The Ottoman Empire was one of the most powerful and long-lasting in world history. The Ottomans ruled large areas of the Middle East, Eastern Europe and North Africa for more than 600 years. Its official religion was Islam, and its leader was known as the sultan. He had complete religious and political authority over his people. Western Europeans generally felt threatened by the empire. However many historians believed that the Ottoman Empire made the area more stable and secure. It was also known for its arts, science, religion and culture.
Origins of the Ottoman Empire
Osman I founded the Ottoman Empire around 1299. He was a leader of the Turkish tribes in Anatolia, now in present-day Turkey. The term “Ottoman” comes from Osman’s name, which was “Uthman” in Arabic.
In 1453, Mehmed II the Conqueror seized the ancient city of Constantinople. It was the capital of the Byzantine Empire, and its defeat meant the end of the 1,000-year-old empire. It's important to note that historians are the ones who call it the Byzantine Empire. To the people living in it, it was the new capital of the Roman Empire, after Rome had fallen.

Sultan Mehmed renamed the city Istanbul, meaning “the city of Islam.” He made it the new capital of the Ottoman Empire. Istanbul became an important center of trade and culture.

Suleiman and the period of expansion

The empire reached its peak between 1520 and 1566, during the reign of Suleiman the Magnificent. This period was known for its great power and wealth.

Suleiman gave the Ottomans a modern government and law. He gave protections to Christians and Jews. Suleiman also changed the tax system. People had to pay taxes according to their income. The rich paid more than the poor. Government jobs became based on ability, rather than on family connections. All Ottoman citizens had to follow the law.
Suleiman also welcomed different forms of arts and literature.

Throughout Sultan Suleiman’s rule, the empire expanded. At its height, the Ottoman Empire stretched from North Africa to the Middle East and up into Central Europe.

**Ottoman art and science**

The Ottomans were known for their art, science and medicine. Istanbul became an artistic center, especially during the reign of Suleiman. The Ottomans absorbed learning from the Arab lands they had conquered, as scholars from places like Egypt, Syria and the Holy Land headed to Istanbul. The Ottomans also came to control the Silk Road trade routes. They traded with Italian city-states like Venice and also Asian nations. These roads also brought new ideas and culture.

Painting, poetry and music were popular. The Ottomans were also known throughout the world for their textiles, carpets and ceramics. The Ottomans built soaring mosques and public buildings during this period.
Science was important. The Ottomans studied advanced mathematics, astronomy, physics, geography and chemistry.

The Ottoman Empire and other religions

The Ottoman Empire was Muslim. It was more tolerant of other religions than Christian kingdoms in Europe at that time. Jews and Christians were considered inferior to Muslims and had to pay extra taxes. But Jews, Christians and Muslims mostly lived together peacefully until the 1800s. Christians and Jews had some power to control their own community affairs.

Devshirme

In the 1300s, the Ottomans created the devshirme system. The Ottomans conquered many Christians lands. Under the system, European Christians were forced to give up some of their male children, who were converted to Islam and became slaves.

However, being picked to join the devshirme was one of the best ways to get ahead in Ottoman society. Some of them became powerful and wealthy. Many became government officials or served in the military. The Janissaries filled many government jobs and were the ones who ran the empire on a day-to-day basis. But the Janissaries were not allowed to marry and have children, so they couldn't create a class of people to challenge the power of the Sultan.

Over time, the devshirme system included some boys from Muslim families too. The system lasted until the end of the 1600s.

Decline of the Ottoman Empire

Much of the Ottomans' wealth and power came from taking over so many lands. The sultan would rent conquered lands to his favorite subjects, and these aristocrats would tax the farmers on the land. But starting in the 1600s, the Ottoman Empire began losing power, influence and land. The reason was a combination of factors.

European nations grew stronger. Many now had gold they'd taken from the Americas. The Europeans brought new types of competition. They used gold from the Americas to buy the raw materials like wool and leather that Ottoman artisans needed. Ottoman manufacturing was hurt. Also, the empire could not compete with trade from the Americas and India. At the same time, the empire was being led by bad or weak sultans.

By 1913, the Ottoman Empire had lost nearly all its territory.
When did the Ottoman Empire fall?

World War I began in 1914. By that time, the Ottoman Empire was already failing. The Ottoman Turks fought on the side of Germany and Austria-Hungary and against the United States, Britain and France. They were defeated in 1918, and most Ottoman territories were divided up. Britain, France, Greece and Russia each took a part.

The Ottoman Empire officially ended in 1922. Turkey became a republic in 1923.

Armenian genocide

In 1915, Ottoman leaders made a plan to wipe out Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. The Armenians are a Christian group whose ancestors came from Armenia. Parts of Armenia were taken over by the Ottoman Empire. Most scholars believe that about 1.5 million Armenians were killed in 1915.

This wasn't the first massacre of Armenians. Armenians had begun asking for more rights in the late 1800s, and in 1895 the Ottomans massacred between 100,000 and 300,000 Armenians because of it.

The Turkish government denies a genocide ever took place. In fact, it’s illegal to talk about it in Turkey.
The Ottoman legacy

The Ottoman Turks lasted for more than 600 years. A total of 36 sultans ruled between 1299 and 1922. They are remembered for their military, art and architecture, and how they accepted different religions and cultures.

The mighty empire’s influence is still alive in Turkey today.