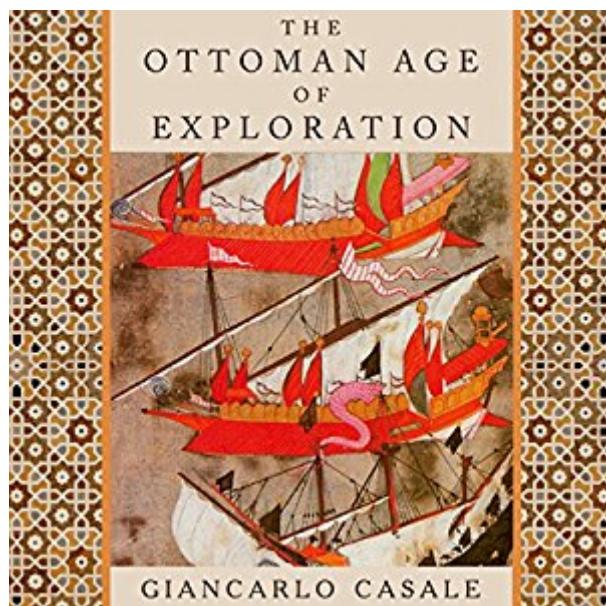


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The Ottoman Age Of Exploration



Synopsis

In 1517, the Ottoman Sultan Selim "the Grim" conquered Egypt and brought his empire for the first time in history into direct contact with the trading world of the Indian Ocean. During the decades that followed, the Ottomans became progressively more engaged in the affairs of this vast and previously unfamiliar region, eventually to the point of launching a systematic ideological, military and commercial challenge to the Portuguese Empire, their main rival for control of the lucrative trade routes of maritime Asia. The Ottoman Age of Exploration is the first comprehensive historical account of this century-long struggle for global dominance, a struggle that raged from the shores of the Mediterranean to the Straits of Malacca, and from the interior of Africa to the steppes of Central Asia. Based on extensive research in the archives of Turkey and Portugal, as well as materials written on three continents and in a half dozen languages, it presents an unprecedented picture of the global reach of the Ottoman state during the 16th century. It does so through a dramatic recounting of the lives of sultans and viziers, spies, corsairs, soldiers-of-fortune, and women from the imperial harem. Challenging traditional narratives of Western dominance, it argues that the Ottomans were not only active participants in the Age of Exploration, but ultimately bested the Portuguese in the game of global politics by using sea power, dynastic prestige, and commercial savoir faire to create their own imperial dominion throughout the Indian Ocean.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This interesting and clearly written book is an effort to provide a more balanced view of the Ottoman

Empire. Casale is concerned with rebutting or modifying the view that the Ottoman Empire was an inward looking, land based polity that failed to exhibit the dynamism of European states in exploring new territories and pursuing commercial opportunities. To dispell this view of the Ottoman Empire, Casale provides a fairly detailed narrative of Ottoman involvement in the Indian Ocean, particularly their rivalry with the Portugese. Casale argues well that this was a major effort by the Ottomans, that this was a novel effort, that the Ottoman court exhibited considerable interest in new geographic knowledge, and that commercial interests, particularly managing the spice trade from Southeast Asia, were of considerable importance. Casale's narrative, which is interesting in its own right, largely substantiates these points and is consistent with Casale's general argument. Viewed through the lens of Ottoman activities in the Indian Ocean, the Ottoman Empire does look quite a bit like several of the aggressively expansionist and mercantilist European states. Casale's arguments, however, have some defects. His European comparator is Portugal, the major Indian Ocean rival for the Ottomans. But, Casale is comparing a relatively weak European state with arguably the most powerful state in the European state system. To really make a strong case, Casale would have to compare the Ottoman Empire in detail with a comparable European state, which would mean a detailed comparison with Hapsburg Spain, not Portugal.

I thoroughly enjoyed this volume, finishing it in a little over a week (aided, admittedly, by the fact that I spent half of that time on a long weekend at a seaside resort where the weather was unseasonably chilly and wet). It is well-written and was handsomely produced by the Oxford University Press, with more than twenty carefully selected illustrations that help the reader to correctly envision the warships of the Turks and Portuguese and the trading ports and fortresses of the Indian Ocean during the sixteenth century. There are also four useful but cartographically basic maps that help the reader to place the location of the ports and battles discussed. To the extent that most western readers know anything substantial about the Ottoman Empire in the sixteenth century, we tend to think of it as a Mediterranean and Balkan power, gradually gobbling up the remaining Christian fortresses along the coasts of Greece and Cyprus while also pushing north up the Danube Valley. But Casale's book reminds us that the Empire's growth in western Asia and north Africa during the first four decades of the sixteenth century was even more explosive. In 1517, the Empire's eastern frontier ran across Asia Minor from roughly the Taurus Mountains in the south to Trebizon in the north. In that year, the Ottoman Sultan Selim "the Grim" went to war against the Mamluk Sultanate, another Islamic power that had dominated the eastern Mediterranean since the final defeat and expulsion of the crusaders two centuries earlier. Selim's army made short work of the Mamluks,

incorporating their possessions in Syria, Palestine and Egypt into his empire and thereby more than doubling its size in less than a year.

I had been meaning to read this book for a couple of years, and just got around to reading it this week. It's fairly short, barely 200 pages, so you can read it in less than a day. The writing is excellent, the maps fairly good and the illustrations interesting. I take some exception to the title; it was less an age of exploration than political and military adventuring into the Indian Ocean. These were rather large scale and it is surprising that the Portuguese survived; luck and ruthlessness, perhaps. Much of the story Casale relates concerns Ottoman viziers, appointees in Egypt and naval commanders. It's mostly from the Ottoman point of view, and anyone interested in Ottoman activities in the Red Sea, Yemen and beyond will find this book well worth the read. Casale's major point is that the "Age of Discovery" histories are usually told from the stance of European discoverers, with all the other "Others" seen as victims; this book shows, as intended, the Ottomans as no victims but a major player in the age. Casale has some discussion of how the Ottomans had little knowledge of wider world geography--not much of a large body of recent works in Arabic were available to them, and he argues that it was indeed an age of discovery rather similar to that of Portugal. I'll leave that aspect for a reader to decide. The book has much to offer aside from that thesis. The Ottomans took Egypt and became responsible for the safety of Mecca and Medina, and were as much pulled into the region of the Red Sea and impelled by an urge to discover. They used the Egyptian port of Suez as an armory and base, and managed to construct a number of fleets there, despite most naval resources (especially wood) having to be imported from rather far off.

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