

The Ottoman Empire: Focus on Society

By the 16th century, the vast and mighty empire of the Ottomans had reached the zenith of its power. The lands under Ottoman rule stretched from the heart of Central Europe to the deserts of Arabia. In nearly every respect, the Ottoman Empire was strong and well-organized. As such, it comes as no surprise that the people under Ottoman rule were organized in a neat power structure as well. From the royal Sultan to the villagers in the rayyah class, the people of the Empire each had a unique position in Ottoman society.

At the very top of the pyramidal societal structure was the Sultan, absolute commander of all, and executor of decisions concerning politics and state wealth (for the purposes of serving the state's interests). A step below the Sultan were a small group of wealthy, esteemed leaders, who were ascribed special status because they were essentially the Sultan's "slaves". The main duties of this select little group were to protect and enlarge the financial assets of the state for the benefit of the Sultan and the Empire. These leaders also ruled and defended the far-flung Ottoman Empire.

While the Sultan invested wealth and the leaders protected it, the majority of commoners, the rayyahs, had the task of actually producing the wealth. The rayyahs had to pay part of their profits from industry, commerce, and farming to the state in the form of taxes. Townsfolk, villagers, and pastoral peoples made up the eclectic mix of the rayyah class. The word "rayyah" literally translates into "the protected flock of the Sultan".

While Ottoman society was clearly divided into distinct social classes, these classes were neither closed nor confining, meaning that with the proper attributes and luck, a man could raise his social status. For example, to be a member of the small ruling class below the Sultan, one had to possess the following three qualities:

- deep-rooted patriotism and loyalty for the Empire and the Sultan.
- acceptance and practice of Islam, which was integrated into the Ottoman lifestyle.
- knowledge and practice of the Ottoman Way, which consisted of complex customs, behavior, and language.

If a rayyah possessed these qualities, he had a chance of becoming one of the numbered leaders. On the other hand, if a leader appeared to be lacking one or more of these qualities, he could just as easily be removed from his position and sink to being a rayyah again. The shaping force behind the Ottoman Empire was most definitely the religion of Islam. As a result, religion became a foremost guiding factor in people's lives. To maintain religious harmony and unity among the diverse Muslim and non-Muslim sects of the Empire, the rayyah class were given the right to organize themselves as they wished. What happened next is that people gravitated towards religion-dictated groups. The people of each important religion and/or sect organized themselves into self-centered, self-governing communities called millets. Millets were like mini-states, that regulated smaller civic matters such as marriages, deaths, etc. In a sense, the Ottoman Empire was like the United States is today; a powerful "federal"

government that ruled from the seat of power in Istanbul, while "millet state" governments ruled over their small vicinities. The significance of millets is that they kept diverse peoples from clashing too much, since each cultural/religious group maintained a dignified distance from each other. This is not to say that the populace of the Ottoman Empire could not get along together though. The people of the Ottoman Empire were united through other common interests, morals, and ideals, as well as by an overwhelming unanimous loyalty to the Sultan himself. Such was the harmonious and organized society of the Ottoman Empire, the huge empire that left its mark on Turkey - and the world - forever. Neatly categorized into unique positions, each individual in the Ottoman Empire had his or her own part to play in society, a role to fulfill in order to contribute to the overall success of the state.

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