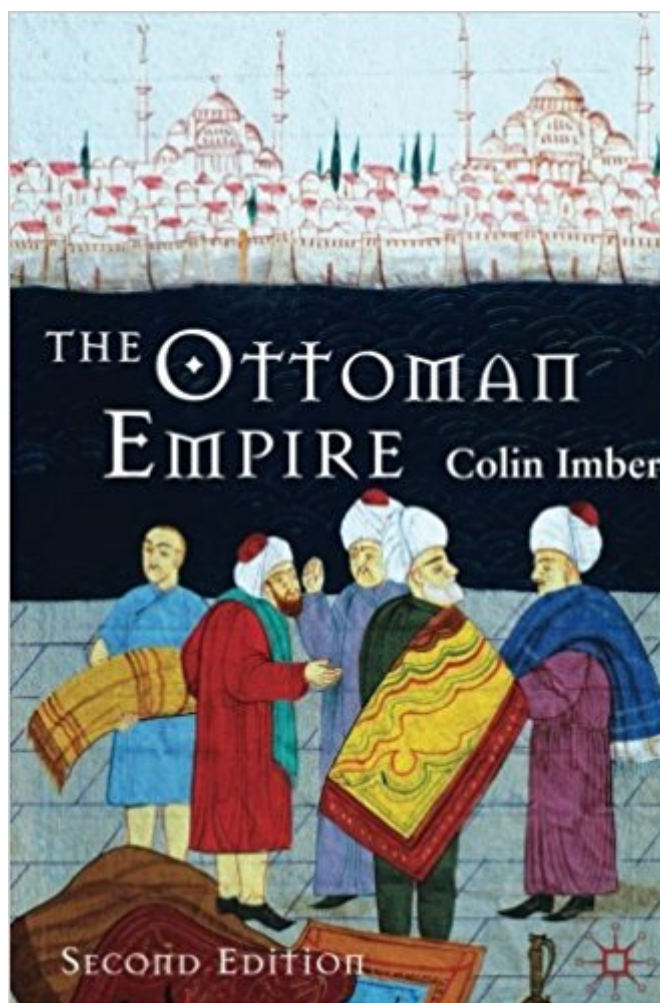


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# The Ottoman Empire, 1300-1650: The Structure Of Power



## Synopsis

This highly-praised and authoritative account surveys the history of the Ottoman Empire from its obscure origins in the fourteenth century, through its rise to world-power status in the sixteenth century, to the troubled times of the seventeenth century. Going beyond a simple narrative of Ottoman achievements and key events, Colin Imber uses original sources and research, as well as the rapidly growing body of modern scholarship on the subject, to show how the Sultans governed their realms and the limits on their authority. A helpful chronological introduction provides the context, while separate chapters deal with the inner politics of the dynasty, the court and central government, the provinces, the law courts and legal system, and the army and fleet. Revised, updated and expanded, this new edition now also features a chapter on taxation and incorporates the most recent developments in the field throughout.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Colin Imber has expanded and updated his masterly survey of the Ottoman state down to the mid-seventeenth century to take account of important recent developments in the field, and to add a lucid account of the labyrinthine Ottoman taxation system. He has produced a valuable and informative study which manages to combine real in-depth insights into the institutions and the remarkably 'other' power structures of the Ottoman empire with an vigorous and often pithy style which wears its learning lightly. A must for all actual and wanna-be Ottomanists." -- Colin Heywood, University of Hull, UK "Colin Imber's book remains the best overview of the early Ottoman institutions. The updates and the addition of a new chapter on taxation make it even better." --

Gabor Agoston, Georgetown University, USA, co-author of the Encyclopedia of the Ottoman Empire.

'Colin Imber has expanded and updated his masterly survey of the Ottoman state down to the mid-seventeenth century to take account of important recent developments in the field, and to add a lucid account of the labyrinthine Ottoman taxation system. He has produced a valuable and informative study which manages to combine real in-depth insights into the institutions and the remarkably 'other' power structures of the Ottoman empire with a vigorous and often pithy style which wears its learning lightly. A must for all actual and wanna-be Ottomanists.' - Colin Heywood, University of Hull, UK 'Colin Imber's book remains the best overview of the early Ottoman institutions. The updates and the addition of a new chapter on taxation make it even better.'

This book suggests the structure of power in the Ottoman Empire, from 1300 to 1650. I did not get that information from reading this book. Of course, he mostly took the European perspective, as the book title suggests, but this book lacks more facts than most books on the Ottoman Empire. This book was lacking information for me. I would not have bought it if I would have been allowed to look inside the book first. (I did not have that feature when I purchased the book).

Interesting

For the past thirty-six years, readers seeking an introduction to the Ottoman empire have turned to Halil İnalcık's classic *The Ottoman Empire: The Classical Age 1300-1600*. Written by the dean of Ottoman history, it provided an overview of its history and an examination of its components that has stood the test of time. Over the three and a half decades since its publication, however, a wealth of new scholarship has emerged that has refined and developed our knowledge. The fruits of this can be seen in Colin Imber's study, one that treads much of the same ground as İnalcık but does so with the benefit of an additional generation of study. The layout of Imber's book is similar to that of İnalcık's (which Imber helped translate); an initial section chronicling the political and military history of the period followed by chapters providing an analytical overview of various aspects of the empire. But whereas İnalcık's book provided a broad-ranging survey that included its cultural and religious elements, Imber focuses more narrowly on the institutions of state: the palace, the bureaucracy, and the military. This allows him to provide a more detailed examination of the military state, one that describes its development and shows how it both conquered and governed the lands

of three continents. Clearly written and well grounded in the literature of the field, Imber's book is a detailed and up-to-date account of the factors underpinning Ottoman power in the first centuries of its existence. Anyone seeking an introduction to the Ottoman empire would do well to start with it. With its concentration on imperial institutions and its closer examination of such things as the Ottoman navy (which has received far more scholarly attention in recent decades than it had when Inalcik wrote his book), it complements rather than replaces Inalcik's longstanding survey, providing readers with a good foundation for exploring in more detail the last and greatest of the Muslim empires.

The Ottoman Empire, 1300-1650  
The Structure of Power  
By Colin Imber  
New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.

Colin Imber's *The Ottoman Empire: 1300-1650: The Structure of Power* is a thorough analysis of what made the Ottoman Empire tick. This is not merely a retelling of the story of a great people, but a systematic discussion of the infrastructure and complicated apparatus of the Ottoman State. In this work by a leading expert on Ottoman history, the organizations and established customs that allowed the Ottomans to conquer and maintain an empire are described in detail. Imber utilizes a wealth of older as well as recent scholarship to give the reader an in-depth understanding of the empire that was a power on three continents.

To write a general history of the Ottoman Empire is a foolhardy undertaking, states Imber in the opening line of his book, but despite his self-effacing statement, the work is so detailed that if one were to seek to revive the Ottoman Empire, this book could almost serve as a manual. We even know the length of the imperial council meetings (seven to eight hours). If one wants to answer the question; "What makes a great empire run?" This would be the book to read. Books about great people and events flood the market each year. Many people read them, but they rarely come away with an understanding of how things worked in practice. This book solves that problem. The work opens with a chronology of the period under discussion; 1300-1650, the years of the origins and rise of the Ottomans to greatness. One of Imber's purposes was to write a straightforward chronology that had hitherto been lacking (pp. xiii-xiv). For this reason, a huge chunk of the book is given over to that purpose. A semi-barbarous Anatolian tribe had to become an empire greater in size than Rome and learn how to run it. Along the way Imber details the various crises the Ottomans encountered and how they overcame them. The chronology ends in the first half of the 17th century, during which time the Ottomans suffered a period known as the "time of troubles." This was a period of financial difficulties, exhaustion and increased political-social disorder and unrest. One symptom of trouble was that the

office of vizier changed rapidly and became an exceedingly precarious institution (there were 45 grand viziers between 1589 and 1651). The chronology section ends with the failure to capture Vienna and the permanent loss of Hungary, two events signaling the lengthy retreat of Ottoman power. Although rich in detail, this chapter might be somewhat overwhelming to the beginner with its disorienting number of names and events, most of which will likely be lost to memory. On the other hand, due to the richness of its mult-lingual sources, the book will probably hold some new information even for specialists. After the chronology, Imber employs a topical approach, moving in his discussion from one prominent institution and practice used by the Ottomans to the next. As the title indicates, the focus is on those institutions that enforced and maintained Ottoman rule and how they developed. In fact, details of politics and administration are so thoroughly dealt with that the book would probably find a place amongst political science textbooks. The Ottomans employed various methods which evolved over time that served well during their period of great power. First under discussion is the maintenance of the dynasty. Recruitment is analyzed next; primarily of the sultan's personal servants, called *çerâmez* 'slaves of the Porte', then follows chapters that describe the palace, provinces, law, army and navy. The heart of the Ottoman state was of course the ruling dynasty, dealt with in Chapter 2. Many Ottoman customs related to dynastic concerns may seem very strange to us. It helps to keep in mind that the reproductive and family life of the sultan was uniquely designed as an instrument of political power. If a consort of the sultan bore a male child she would never again have conjugal relations with her husband the sultan. Also, each male child was brought up separately. The mother then took a dominant role in the upbringing of the child. Being a member of the ruling dynasty of course brought tremendous privilege but also danger. The violence surrounding the greatest center of power is reported matter-of-factly and in detail. One quickly loses count of the executions, massacres and pitched battles related to fighting over the sultanate. A major cause of conflict was that no official heir was designated by the sultan. Each son of the sultan at the moment of birth was considered eligible for the throne. Once out of their minority princes began the process of plotting to take power. For this reason civil wars between various offspring of the sultan were frequent, often leading to massive fratricide and extended military campaigns. Sometimes the sons did not wait for the death of their father to begin the battle for succession and fathers themselves were not safe from their own sons. For example, Bayezid II, in the midst of the struggle for the throne amongst his sons, was forced off the throne by his son Selim and died soon after, most likely of poisoning. This particular conflict was to last four years until Selim emerged as the clear victor. Selim's reward was a paltry six years on the throne and the sight of his own son succeeding him. However, the practice of fratricide, with the

killing of any relative deemed a threat, began to die out at the end of the sixteenth-century. Nevertheless, Sultans were by no means immune from being dethroned for other reasons as well, such as misrule. Ibrahim (1640-8) was kept a prisoner at the palace and saw his brothers executed. This experience seems to have emotionally and mentally scarred him. Once enthroned as sultan, his wasteful spending and unworthy ministerial appointments led to his overthrow and violent death at the hands of a conglomerate of conspirators including the janissaries, the chief mufti and others. Despite the dangers, the power of the sultan was enormous. Although the palace was his official residence, if he happened to travel, governing power followed him. He was the government. The sultans ruled with an imperial council but were not required to heed their advice. They controlled the empire through appointments. Non-religious communities had considerable freedom but ecclesiastics held their positions at the behest of the sultan. The sultan ruled through his court as much as through formal organs of government and many directives were taken without being written down. For this reason it is often difficult to trace the origin of many political decisions. Included in the chapter on the dynasty is a fascinating discussion of how the Ottoman sultans legitimized their rule. For this they used a combination of religious and historical techniques. The moment the sultan actually physically took the throne marked the start of his rule. Throughout much of the first centuries of the Ottoman rise to power, the sultan was expected to be a war-leader first and foremost. His success in war was an essential pillar of his right to rule. This bears some similarity to the tradition in U.S. history in which the man on horseback has often been seen to be fit to carry out the political leadership of the nation if he had also proven ability as a great war-leader. A sultan could be criticized for not participating in a campaign, as Bayezid II was criticized for not personally leading his forces against the Mamluks in the 1485-90 conflict. Religious sanction for many military excursions was provided by the teaching of Holy War against the infidel as the sultan led his armies against Christian opponents. The sultan became a ghazi, or holy warrior in Islamic law. This title was used by sultans as late as 1876. This also sanctioned the possession of Christian lands. According to law, the lands of non-believers were to pass to the Muslim ruler. This device also justified war against fellow Muslims. In those cases, Muslim enemies of the sultan were declared as preventing the true Holy War against Christians by the trouble they were causing. For example Murad I, got the support of the ulama to attack Muslims on his eastern border to forestall their attack on him. He received religious sanction for this because it was keeping him from waging war on Christians in the west. Further legitimacy was provided by genealogy. Here genealogies were constructed which traced the Ottoman all the way back to Japheth, son of Noah. These genealogies provided sultans with a physical descent which validated

their right to rule. Furthermore, the capture of Constantinople allowed the sultans to appropriate the title of "Roman Emperor" – the true successor of the antique imperial power taken from the last Byzantine emperor. Other methods used to sanction Ottoman authority include the sultans title of caliph and that of "chosroes" – a name of ancient rulers of Iran. Suleyman I added this title after defeating the Safavid shahs. Once established, how did the Ottomans obtain enough trained personnel to run their rapidly expanding domain? This is the subject of Chapter 3. The Ottomans used a system known as the "Collection" to recruit talented administrators as well as others. They did not hesitate to use non-Muslims, even in high positions. The use of foreigners and Christians occurred for several reasons. Many were used to supply recruits for the Janissaries, the Sultans palace or the household cavalry. Other reasons were political. At the Battle of Ankara in 1402, the Sultan found many of his men deserting to the enemy because they saw their former lords serving in the enemy's army. In order to avoid this problem, the practice developed of moving large numbers of foreigners into newly-conquered regions while deporting out of these territories some of the population to distant lands where they had no connections. Chapter 4 delivers a detailed look at the world of the palace. We learn its physical layout, the various offices related to it and changes that occurred over time. Chapter 5 enlightens the reader as to the role of the provinces; those all-important sources of revenue. Imber teaches the names of the various Ottoman terms to clarify his explanation. He also describes the process whereby the provinces evolved from military feudatories to civilian tax farms. Chapter 6 informs the reader on the role of law in its sacred and secular forms. The legal structure of the empire was diverse, reflecting the diversity of cultures and religions within its boundaries. Despite this, Islamic law held precedence and every town had an Islamic court. Both Muslims and non-Muslims are known to have used them. Chapters 7 & 8 illuminates the development of Ottoman military skill from tribal raiders with only the power to annoy to sophisticated military complex complete with organized imperial cavalry, troops, siege equipment and naval strength enough to challenge the nations of Christian Europe. Early Turkish tactics involved an emphasis on mobility and raiding including ambush and surprise attacks. In Osman and Orhan's time they could not stand up to a well-equipped and disciplined force in the field, and when faced with such an enemy often retreated to rugged terrain when necessary. But Orhan and Murad I (1362-89) began the transformation of the Ottoman military to a force that could carry out siege operations and field battles. By the 1453 assault on the imperial city of Constantinople, the Ottomans were using the latest technology available, much to the grief of the Byzantine defenders. This included the "Great Turkish Bombards", capable of destroying the most powerful walls in the world.

Imber concludes his study of the Ottoman military with a chapter on naval power. The creation of a new Capital at Constantinople, fully dependent on water-borne transport for its supplies, rendered an effective sea-presence mandatory. As the empire expanded, particularly with the conquest of Egypt in 1517, sea power, communications, and the means to protect those communications, became even more vital. The essential type of war vessel was the galley. The design of the galley did not undergo significant change except for the addition of artillery in the latter 1400s. There is no separate treatment of how the Empire was financed because Imber felt inadequate to deal with the intricacies of finance, but scattered throughout the text there are details of how various officers received pay. For example, land allocation in the form of fiefs, the smallest of which was called a timar, was widespread. These land holdings were a way for the sultan to maintain a large cavalry force. A Cavalryman holding a fief, for instance, could collect taxes from his peasants. As the chief law-enforcement officer, he had the right to pocket up to half of the fines for misdemeanors. He could even increase his lands if he wanted to by petitioning the governor who would then present the petition on his behalf. This usually occurred after a war in which many timar had become available. Registers and law books were used to keep track of the different types of fiefs, who owned what and what obligations were owed to the sultan. The sultan needed to know many things, for example the exact number of troops available and who had an obligation to provide horses or other supplies and equipment. Sources of revenue were assigned to other administrators by the sultan. Imber's book is also about change. The institutions and practices described underwent change over time. In one instance, provincial government was quite different in the mid-seventeenth century, where Imber's chronology ends, than it was just a century earlier. The timars had declined in number and had changed in nature. They were now assigned more to non-military candidates as opposed to cavalymen, which had been standard practice earlier. Provincial governors were also no longer military generals. The ultimate result was a loss of authority on the part of the provincial governors as they could no longer effectively oversee timar holders or command them in war time. This book is well researched, even for the specialist. The bibliography is up to date, including many sources which appear to have been recently translated or published. For example, Elizabeth Zachariadou's editing of the proceedings of the international symposium of the program of Turkish studies of the Institute for Mediterranean Studies called The Kapudan Pasha and his Domain, Rethymno was published in 2002 in the same year as Imber's book. He had to cite it as 'forthcoming' in his bibliography. Mr. Imber has certainly set a high standard for all subsequently related works. A fine example of Imber's historical reasoning occurs on page 199. Imber argues that the Ottomans borrowed



the system of keeping registers from the Ilkhans. His evidence is that the language of Ottoman registers, and most treasury documents, is in Persian, the cipher script is the same as that used in Ilkhanid accounts, and they feature some of the same fiscal practices. Bayezid I had conquered and annexed former Seljuk and Ilkhan territory and had then probably discovered and adopted their accounting methods. Despite its analytical nature, Imber retains a very accessible narrative style. This is a user-friendly, easy to read reference work due to the clear delineation of topics. The book does not suffer from the dry pedantic style of many scholarly works. Rather, the writing style is clear and easily grasped by the non-specialist. Nor is the book flowery or sensational. It would not be recommended as entertainment but as a thorough and efficient purveyor of knowledge enabling the reader to grasp key elements of the Ottoman state. Imber's purpose is not to tantalize the reader but to provide an in depth understanding of political, economic, military and social structures and how they worked. It is a rational investigation devoid of nationalistic or deterministic explanations. In his introduction Imber states his purpose: to write a general overview of Ottoman history that would "serve to introduce the non-specialist to the field, and to provide a context which makes it possible to read the specialist's works." Imber achieved his purpose admirably.

The book is unusual, for me at least, in its style. It has a flowing narrative, unlike many history books in academia, while containing many valuable references for most of the significant events and people. I got a sense of the chess power play that prevailed in the Balkans for almost a century before the Ottomans conquered it. All this information almost nonexistent in most of the history books of the Balkan countries which, in my opinion, even today suffer from a national-romantic tone of the 19th century portraying the Ottomans as a dark chapter in their history that destroyed their otherwise earthly paradise. The book also offers insights on the judicial and military organization of the empire and where the source of this organization came from. It combines cultural influences from Turkic, Arab, and Persian world, together with the presence of a former empire (Byzantium), offering a blend of rational explanations. It is a book that I am going to read again.

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