



# The Ottoman Age of Exploration

*Giancarlo Casale*, ????? ???? (?????)

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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 sixteenth 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.

## The Ottoman Age of Exploration Details

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## Hamdi Hassan says

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## Jean says

In many ways this book reads like a textbook but it is highly readable. The news from the Middle East recently triggered me to learn more about the history of the area. Giancarlo Casale, a professor of history, proceeds chronologically, weaving together political and intellectual history of the Ottoman Empire throughout the 16th Century. He focuses on a number of high officials among them were the Grand Viziers Ibrahim Pasha, Hadim Suleiman Pasha, Rustem Pasha, the one Grand Vizier opposed to the whole Indian Ocean enterprise, and Sokolla Mehmed Pasha, probably the strongest supporter. They were aware of what advantage a strong Ottoman presence in the Indian Ocean could be to the profitable Spice trade. The Ottoman controlled the area from the Red Sea to Atjeh in Sumatra. In response to the Portuguese global claims the Ottoman declared that the Sultan was the “Caliph of all Muslims”. The Caliphate united all Muslims under the same religious authority, much as the Papacy did for Christendom. The author shows that shifting priorities and bitter personal rivalries at the Ottoman court hampered the development of a long term global policy. Slowly the conviction grew that tax income from land was preferable to the profits made from the government controlled spice trade.

Casale’s aim is to show the achievements of the “Ottoman age of exploration” not only the military and commercial but the intellectual and political ones. He does so in a convincing manner, making both sides, the Ottoman and the Portuguese, come alive in their negotiations, their self views and perception of their opponent. The book is well researched. Casale speaks Turkish, Portuguese and Italian, enabling him to consult all the relevant archives and secondary literature. I read this as an audio book downloaded from Audible, therefore missed out on the maps and pictures. James Adams narrated the book.

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## Malek Alkasem says

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## Avempace says

At its apogee in the 16th century, the Ottoman Empire was engaged in a colossal struggle for supremacy against formidable foes across far flung fronts: against the Habsburgs to the North in Europe, Spain to the West in the Mediterranean, the Russians to the East/NorthEast, the Savafids to the East/SouthEast in Turkey, Iraq and Western Iran, and the Portuguese to the South in Indian Ocean. Of the incessant campaigns swirling around the borders of the empire, those focused on the Indian Ocean have been the least noted by historians. Yet, they served essential purposes for the empire, both politically and economically. Politically, they

emphasized its claim as the heir to the classical Islamic commonwealth of trade routes and faith communities stretching from the Middle East through the Indian Ocean to the far East. Economically, they fulfilled a vital function in securing control over the spice and trade routes, and ultimately the monetary flow in the form of precious metals eastward. It is often forgotten that the conquest of Egypt by the Ottomans in 1516 was heralded by the defeat of the Mamluk fleet by the Portuguese in 1509. It is the threat of Egypt, and the entire network of Indian Ocean trade routes, being lost to the Portuguese that ushered the Ottoman-Portuguese struggle for supremacy over the Indian Ocean network, the focus of this book under review.

The crafting of the stratagems underpinning the Ottoman imperial wars as well as their execution fell to the Grand Viziers of the empire, many of who were capable men who commanded a well oiled bureaucratic and military machine. Beautiful mosques honoring those men, most notably Rustem Pasha and Mehmet Sokollou Pasha, still adorn the seashore of modern day Istanbul. The grand viziers had to deal with all these fronts simultaneously in real time and in a strategically integrated fashion. In that sense, it is no wonder that different factions emerged within the bureaucracy arguing for one front at the expense of another. The Indian Ocean was a relatively neglected frontier securing modest resources compared to the massive efforts sunk against foes on other fronts. Yet it could be argued that strategically it was the most interesting of the lot and the most relevant to the viability of the Ottoman empire as a world power, spawning vexing "what ifs" alternative histories to match.

With this background in mind, the Ottoman Age of Exploration does a remarkable job of relating the 16th century history of the Ottoman encounter with the Indian Ocean and their face-off with the Portuguese. Amongst its strengths are a wealth of primary sources, both Ottoman and Portuguese, a clear analysis of the political and military events surrounding the Ottoman Indian Ocean expansion, and an interesting array of lively personalities involved in that struggle. The figure of Sokollou Pasha in particular towers above the rest as the architect of a global Ottoman vision extending into the Indian Ocean that was frustrated by events mostly beyond his control. The book has some weaknesses that need to be addressed. To my mind, the Ottoman Indian Ocean venture was not an age of exploration as much as an age of reclamation of a classical Islamic heritage of trade routes and centers, as outlined above. Another potential weakness is that in its sharp focus on the Indian Ocean front, it blurs by necessity the global vision of the empire engaged across its many fronts, with all the interconnected challenges and complexities that the Ottoman policy maker would have had to consider. Notwithstanding these shortcomings, the Ottoman Age of Exploration remains a significant piece of scholarship and an interesting one at that.

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## John says

Casale's angle in *The Ottoman Age of Exploration* is bold and thought provoking. Instead of looking at the Ottoman Empire as a Mediterranean power in conflict with Spain, or as an Asian land power in conflict with other Asian empires, Casale argues that the sixteenth-century Ottomans were engaged in a rivalry with Portugal for Indian Ocean hegemony. The Ottoman mindset when it came to the Indian Ocean world was remarkably similar to the western European mindset. Both areas had been effectively isolated from the wider trading world to the south and east. Both areas were seeing gains in military technology, and were looking to capitalize on those gains by expanding their influence. And in both places there was a flowering of cartography and other expressions of scholarly interest in the wider world. Thus, both the Ottomans and western Europeans "formulated ambitious plans for global expansion that followed the same underlying logic." The Ottomans attempted to enter the new system that was coalescing in the Indian Ocean on much the same terms as the Portuguese. They were not looking to conquer actual physical space as much as they were trying to assert authority over a large swath of political space. And they justified this assertion of authority through religious rhetoric, which is remarkably similar to how the Portuguese justified their authority. Casale is directly attacking a common interpretation of world history: that only the states of

Western Europe were interested in “sovereignty over the seas,” and that Islamic powers were focused on conquering land rather than controlling trade.

The Ottoman Age of Exploration is somewhat old fashioned in its focus on diplomatic personalities and military figures. At first, it was refreshing to read a monograph dedicated to events and their consequences. Before I reached the halfway point of the book, however, I was again getting sick of the old-fashioned approach. Casale, by filling his book with an endless recounting of sultans and admirals, betrayals and marriages, and battles won and lost, ironically makes a very good case against "great man" event-driven history. The book is so cluttered, and the clutter obscures Casale’s smart ideas about the Ottomans, their orientation toward the rest of the world and their place in global systems. By the end of the book, Casale has assembled a convincing argument that at least some Ottoman leaders – an Indian Ocean faction – worked for and achieved a “soft empire” in the Indian Ocean world. They controlled a large percentage of the spice trade, they had trading alliances with Muslim states in various parts of South and Southeast Asia, the sultan was being praised in mosques as far away as China, and many populations all over the Indian Ocean world were open partisans of the Ottoman Empire. But he has distracted the reader with so many minor people and events that his larger discovery gets a little lost.

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Azza Masmoudi says

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### Zayn Gregory says

The Ottomans were very active throughout the Indian Ocean world during the 1500s despite having no access to or knowledge of the area at the beginning of the century. The author shows their exploration of the Indian Ocean is closely analogous to the activities of the Portuguese in same period. The most remarkable aspect of the story is the way Muslim peoples from East Africa to Sumatra were all prepared to give their loyalty and even their sovereignty to the Osmani Khalifah simply for showing up once with a boat or two on their shores. Aceh is described mostly just in the context of Ottoman diplomacy. I'd like to read more about the Sultanate of Aceh next.

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### Rindis says

Everyone knows of the Age of Exploration, and the Portuguese efforts to find a sea-route around Africa to India. If you know a little more history, you know something of their efforts related to controlling trade in India and the Indian Ocean.

What is even less known is the efforts the Ottoman Empire expended in controlling the Indian Ocean. We mostly remember the Ottoman Empire as a land power. But it controlled the bulk of the Mediterranean for quite a while, mostly during the 16th Century, and the celebrated defeat at Lepanto was celebrated because it was in the face of heavy naval superiority, which Lepanto did not affect. What almost no one remembers is that the Ottoman Empire gained control of the Red Sea and Persian Gulf during this period and challenged Portugal for control of the Indian Ocean.

Part of this might be because both powers were operating far from home at the end of administrative and logistical support. There's not a lot of huge conflicts here—there are some important ones, but the size of the forces involved tends to be much less than we are used to thinking in terms of. Casale's book is a very enlightening look at this entire situation from the Ottoman point of view.

The main focus of the book is a group that he calls the "Indian Ocean Faction" in the Ottoman government. I think he presents them as a more coherent and unified group (partially through use of that name) than I guess they really were, but it looks pretty evident that they did help and promote each other as they could, and were a legitimate faction. In general, Casale covers the Ottoman "discovery" of the Indian Ocean (an area that they didn't know much more about than Western Europe for some time) through an attempt to draw the eastern Muslim world into the Ottoman political orbit, policy changes, and the end of both Ottoman and Portuguese efforts at taking the entire pie.

As if politics, war, negotiations, and trade aren't enough, Casale also talks about maps and mapmaking. After

