

EARLY MODERN ARABIC HISTORY

Devin J Stewart, Ph.D.

The Ottoman Period

Reading: Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, pp. 709-58; Bruce Masters, *The Arabs of the Ottoman Empire, 1516-1918: Social-Cultural History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

Ottoman conquest, 1516-17. The Ottoman state began ca. 1291 as a small principality on the Byzantine frontier in Eastern Anatolia, and its main order of business was to raid the Byzantines incessantly, carving out an ever-larger territory for itself. The Ottomans conquered Bursa in 1326, making that their capital, then Edirne (Adrianople) in 1366, along with additional territory in both the Balkans and Anatolia. Though nearly wiped out by Tamerlane at the Battle of Ankara in 1402, the Ottomans quickly recovered and conquered Constantinople in 1453, bringing the Byzantine Empire to an end after over seven centuries of intermittent warfare with Muslim powers. Firmly established in Istanbul, the Ottomans expanded both in Europe and Anatolia, coming into conflict with the Safavids in Iran, whom they defeated in 1514 at the Battle of Chaldiran in Azerbaijan, and the Mamluks in Syria. In 1516, the Ottomans defeated the Mamluk forces led by Qansuh al-Ghawri at Marj Dabiq north of Aleppo. The next year, 1517, they marched through Syria and defeated Tuman Bay and the remaining Mamluks at the Battle of al-Raydaniyyah, north of Cairo. In less than two years, the Ottomans had doubled the size of their Empire and become rulers of a large part of the Arab world, but they did not stop there. In 1536 they conquered Iraq from the Safavids. Later conquests in North Africa gave them suzerainty over the local rulers in Libya, Tunisia, and Algeria. The campaigns of Sinan Pasha in the mid-16th century gave them control over Yemen. The only territories that they did not control in the Arab world were Morocco and parts of the Arabian Peninsula.

Power shifts north. From the perspective of the native Arab population, the Ottomans resembled the Mamluks in their Turkish language and cultural background, their separation as a separate military class from the populace in general, and in their patronage of Islamic architecture, learning, and charity in order to establish political legitimacy. There were a number of important differences, however. In general, the centers of power moved further north to Istanbul, Tabriz, Isfahan, and Bukhara, key points for controlling the Silk Road. Cairo ceased to be a major world capital and began to lose the glory it had had during the Mamluk period. While Cairo and Damascus continued to be centers of learning, the main intellectual center became Istanbul, where scholars of Turkish and Persian origin had an advantage, and the scholars of Cairo and Damascus became subordinate to and dependent on "the Turkish Mullas", who occupied the major posts of judge and law professor not only in Anatolia, but in the provinces as well. The former Mamluk territories became sources of tax income for the central government in Istanbul.

Decline. The Ottomans on the whole were better organized, more capable, and less rapacious than the Mamluks, but overall the Arab provinces experienced a decline during this period, the causes of which were not only political but also economic. In the sixteenth century the European powers, led by Portugal and including the Dutch and the British especially, began rounding the Cape of Good Hope in order to reach the Indian Ocean and trade directly with East Africa, Yemen, Oman, India, and points further east, thereby breaking the Middle East's monopoly over the spice trade which dated back to before the Islamic period and thereby depriving the region of a lucrative source of income. Under these circumstances, income from trade along the Silk Road, which stretched from China

through Mongolia and Central Asia to northern Iran and Anatolia, became more important, further consolidating power and economic prosperity in the northern tier of the Middle East, farther from Arab regions. While Syria, Egypt, and Iraq continued to be important agricultural regions, by nearly any measure they deteriorated considerably and particularly after the Ottomans' heyday in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Naval presence. While they were expanding their territory in the Arab World, the Ottomans were also expanding north through the Balkans into Central Europe. An oft-cited indication of the extent of their expansion is the fact that they besieged Vienna twice, once in 1529 and once in 1683. The Ottoman presence in the Balkans and north of the Black Sea would be reversed in European attempts to end Muslim control and to expel Muslims in later history, leading to a series of conflicts with the Russians in the 18th and 19th centuries, the Crimean War, the Greek War of independence, the conflicts of World War I, and most recently the crises in Bosnia and Kosovo. In addition, during the period of expansion the Ottomans developed a strong naval fleet in the Mediterranean and even reached into the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. They challenged the European powers and only lost their dominant standing in the late 16th century. The turning point was the Battle of Lepanto in 1571, in which the navies of the Holy League (including Spain, Venice, and others) destroyed the main fleet of the Ottomans near the Gulf of Corinth.

Barbary corsairs. While the Ottomans were no longer able to meet the navies of Spain, Portugal, and England on an equal footing, their navy and the navy of their vassals in Tripoli, Tunis, and Algiers preyed upon Mediterranean shipping until the 19th century. In a form of state-sponsored piracy, captains supported by local rulers raided commercial vessels, taking ships, plunder, and captives. The captives were generally held for ransom or sold into slavery. Some captives became renegades, converting to Islam and working with the pirates, even becoming captains themselves. This piracy led to the political and military involvement of the young nation of the United States with the region. Morocco was one of the first nations to recognize the United States' independence, and North Africa appears in the Marine's song: "From the halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli ..." commemorating their expedition against the Bey of Tripoli in 1811.

Napoleon in Egypt. The Ottoman Empire in the 19th century was described as the sick man of Europe: the European powers were crowded around him as he lay dying, waiting for the moment when he would pass away so that they could carve out pieces of territory for themselves. The rivalry between the circling vultures, the French, the British, and the Russians, however, had the effect of delaying the colonization of the Arab world for nearly a century. The entire Arab world could have become colonized at the end of the 18th century, for it was then that Napoleon invaded and conquered Egypt, one of the most important Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire. The French occupied Egypt from 1798 to 1801. However, the British, anxious to prevent strategic points on the route to India from falling into the hands of rivals, were instrumental in ousting the French from Egypt and preventing them from returning. Napoleon's invasion was a shock to Egypt, the Arab World, and the Ottoman Empire because it made it clear that the Europeans had gained a tremendous lead in military and technical advancement. Napoleon brought scholars in all fields along with the expedition. They wrote the *Description de l'Égypte*, a multi-volume record of the flora, fauna, and monuments of Egypt. They made demonstrations of chemistry and physics to the scholars of Egypt, showcasing some of the great advancements the French had made in these fields over the previous century. Because of their discovery of the Rosetta stone while restoring a fortress, Jean-François Champollion would decipher hieroglyphic writing back in France.

Muhammad Ali and modernization. From 1805 until 1849, Muhammad Ali, an Albanian by origin, served as the Ottoman governor of Egypt. Undoubtedly in reaction to the technical superiority of Napoleon's army, he embarked on a large-scale reform and modernization project that transformed Egypt and soon outstripped the efforts of the Ottoman central government. He sent educational missions to France to learn military sciences, mining, engineering, medicine, and other topics. The graduates returned to Egypt to teach a new cadre of civil servants. A government newspaper was established, as well as a printing press for Arabic books. The first railroads were built, and steamships were used on the Nile. Roads and infrastructure were built, and irrigation and transport for agricultural goods were improved. In order to generate income, Muhammad Ali promoted state control of agriculture, concentrating on the production of cotton, Egypt's most lucrative cash crop. The army was organized and modernized. Muhammad Ali and his son Ibrahim led military expeditions against the Wahhabis in Saudi Arabia in 1811-18 and then fought the Ottomans twice, in 1831-33 and 1838-40. They defeated the Ottoman forces at Konya in 1832 and again at Nezib in 1839 and certainly would have toppled the Ottoman government had it not been for the intervention of the British on both occasions. These shows of strength allowed Muhammad Ali to rule over Syria for a time and to establish a dynasty in Egypt that would last until 1952; his successors first adopted the title Khedive but were recognized as King in the twentieth century.

The British occupation of Egypt. While the European powers colonized peripheral areas, including Algeria, which the French invaded in 1830, and Aden (South Yemen), which the British occupied to serve as a coaling station on the route to India 1839, they did not occupy the central territories until much later. An understanding, referred to as Entente Cordiale, stipulated that the British and the French would not oppose each other's interests in the Middle East as long as they did not undermine those of the other party. This policy, which was put into a partly secret treaty in 1904, prevented the colonization of the Middle East and the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The Khedives Sa'id Pasha and Isma'il engaged the French to build the Suez Canal, which was completed in 1869. This broke down the tacit understanding with the British, because they viewed foreign control of the Suez Canal as a direct threat to their interests in India. Lacking the administrative abilities of Muhammad Ali and tending to spend much more than the government could afford, Ismail drove Egypt into debt, and in 1875 the British bought a controlling interest in the Canal and became intimately involved with the administration of Egypt's finances. This led to the British occupation of Egypt in 1882. Elsewhere, Tunisia became a French colony in 1878, Sudan was conquered jointly by the British and Egypt in 1898, Libya was occupied by Italy in 1908, and Morocco divided by the French and Spanish in 1912. The central Arab lands remained provinces of the Ottoman Empire until WWI.

Questions

Describe the Ottoman conquests of the Arab provinces. What factors led to their occurrence?

In what ways were did the Ottomans continue the legacy of earlier dynasties in the Middle East, and in what ways did they depart from earlier examples?

What are some of the long-term effects of Ottoman rule in the Arab world?

What happened to the great capital cities of earlier periods—Damascus, Baghdad, and Cairo—during the Ottoman period?

Describe the effects of coffee and tobacco on the Arab World.

How did Napoleon's invasion of Egypt affect the history of Egypt and other neighboring regions?

How would you characterize the relationship between Muhammad Ali's Egypt and the Ottoman sultanate in Istanbul in the first half of the nineteenth century?

What are the major reforms that Muhammad Ali instituted, and what long-lasting effects did they have?

Further Reading

Creelius, Daniel and Abd al-Wahhab Bakr. *Al-Damurdashi's Chronicle of Egypt 1688-1755*. Leiden: Brill, 1991.

Davis, Robert C. *Christian Slaves, Muslim Masters: White Slavery in the Mediterranean, the Barbary Coast and Italy, 1500-1800*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

Fahmy, Khaled. *All the Pasha's Men: Mehmed Ali Pasha, His Army and the Founding of Modern Egypt*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Hanssen, Jens and Thomas Philipp, and Stefan Weber, eds. *The Empire in the City: Arab Provincial Capitals in the Late Ottoman Empire*. Würzburg: Ergon, 2002.

Hathaway, Jane. *The Politics of Households in Ottoman Egypt: The Rise of the Qazdaglis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Hathaway, Jan and Karl Barbir. *The Arab Lands under Ottoman Rule, 1516-1800*. London: Routledge, 2002.

Hathaway, Jane. *Al-Jabarti's History of Egypt*. Princeton: Markus Wiener, 2009.

Lane-Poole, Stanley and J. D. Jerrold Kelley. *The Story of the Barbary Corsairs*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1890. (available on line)

Masters, Bruce. *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World: The Roots of Sectarianism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Tinniswood, Adrian. *Pirates of Barbary: Corsairs, conquests and Captivity in the Seventeenth-Century Mediterranean*. London: Riverhead, 2010.