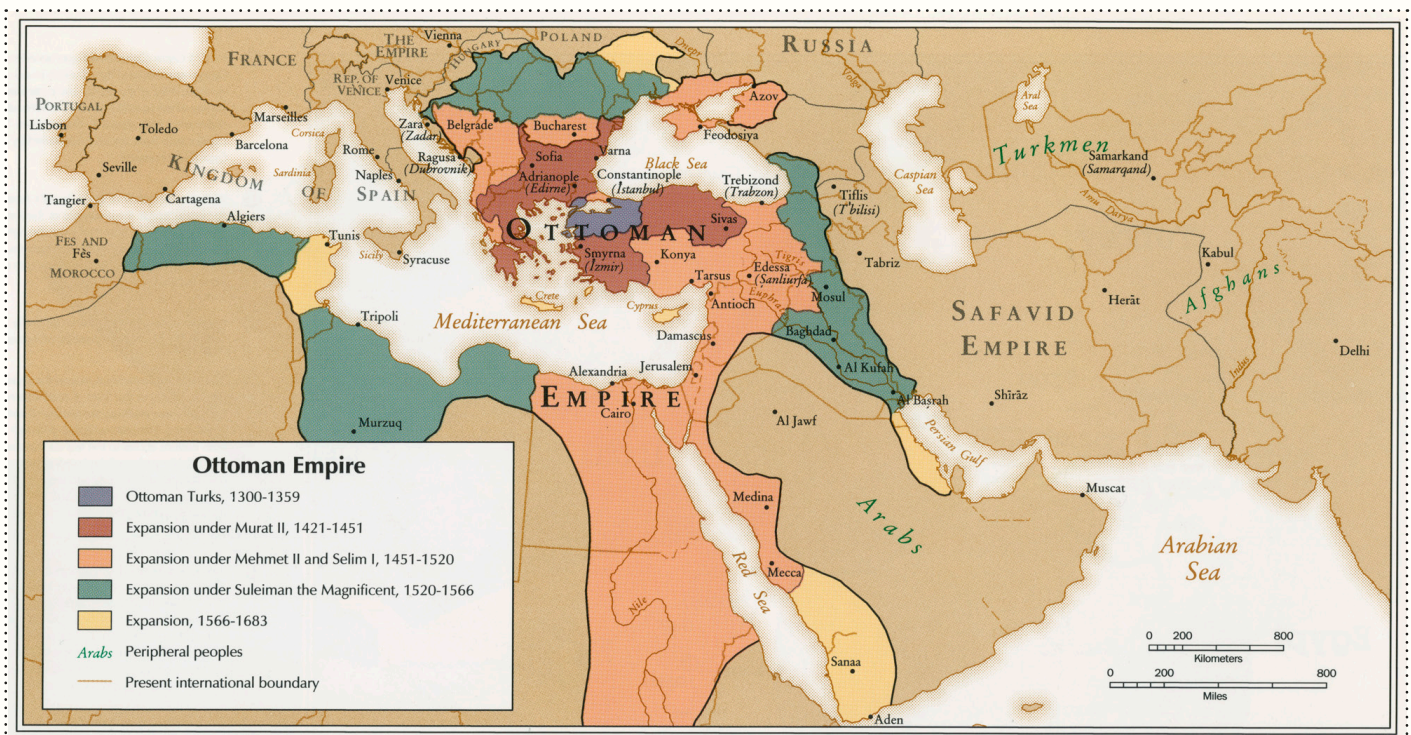




Background: The Ottoman Empire and the emergence of Süleyman I

The Ottoman Empire was a powerful and wide-reaching state that controlled much of the Mediterranean and Eastern Europe during the early modern period. In 1520, Süleyman I, known in Europe as Süleyman the Magnificent, became the ruler of the empire. Under his leadership, the Ottoman Empire experienced a time of great expansion, impressive art and culture and important legal reforms. When Süleyman came to power, the empire was already a strong force, with huge territories spread across three continents.



The Ottoman Empire [Image](#) by Norman B. Leventhal Map Center / Flickr / CC BY 2.0

Nature and geographical scope

The Ottoman Empire was a complex, multi-ethnic and multi-religious state ruled by a powerful sultan. It stretched from the Balkans in Europe, across Anatolia (modern-day Turkey), and down into the Middle East and North Africa. Its control of key trade routes and its strong military made it a major force in global politics. The empire's large geographical reach gave it access to many different resources and populations, which added to its wealth and military power. The empire was strong and tightly controlled, using its army and government officials to rule its vast lands. It began in the late 1200s under Osman I, and its capital became Istanbul (formerly called Constantinople) after Sultan Mehmed II captured it in 1453. During the reign of Selim I (1512–1520) and his son Süleyman the Magnificent (1520–1566), the Ottoman Empire expanded significantly. Selim I led military campaigns in the Middle East and defeated the Safavid Empire of Persia at the Battle of Chaldiran in 1514. In 1516 and 1517, he turned his attention to Egypt and Syria, which were then ruled by the Mamluk Sultanate. His army won key battles near Aleppo and Cairo, giving the Ottomans control of the eastern Mediterranean, Egypt and the holy





cities of Mecca and Medina. By gaining these lands, the Ottoman sultans also became **Caliphs**, making them important religious leaders for Muslims across the world.

Relations with its neighbours

The Ottoman Empire often fought with and competed against the countries around it. In the West, it shared borders with Hungary, the Habsburg Empire (which ruled places like Spain and Austria) and several Balkan countries. Many of these regions, such as Greece, Serbia, Bosnia and Bulgaria, were taken over by the Ottomans by the late 1400s. In the early 1500s, the Ottomans kept control of these lands by giving land to soldiers (this was known as the Timar system) and by taking Christian boys through the *devshirme*, also called the 'blood tax', to train them as elite soldiers known as Janissaries.

The Habsburgs, who ruled Spain and Austria under Charles V, saw the Ottomans as a major threat to Christian Europe. Even so, the Ottomans sometimes made alliances with other countries. For example, France and the Ottomans worked together against the Habsburgs.

In North Africa, the Ottomans took control of cities along the coast and worked with famous pirates like Barbarossa Hayreddin. This helped them control the Mediterranean Sea and challenge the power of Spain and Venice.

Because the Ottoman Empire lay between Europe, Asia and Africa, it became an important centre for trade and the exchange of cultures.

The establishment of Süleyman's authority

Süleyman became sultan in 1520, which was an important moment in Ottoman history. His family background and the rules about who could become the next sultan helped him rise to power.

Rules of accession in the Ottoman Empire

In the Ottoman Empire, there were no clear written rules about who should become the next sultan. Instead, succession was based on family traditions, politics and strength. Unlike in many parts of Europe, where the oldest son usually became king, any son of the sultan could try to take the throne. This often led to fierce fights between brothers.

From the 1300s onwards, a prince's chances of becoming sultan depended on his skills, supporters and personal power. Young princes were sent to govern different parts of the empire. This gave them experience and helped prove whether they were capable leaders. However, it also gave them the chance to raise their own armies and compete with each other when the sultan died.

When a sultan died or became seriously ill, his sons would race to the capital with their soldiers, each trying to take control. The one who won usually killed his brothers to stop them from challenging him later. This harsh practice was made official by Sultan Mehmed II (who ruled from 1451 to 1481). He introduced a law that allowed a new sultan to kill his brothers to protect the empire. Mehmed's son, Bayezid II, also fought his brother Cem for the throne. This showed that being the oldest or most legitimate heir did not matter – what



mattered was being strong enough to win. By the early 1500s, the system of succession remained violent and uncertain.

Süleyman's claim to the Sultanate

Süleyman became sultan after his father, Selim I, died in 1520. This time, there was no struggle for the throne because Süleyman was Selim's only surviving son. This made it much easier for him to take power. Before this, Süleyman had already been governor of Manisa, which was close to Istanbul. This meant he could reach the capital quickly and become sultan without any problems.

Süleyman also had strong support at court, and his father clearly wanted him to rule. Selim I had taken power himself by removing his own father, Bayezid II, and killing his rivals. He made sure that Süleyman would not face the same difficulties. It is believed that Selim had other possible claimants killed so that no one could challenge Süleyman's right to rule.

When Selim died in 1520, Süleyman entered Istanbul and became sultan without facing any opposition. His rule was accepted because he was strong, came from the right family and acted quickly. However, later in his life, there were disputes about who would succeed him, especially among his sons Mustafa, Selim and Bayezid. This showed that the Ottoman way of choosing a new sultan often led to family conflict but ensured that only the strongest leader took the throne in the end.

2.4.1 The establishment of Süleyman's authority

Süleyman I's reign, which began in 1520 and ended in 1566, was marked by the rapid strengthening of his authority and the expansion of the Ottoman Empire. His personal qualities, strong leadership and military reforms helped lay the foundations for a golden age of Ottoman power. Understanding how he ruled and kept control is key to understanding his lasting legacy.

How Süleyman ruled his empire

Süleyman the Magnificent is remembered as one of the greatest sultans of the Ottoman Empire. He made the empire stronger through skilled leadership, clever government and fair laws. During his reign, the empire reached its height in politics, military strength and culture.

Süleyman was intelligent, religious and charismatic. He was well educated and spoke many languages, including Turkish, Arabic, Persian and some European ones. He was also a poet who wrote under the name Muhibbi, and he enjoyed being around scholars, artists and legal experts. Because of his focus on justice, he was called Kanuni, or 'The Lawgiver', for creating clear and fair laws.

Süleyman was both a strong military commander and an effective ruler. He personally led his armies and won important battles, such as the capture of Belgrade (1521), Rhodes (1522) and victory over Hungary at the Battle of Mohács (1526). However, he also knew how to share power. He trusted skilled advisors to help govern the vast empire. One of his closest aides was Grand Vizier Ibrahim Pasha, who held great power until he fell out of favour and was executed in 1536. Later, Rüstem Pasha, Süleyman's son-in-law, also





played a key role in running the empire. By giving authority to trusted officials, Süleyman made sure the empire was managed effectively each day, while he remained in control overall. The government was highly organised and used a large team of workers and administrators to keep everything running smoothly.

Use of the Timar system and the feudal system

One of the main ways the empire stayed strong was through the **Timar system**. In this system, the land did not belong to the nobles but to the sultan. The sultan gave land to *sipahis* (horse soldiers) in exchange for military service. These soldiers collected taxes from farmers and used the money to pay for weapons and to support their soldiers when needed.

This system ensured the empire always had soldiers without needing a large full-time army. The sultan's government controlled the system by moving land grants around and keeping careful records in the *defter* (tax register).

The Timar system was similar to the feudal system in Europe, but with one big difference: the land always belonged to the sultan and could not be passed down to children.

Süleyman also created new laws (*Kanun*) to work alongside Islamic law (*Sharia*). This helped establish fair rules for everyone, including Christians and Jews, who were allowed to keep their own religious communities called millets. This made it easier to govern the many different peoples of the empire. Süleyman's reign was like a golden age, with strong leadership, good laws, wise advisors and an organised army.

The role and significance of Hürrem Sultan

Hürrem Sultan, also known as Roxelana in Europe, was one of the most powerful women in Ottoman history. She was Süleyman's favourite wife and played a major role in politics and royal family matters, which was unusual at the time. Her rise to power began a period called 'the Sultanate of Women', when royal women had more influence than ever before.

Hürrem came from humble origins. She was born around 1502 in Ruthenia (Ukraine today) and was captured and sold as a slave. She eventually entered Süleyman's palace and quickly became his favourite. She even replaced his other concubine, Mahidevran, who was the mother of his eldest son, Mustafa.

Hürrem had five or six children with Süleyman, including Selim II, who later became sultan. She was the first concubine an Ottoman sultan officially married, breaking old traditions. Usually, sultans did not marry concubines to avoid giving too much power to one woman. By marrying Hürrem, Süleyman allowed her to stay close to him in Istanbul instead of sending her away, as was customary for mothers of princes.

Hürrem influenced politics at home and built connections with other countries too. She wrote letters to the King of Poland to help maintain peace and encourage trade. She also carried out charity work, building mosques, schools, hospitals and soup kitchens for the people. One of her biggest projects was the Haseki Sultan Complex in Istanbul.

Hürrem is also remembered for being involved in the conflict over who would become the next sultan. Many believe she helped get Prince Mustafa, Süleyman's oldest and most popular son, killed in 1553 because she wanted her own son, Selim, to succeed. There is no clear proof, but many think she and Rüstem Pasha, her son-in-law, planned it together.





Because of her actions, Hürrem changed the future of the Ottoman Empire and showed how powerful royal women could be.

The development of the army under Süleyman

Süleyman's military reforms and expansion of the army were crucial to his successful campaigns.

The use of recruitment, the Janissaries and the importance of taxation

Under Süleyman, the Ottoman army reached its peak in strength and organisation. It was a powerful and well-funded force at the heart of Süleyman's efforts to expand the empire and maintain control over lands in Europe, Asia and Africa. His military reforms, recruitment systems and efficient tax policies made it possible for the empire to fight long wars against strong enemies like the Habsburgs, Safavids and Mamluks.

At this time, the Ottoman army had two main parts: the *kapıkulu* (the sultan's personal troops) and the provincial forces. The most important *kapıkulu* unit was the Janissaries, a professional infantry force recruited through the *devshirme* system. This system, developed earlier, took Christian boys (mainly from the Balkans) from their families. They were converted to Islam and trained to serve in the army or in government roles.

During Süleyman's reign, the Janissaries were highly trained, disciplined and armed with firearms, making them one of the best military units in the world at the time. They were not only soldiers but also an important part of the state, loyal directly to the sultan. They received salaries, lived in barracks in Istanbul and other major cities, and followed strict rules. Süleyman increased their numbers and improved their pay and benefits, which helped keep them loyal. They proved their value in major battles such as the siege of Rhodes (1522) and the Battle of Mohács (1526), where their discipline and firepower played a key role in victory.

In addition to the *kapıkulu* troops, Süleyman relied on the *timariot* cavalry, made up of *sipahis* (cavalrymen) who were granted land (timars) by the state in return for military service. These cavalrymen formed the backbone of the Ottoman field army. They provided troops based on the income from their land and were also responsible for maintaining order in the provinces. Unlike the Janissaries, *sipahis* did not receive salaries – they supported themselves through the taxes collected from peasants who farmed their timars.

The success of Süleyman's army depended on a strong tax system. Wars were expensive and Süleyman went on campaign almost every two years, so careful financial planning was essential. The state raised money through taxes on farming, trade and tribute from vassal states. The *defter* (tax register) system kept detailed records of land and income, which helped the government allocate timars and collect taxes properly.

Taxes also paid for the army's supplies. Large campaigns involved moving tens of thousands of soldiers, along with weapons, food and siege equipment. For example, the siege of Vienna in 1529 required transporting a massive army over long distances, supported by state-run granaries and storage depots. Without an effective tax system and strong administration, this would not have been possible.

In short, Süleyman's army was professional, relied on an effective recruitment system





through the *devshirme*, and included a feudal-style cavalry force. Backed by a centralised tax system, the army was a key instrument of Ottoman power and helped Süleyman maintain control over his vast empire.

Methods of training and promotion

During Süleyman's reign, the Ottoman army improved greatly in training, organisation and promotion. These changes helped it become one of the strongest armies of the early modern period. Süleyman inherited a capable army from earlier sultans, but he made it more professional, better trained and more efficiently managed. This allowed the empire to expand and remain strong.

A central part of Süleyman's military was the Janissary corps, the elite infantry of the *Kapıkulu* (the sultan's personal troops). The Janissaries were recruited through the *devshirme* system. This was a kind of tax on Christian families, mostly in the Balkans, where strong and intelligent boys were taken from their homes, converted to Islam and given strict training in palace schools such as the Enderun School. This ensured they were completely loyal to the sultan and had no ties to their old families or communities.

Training for the Janissaries was long and demanding. They learned archery, sword fighting, the use of firearms, military drills and physical fitness. They also received religious and moral education to keep them disciplined and obedient. The most talented boys received further education and could enter the bureaucracy or palace service, while others remained in the army. Their training focused on obedience, teamwork and endurance, which helped them remain organised and effective in difficult battles.

Promotion within the Janissary corps and the wider army was mostly based on merit, although politics could still play a part. Unlike the noble armies of Europe, the Ottoman military rewarded skill and loyal service. Soldiers could rise through the ranks to become officers (such as *aga* or *bölükbaşı*) and, in some cases, top commanders like the *Agha* of the Janissaries or even *Grand Vizier*. One famous example is Sokollu Mehmed Pasha, who began as a *devshirme* recruit and rose to become Grand Vizier, serving under Süleyman and his successors – showing that talent and loyalty could lead to the highest positions.

Outside the Janissaries, Süleyman also maintained a strong cavalry force – the *timariot sipahis*, who formed part of the provincial army. These cavalrymen were trained from a young age, often following family traditions of military service. Unlike the Janissaries, they were not trained in central schools but were expected to take part in campaigns and maintain their skills in horse riding, archery and close combat. Their rank and status depended on their military success and the income of the *timar* they held.

Süleyman ensured that training and discipline were closely monitored by the central government. Military units were inspected regularly, especially before major campaigns. Soldiers who failed to meet expectations could be demoted or lose their privileges. During campaigns such as the siege of Rhodes (1522) and the Battle of Mohács (1526), the skill and discipline of the army – particularly the Janissaries – showed how effective their training and leadership had become.

In conclusion, Süleyman's army was known for its professional training (especially for the Janissaries) and for offering soldiers the chance to rise through the ranks based on merit and service. This made the Ottoman military adaptable, loyal and highly effective, playing a major role in the empire's golden age.





2.4.2 The expansion of the Ottoman Empire into Europe in the 1520s

When Süleyman I became sultan in 1520, he began a series of military campaigns to expand the Ottoman Empire's territory in Europe. These campaigns, driven by both strategic and political aims, led to major Ottoman victories and changed the balance of power in the region. Understanding the goals and results of these campaigns is key to understanding the early years of Süleyman's reign.

Süleyman's aims at the start of his reign

When Süleyman I became sultan in 1520, he wanted to make the Ottoman Empire even larger and more powerful, especially in Europe. He aimed to show that the Ottomans were stronger than both their Christian and Muslim rivals. He also wanted to prove that he was a strong and just ruler by leading his armies in person and creating fair laws.

From the beginning of his reign, Süleyman planned major military campaigns to show he was a true warrior-sultan. Two early conquests – Belgrade in 1521 and Rhodes in 1522 – reveal what he hoped to achieve. These victories were not only about gaining land, but also about demonstrating the strength of the Ottoman Empire and proving Süleyman's greatness.

Conquest of Belgrade (1521)

Belgrade was a very important fortress city on the Danube River. It was seen as the gateway to central Europe and had stopped the Ottomans in the past – Mehmed II failed to capture it in 1456. At the time, Belgrade was controlled by the Kingdom of Hungary, which blocked Ottoman expansion further into Europe. Süleyman wanted to take Belgrade to open the way to Hungary and Vienna, and to take revenge for earlier Ottoman failures.

In the spring of 1521, Süleyman led a large army himself, showing that he was willing to fight alongside his soldiers. The Ottomans brought around 100,000 men and powerful cannons to break through the city's defences. The defenders received little help from Hungary and could not hold out against the siege. After intense fighting, Belgrade fell in August 1521.

This was a major victory. The Ottomans now controlled the Danube River and had a clear path into Hungary. It also sent a message to Christian Europe that Süleyman would carry on his ancestors' mission of expanding the empire.

Conquest of Rhodes (1522)

After capturing Belgrade, Süleyman turned his attention to Rhodes, an island in the eastern Mediterranean controlled by the Knights Hospitaller. These knights had long attacked Ottoman ships and caused problems for the empire. Rhodes was also important because it was a Christian stronghold located very close to Ottoman territory.

In June 1522, Süleyman gathered over 400 ships and more than 100,000 soldiers, including elite Janissaries. He personally led the siege, showing his role as a *ghazi* (holy warrior).



The siege was long and difficult – the knights, led by Grand Master Philippe de Villiers de L'Isle-Adam, defended the island bravely for six months. However, the Ottomans' constant attacks and heavy cannon fire eventually broke through the defences. The knights surrendered in December 1522. Süleyman allowed them to leave peacefully, which helped him appear fair and honourable.

The conquest of Rhodes gave the Ottomans control of the eastern Mediterranean and removed a long-standing enemy. It also strengthened Süleyman's image as a powerful defender of Islam and a ruler who won through both strength and justice.

In short, at the beginning of his reign, Süleyman aimed to show strength, expand the empire and prove he was the rightful ruler. The victories at Belgrade and Rhodes were both military and symbolic successes that set the tone for the rest of his rule.

The development of Süleyman's activities in Europe

Süleyman did not stop after his victories at Belgrade and Rhodes. He wanted to keep advancing into central Europe. His goals were to remove Hungary as a barrier, weaken the Habsburgs (a powerful European royal family), and prove to the world that he was a great emperor. Two key events in this next stage were the Battle of Mohács in 1526 and the Siege of Vienna in 1529.

Battle of Mohács (1526)

By 1526, Hungary was weak and divided. King Louis II of Hungary refused to pay tribute to the Ottomans and supported the Habsburgs instead. This gave Süleyman an excuse to attack and remove Hungary as a threat. He also wanted to expand the Islamic world and challenge the power of Charles V, the ruler of the Holy Roman Empire.

Süleyman led an army of between 60,000 and 100,000 men, including elite Janissaries, cavalry and artillery. Hungary could only gather around 25,000 soldiers. On 29 August 1526, near Mohács, the Hungarians attacked first but failed to hold their lines. The Ottomans launched a powerful counter-attack, killing thousands. King Louis II drowned while trying to escape, and the Hungarian army was completely destroyed.

After the Battle of Mohács, Hungary was no longer an independent kingdom. Süleyman placed a noble named John Zápolya on the throne as a puppet ruler loyal to the Ottomans. However, the Habsburgs also claimed the Hungarian crown, leading to a long conflict between the Ottomans and the Habsburgs over control of Hungary. This victory made the Ottomans the strongest power in Central Europe.

Siege of Vienna (1529)

After Mohács, Süleyman decided to strike deeper into Europe by attacking Vienna, the Habsburg capital. This was the first time the Ottomans attempted to capture the city. Süleyman led more than 120,000 men through harsh weather and difficult terrain. By the time they reached Vienna in late September, bad conditions and a lack of supplies had weakened the army.

Vienna was well prepared for a siege and was defended by Ferdinand's forces under the command of Niklas von Salm. The Ottomans bombarded the city and launched repeated attacks on its walls, but they failed to break through. Heavy rain, disease and long supply lines eventually forced Süleyman to abandon the siege and withdraw in October 1529.





Although he did not take Vienna, the siege caused fear across Europe. It showed how far Ottoman power could reach and marked the beginning of a long struggle between the Ottomans and the Habsburgs. It also added to Süleyman's reputation as a bold and ambitious ruler.

2.4.3 The maritime expansion of the Ottoman Empire

Süleyman understood how important having a strong navy was, so he worked hard to build up and expand the Ottoman fleet. This helped protect trade routes, show Ottoman power across the Mediterranean and compete with European navies. Learning about the main leaders, key battles and the outcomes of Süleyman's naval plans helps us understand how far his empire's influence reached.

How Süleyman developed and expanded the Ottoman navy

During his reign, Süleyman turned the Ottoman navy into one of the most powerful in the world. He spent a great deal of money on building new ships, setting up naval bases and hiring skilled captains and sailors. The Ottomans needed a strong navy to protect their trade routes, transport soldiers, guard Muslim pilgrims travelling to Mecca and Medina, and compete with European rivals like the Habsburg Empire, the Knights of St. John and Venice. Süleyman expanded large shipyards in places like Galata and Istanbul, where hundreds of warships were built. He also developed important naval bases in locations such as Gallipoli, Rhodes and Algiers, which helped launch attacks across the Mediterranean. The Ottomans mainly used galleys – long ships powered by rows of oarsmen and armed with cannons. These ships were fast and effective for sea battles and blockades. Süleyman made sure the navy had well-trained sailors, soldiers and rowers from all over the empire. He also set up a professional system to manage pay, supplies and ship repairs.



Göke (1495), flagship of Ottoman Admiral Kemal Reis [Image](#)
by Unknown author / Wikimedia Commons / Public Domain



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The role of Barbarossa

One of the main reasons for the navy's success was Süleyman's partnership with Hayreddin Barbarossa (born Khizr Reis), a famous pirate who became an admiral. Barbarossa and his brother Aruj built a strong base in Algiers, from where they attacked Spanish and Portuguese ships.

Süleyman saw how useful Barbarossa could be and invited him to join the Ottoman navy. In 1533, Barbarossa sailed to Istanbul, where Süleyman made him *Kapudan Pasha* (Grand Admiral). Barbarossa then led the navy to major victories.

One of the most important was the Battle of Preveza (1538), where Barbarossa defeated a large fleet made up of Spanish, Papal and Venetian ships led by the well-known commander Andrea Doria. This win gave the Ottomans control of the eastern Mediterranean for many years.

Barbarossa also led raids on southern Italy, Sicily and the Balearic Islands. He even rescued thousands of Muslims who had been forced out of Spain after the Reconquista. Barbarossa's fleet sometimes worked with France, an ally of Süleyman, against the Habsburgs. This showed that Süleyman used his navy not just for war, but for diplomacy too.

Süleyman's efforts to build up the navy – along with Barbarossa's skill – made the Ottomans a top naval power. This helped Süleyman spread his empire's influence far beyond its land borders.

Key military engagements

Conquest of Tunis (1534)

One important naval campaign was when Barbarossa captured Tunis in North Africa. At the time, Tunis was ruled by a local leader who was connected to Spain. Taking Tunis gave the Ottomans a key port in the middle of the Mediterranean and challenged Spain's power in the region. Barbarossa's fleet and soldiers took the city quickly, but the following year, in 1535, the Spanish ruler Charles V recaptured it with a huge army and navy. Even though the Ottomans lost Tunis soon afterwards, this showed how important Süleyman believed it was to control ports in North Africa.

Failure of the Algiers Expedition (1541)

Another major event was when Charles V tried to capture Algiers in 1541 to stop Ottoman raids along the Spanish coast. But his plan went badly. Storms wrecked much of his fleet before they even landed. The rest of his army was attacked by the defenders and forced to retreat. This failure was very embarrassing for Charles and showed that the Ottomans were still strong in the western Mediterranean. It also proved that Süleyman's navy, skilled commanders and well-placed bases worked effectively together.

Siege of Malta (1565)

Near the end of Süleyman's life, the Ottomans attacked Malta, which was held by the Knights of St. John. These knights had been attacking Ottoman ships for years. Süleyman sent a huge fleet of over 180 ships and more than 30,000 soldiers to take the island. But the siege failed. The defenders, led by Jean de Valette, fought bravely. The Ottomans faced





problems with disease, poor planning and weak supply lines. After months of fighting, they had to give up. This failure showed that even the powerful Ottoman navy had its limits. Süleyman died the following year.

The political and economic impact of naval development

Süleyman's navy had a big impact on politics and trade. It changed how the Ottoman Empire dealt with Europe and helped shape global trade routes.

Ottoman relations with France

When Süleyman ruled, the Ottoman Empire was at its peak. One of the most important partnerships was with France. France wanted help from the Ottomans in its struggle against the Habsburg Empire, which was very powerful in Europe. The Habsburgs controlled Spain, parts of Italy, the Netherlands and the Holy Roman Empire. Both France and the Ottomans saw the Habsburgs as a threat, so they joined forces to weaken them.

In 1536, they signed the Treaty of Amity, which made their friendship official. This was important for both politics and trade. It allowed French traders to do business in Ottoman lands without paying high taxes, which helped France grow richer.

The Ottomans and France also worked together in war. A good example was the Siege of Nice in 1543. The French king, Francis I, was fighting the Habsburgs in Italy. The Ottoman admiral Barbarossa brought his fleet to support the French against the Habsburg army. This teamwork helped the French win battles both on land and at sea.

Francis I sent ambassadors to Süleyman's court to keep the alliance strong. One well-known ambassador was Jean de La Forêt, who worked in the Ottoman capital for years to make sure the partnership continued.

Trade routes and the Red Sea

By building a strong navy, Süleyman protected important trade routes and kept the empire powerful. Controlling the eastern Mediterranean and the North African coast helped the Ottomans dominate trade between Europe, Asia and Africa. When the Ottomans took over Rhodes (1522) and Tunis (1534), they gained control of key ports where many trading ships passed through. The navy protected merchant ships from pirates so that goods like spices, silk, grain and cloth could travel safely. This trade brought in a lot of money through taxes.

Süleyman also understood how important the Red Sea was. It was the route used by Muslim pilgrims travelling to Mecca and Medina, and it connected to the Indian Ocean trade. After defeating the Mamluks in 1517, the Ottomans gained Egypt and ports along the Red Sea. They built naval bases in places like Suez and Jeddah to protect ships and make sure pilgrims were safe. The Ottomans also used their navy to challenge the Portuguese, who were trying to control the Indian Ocean spice trade by capturing ports in East Africa and India. Although the Ottomans never fully controlled the Indian Ocean, they made it harder for the Portuguese to dominate trade completely by helping Muslim states and pirate fleets attack Portuguese ships.



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2.4.4 The significance of religion in the sixteenth century

The 1500s were a time of major religious change in Europe. People argued about religion, which led to wars and new alliances between countries. Religion influenced politics and changed how people lived. To understand Europe and the Ottoman Empire during this period, it is important to see how much religion mattered.

Why religion was a cause of dispute in Europe

Spain's attitudes to Muslims

Religious differences caused wars and shaped alliances between countries in Europe. After Spain completed the Reconquista in 1492, when King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella captured Granada (the last Muslim city in Spain), they wanted the whole country to be Catholic. At first, they promised Muslims (known as *Mudéjars*) they could keep their religion. However, they soon broke that promise. In 1502, Muslims in Castile were told to convert to Christianity or leave Spain. This rule was extended to Aragon in 1526. Many Muslims converted but continued to practise Islam in secret. These people were known as Moriscos.

The Spanish rulers forced conversions and punished the Moriscos for keeping their old culture. They were banned from speaking Arabic, wearing traditional clothes or following Islamic customs. Many Moriscos were treated unfairly and not trusted by other Spaniards. In 1568, the Moriscos in southern Spain rebelled in what is known as the Revolt of the Alpujarras. They were angry about new laws banning their language, clothes and customs. The rebellion was crushed, but it showed that forcing everyone to follow one religion did not work well in such a mixed society.

Other countries, especially the Ottoman Empire (a powerful Muslim empire), noticed how badly Spain treated its Muslims. The Ottomans used this to present themselves as defenders of Muslims everywhere. They did not send much military help to the Moriscos, but they used their suffering as a reason to fight Christian Europe and grow their power in the Mediterranean.

The political consequences of religious reform movements

New religious ideas also changed politics in places like Germany and Switzerland. People such as Martin Luther and Huldrych Zwingli started movements that broke the Catholic Church's control over Europe. This led to major arguments, wars and new alliances.

In Germany, Martin Luther's 95 Theses in 1517 challenged the Pope's authority. Many German princes supported Luther because they did not want to pay the Pope or obey the Holy Roman Emperor. By becoming Protestant, they could take church land and gain more power. This caused the Holy Roman Empire to break into many Catholic and Protestant areas. It led to wars, such as the Schmalkaldic War (1546–1547). Emperor Charles V wanted everyone to stay Catholic, but the Protestant princes fought back.

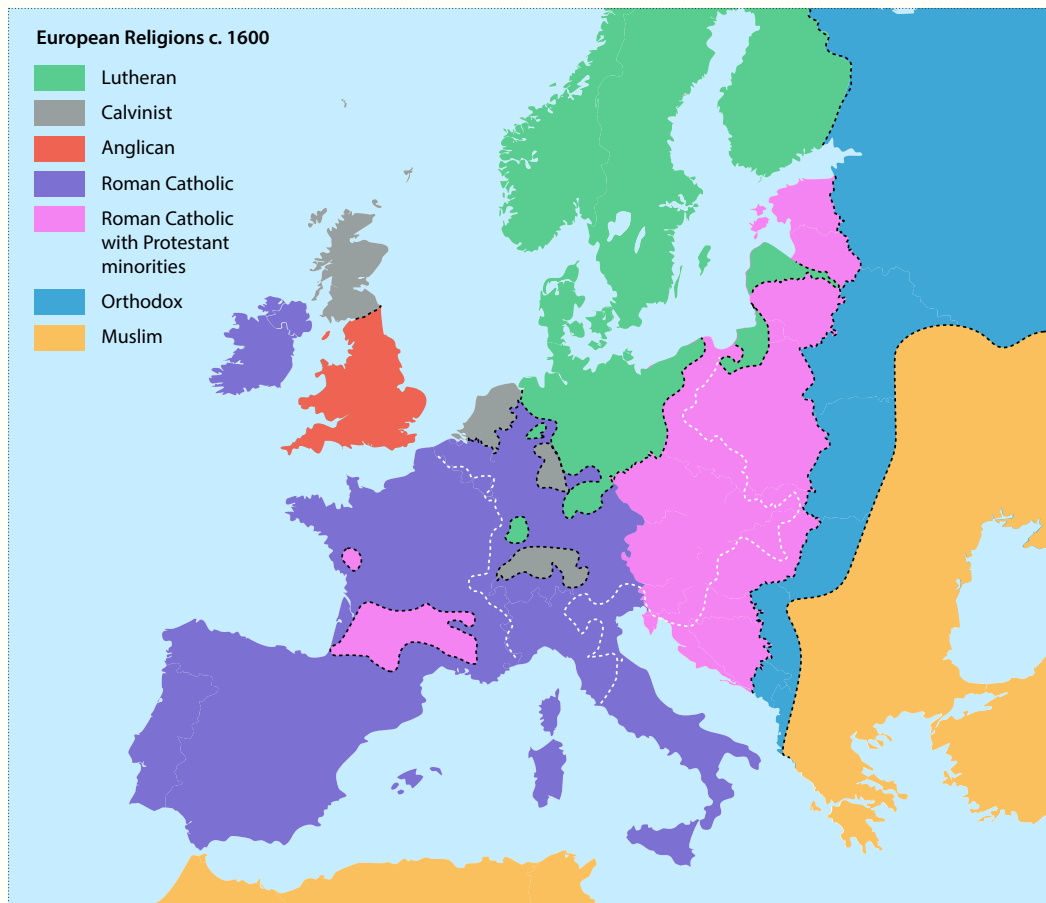
The Peace of Augsburg in 1555 ended this conflict for a while. It said that each ruler could decide whether their land would be Catholic or Protestant – 'whose realm, his religion.' This helped stop fighting for a time but made religious division in Europe official.





Other countries reacted strongly. The Catholic Habsburgs in Spain and the Holy Roman Empire hated Protestantism because it weakened their power. Catholic France, however, helped the Ottomans and German Protestants – not because they supported Protestants or Muslims, but because they wanted to weaken the Habsburgs.

So religion did not just affect faith – it forced leaders to make decisions about power, allies and enemies in new ways.



Map of Europe around 1600 showing regions by religion

Religious tolerance in the Ottoman Empire

Unlike the religious conflicts in Europe, the Ottoman Empire was mostly tolerant of different religions.

Süleyman's upholding of Islam

Süleyman I was a strong Muslim ruler who followed *Sharia* (Islamic law) in his empire. He made sure that Islam was the main religion – he built large mosques, supported Islamic schools and scholars, and took action against groups he saw as a threat, like the Shi'a-linked *Kızılbaş*. However, Süleyman also allowed Christians and Jews (called *dhimmis*) to follow their own religions, as long as they paid a special tax called *jizya*. His fair laws and focus on justice helped keep his empire stable and peaceful for many different groups of people. In Istanbul, the empire's capital, Süleyman built huge Islamic buildings like the famous Süleymaniye Mosque. At the same time, churches and synagogues stayed open, showing that different faiths could live side by side.





The protection afforded to Jews and Christians

Even though Süleyman was a devout Muslim, the Ottomans had a system that let Christians and Jews live safely and practise their religions. This was partly because Islamic law teaches that 'People of the Book' (Jews and Christians) should be protected. These groups were called *dhimmis*. They had to pay the *jizya* tax and follow certain rules, but they were allowed to run their own communities, settle family matters in their own courts, and keep their religious leaders. Süleyman, who was called *Kanuni* (the Lawgiver), made these rules clear and fair so people could live together peacefully.

This system was known as the millet system. Each religious community acted like a small nation, with its own leader who looked after the people's religious and everyday life. For example, the Greek Orthodox Patriarch led the Orthodox Christians, while the *Hahambaşı* (Chief Rabbi) led the Jewish community. Under Süleyman, the Jewish population grew significantly. After Spain and Portugal exiled Jews during the Inquisition, the Ottomans welcomed them. Many Jewish families moved to cities like Istanbul, Salonika and Edirne. They brought useful skills such as trading, printing, medicine and crafts. Süleyman even had a Jewish doctor, Moses Hamon, who treated him personally.

Christians too, especially in the Balkans and parts of Turkey (Anatolia), kept their churches and priests. They were not allowed to join the army or hold certain jobs, but they could work in business or government offices. Some Christian boys were taken through the *devshirme* system – they were removed from their families, converted to Islam and trained to become elite soldiers (Janissaries) or high-ranking officials. This system allowed people from different backgrounds to rise to powerful positions.

2.4.5 The reign and legacy of Süleyman I

Süleyman I's reign was the height of the Ottoman Empire's power and culture, but it also created problems for the future. He is remembered as a great ruler and lawmaker, but his time as sultan was not without difficulties. To understand his impact, it is important to look at the problems he faced at home and why people still talk about him today.

Domestic challenges facing the Ottoman Empire

Under Süleyman, the Ottoman Empire reached its peak, but behind the glory there were serious problems – too many people to feed, rising prices, unfair taxes, costly wars and an expensive court. These challenges made it harder for the empire to stay strong after his death.

The impact of demographic changes, food shortages and inflation

During Süleyman's reign, the empire's population grew quickly because of peace and new land being added. More people meant more food and land were needed. But farming could not keep up. Bad harvests, droughts and animal diseases made the situation worse.

More people moved to cities like Istanbul, Cairo and Aleppo, hoping to find work and food. This caused the prices of basic goods, especially bread and grain, to rise. The Ottomans tried to bring in food from other parts of the empire, such as Egypt and the Balkans, but





this was costly and slow. Sometimes there were bread riots in Istanbul because people were so angry about hunger and high prices.

Another reason prices went up was that large amounts of silver from the Americas flooded into Europe and the Ottoman Empire. This caused money to lose value – so even if people earned the same wages, they could not buy as much. This was called inflation. It created big problems for soldiers and government workers, whose pay did not rise with prices. Some began to take bribes, while others became angry and even rebelled.

The empire also gave out land, known as timars, to soldiers and officials as rewards. But as the population grew and land became scarce, it became harder to give out timars fairly. Some people cheated the system, and the government struggled to collect taxes properly. To deal with this, the state often sold the right to collect taxes to private individuals – a system called tax farming. These tax farmers paid the government upfront, then collected taxes from local people, often demanding far too much. This led to anger and made many villagers lose trust in the empire.

The costs of war, government and the royal court

Süleyman fought more wars than any Ottoman ruler before him. He expanded the empire into Central Europe, North Africa and the Middle East. Major wars like the Siege of Vienna (1529), along with battles against Persia and the Habsburgs, cost huge amounts of money. Armies needed food, weapons, ships and forts, which quickly drained the empire's wealth.

Even though the Ottomans gained land and treasure through conquest – such as when they captured Buda in 1541 – this extra money did not last long and was not enough to fix the empire's deeper problems.

As the empire grew, it needed more officials to run the new provinces. Süleyman created new laws to keep control, which is why he became known as *Kanuni* (the Lawgiver). But paying so many governors, judges and soldiers cost more each year. Many local officials were corrupt and took money for themselves. This meant the central government often relied on tax farming, which made villagers angry and weakened control in distant regions.

At the same time, Süleyman's royal court in Istanbul became very expensive. Huge building projects like the Süleymaniye Mosque, designed by the famous architect Mimar Sinan, were meant to show the empire's power but cost a lot. The palace also had to feed and pay many people – guards, servants, the harem, Janissaries (elite soldiers), artists and advisors.

Because inflation made money lose value, Janissaries and other soldiers often found their wages no longer covered their needs. Many demanded more money, refused to work or even rebelled.



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Why Süleyman is regarded as a significant ruler

Süleyman is remembered as both ‘the Magnificent’ and ‘the Lawgiver’, but these titles are sometimes debated. He brought the empire’s laws together and helped expand its power and culture, but his reign also had flaws and left problems for the future.

Süleyman the Lawgiver, and criticisms of that title

Sultan Süleyman I ruled the Ottoman Empire from 1520 –1566. He was called *Kanuni*, which means ‘the Lawgiver’, because he made major changes to the empire’s legal system. Süleyman didn’t just fight wars — he also wanted to make sure the empire’s diverse population was ruled fairly and consistently.

Before Süleyman, the empire’s laws were a mix of *Sharia* (Islamic religious law), *kanun* (non-religious state law), and *örf* (local customs). Süleyman worked to bring these together into a clearer, written system so that judges, officials and ordinary people knew what to expect. His law code, called the *Kanunname-i Ali Osman*, covered taxes, crime, land ownership and how markets should be run.



A plate bearing the name of Sultan Süleyman I at al-Masjid al-Nabawi in Medina [Image](#) by Ashashyou / Wikimedia Commons / CC S-A 4.0

He also made rules to protect poor farmers, so powerful landowners could not take their land unfairly. He tried to stop corrupt judges by improving how they were chosen and trained. He also wanted all final legal decisions to come from Istanbul, so local officials couldn’t just make up rules to suit themselves.

Süleyman wanted to be seen as a just ruler – the ‘Shadow of God on Earth.’ He had poems and inscriptions made to show his concern for fairness and good government.

But not everyone agrees that Süleyman truly deserved the title ‘Lawgiver’. Some historians say he didn’t create many new laws – he mainly improved and organised those made by earlier sultans like Mehmed II and Bayezid II. Critics also argue that by making the system too fixed and centralised, he made it harder for later sultans to respond when the empire’s problems changed.

Some of Süleyman’s actions didn’t match his image as a fair ruler. For example, he continued the *devshirme* system, where Christian boys were taken from their families and trained as Muslim soldiers or officials. He was also harsh with religious groups he saw as dangerous, especially Shi’a Muslims.

So, although Süleyman’s legal reforms helped hold the empire together, people still debate whether he truly deserves to be called the ‘Lawgiver’.



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Süleyman the Magnificent, and criticisms of that title

In Europe, Süleyman is often called Süleyman ‘the Magnificent’. This is because he made the Ottoman Empire extremely powerful, won major military victories and supported an impressive cultural golden age.

Under Süleyman, the Ottoman Empire reached its greatest size. His armies captured key cities such as Belgrade (1521), Rhodes (1522), and Baghdad (1534). In 1529, his troops even reached the gates of Vienna. He also took control of Mecca and Medina, two of the holiest cities in Islam. This strengthened the empire’s role as the leader of the Sunni Muslim world.

At sea, the Ottoman navy – led by Admiral Hayreddin Barbarossa – won a major victory against Spanish and Venetian ships at the Battle of Preveza (1538). This gave the Ottomans control over the eastern Mediterranean. These victories made Süleyman famous across Europe and helped create his image as a powerful and successful ruler.

Culturally, Süleyman’s court in Istanbul became a centre of art, architecture and literature. He supported the great architect Mimar Sinan, who designed stunning buildings like the Süleymaniye Mosque. Süleyman himself wrote poetry under the name ‘Muhibbi’, and his court became as impressive as the Renaissance courts in Europe at the same time.

However, not everyone agrees that the title ‘Magnificent’ tells the full story. Some historians point out that his many wars were extremely costly, both in money and in human lives. Although the empire gained land and riches, these victories also stretched its resources and made it harder to govern such a large area effectively.

There were problems inside the royal court as well. Süleyman’s reign was marked by plots, rivalries, and family tensions. One of the most shocking events was when he ordered the execution of his own son, Prince Mustafa – likely due to pressure from his wife, Hürrem Sultan, and her allies. This showed how brutal and dangerous court politics could be.

Lastly, some historians argue that Süleyman did not build everything from scratch. Many of the empire’s key systems – like the legal code, military structure and central government – had been started by earlier sultans such as Mehmed II and Bayezid II. Süleyman improved and expanded them, but he didn’t create them on his own.

So, while he truly strengthened the empire and helped its culture flourish, the title ‘the Magnificent’ may leave out some of the more difficult and darker sides of his reign.

Conclusion

Süleyman’s reign marked the height of Ottoman power, but his legacy extended far beyond his lifetime. He left behind a vast and diverse empire, strengthened by military conquests, legal reforms and maritime expansion. His rule demonstrated effective governance and cultural flourishing, while managing the complexities of a multi-ethnic, multi-religious state. Süleyman’s legacy remains a subject of ongoing debate, with scholars recognising both the achievements of his military and administrative leadership and the economic and political challenges that followed. While acknowledging the burdens his campaigns placed on the empire, we must also recognise his role in shaping the Ottoman Empire’s place in world history.

