Suleiman the Magnificent, ruler of the Ottoman Empire in the 16th century, conquered many lands and allowed diverse cultures to exist within his empire. Comparing and contrasting his accomplishments with those of Alexander the Great or other famous conquerors can give students a new perspective on world history.

Historical Background
At its height, the Ottoman Empire’s lands stretched as far as Yemen to the south, Hungary to the west, Persia to the east, and Russia to the north. This large empire was ruled by a single family that produced an unbroken line of sultans (rulers) from the 1300s until the early 1900s. Under Suleiman—a sultan renowned for his sense of justice, his dedication to his people, his skills as a warrior, his understanding of Islam, and his artistic achievements—the Ottoman Empire experienced a golden age from 1520 to 1566. Europeans called Suleiman “the Magnificent,” but the Ottomans called Suleiman Kanuni, or “The Lawgiver,” because he established Ottoman law codes in order to create a unified system of justice, with Suleiman as the supreme authority.

The Ottoman Empire was known for its ruthless pursuit of new land, its great prosperity, its support for the arts and architecture, and the education of its citizens. Suleiman could afford all of these things because of the wealth he acquired through trade and taxation. During his reign, the sultan’s chief architect, Mimar Sinan, built over 300 structures throughout the empire. Sinan’s greatest architectural achievement was Suleiman’s Mosque (called Suleymaniye in Turkish and Arabic)—a rectangular prayer hall covered by an eighty-six-foot-wide dome—that remains Istanbul’s largest mosque. Suleiman was also a prolific poet, writing more than 3,000 poems during his lifetime. Islam was the main religion in the Ottoman Empire, but Suleiman allowed freedom of religion. Non-Muslims were allowed to create their own communities, live in their own neighborhoods, and run their own schools. However, Suleiman did charge Christians and Jews a personal tax as payment for being allowed to practice their religion. Sultans who came after Suleiman, including his son Selim, were less capable rulers. By 1922, the office of sultan had been abolished and by 1923 the Republic of Turkey was born. However, influences from the time of Suleiman continue to flourish in Turkey today, particularly in the skill of the artisans and rug makers who work and live there.
Suleiman I

Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, Suleiman I "the Magnificent" conquered Iraq and parts of Christian eastern and central Europe, as well as parts of the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean.

Suleiman was born in about 1494, the only son of Selim I, who had conquered Syria and Egypt. Selim I had strangled his brothers (as required by law) in order to avoid wars of succession; Suleiman, as the only son, was spared this ceremony when he took over the title of caliph (successor to Muhammad) at age 26. The young Suleiman had already helped run his father's government for 16 years, and he continued his father's warrior tradition. But first he had to suppress revolts in Syria, Egypt, and Anatolia from his palace in Istanbul.

Suleiman's first military campaign was against Belgrade. Sitting where the Danube and Sava rivers meet, Belgrade was the key to Christian defense of Europe. Suleiman (a devout Muslim) marched in with an army of 100,000 in 1521 and captured the Christian city in three weeks. Most people had fled, and the 400 who surrendered with either killed or enslaved.

Suleiman next turned his attention to the Island of Rhodes, just six miles off the coast of Turkey and the last outpost of Christian Crusader knights. The knights survived by attacking Turkish trading ships between Istanbul and Egypt. Suleiman laid siege to the island, firing 85,000 cannonballs at the fortress' walls. Magnanimously, Suleiman allowed the knights to surrender with honor, keeping their arms, a few days before Christmas 1522. Suleiman also spared the citizenry of Rhodes, a move that would earn him the title "The Magnificent" among European Christians.

Suleiman stayed away from war for three years, but his highly trained soldiers grew restless. In 1526, he invaded Hungary. During the First Battle of Mohacs (1526), his army of 100,000 killed 20,000 Hungarians in only two hours. Suleiman put John Zapolya in place as a vassal king of Hungary. The Ottoman Empire now stretched from Egypt in the south, to the eastern reaches of Turkey, and to Hungary in the west. Later, Archduke Ferdinand of Austria defeated Zapolya in a civil war, and Suleiman laid siege to Vienna from September 27 to October 15, 1529. Suleiman's army withdrew before it was able to overtake the city, but it was the greatest threat to Christian Europe since the eighth century.

In 1530, infuriated that the pope had crowned Charles V as Holy Roman emperor (Suleiman was the only true emperor, he believed), Suleiman tried to lure Charles into war in Austria. His effort was unsuccessful, but his army did pillage Austria. Next, he turned his attention to Persia in the east. His brother-in-law and grand vizier, Ibrahim, led the army against Tabriz and Baghdad, overtaking those cities. Unfortunately for Ibrahim, he also began to take on titles he did not deserve. He soon discovered that while Suleiman wasn’t forced to strangle any brothers upon his accession to the throne, he was not above strangling an uppity brother-in-law. Ibrahim’s body was found outside the palace on May 15, 1536.

Through cooperation with the pirate Barbarossa brothers, Suleiman was able to gain control of the Mediterranean Sea in 1538. Suleiman’s forces, under command of Piri Reis, also gained control of the Red Sea and successfully protected the Middle Eastern caravan routes essential to the spice trade. In 1540,
Zapolya died, and Suleiman was drawn again into war in Europe. He recaptured Buda (now Budapest) and occupied Albania and Moldavia (Romania). In 1547, Suleiman made a truce with Archduke Ferdinand under which Ferdinand paid an annual tribute to the Turkish sultan.

Back in Istanbul, Suleiman was increasingly influenced by Roxelana, a Russian woman who had been a member of his harem and later became his wife. Hungry for power, Roxelana arranged for Suleiman's eldest son to be strangled in 1553, leaving her sons as the only eligible heirs to the throne. At the same time, Suleiman was again warring in Persia, finally settling the border dispute in 1555. The Ottoman Empire absorbed half of Georgia and Azerbaijan and all of Kurdistan and Iraq. Roxelana died in 1558, and her sons Selim and Bayezid went to war against Suleiman, trying to overthrow him. A defeated Bayezid fled to Persia, where the shah traded him back to Suleiman. Suleiman executed Bayezid and his four sons in 1561.

All through his reign, Suleiman was an active legislator, establishing laws governing criminal punishments, inheritance rights, and regulations regarding feudal grants. For this reason, he is known as Suleiman "The Lawgiver" in the Muslim world. He was also a poet and a patron of the arts. He commissioned many mosques to be built and many other buildings that today give Istanbul its domed and minaret architectural flavor.

In 1560, the Turkish fleet defeated the Spanish Navy off Tunisia. Suleiman turned his attention to the island of Malta, being held by the same knights he had allowed to go free off Rhodes 40 years earlier. In 1565, 40,000 Turks laid siege to the island. The Christian knights held them off but suffered terrible casualties. Suleiman himself, now 72 and ailing, did not travel to Malta, but he did make one final assault on Hungary. He died outside the Hungarian town of Szigeth on September 5 or 6, 1566. His grand vizier pretended Suleiman was still alive, propping up the body until his son, Selim, could reach Istanbul and gain the throne. Suleiman's heart was buried at Szigeth and his body returned to Istanbul, where it is interred in the Suleiman Mosque.

Further Reading


MLA Citation

Otoman Empire 1300 – 1600,
At the same time that Edward III ruled England; cannons were first being developed; the Ming Dynasty was ruling China; the Moors were invading Spain; India was the land of the Khans; Italy was made up of city states, including the Roman Papal State, Venice, and Florence; Robert Bruce ruled Scotland; Islamic traders traveled across Northern and Eastern Africa, and the Olmec and Mayan peoples dominated Central America, a Ghazi (warrior/ruler) ruler, Osman, led his armies to conquer Byzantine cities and forts in Turkish Anatolia (present day Western Asian Turkey).

Osman declared himself Sultan in 1299 and in so doing, founded the empire that would bear his name – Ottoman. Conquered peoples were ruled under a newly devised institution, the millet. The millet allowed non-Turks and non-Muslims to live their lives fairly much as always, with the exception of taxes and military service. Within one hundred years, Osman’s Dream of a three continent empire was coming true. His son and grandson, Orhan and Murad I, expanded the empire throughout Turkey and European Thrace, minus the Byzantine stronghold and capital, Constantinople. The Italian city-states of Genoa and Venice were unable to help the Byzantines defeat the Ottomans. Bulgaria, Greece, and Serbia, along with the rest of the Balkans (the lands just beyond Thrace), became concerned, knowing they were not well prepared to fight off the Ottoman invaders. Bulgaria faced a second threat from Hungary, who also wanted the rich land on the Black Sea. Serbia had been the ruling force of much of the Balkans, but a weak leader in the mid-1300’s caused the various lands to throw off Serbian control and divide into smaller, more vulnerable countries known as principalities. Among these were Thessaly, Epiros (both former Greek provinces), Albania, and Macedonia. Attempts by Serbian lands to unite against the Ottomans were unsuccessful and the Ottoman control of food supplies to Byzantium increasingly led to Ottoman land holdings being extended to the north and west. Further conquests in the 1380’s and 1390’s were enhanced through the practice of taking young men from conquered Christians to become the standing army (devirsme). One of the most crucial battles was the Battle of Kosovo on June 28, 1389; a resounding victory for the Ottoman and vassal agreements with Serbia’s princes. In 1396, the Hungarian king Sigismund organized a crusade against the Ottomans. The primary battle took place in Nikopol and was a crushing defeat of the French and Hungarian knights. Because Bulgaria had allowed the Crusaders to pass through its lands, the Ottoman Sultan invaded Bulgaria and took all the territory, ending the existence of Bulgaria until the 20th century. Attacks by the Mongol khan, Timor, from the East interrupted the quest for more lands and expansion of the empire. Additional squabbling between the sons of the Sultan who had died in captivity also interfered with the acquiring of new lands and adequate administration of the Balkan lands.

- By Linda Waagen

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