hauled his warships over land to circumvent the Byzantine sea forces and reach the vulnerable inner harbor, and then unleashed his troops on the nearly defenseless city. The takeover of Constantinople, soon renamed Istanbul, was crucial for the Ottomans in more ways than one—not only did it solidify Ottoman control over the vital trade link between the Mediterranean and Black Seas (and hence between Europe and Asia), but it also brought about the final demise of the Byzantine Empire and clearly marked the ascendancy of a new regional power.

Having conquered most of southeastern Europe, including Greece, Serbia, and Albania, prior to seizing Constantinople, the Ottomans turned their attention to the east. In the Battle of Chaldiran in 1514, Ottoman ruler Selim I held firm against the expanding Safavid Empire of Iran, establishing a boundary between the two powers that stands more or less intact to this day. A few years later Selim added Egypt and Syria to the Ottoman domain by conquering the Mamluk Sultanate, then continued his expansion when the Muslim rulers of Algeria and Tunisia joined the empire voluntarily.

When Selim's son Suleiman (known to Europeans as "the Magnificent" and to his own people as "the Lawgiver") set his sights on Christian Europe, however, the seemingly invincible Ottoman forces faced a rare setback. Initially victorious—conquering Belgrade and the island of Rhodes in the early 1520s—Suleiman assaulted Vienna in 1529 but was forced to turn back before winter set in. Meanwhile, Ottoman attempts to capture control of the Mediterranean also met with unexpected challenges. From the mid-fifteenth to the mid-seventeenth centuries, various sultans battled the Italian city-state of Venice, which had dominated Mediterranean commerce through control of key territories such as the islands of Crete and Cyprus and

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certain Greek port cities. The Ottomans never managed to vanquish their Venetian rivals completely; they settled instead for a tribute relationship and allowed the Venetians and other foreign traders to conduct business in Ottoman ports. Indeed, while Mediterranean trade was seen as an important source of revenue, the Ottomans—perhaps because of their Turkish warrior heritage and lack of any maritime history—always viewed theirs as a land-based, rather than sea-based, empire. They found themselves in control of the Red Sea after their takeover of Egypt, coastal Ethiopia, and the Muslim homeland surrounding Mecca and Medina in Arabia. But they tended to leave the lucrative Indian Ocean trade to the Portuguese and other Europeans, despite controlling outposts at Aden and Oman on the southern Arabian Peninsula.

Military, Political, and Economic Structures

Ottoman military traditions and practices played a key role in the development of the empire's character. After the Ottoman takeover of the Balkans in eastern Europe, Christian prisoners of war were used to create a corps of new troops called Janissaries; supplementing the traditional Turkish archers on horseback, these military slaves fought on foot with guns. After 1400 or so, the Janissary corps began to be replenished through the devshirme system, in which young Christian boys from the Balkans (and sometimes other Ottoman-controlled territories) were taught to speak Turkish and given military training. Some were selected to study Islam, liberal arts, and military strategy at the sultan's palace in Istanbul, in effect being groomed to become high-ranking military commanders and government officials. The Ottoman navy, meanwhile, was composed of Greek, Turkish, Algerian, and Tunisian sailors who patrolled the Mediterranean in galleys.

AP Tip

You should be able to compare characteristics of the Ottoman system of slavery, which allowed non-Muslims to rise to high-ranking positions in the Ottoman military and political systems, with slavery in the European colonies of the New World, which forced Africans into lives of grueling, menial agricultural labor in most cases. Other forms of forced labor also demonstrate characteristics that contrast significantly with Ottoman slavery—for example, Russian serfdom, which tied peasant farmers to land they did not own, is much more similar to New World slavery than to Ottoman.

Such calculated incorporation of outsiders into the Ottoman military was typical of an empire that was becoming a virtual mosaic of cultural influences. The court language, Osmanli, blended Turkish with Arabic and Persian; speaking this language was one mark of membership in the askeri (military and government bureaucrat) class, whose close ties with the sultan exempted them from paying taxes. The raya ("flock of sheep") was the name given to the rest of the

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population, which combined Muslims, Christians, and the Jews who fled to Ottoman territory following their expulsion from Spain in 1492. While Islam—and Shari'a, Islamic law—spread steadily into the urban areas of conquered territories in the Balkans, local customs and non-Muslim practices persisted as well, particularly in more rural areas. Most Ottoman subjects, in fact, were influenced more by local officials and religious leaders than by imperial administrators, who were usually Turkish cavalrymen given land grants by the sultan. These provincial officials collected taxes from their subjects and provided order in the region when not off on military campaigns in the summer, but otherwise they maintained a fairly limited involvement in the day-to-day activities of the raya.

Urban Life During the Empire's Peak

Istanbul, the Ottoman capital, was also a major crossroads, bridging the European and Asian components of the empire, and it rivaled other major port cities of the time in size, wealth, and cosmopolitan character. The city itself was hilly and crowded, with a mazelike network of narrow streets centered on a busy harbor where Jewish, Hindu, and Christian merchants from Europe and Asia carried out their trading. Dominating the city's skyline was the former Byzantine cathedral Hagia Sophia, converted to a mosque and renamed Aya Sofya after the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453.

While male citizens frequented the shops and markets run by the guilds of merchants and artisans, most Ottoman women spent their days confined to the harem, or "forbidden area," of their homes. Despite such restrictions, women in the Ottoman Empire wielded great influence. Wives were joined in the harem by children, female servants, and in some cases eunuchs (castrated male servants). In addition to running the household, some Ottoman women, taking advantage of the fact that Islamic law allowed females to retain their property after marriage, involved themselves in managing inheritances from their fathers and buying and selling real estate. Because Muslim court systems did not include attorneys, women were also permitted to appear in court and testify on their own behalf on legal matters.

Much of the tone of Ottoman life was set by fatwas, or legal opinions issued by urban religious scholars known as muftis. A mufti's interpretations of Shari'a theoretically overruled any conflicting policies issued by the sultan, but in practice the muftis seemed to tailor their opinions to match the views of the sultan, who had appointed them. The fatwas demonstrated not only the religious motivation behind matters as mundane as the ban on drinking coffee, but also the Ottoman justification for military campaigns intended to annex territory the empire considered to be under the control of "infidels."

Military Reforms Bring Crisis

Such military campaigns gradually became more taxing for the empire to carry out. As the use of gunpowder expanded throughout Asia and Europe, the Ottoman military increased its reliance on the Janissary corps. At the same time, the number of landholding cavalrymen was reduced in order to balance the military budget. The late sixteenth century then saw a period of inflation caused by the influx of New

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World silver into the economy, which hampered the ability of many of the remaining landholding elites to collect taxes and purchase their military supplies. The sultan's government took this opportunity to further reduce the cavalry, reclaim their lands, expand the Janissary corps, and hire temporary soldiers—but in order to fund such military expansion, emergency taxes were levied on much of the population.

By 1590, a crisis had developed; displaced landholders, unemployed temporary soldiers, peasants overwhelmed by taxes, and other frustrated citizens joined together in periodic revolts throughout Anatolia and other parts of the empire. The Janissaries emerged from this period with increased leverage, demanding the right to pass corps membership along to their sons. The devshirme system (along with its thorough training) was thus abolished, the size of the corps grew steadily, and the Janissaries' superior military skills began to deteriorate. As a result, Ottoman officials of the early seventeenth century faced serious challenges in maintaining the strength and unity of their empire.

Ottoman Decline Begins

During this period of crisis, one official response had been to confine the sultan's male relatives to the palace in Istanbul to thwart any possible coup attempts. Such confinement bred a new type of Ottoman sultan, no longer a military leader in touch with all corners of his empire, but rather a figurehead remote from involvement in the day-to-day activities of running the government. Grand viziers, or chief administrators, took over the duties of maintaining control in an increasingly fractured empire by the early 1600s. For example, the old system of land grants for high-ranking cavalrymen was finally phased out entirely, replaced with a new program of tax farming that allowed absentee landlords to profit from the taxes they levied on individual farmers, who often resented the arrangement. The sultan was thus forced to shift some of his power to provincial governors to maintain order in many rural areas. Meanwhile, the Janissaries continued to exercise their newfound influence to gain the right to participate in manufacturing and trade activities, further weakening their military skills. Such interest in commerce reflected the global changes of the era, and parts of the empire saw great transformation. Port cities such as Izmir (known in Europe as Smyrna) experienced rapid population growth, in part because of the influx of migrants seeking refuge from the upheaval in other parts of the empire, along with the arrival of European merchants and settlers of Armenian, Greek, and Jewish background. By the late 1500s, the region comprising western Anatolia, the Balkans, and the Mediterranean coast became a key component in the growing world trade network, as farmers there switched from growing grain for subsistence to producing cash crops such as cotton and tobacco.

Tobacco, in fact, was prohibited by the imperial government; its continued cultivation and trade were indicative of the growing weakness of the sultan's central bureaucracy. By the 1700s, European traders had forced the Ottomans to grant them capitulations, or special trade agreements with low duties and fees, in their largely successful quest to dominate the Indian Ocean trade network. The Ottoman economy thus was becoming more and more dependent on

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Europe at a time when the once-great Ottoman military was steadily weakening—more and more of the Janissaries lacked necessary training, and many of them began sending substitutes on seasonal campaigns. The sultans turned to the provincial governors for assistance in raising temporary armies, yet another step toward a shift in power away from the central government. As the sultan's inner circle in Istanbul distracted itself by throwing lavish parties and indulging in a craze for growing outlandishly expensive tulips, provincial governors, wealthy landowners, and others took advantage of the opportunity to seize power for themselves. As a result, various groups came to wrest control—practical if not official—of different parts of the empire from the sultan: mamluks in Egypt, Janissaries in Baghdad, conservative Sunni Muslims in Arabia. In 1730, the power struggle came to Istanbul itself when a conservative Janissary revolt forced Sultan Ahmed III to abdicate. The rebellion itself was short-lived—imperial power was restored after several months—but the fact that the Ottoman Empire had slipped into serious disarray could no longer be ignored.

The Safavids of Iran

Following the death of Timur in 1405, several tribal chiefs and military leaders battled for dominance in Central and western Asia. In Iran, the eventual victor was Ismail, a young boy who was heir to the leadership of a Sufi brotherhood known as the Safaviya; he declared himself shah of Iran in 1502 and ordered that Shi'ite Islam would be the religion of the realm. A tumultuous century of war and persecution followed, as many Iranians resisted abandoning their Sunni beliefs. By the early 1600s, however, Iran had been transformed into a land that was majority Shi'ite, surrounded by Sunni neighbors. Its isolation was heightened by cultural differences as well—centuries of scholarship and writing in Persian rather than Arabic had produced a distinctive Iranian library of legal and theological texts; epic, lyric, and mystic poems; historical volumes; and drama and fiction. Other unique aspects of Safavid society were shaped by mystical Sufi traditions and rituals that merged with militant politics aimed at spreading Islam, by force if necessary.

An Inland Empire

Under the reign of Shah Abbas I, who ruled from 1587 to 1629, Isfahan became the capital of Iran. Located near the center of the realm to give the shah ready access to any frontiers under attack, Isfahan had an economy founded on the trade of silk fabrics and intricately designed wool carpets, facilitated by its location in the centuries-old zone of transport by camel caravan. In many aspects, Isfahan resembled the Ottoman capital of Istanbul: small, crowded streets; houses with interior courtyards and separate women's quarters (known as anderun, or "interior," in Iran); a main bazaar filled with the guild-run shops of artisans and merchants. Its citizens even shared similar styles of dress, with women veiling themselves outside the home, and both sexes covering their hair (scarves for women, turbans for men) and wearing flowing dresses or caftans to conceal their arms and legs. Unlike Istanbul, though, Isfahan could not be described as truly

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cosmopolitan—colonies of Jews, Hindus, and Armenian Christians were involved in trade ventures, but lacking a harbor, Isfahan rarely received the variety of European, Middle Eastern, and Asian visitors and immigrants that Istanbul did, and its volume of trade was correspondingly lower as well.

AP Tip

The Ottoman harem and Safavid anderun exemplify the complex, sometimes bewildering role of women in Muslim societies: while women were largely sequestered from the outside world and confined to their separate household quarters, they were allowed to participate in certain business activities independent of their husbands and appear in court to attend to legal matters if necessary. In some ways, this is the direct opposite of the contemporaneous status of European women, who faced fewer restrictions on their participation in public activities but were usually forced to turn over any wages or inheritances to their fathers or husbands.

Economic Crisis and the Safavid Downfall

The manufacture and trade of rugs and silks did not provide Iran with a vital economy. Subsistence farming and herding occupied most of the shah's subjects, and nomadic groups known as qizilbash ("redheads," because of their red turbans) were given large sections of land by the shah in exchange for providing mounted soldiers for the military. The chieftains of these groups did not subdivide the land to promote agricultural development, and they often ruled according to their own whims. Thus, the Safavid shah lacked both a solid economy and a firm rule over his territory.

In the late 1500s, pressure from Sunni neighbors such as the Ottomans and the Uzbeks of Central Asia drove Shah Abbas to create a corps of slave soldiers who agreed without resistance to employ modern firearms, unlike the nomadic warriors who insisted on fighting with traditional bows and arrows. Like the Ottoman Janissaries, this new corps (mostly former Christian converts to Islam who had been taken as prisoners of war from the Caucasus region) began to rival the nomadic chiefs for power in the Safavid political and military structure. Shah Abbas's less capable successors faced serious difficulty in keeping these factions under control.

These successors also lacked skill in managing the overland silk trade that had been contributing to the Safavid economy; at the same time, the global inflation caused by the influx of American silver into the world trade market brought on a crisis similar to that faced by the Ottoman Empire: finding the funding to maintain the military and the government. Attempts to force the nomads from their lands in order to increase tax revenues proved futile; the nomads still maintained military capabilities of their own and could successfully elude the shah's forces. Support for the regime dwindled rapidly, and in 1722

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invading Afghans seized Isfahan and brought a fairly abrupt end to Safavid rule.

The expense of maintaining a military large and versatile enough to defend a land-based empire such as the Ottoman or Safavid was rapidly becoming untenable. Taxes from agricultural production would fail to generate the wealth necessary to compete with the growing economic might of the European powers. While cultural achievements in poetry, arts, and craft production remained a source of justifiable pride, the Muslim rulers of the Ottoman and Safavid Empires simply did not foresee the vast change that the world economy was about to undergo. Their centuries-old traditions of territorial conquest and expansion as a means of amassing—and displaying—power would become relics in the new era of sea-based trade empires that was set to begin.

Free-Response Questions.

1. Compare and contrast the impact of the global inflation of the sixteenth century on the Ottoman and Safavid Empires.

2. Describe changes and continuities in the political structure of the Middle-East from 1400 to 1750