

# History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

## Ottoman Empire, origins of

### The Origins of the Ottoman Empire

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The origins of the Ottoman Empire are to be found in a combination of Turkish *asabiyah* and the Islamic spirit of *ghazza* (meaning, struggle in the cause of God). *Asabiyah*, a term used by Ibn Khaldun to denote tribal cohesion, is the force that holds together tribes through bonds of blood, a characteristic found in abundance among peoples of the desert and the nomads of the steppes. The Turks were a people who lived in the upper reaches of Central Asia, on the borders between Sinkiang Mongolia and Kazakhstan and possessed the qualities of *asabiyah* in abundance. They were, like their Mongol cousins, a people who roamed the grasslands on their horses, setting down their tents just long enough for rest and recuperation. They were known for their fierce loyalty to the clan and for their bravery and horsemanship.

In the 8<sup>th</sup> century, as Islam spread towards the Amu Darya, the Turks came into contact with its universal precepts and embraced the new faith. Many found service in the armed forces of the Abbasid Empire. Using their innate qualities of leadership, some rose through the ranks, occupied important positions in the army and by the middle of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, became the kingmakers in Baghdad. By the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, they had replaced the Caliphate in Baghdad with the Sultanate as the de-facto political power. The rise of the Seljuks in the 11<sup>th</sup> century marked a high point in Turkish power. The Seljuk victory over the Byzantines in August 1072 was a turning point in world history and opened Anatolia to Turkish penetration. Until the advent of Hulagu Khan and the fall of Baghdad (1258), Turkish pressure on Byzantine holdings in Anatolia was continuous and forceful. There was a pause during the Mongol eruptions. Hulagu captured the upper reaches of the Rivers Tigris and Euphrates located in eastern Anatolia and forced the Turks further west. Most of Anatolia accepted Mongol dominance and the Mongol lords appointed their own satraps to rule over the local principalities.

But the Turks were not a people to accept Mongol over-lordship for long. After the Battle of Ayn Jalut (1261), Mongol power waned, while Turkish power gathered momentum. As early as the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the Turks were organized into effective brigades, each one led by a bey. The primary purpose of these brigades was to march against the Byzantine territories. It is here that the Islamic spirit of *ghazza* came into play.

Without Islam, the Turks were a roving band of nomads, not unlike the nomads of bygone eras, who were pushing against the frontiers of settled civilizations. With Islam, they became not just conquerors but founders of a global empire and a global civilization. The narrow *asabiyah* of tribe and race gave way to the global vision of Islam. Those who took part in *ghazza* were called *ghazis*. The term *ghazi* carries a connotation of valor, strength, humility, selflessness, charity, steadfastness, struggle and chivalry to this day in languages spoken by Muslims worldwide. There were several groups of *ghazis* and a person could move freely from one group to another.

It was these *ghazis* who cemented Turkish power in West Asia and projected it into the very heart of Europe. Uthman Ghazi emerged from among these *ghazis* as the *bey* (Turkish, meaning authority, leader) of the western marches. The house of Uthman is called Uthmanali and the empire founded by him is referred to as the Uthmania or Ottoman Empire. It is said that Uthmanali was inducted as a *ghazi* by a sage, Shaykh Ede Bali. By 1301, he controlled the swath of territory extending from Eskishehir to Bursa and advanced towards the old Byzantine capital of Iznik. Alarmed, the Byzantine Emperor sent a force under Muzalon to relieve Iznik. The Turks annihilated this force at the Battle of Yalakova (1301). This critical victory was a turning point for the Ottomans. Uthman's fame spread far and wide in the Muslim world and attracted a growing number of volunteers for the *ghazza*.

The Turks followed up this victory by occupying the regions around the cities of Iznik and Bursa, isolating them both. Uthman's son Orkhan captured Bursa in 1326. Iznik fell in 1331. Orkhan was a contemporary of Mansa Musa of the Mali Empire and Muhammed bin Tughlaq of India. Ibn Batuta visited Bursa in 1333 and described it as a beautiful town with fine mosques, markets and schools. The *ghazi* spirit of the Uthmania Turks won his admiration and he accompanied Orkhan on many of his expeditions against the Byzantines. The situation in Anatolia at the time was the flip side of that in Spain. In the eastern Mediterranean the march of the *ghazis* brought them to the very gates of Constantinople. In contrast, the last attempt by North African Muslims to reconquer Spain from the Christians was made in 1333 and ended in total failure.

Orkhan continued his march westward, occupying the province of Karasi in 1345. The continent of Europe lay ahead of him. In 1346, he married Theodora, a Greek princess, in a tradition that was in keeping with the times when the Byzantine court sought marriage ties with the Turks to contain their advance. These marriages of convenience, however, did not arrest the Turks. The western march was placed under Sulaiman, the eldest son of Orkhan. In 1354, Sulaiman captured the Fort of Gallipolis. Ankara was captured the same year. When Sulaiman died in an accident in 1356, the march passed under the leadership of his brother Murad who stormed and captured Erdirne in 1357. This alarmed Pope Urban V who declared a Crusade in 1366. However, the response to this call was mute and Turkish advances continued. Sofia was conquered in 1385, Nish in 1386 and Salonica in 1387. The Balkan princes and the Byzantine emperor saw the futility of resisting the Turks and avidly sought an alliance with them against each other. In 1365-1366, the Bulgarian King Shishman sought the help of the Turks against a combined attack by the Hungarians and the Latin Crusaders. In 1373, the Byzantine Emperor John V accepted the over-lordship of Murad and took part in the Balkan campaigns as his vassal. His son Andronicus IV remained on the throne in Constantinople under the protection of the Turks.

To the east, the Ottomans pressed their claims against the other Turkish principalities. Declaring themselves to be heirs of the Seljuks, they fought and won their struggles against the Beys of Sivas and Karaman. In 1387, Murad marched against, the old capital of the Seljuks, defeated the house of Karaman and completed his conquest of Anatolia. Meanwhile, the Balkan front was far from quiet. In 1386, the Serbs were in open rebellion and were supported in their uprising by the kings of Bosnia and Bulgaria. Murad marched against Bulgaria in 1387. Bulgaria was occupied and Shishman, the King of Bulgaria

was expelled. Continuing his advance, Murad met the Serbian army at the Battle of Kosova in June 1389. In a pitched battle the Serbs were defeated and the last resistance to Turkish rule in the Balkans was crushed. Murad himself was fatally wounded in the Battle of Kosova and was succeeded by his son Bayazid, who is referred to as *Yildirim* in Turkish.

By the time Murad died in 1389, he had laid the foundations of a fledging empire in Anatolia and southeastern Europe. The city of Constantinople remained as an island in this sea, only because the Byzantine Emperor had accepted the over-lordship of the Turks. Political centralization had begun, which was in time to embrace all of West Asia, North Africa and southeastern. The spirit of the *ghazis* which won and founded this empire was to last for centuries and make it the pre-eminent military power in the world until the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

As an Islamic Empire, it eschewed the principles of tolerance and co-existence of peoples of different religions and nationalities. It provided political stability to the peoples of North Africa, West Asia and southeastern Europe for almost 600 years, a period longer in its duration than any other empire in recorded history.

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