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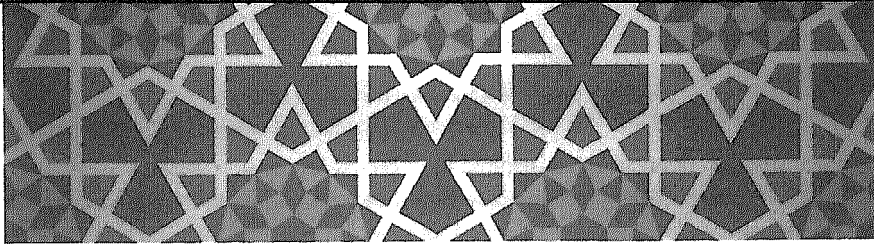
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Introduction

AN EMPIRE OF THE MIND

Imagine, just for a moment, that the Ottoman Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror never captured the city of Constantinople. Instead, suppose that Emperor Constantine Palaeologos and the ragtag remnants of his Byzantine army managed, against all odds, not only to save their capital on that fateful Tuesday in 1453 but also, during the following decades, to reoccupy all of the lands in the Balkans and Anatolia that had once constituted the core of their empire.

Now imagine that the dawn of the sixteenth century witnessed an even more startling rise in this empire's fortunes, as victorious Byzantine legions marched ever further, conquering provinces like Syria and Egypt that had been lost to them for centuries and, later, spreading into such distant and unfamiliar lands as Yemen, the Sudan, and the Horn of Africa. Then, from these advanced bases, imagine that Byzantine fleets began to conduct patrols of the Indian Ocean, to organize massive expeditions against enemy strongholds in Hormuz and Gujarat, and to send crack military teams to support their allies in places as remote from one another and from the imperial capital as Indonesia and the Swahili Coast.

Naturally, such prodigious military expansion would be accompanied by equally impressive advances in other fields. Thus, picture a Byzantine treasury that began to use the spice trade to move beyond its traditional reliance on agriculture, dispatching commercial agents to the markets of India and Sumatra and organizing regular convoys of state-owned ships to bring pepper and cloves to the spice bazaars of Egypt. Meanwhile, back in Constantinople, imagine the growth of a new group

of Byzantine intellectuals who, inspired by these far-flung successes and bankrolled by the city's burgeoning imperial elites, began to cultivate an interest in the rapidly developing sciences of cartography and geography. In short, imagine a sixteenth-century Byzantine Age of Exploration.

If such a Byzantine state had actually existed, how might scholars in our own day characterize its growth? Here, as historians, we are now on slightly firmer ground. For although our imaginary Byzantine state was never to be, there is a substantial body of real-world scholarship that examines the delicate connection between late Byzantine intellectual life (during a period sometimes known as the Palaeologan Renaissance) and the development of Renaissance humanism in the West.¹

Judging from the direction taken by such works, it seems clear that a comparison between the accomplishments of our sixteenth-century Byzantine explorers and those of their contemporaries from Western Europe would be an obvious one, providing inspiration for an endless series of scholarly questions about their relative similarities and differences. "Why were the Byzantines so uninterested in the New World?" one virtual historian might ask. "How important were the religious and linguistic differences that divided them from the West?" might ask another. "Was the contemporaneous nature of Byzantine and Western expansion just a coincidence?" might ask a third. But regardless of the ways in which these individual questions might be framed, researchers of all stripes would naturally take up the challenge of incorporating Byzantine history into the larger story of European global exploration.

So what about the Ottomans? It just so happens that the Ottoman Empire accomplished in the real world of the sixteenth century every one of the things that the virtual Byzantines accomplished only in our imagination. Yet astonishingly, no serious attempt has ever been made to portray these Ottoman achievements as part of the larger story of physical expansion abroad and intellectual ferment at home that characterized Western European history during precisely the same period.² Herein lies the central question of this book. Stated simply, it asks: "Did the Ottomans participate in the Age of Exploration?" The answer, also stated simply, is yes.

DEFINING OTTOMAN EXPLORATION

There are few historical subjects that have aroused passions for as long, and for as many reasons, as the European Age of Exploration. Despite a vast and constantly growing literature dedicated to it, scholars continue to disagree widely about its origins, its scope, and its ultimate consequences. But if the phenomenon remains one that can be defined in any number of ways, for the purposes at hand the problem need not be so complicated. This book therefore focuses on a few key aspects of European expansion that are both generally agreed upon and directly relevant to the Ottoman case.

The first of these is the relative isolation of Western Europe during the period directly preceding the earliest voyages of discovery. During the first half of the fifteenth century, a time when Muslim merchants could travel virtually unobstructed from Morocco to Southeast Asia, and navigators from Ming China could boast of enormous naval expeditions reaching as far west as Hormuz, Aden, and Mombasa, Western Europeans remained almost totally confined, both physically and intellectually, to a small slice of the world bounded by the North Atlantic and the Mediterranean.³ Even as late as the eve of Columbus's first voyage, European knowledge of other world regions continued to be based on a handful of sketchy medieval travelers' accounts and a few dusty maps and geographical texts only recently recovered and translated from ancient Greek.⁴ In this sense, European exploration was possible in large part because Europeans had so much more of the world left to explore.

At the same time, however—and rather ironically, considering this state of isolation—a second distinguishing characteristic of European exploration is the audacious political ideology that accompanied it. To illustrate this, no better example exists than the famous Treaty of Tordesillas, signed in 1494 between the crowns of Portugal and Spain under the sacred auspices of Pope Alexander VI. According to its terms, the two Iberian powers agreed to nothing less than a partition of the entire extra-European world, with each side claiming the right to conquer and rule all lands within its own hemisphere and to maintain exclusive control over its navigation and maritime trade. The sweepingly global scope of this agreement, combined with the explicit connection it drew between state power and maritime commerce, established a prototype for a new kind of overseas empire that would redefine European political discourse for centuries to come. And yet, at the time that the Treaty of Tordesillas was signed, neither Portugal, nor Spain, nor any other European nation controlled so much as one square inch of territory (or even a single ship) anywhere in Asia or the New World. History may offer other examples of rulers who have staked claims to universal dominion on a similarly tenuous basis, but rarely have these claims anticipated real-world success in such an unexpected and innovative way.⁵

Of course, if European powers were willing to indulge these improbable aspirations, this was in part thanks to a pair of recent but critical technological advances that permitted exploration and colonial expansion on a scale previously unimaginable: firearms and the oceangoing sailing ship. Strictly speaking, the former was not a Western innovation, as the military uses of gunpowder were by no means entirely unknown outside Europe before the sixteenth century. Still, the widespread use of handguns and the casting of heavy iron and bronze artillery bores were technologies perfected in the West. And when combined with the carrack, an innovative type of sailing vessel ideally suited to long-distance navigation and, more important, to mounting large numbers of cannon on board, firearms provided Westerners with the perfect military tool for fulfilling their dreams of empire. By the turn of the sixteenth

century, their heavily armed sailing ships had developed into veritable floating fortresses, allowing the Spanish and Portuguese to use the sea to project their power abroad as never before.⁶

Finally, alongside these considerations of technology and political ideology, the last and perhaps most recognizably European component of the Age of Exploration is the distinctive cultural and intellectual transformation that accompanied it. Coinciding with the spread of Renaissance humanism and with the invention of the movable-type printing press, the explorations ushered in a period of intense Western intellectual ferment, as the flood of new information from abroad inspired Europeans to undertake a comprehensive reevaluation of their traditional understanding of the world and their own place within it. Intellectually speaking, much of what is understood today as Western civilization can thus be seen as an immediate by-product of the European voyages of discovery.⁷

In broad lines, then, these are the four characteristics of sixteenth-century European expansion that constitute the basic definition of the term Age of Exploration in this book: a starting point of relative geographic and cultural isolation, the subsequent development of expansive political ideologies focused particularly on trade routes and maritime navigation, innovation in a few key areas of military and naval technology that made overseas expansion possible, and an unprecedented intensification of intellectual interest in the outside world.

But how does this definition relate to the specific experience of the Ottoman Empire during the sixteenth century? This book argues that Ottoman expansion shared, to varying degrees, all of these essential traits of European exploration—an assertion that will no doubt come as a surprise to those accustomed to thinking of the Ottoman Empire in quite different terms: at first as the primary *obstacle* to exploration and later as its principal *victim*. After all, a suspicious reader may ask, isn't it common knowledge that both the Spanish and the Portuguese envisioned their overseas ventures as a logical extension of the Crusades? Isn't it also true that the establishment of a Portuguese trading empire in the Indies came at the expense of Muslim merchants? And didn't this, over the *longue durée*, permanently marginalize the economy of the Islamic world?⁸

Yes and no. On the one hand, even if historians continue to debate the long-term economic consequences of early Iberian expansion, there is little doubt that Muslim merchants did indeed bear the brunt of the notoriously violent early Portuguese efforts to seize control of the Indian Ocean spice trade. But on the other hand, there is an important distinction to be drawn between Muslims and Ottomans—a distinction without which the Ottoman Empire's true place in early modern history cannot be properly understood.

Specifically, it is an essential tenet of this book that before the Age of Exploration began, the Ottoman Empire had virtually no meaningful contact with the Indian Ocean—a part of the world that was, despite a deeply rooted indigenous Muslim presence, nevertheless as remote and unfamiliar to the Ottomans as it was to

contemporary Europeans. Prior to the sixteenth century, Ottoman scholars were almost totally ignorant of the history and geography of the Indian Ocean, Ottoman statesmen lacked even a rudimentary knowledge of its resources and its political economy, and the empire's trade with the region, while not insignificant, was largely carried out by intermediaries. In this respect, the situation of the Ottoman Empire at the turn of the sixteenth century was not substantially different from that of Portugal or Spain: it was a newly consolidated and rapidly expanding state, but one whose intellectual, political, and economic horizons were still firmly encompassed by the Mediterranean basin. Indeed, this condition of relative isolation would last even longer for the Ottomans than it would for their European rivals, ending only with the Ottoman conquest of Egypt in 1517—a full twenty years after Vasco da Gama's triumphant circumnavigation of the Cape of Good Hope.

Once the Ottomans finally did establish a toehold in this previously unknown part of the world, however, they rapidly began to reorient themselves, take stock of the region, and develop a new set of imperial ambitions that were particularly suited to its oceanic vastness. And crucially, the Ottomans soon learned that competition from Europeans (or, more precisely, from the Portuguese) actually made the fulfillment of these ambitions *easier* rather than more difficult, by providing a foil against which the House of Osman could radically redefine the terms of sovereignty and legitimacy throughout the Islamic world.

Using the conquest of Egypt as a pretext, after 1517 the Ottomans began to assert a new kind of transcendent authority over all the Muslims of the Indian Ocean, as they claimed for their dynasty the titles of Caliph and Protector of the Holy Cities previously associated with the Egyptian Mamluks. These two titles, despite an ancient pedigree in Islamic legal parlance, had long been devoid of any overt political significance and for centuries had been invoked only for vague motives of ceremony and prestige. But after the arrival of the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean—and their establishment of a naval blockade that restricted, for the first time in history, maritime access to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina—these titles acquired a new political currency that the Ottomans proved adept at exploiting. Thanks to their efforts, by the second half of the sixteenth century, the Ottoman sultan's rank as supreme leader of the Sunni Muslim world was, at least on a theoretical level, generally recognized throughout maritime Asia. In other words, in a quintessentially Islamic response to the claims of universal dominion outlined in the Treaty of Tordesillas, the concept of a Universal Caliphate became a fixture of the political discourse of international Islam to an extent not seen since the early Abbasid Empire in the ninth and tenth centuries.⁹

How, in practical terms, were the Ottomans able to accomplish this? In a manner again strikingly similar to the experience of the Iberian powers, the Ottomans owed much of their success to their privileged access to the most advanced military technology of the day. The superiority of Ottoman artillery, for example, proved crucial during the conquest of Egypt, and even more so in subsequent conflicts in

Yemen and Ethiopia where such weaponry was virtually unknown prior to Ottoman intervention. Later, the Ottoman state played an equally instrumental role in disseminating firearms throughout the wider Indian Ocean, where its ability to supply far-flung allies with artillery, cannon founders, and other forms of military expertise added a practical punch to the already considerable cachet of Ottoman dynastic prestige.¹⁰

Meanwhile, at sea, evidence suggests that the Ottomans began to experiment with tall-sided sailing ships similar to those employed by the Portuguese, although these never took more than a supporting role in naval operations.¹¹ More important, Ottoman seamen were able to adapt traditional galley technology to the special conditions of the Indian Ocean, and by mid-century had grown confident enough to launch a string of predatory corsair attacks targeting Portuguese shipping. Eventually, such attacks proved so effective at undermining the Portuguese maritime blockade that the Ottomans were able to appropriate the lion's share of the transit trade in spices previously carried in Portuguese ships around the Cape of Good Hope.

Moreover, as the volume of this trade steadily increased, the Ottoman state also devised an array of new techniques for extracting profit from it. In the provinces bordering the Indian Ocean, fiscally minded administrators experimented with new taxation policies to coordinate traffic through the competing routes of the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf, thereby maximizing revenues from both. And in the Red Sea, the state itself became an active participant in trade by organizing a regular convoy of ships that imported state-owned spice cargoes from Yemen and resold them in Egypt at a handsome profit. Farther afield, Ottoman commercial agents were established in remote trading centers like Hormuz, Calicut, and Aceh and contracted business for the imperial treasury in these overseas markets as well. Together, these initiatives amounted to a comprehensive strategy for controlling Indian Ocean trade, which over time proved more than a match for the Portuguese *Estado da Índia*.¹²

Finally, the Ottoman Age of Exploration was, like its European equivalent, defined as much by cultural and intellectual expansion at home as by economic and territorial expansion abroad. Early on, this was a phenomenon stimulated chiefly by patronage from the imperial court and shaped by the influx of information from Europe about the spectacular discoveries of Western explorers. But as the century progressed, Ottoman travelers began returning from overseas with their own first-hand accounts of adventures in the East, while more sedentary scholars busied themselves with the translation and dissemination of previously neglected geographical works in Arabic. All of these different types of sources were, in time, combined in a number of new, distinctively Ottoman maps, atlases, and geographical treatises that profoundly transformed the Ottoman worldview and played a crucial role in shaping the Ottomans' ideological and strategic objectives as they competed with their imperial rivals from the West.¹³

EXPLORATION, GLOBAL POLITICS, AND THE PROBLEM
OF EUROCENTRISM

In the following pages, each of these remarkable parallels between Ottoman and European overseas expansion is explored in greater detail. But at the outset, it must be stressed that although a comparative framework informs the underlying issues raised by this book, *The Ottoman Age of Exploration* is at its heart a narrative rather than a comparative history. As such, it is written from an Ottoman perspective, and remains thoroughly focused on the actions of the Ottomans themselves. Its chapters are organized chronologically, each covering a period of between ten and twenty years and together providing a comprehensive account of a century of Ottoman contact with the world of the Indian Ocean. And throughout this narrative, the emphasis is on politics, with each chapter highlighting the role of individual political actors and the factions to which they adhered, while integrating into this political story a discussion of the most important texts, maps, and other sources of information that guided them on both practical and ideological levels.

Through this basic narrative approach, *The Ottoman Age of Exploration* seeks to introduce a new concept of “global politics” into the study of early modern Ottoman history. By detailing the ways in which a developing Ottoman worldview translated into concrete strategies for imperial expansion overseas, it demonstrates that the Ottomans of the sixteenth century were able to act as protagonists of the first order in creating a newly integrated world system of competing imperial states. In so doing, this book contributes to the developing scholarly literature on the history of the discoveries on multiple levels. Most basically, it presents a stark empirical challenge to interpretations of sixteenth-century political history that portray European empires as the only states capable of engaging in politics at anything more than a regional level. But in even more general terms, *The Ottoman Age of Exploration* also aims to open a new area of dialogue between two dominant but still largely separate trends in recent scholarship on the early modern world as a whole: one firmly grounded in the study of the Western intellectual tradition, and the other quite self-consciously opposed to it.

Of these two trends, the former can be loosely classified under the rubric of encounter studies, a field that blends the disciplines of history and literary theory in a way first popularized through the study of narratives of travel in the post-Columbian New World.¹⁴ More recently, encounter studies has broadened its gaze to include almost any intellectual artifact of Europe’s interaction with the Other during the late medieval and early modern periods, ranging from examples of Western geography, cartography, and narrative history to painting, epic poetry, and even works of philosophy and legal theory.¹⁵

Through a critical reexamination of all of these diverse images and texts, encounter studies has immeasurably deepened our understanding of the Age of Exploration in two fundamental respects. First, it has documented the very profound extent to

which Europe's interaction with the outside world was, from the European perspective, conditioned by the preexisting intellectual traditions of the medieval and Renaissance West. Second, it has revealed the extremely complex ways in which this very process of engagement was a formative experience in the development and consolidation of Western civilization at the most elementary level. But what encounter studies does *not* do is reveal very much about the world independent of its representation by Westerners. This is a lacuna that is sometimes easy to overlook, since the subject matter of "encounters" is, at least superficially, so seemingly cosmopolitan. But in the end, by focusing almost exclusively on European authors and European texts, the discourse of encounter studies is still an inherently Eurocentric one, even as it attempts to frame its discussion within the most global and expansive of intellectual settings.¹⁶

The same cannot be said of the self-styled world historians, an opposing camp of scholars who, over the past few decades, have dedicated themselves to developing narratives of human history that consciously avoid any Eurocentric bias. Instead, world historians have intentionally focused on phenomena unbounded by geographically or culturally specific categories of analysis, ranging from transfers of technology and the spread of infectious disease to patterns of migration and the consolidation of relationships of global economic dependency. In the process, they have produced a body of work of a truly remarkable creativity and explanatory power, employing a range of methodologies and a diversity of perspectives so broad as to defy easy description. Still, whether they frame their arguments in terms of "strange parallels," "great divergences," "guns, germs, and steel," or any of the other superbly original paradigms of world history crafted in recent years, all such works can be said to share the same basic appeal: an ability to explain the development of the global human community in a way that is completely independent of the narrative of Western civilization.¹⁷

The problem, however, is that by consciously avoiding any direct reference to culturally specific trends, texts, or intellectual movements—as well as the politics they reflected and engendered—world historians have succeeded in taking much of the human element out of their story. And while this would count as a serious limitation for almost any period of history, it is especially so when dealing with the early modern world. For all its problematic implications, the history of global exploration in the sixteenth century remains one of the most compelling human stories of all time. Through their willingness to sacrifice it before the altar of inclusiveness, world historians have therefore paid a very high intellectual price.¹⁸

How, then, do we reconcile these two conflicting visions of the early modern past? *The Ottoman Age of Exploration* proposes one possible solution, by integrating the kind of expansive intellectual history practiced by students of global encounters with the more inclusive grand narratives of world historians. Through its twin focus on politics and culture, it provides an example of a non-Western state whose encounter with the outside world was experienced as a discovery precisely because it

involved the same delicate interplay of political ambition, economic self-interest, and intellectual inquisitiveness characteristic of the European Age of Exploration.¹⁹ This does not imply, however, that the Ottoman experience of discovery was always identical to its European equivalent or that it is relevant to the broader history of the early modern world only to the extent that it was similar. Rather, it suggests that the experiences of both Ottomans and Europeans were part of a larger interactive process, in which each side formulated ambitious plans for global expansion that followed the same underlying logic, even as the particulars of their respective imperial projects diverged in important ways.

A case in point is the Ottoman Empire's oft-lamented "failure" to explore the Atlantic or to establish colonies in the New World as Europeans did. In most existing literature on the subject, this is a piece of evidence routinely pointed to as proof that the Ottomans lacked both an awareness of the discoveries and an inclination to participate in them.²⁰ But this book, rather than asking why the Ottomans never explored the New World, begins with an altogether different question: Why would they even wish to in the first place? As every schoolchild knows, Columbus himself set sail for the west not to discover a new continent (whose very existence he repeatedly tried to disprove) but in search of an alternate route to the Indies. In much the same way, the Portuguese explorers who discovered Brazil did so accidentally while on their way to India, since only by sailing far into the Atlantic could they find winds that would carry them past the southern tip of Africa. Even as late as the seventeenth century, numerous Dutch, English, and French expeditions to North America were similarly undertaken in search of an elusive Northwest Passage to the Orient.

Hence, from the perspective of their own times, the Ottomans' lack of involvement in the Western Hemisphere can hardly be considered a manifestation of collective failure. Instead, it was a logical reflection of the fact that, unlike for Europeans, the New World for them was not on the way to India. As a result, once they had successfully conquered Egypt (a prize for which the Spanish and Portuguese would have gladly traded all their claims in the Americas), the Ottomans quite reasonably took advantage of the Red Sea and Persian Gulf to gain access to the treasures of the East, rather than vainly searching the Atlantic for a shorter route that simply did not exist.²¹

With the benefit of a half millennium of hindsight, of course, we know just how valuable the New World was one day destined to become. But at the dawn of the Age of Exploration, this future was far from obvious, and it therefore serves as a very poor standard for evaluating the relative success of the Ottoman imperial project. By comparison, a much fairer (and certainly less anachronistic) set of criteria are those laid out by the Ottomans' contemporaries and rivals in the sixteenth century. First among these was Admiral Afonso de Albuquerque, the redoubtable founder of the Portuguese empire in maritime Asia, who stated in the most explicit terms exactly what he hoped to achieve as he set out for the Indies: cut off maritime traffic through

the Red Sea, seize control of the Indian Ocean's lucrative trade in spices, use the profits from this trade to finance the invasion and conquest of Mamluk Egypt, and ultimately liberate Jerusalem for the honor of Christendom and the glory of the Portuguese Crown.²²

If we assume, as the evidence presented in this book suggests, that the contemporary Ottomans shared a similar set of goals—and if we keep in mind that, at the dawn of the Age of Exploration, they were no closer to achieving them than were the Portuguese—then the Ottomans' accomplishments during the course of the sixteenth century seem very impressive indeed. Despite a precocious Portuguese start, by century's end it was not they but the Ottomans who had conquered a weakened Mamluk state, the Ottomans who controlled the bulk of the transit spice trade between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean, and the Ottomans who held Jerusalem (and Mecca and Medina as well) for the honor of Islam and the glory of the House of Osman. In this sense, it is no exaggeration to declare the Ottomans victors in the opening round of history's first truly global struggle for dominance. This book is an attempt to tell their story.