

Süleyman the Lawgiver¹ and his empire



- ❖ Ottoman expansion climaxed during the reign of Süleyman I (Süleyman the Lawgiver), 1520-1566.
- ❖ Süleyman personally led armies that pushed the empire out in nearly every direction, including Europe (making it as far north as Hungary – once seen as “the impenetrable shield of the Christian West”).²

¹ It is interesting to note that Süleyman is honoured in the West as “the Great” or “the Magnificent,” while his own people use the epithet “the Law Giver”.

² Christopher Catherwood, *A Brief History of the Middle East*, (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2006), 124.

I who am the Sultan of Sultans, Sovereign of Sovereigns, Distributor of Crowns to Monarchs over the whole Surface of the Globe, God's Shadow on Earth, Sultan and Padishah of the White Sea and the Black Sea, of Rumelia and Anatolia, of Karaman and the countries of Rum, Zulcadir, Diyarbekir, Kurdistan, Azerbaijan, Persia, Damascus, Aleppo, Cairo, Mecca, Medina, Jerusalem and all Arabia, Yemen and many other lands that my noble forebears and illustrious ancestors . . . conquered by the force of their arms and that my August Majesty has also conquered with my blazing sword and victorious sabre . . .

Letter from Suleiman to Francis I of France

Quote published in "Suleiman the Magnificent" by André Clot (2012)

- ❖ Süleyman I established the Ottoman Empire as a naval power, creating or fortifying pre-existing fleets in the Black, Caspian and Mediterranean Seas. Süleyman I challenged Christian vessels throughout the Mediterranean (particularly through his grand admiral Hayreddin Barbarossa), as well as Portuguese ships in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean (thanks to the ill-fated efforts of Ottoman navigator Piri Reis). The Ottomans seized the island of Rhodes from the Knights of St. John, besieged Malta, acquired Yemen and Aden on the Arabian Peninsula.
- ❖ The Sultan exercised personal command of the army, appointed and dismissed officials at will, and adopted whatever policies he wished. In theory, the Sultan owned all land and granted it to their people on a hereditary basis in return for payment of fixed taxes.
 - Süleyman I compiled and systematized sultanic or secular laws (*kanun*) and harmonized them with Islamic Law (*sharia*) - hence the honorific "the Law Giver." Especially during the later part of his reign, the Sultan wanted to be remembered as a just ruler.³

³ Gábor Ágoston and Bruce Masters, *Encyclopedia of the Ottoman Empire*, (New York: Facts on File, 2009), 542.

- ❖ Süleyman I largely shifted the Ottoman empire's military focus from east to west, and his victories in the Balkans, Hungary and the island of Rhodes established his image in Europe as a great adversary (particularly of Holy Roman Emperor Charles V) and in the Islamic world as a warrior sultan and defender of Islam.

- A key part of the sultan's military strategy was the use of cannon technology. As André Clot writes in *Suleiman the Magnificent* (2012):

Thanks to his magnificent artillery, the sultan of Constantinople now controlled the most powerful and modern military machine in the known world; the Christian nations, well aware of the fact, were terrified. The enormous Turkish guns, often built with the help of Christians who knew the most up-to-date techniques, were famous throughout Europe. The Ottomans also bought cannons in Europe or used those they had captured from their Christian enemies: between 1521 and 1541, according to F. Braudel, 5,000 guns were taken in battle in Hungary. Francis I even sent some cannons to Suleiman at the time of his Hungarian expedition in 1543. Gun carriages had been introduced into Turkey by Marrano immigrants from Spain, but most of the gunnery was produced within the empire: in the Tophane (or foundry) district of Istanbul, which has retained the name to this day and where the gunners' barracks were also situated; and in other foundries and units scattered throughout the provinces. There were about a thousand artillerymen in all, plus specialists in mines, mortars and bombs, units involved in the transport of cannons (*topçu başı*), and so on.

It was their artillery power which assured Ottoman superiority over the rest of the Islamic world.

- ❖ As with sultans before him, the janissaries were a critical part of Süleyman's political and military worlds. As André Clot continues:

The Ottoman Court

The permanent army was made up of slaves of the Porte¹⁴ (*kapikulu*). Two forces formed part of it: the Porte *sipahi* (cavalry) and the janissaries, the most illustrious corps in the Turkish army. The janissaries were formed at the start of the Osmanli era and were about 5,000 in number in the 15th century, 12,000 under Suleiman. They are sometimes given a significance they did not really possess, at least on the battlefield, since at no time did they make up the whole Turkish army or anything like it. Their role was usually to join battle after the enemy had faced attack from the cavalry and irregulars and artillery bombardment. Their fresh forces would then often tip the balance.

Their political influence, on the other hand, was immense and their demands – particularly dangerous in that they were inspired by a powerful *esprit de corps* – more than once forced the sultan to change his plans. No sultan could take power without granting a large accession gift agreed after long negotiations and much argument. By siding with a particular claimant to the throne, the janissaries decided the fate of the empire on several occasions.

Their devotion knew no limits, their loyalty was absolute. Only too ready to sacrifice their lives for the sultan, in battle they formed a completely solid line of defence around him. To give expression to the link which united him with his elite troops, Suleiman enlisted in one of their companies and was paid like an ordinary soldier. His successors did exactly the same.

Compelled to be celibate and subject to strict training and iron discipline, the janissaries showed matchless strength and skill in handling their weapons. When they trooped by in silence, they deeply impressed European visitors. ‘One would have thought them friars,’ remarked Busbecq, in his account of an audience with Suleiman at Amasya. They were so still and rigid, he continued, that from a distance one could not tell if they were men or statues. A Frenchman called du Fresne-Canaye compared them with monks. Bodyguards of the sultan and his greatest asset in battle, the janissaries were fanatical Muslims – although all of them, at least in the 16th century, were of Christian origin. They were, in fact, slaves of the sultan recruited by means of the *devşirme* system – that is, chosen from among the provincial children who did not possess the intellectual ability to become civil servants.

Hurrem Sultan

Taken from Leslie Peirce’s *Empress of the East: How a European Slave Girl Became Queen of the Ottoman Empire* (2017):



THE RUSSIAN SLAVE had been the concubine of Suleyman I, “the Magnificent,” for fifteen years when the royal wedding celebration took place in 1536. Like all concubines of the Ottoman sultans, she was neither Turkish nor Muslim by birth. Abducted from her homeland, the young girl proved herself adaptable and quick-witted, mastering the rules, the graces, and the politics that propelled her from obscurity to the sultan’s bed. She rapidly became Suleyman’s favorite, astounding both his court and his public. Sultans of the Ottoman empire did not make demonstrable favorites of their consorts, however much they came to care for them. But Suleyman and Roxelana became the parents of six children in quick succession, five of them sons. Some thought Roxelana used seductive powers, even potions, to induce the love Suleyman appeared to bear her. They called her witch.

Together the royal couple overturned one assumption after another. Roxelana was the first Ottoman concubine ever to marry the sultan who was her master. She was also the first to cut an overtly conspicuous figure. It was Roxelana who transformed the imperial harem from a residence for women of the dynasty into an institution that wielded political influence. Royal women following in her footsteps crafted powerful roles in Ottoman politics while serving as advisers to their sons and, in the seventeenth century, ruling as regents. When Roxelana died in 1558, she also left as a tangible part of her legacy numerous charitable foundations in the Ottoman capital of Istanbul and across the empire—another break with tradition.

While there was no formal office of queen among the Ottomans, Roxelana filled this role in all but title, a formidable match for the great female rulers and consorts of Europe who shared the sixteenth century with her. But the radical nature of what can only be called the reign of Suleyman and Roxelana—a ruling partnership never repeated by the Ottomans—made her a controversial figure in her own time. The debate over her place in Ottoman history persists today.