

MEDITERRANEAN PRISONERS VERSUS GUARDIANS OF NARROW PASSAGES: OTTOMANS' GEOGRAPHY, MARITIME STRATEGIES AND THEIR RIVALS DURING THE AGE OF EXPLORATION

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Abstract

This article explores the decisive role of geography in shaping state power and foreign policy during the Age of Exploration, with a focus on the maritime strategies of the Ottoman Empire and its rivals. Despite their dominance within the Mediterranean, both Ottomans and Venetians were geographically constrained, effectively becoming "Mediterranean prisoners" limited by Iberian control of strategic maritime chokepoints, the Strait of Gibraltar and Bab el Mandep. In contrast, Portugal and Spain leveraged their advantageous Atlantic positions to control critical narrow passages, enabling them to spearhead global exploration and empire-building. By analyzing the geographic realities underpinning these contrasting trajectories, the study highlights how physical location not only structured political, economic, and military strategies but also fundamentally limited the Ottomans' and Venetians' ability to project power globally. The article underscores the enduring importance of geography as a persistent and foundational factor in international relations, shaping historical and contemporary geopolitical dynamics.

Key Words: *Geography, Ottoman Empire, Maritime Policy, Mediterranean, Age of Exploration, Naval Powers*

Öz

Akdeniz Tutsakları Dar Geçitlerin Muhafızlarına Karşı: Osmanlı Coğrafyası, Deniz Stratejileri ve Keşifler Çağındaki Rakipleri

Bu makale, Keşifler Çağında coğrafyanın devlet gücünü ve dış politikayı şekillendirmedeki belirleyici rolünü, özellikle Osmanlı İmparatorluğu ve rakiplerinin denizcilik stratejilerine odaklanarak incelemektedir. Akdeniz'deki hakimiyetlerine rağmen, hem Osmanlılar hem de Venedikliler coğrafi olarak kısıtlanmış, stratejik deniz geçitleri olan Cebelitarık Boğazı ve Bab el Mandep'in İber güçleri tarafından kontrolüyle fiilen "Akdeniz tutsakları" haline gelmişlerdir. Buna karşılık, Portekiz ve İspanya, kritik dar geçitleri kontrol etmek için avantajlı Atlantik konumlarından yararlanarak küresel keşif ve imparatorluk inşasında öncü rol oynamışlardır. Bu zit yörlümlerin altında yatan coğrafi gerçekleri analiz ederek, çalışma, fiziksel konumun yalnızca siyasi, ekonomik ve askeri stratejileri yapılandırmakla kalmayıp aynı zamanda Osmanlılar ve Venedikliler'in küresel güç yansıma kabiliyetlerini de temelden nasıl sınırladığını

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vurgulamaktadır. Makale, uluslararası ilişkilerde ısrarlı ve temel bir faktör olarak tarihsel ve çağdaş jeopolitik dinamikleri şekillendiren coğrafyanın önemini vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Coğrafya, Osmanlı İmparatorluğu, Denizcilik Politikası, Akdeniz, Keşif Çağı, Deniz Kuvvetleri*

Introduction

The strategic location of Alcatraz prison powerfully illustrates the importance of geography in shaping security outcomes. Situated on an isolated island surrounded by cold, treacherous waters, the prison's location itself functioned as a formidable barrier to escape, demonstrating how physical space can be employed as a deliberate tool of control. This relationship between geography and security is not limited to institutional settings; it extends to international relations, where a state's geographical position significantly influences its foreign policy behavior and security strategies. As such, understanding the spatial dimensions of political and strategic decision-making is essential for analyzing global patterns of power, conflict, and cooperation.

The central argument of this study is that geography serves as a fundamental element in shaping foreign policy, functioning as a transformative, driving and guiding cartography of power that defines strategic possibilities and constraints for states. However, this does not mean that geography should be seen as a deterministic force that solely dictates historical or political outcomes. Instead, it serves as a foundational context, a structural backdrop or "starting point" that helps explain why certain developments take specific forms in particular places at a particular time. While not the only factor, geography provides essential conditions that shape the direction and character of events. The study does not treat geography as a deterministic or fatalistic force in this context. Instead, it views geography as an independent variable that influences actors' actions in diverse ways depending on evolving circumstances. Be it the changing hubs of power, such as Europe, America, or Asia, or shifting zones of conflict, like Central Europe, the Balkans, or the Middle East, geography's temporal relative impact shapes how actors position themselves.

Historical events are not mere coincidences but are profoundly shaped by geography, a crucial and enduring factor determining state power and foreign policy.¹ The location of a nation, especially its access to vital maritime chokepoints and its geographic orientation, has fundamentally influenced the capacity of significant powers like the Ottoman Empire and Venice to exert global influence during the Age of Exploration. In stark contrast, this geographic positioning provided substantial advantages to Atlantic-bordering nations such as Spain and Portugal, enabling them to dominate and shape the world during this

¹ Tzu 2010, p.35.

Mediterranean Prisoners Versus Guardians of Narrow Passages: Ottomans' Geography, Maritime Strategies and Their Rivals During the Age of Exploration

pivotal era. Geography is both the compass and the constraint of foreign policy. It shapes ambition, circumscribes possibility, and structures the relationships between states. While diplomacy, technology, and economics influence international behavior, geography remains the most consistent and inescapable framework within which foreign policy is made. In this context, political maps illustrate geographical realities.² Maps reveal more than territorial divisions; they are silent narratives of power, strategy, and intention. They reflect specific interests; historical contexts shape them and help construct certain versions of history. They offer selective representations, often concealing the agendas they support.³ A glance at the world map shows more than political boundaries; it uncovers how geography quietly orchestrates international relations. Why is Chile stretched so long and narrow along the Pacific? Why do small states line the Arabian coast? The incorporation of Belgium into the Kingdom of the Netherlands at the Congress of Vienna was driven not by cultural alignment but by geographic logic: the great powers sought a defensible buffer to ensure stability in post-Napoleonic Europe. These curiosities, visible at a glance, are not geographical accidents but outcomes of historical necessities of dominant powers and their strategic design. This act (and many others like it) demonstrates how crucial geography is in shaping the structure of the international order.

By examining the maritime strategies of the Ottoman Empire and its rivals during the Age of Exploration, a limited time period, the study demonstrates how geographic realities enabled regional dominance and imposed critical limitations on global ambitions. Despite their significant influence within the Mediterranean, both Ottomans and Venetians were constrained by their geographic positioning. They were hemmed in by powerful maritime rivals such as Spain and Portugal and restricted by the strategic chokepoints of the Strait of Gibraltar and Bab-el-Mandeb. These constraints rendered the Ottomans and Venetians, in effect, "Mediterranean prisoners": preeminent within their immediate sphere yet unable to transcend the barriers that defined the boundaries of global maritime power. The study thus argues that despite impressive political, military, and technological power, geographic position played a decisive role in shaping the historical trajectories of these empires, ultimately precluding their emergence as dominant actors in the evolving global trade networks of the Age of Exploration.

In this context, the study's central question is how geography influenced the state power and maritime strategies of the Ottoman Empire and Venice during the Age of Exploration, particularly in comparison to the maritime strategy of

² Story 2006, p.1.

³ Pickles 2004, p. 64.

Iberian powers like Spain and Portugal. To address this, we sought answers to the following questions: What geographic factors limited the Ottoman Empire's and Venice's ability to project naval power beyond the Mediterranean? How did control of strategic maritime chokepoints (e.g., the Strait of Gibraltar, Bab-el Mandeb) shape the global reach of Mediterranean versus Atlantic powers? In what ways did the geographic position of Spain and Portugal provide them with advantages that facilitated their global exploration and empire-building? How did geographic constraints influence the economic, military, and political strategies of the Ottoman Empire and Venice? What broader implications does the geography observed in the Age of Exploration have for understanding contemporary geopolitics? Can geography influence transformation and adaptation?

The article also contrasts the geographical advantages of Spain and Portugal, whose control of the gateways to the Atlantic allowed them to lead maritime exploration and build overseas empires, while the Ottomans and Venetians remained constrained to their Mediterranean sphere. At this point, it is essential to emphasize the role of the time (T) factor in international politics. The morphogenetic approach, developed by Margaret Archer, emphasizes how structure and agency interact over time. It views social systems, including international relations, as dynamic processes where structures (institutions, power relations, norms) condition but do not determine the actions of agents (like states), and agents, in turn, can reproduce or transform these structures.⁴ Crucially, this happens in temporal phases; what was once an advantage can evolve, degrade, or even become a constraint due to the interplay between past decisions and current actions. When applied to foreign policy, the morphogenetic perspective helps us understand how time alters strategic positions. What may begin as a beneficial foreign policy choice, such as forming an alliance, maintaining a naval presence, or exploiting a trade route, is not static. In essence, time possesses the capacity to reshape overarching strategic doctrines. Over time, changes in the international system, technological developments, or the actions of other states may shift the context, turning previous advantages into strategic burdens. The evolution of circumstances over time can significantly alter a state's foreign policy goals and grand strategic orientation. A pertinent example is Russia, which redirected its expansionist ambitions in response to its enduring geographical constraints. Following its defeat in the Russo-Japanese War, Russia abandoned its eastward thrust and reoriented its strategic focus southward, particularly toward the Mediterranean. States must continually reassess their positions and decide whether to maintain the current structure or initiate change, precisely what the

⁴ See M. Archer 1995.

Mediterranean Prisoners Versus Guardians of Narrow Passages: Ottomans' Geography, Maritime Strategies and Their Rivals During the Age of Exploration

morphogenetic cycle describes. From this perspective, the importance of a power's geographic location is fluid and contextual over time. Portugal's position, which was disadvantaged when the known world and trade routes were concentrated around the Mediterranean, became strategically advantageous when the center of economic gravity shifted beyond the Mediterranean during the Age of Exploration. This shift highlights the importance of time and the critical role of geographic chokepoints in shaping state strategies, regardless of where the global trade center was. The enduring strategic importance of chokepoints is further highlighted by the long-standing rivalry among European great powers for control of territories such as Gibraltar, reflecting how powers such as England came to recognize the geopolitical value of such locations.

The study considers the broader implications of geography in shaping global powers, highlighting its continuing relevance in contemporary geopolitics. Just as in the Age of Exploration, geography continues to influence the global position of states today. It demonstrates that while the Ottoman Empire and Venice were formidable within the Mediterranean, their geographic limitations prevented them from achieving the global dominance their military and technological prowess might have enabled. This exploration underscores the enduring importance of geographic constraints in shaping political dynamics and how maritime geography continues to determine the trajectory of great powers.

Scholarly Perspectives on Geography and Imperial Strategies of Naval Powers during the Age of Exploration

The classical geopolitical theories of Alfred Thayer Mahan and Halford Mackinder have long emphasized geography as a structural determinant of state power.⁵ Mahan argued that maritime dominance, rooted in geographic position and access to sea routes, was key to global influence. Mackinder, in contrast, focused on land power, proposing that control of the Eurasian "Heartland" dictated global supremacy. Both approaches treat geography as a largely fixed and deterministic force. However, such views have been increasingly critiqued for neglecting historical context, technological change, and human agency. This study reinterprets geography not as a permanent structural condition but as a temporal factor whose influence varies across time and is shaped by political, economic, and strategic developments. It argues that while geography matters, its significance is historically contingent rather than structurally absolute.

Geography is a determining factor in shaping states' policies, which is Tim Marshall's central theme in *Prisoners of Geography*.⁶ He adopts a

⁵ Mackinder 1904, Mahan, 1902.

⁶ Marshall 2019.

deterministic approach to geography, arguing that physical terrain, mountains, rivers, plains, and climate are primary forces shaping nations' political, military, and social trajectories. It contends that geography limits the choices available to leaders, constraining their actions regardless of ideology or intent, and provides enduring structural explanations for historical and contemporary conflicts. The study illustrates how geographic features consistently override human ambition, from Russia's compulsion to secure the flatlands of Eastern Europe to the strategic stalemates between India and China due to the Himalayas. While acknowledging the mitigating influence of modern technology, the study insists that no advancement can fully escape the constraints imposed by the natural world. In doing so, it challenges more voluntaristic or ideational interpretations of global affairs, reasserting the centrality of geographic determinism in understanding state behavior and international relations. Contrary to Marshall's deterministic and fatalistic perspective, this study aims to illuminate the transformative, restrictive, compelling, and guiding effects of geography through historical cases, by considering the temporal dimension (time) in evaluating geography, rather than strictly fatalistic interpretation.

The maritime strategies of the Ottoman Empire and its rivals, Venice, Portugal, and Spain during the Age of Exploration have been the subject of considerable scholarly debate. The literature surrounding these powers can be categorized into several key themes: the decline of Venetian power concerning Atlantic commerce, Ottoman naval strategies, the role of technology and cultural factors, and the comparative analysis of Western and Muslim naval powers during the Age of Exploration. A significant body of literature has focused on the decline of Venice, often attributing it to the rise of Portuguese and Dutch maritime dominance. It was once believed that the Portuguese sea route to the Spice Islands severely undermined the Venetian economy. However, scholars like Arnold argue that Venice's decline was more a consequence of its neglect of Atlantic commerce and internal Italian conflicts than direct competition from the Portuguese and Dutch spice trade.⁷ Arnold contends that the Venetians failed to adapt to changing global trade patterns, focusing too heavily on their Mediterranean-based commerce, which left them vulnerable to shifts in the wider European maritime system. This insight challenges previous assumptions, emphasizing the internal factors contributing to Venice's decline. Nonetheless, even with extensive maritime experience, the connection between this decline and geographical factors is not addressed.

Another significant theme in the literature revolves around the Ottoman Empire's approach to naval power and its perceived "failure" to engage in the

⁷ Arnold 2012.

Mediterranean Prisoners Versus Guardians of Narrow Passages: Ottomans' Geography, Maritime Strategies and Their Rivals During the Age of Exploration

Atlantic or establish colonies. Casale highlights the widespread belief that the Ottomans were uninterested or unaware of European maritime discoveries.⁸ However, this view is contested by scholars like Hess, who suggest that the Ottomans' naval strategy was shaped by their internal priorities, particularly their focus on territorial expansion in the Balkans rather than exploration of new maritime territories like the Atlantic or the Indian Ocean.⁹ Hess points out that the Ottoman Empire's agricultural-based economy and land-focused military structure made the transition to oceanic naval strategies less feasible, as their military practices were centered on Mediterranean-style naval warfare using large cannons and galleys. Hess also argues that Ottoman naval failures in the 16th century allowed Atlantic nations, particularly Portugal, to gain control of critical sea routes, leading to European dominance in the Mediterranean and later in Muslim territories. While the Ottomans did engage in naval operations in the Mediterranean and rebuilt their fleet after the Battle of Lepanto in 1571, their primary focus remained on land-based expansion. The Ottomans' failure to adopt Portuguese naval technologies, such as sailing ships designed for the Atlantic, stemmed from the incompatibility of these technologies with their military and economic structure. This highlights the limitations of Ottoman naval power in the face of evolving European strategies, but not geography. Rather than stemming from incompatibility with military or economic structures, geography's transformative and forcing influence has guided actors in divergent positions along distinct strategic trajectories.

A notable gap in the literature is the limited attention given to the role of geographical factors in shaping Ottoman maritime strategies. While internal political, military, and economic structures have been emphasized, geography often remains an implicit backdrop rather than a central explanatory factor. The Ottoman Empire's strategic position, straddling the eastern Mediterranean, Black Sea, and Red Sea, naturally directed its naval priorities toward securing these enclosed and semi-enclosed bodies of water. Its command over critical maritime chokepoints such as the Bosphorus, the Dardanelles, and the Suez region made regional maritime dominance more advantageous and logistically feasible than distant oceanic ventures. In this context, Ottoman naval strategies were less a product of failure or shortsightedness, and more a rational adaptation to the empire's geographic realities and a further effort to overcome these geographical constraints. Thus, geography was not merely a passive setting but a determining force that shaped the scope and character of Ottoman naval policy.

⁸ Casale 2010.

⁹ Hess 1970.

A recurring argument in the literature is the technological and cultural factors that shaped Ottoman and Venetian maritime strategies. Cipolla attributes the rise of Western naval power after the fifteenth century to advances in sailing and cannon technology, which were crucial to European maritime success.¹⁰ He argues that Asian societies, including the Ottomans, failed to adopt these new technologies due to cultural barriers. This line of reasoning may hold value within the Eurocentric scholarly discourse as an explanation for why the Ottomans did not pursue oceanic navigation despite their strong naval presence in the Mediterranean. However, it is often interpreted through an Orientalist perspective that links this decision to supposed cultural or civilizational shortcomings. In reality, geographical constraints defined the empire's strategic orientation and reinforced its internal power structures, limiting the drive for expansion beyond familiar waters.

David Arnold has a similar approach. He suggests that the Age of Exploration was a Eurasian achievement, with European maritime power benefiting significantly from Eastern navigational tools and knowledge. However, Europe's ability to adapt and combine these tools with its expertise gave it a decisive edge over Asian powers. This technological synthesis, bold political ideologies, and intellectual shifts catalyzed European exploration and expansion.¹¹ Yet, this analysis leaves some critical questions unanswered: Why were the Italians, particularly Venetians, so ineffective during this era despite their advanced maritime capabilities? Although the Ottomans may have held technological and military superiority or at least parity within the Mediterranean, what was the key factor that limited their influence beyond it? This supports the claim that geography is not obsolete despite technology. Despite transportation, communication, and warfare advances, geography still constrains military and political strategies. Logistics, terrain, and distance still limit the projection of power, as seen in the wars of Napoleon or others.

Scholars like McNeill and Hess have compared Ottoman and European naval strategies, noting that by the end of the 15th century, internal conflicts and external pressures weakened the Ottoman Empire, causing it to lag behind rising European maritime powers.¹² McNeill suggests that the Muslim world, including the Ottomans, struggled with internal divisions and external challenges that undermined their ability to compete with the emerging Atlantic powers. Hess provides a more nuanced view by emphasizing that while the Ottomans were engaged in significant naval operations, they focused primarily on the

¹⁰ Cipolla 1965.

¹¹ Arnold 2012.

¹² McNeill 1963, Hess 1970.

Mediterranean Prisoners Versus Guardians of Narrow Passages: Ottomans' Geography, Maritime Strategies and Their Rivals During the Age of Exploration

Mediterranean and securing territories close to home, rather than competing with the Portuguese or Spanish in the Indian Ocean or Atlantic. Furthermore, Hess claims that Western accounts of Ottoman naval failures often overlook Ottoman successes and victories, framing the Ottoman Empire as a passive player in global maritime affairs. He argues that Muslim historical narratives emphasized Ottoman victories, contributing to a distorted understanding of their maritime capabilities during this period.

Casale offers a critical perspective on Ottoman intentions during the Age of Exploration, arguing that the Ottomans aimed to establish a global transportation system linking all parts of the Islamic world, with the Ottoman Empire at its core.¹³ This ambition, symbolized by Sokollu's efforts to transform the ummah (the global Muslim community), suggests that the Ottomans envisioned maritime expansion. Still, they focused more on creating regional networks than competing with European powers for global dominance. The success of the European maritime expansion is often attributed to a combination of advanced technological innovations, bold political ideologies, and intellectual shifts that fostered global ambitions. Casale argues that these intertwined factors made the Age of Exploration possible, with Western Europe, despite its isolation before the Age of Exploration, becoming the dominant force in global maritime trade and exploration. European powers, driven by technological innovation and transformative political and ideological changes, sought to expand their influence and secure control over new sea routes and territories. Casale's analysis reveals a Eurocentric perspective, placing limited emphasis on the geographical factors that shaped Ottoman maritime strategy. Instead, it leans heavily on cultural explanations as the primary lens of interpretation.

Acemoğlu's prominent thesis contends that geography plays no significant role in determining the rise and decline of nations.¹⁴ Acemoğlu argues that geography alone is insufficient to account for global inequality or the distribution of state power, emphasizing instead that historical processes, particularly colonization, shaped institutional frameworks that have had enduring impacts on development. While geography may set initial conditions, Acemoğlu claims that the institutions, shaped through colonization and political choices, ultimately determine a state's prosperity or stagnation. While this thesis may appear convincing through contemporary dominant Western-centric narratives it reflects an anachronistic perspective regarding universal historiography. Interpreting institutions as the primary drivers of national success from a 21st-century standpoint involves reading a slow, cumulative historical process through

¹³ Casale 2010.

¹⁴ Acemoğlu, Robinson 2012.

modern assumptions. However, let's turn back 500 years and assess the Mediterranean world, where the dominant powers of the time were concentrated, within the conditions of that era. Then Acemoğlu's thesis begins to lose its validity. As argued in this study, during the Age of Exploration, the advantage did not go to the powerful Ottomans, who were dominant in the known geography, had more advanced trade networks, and conquered Istanbul despite significant challenges, nor to Venice, which was similarly positioned. Instead, the upper hand went to Portugal and Spain, whose geographic location provided a strategic advantage for oceanic exploration and expansion. Navigating narrow straits, such as those at the Dardanel, is notoriously tricky, even for the world's most powerful navies, and often impossible even for the most "institutionalized" states. Contemporary events at the mouth of the Red Sea illustrate geography's asymmetric influence on power distribution. Thus, geographic constraints played a more immediate and decisive role than institutional arrangements in shaping outcomes and state power during that period. As for the historical dimension, the Ottomans had established a more centralized and powerful administrative system within the institutional framework of the time. Based on institutional logic (but not anachronistic) alone, they should have gained a clear superiority over Spain, whose centralization came later, and the relatively weaker Portugal. By that reasoning, the Ottomans should have been able to pass through the straits without difficulty and evolve into a dominant global empire. However, one of the central arguments of this study is that this did not occur. Therefore, the claim that institutions alone explain the rise and fall of nations neglects the significant role played by geographical and temporal conditions, particularly in the early modern era.

The contributions of scholars such as İdris Bostan, Salih Özbaran, and Cengiz Orhunlu represent foundational research in the field of Ottoman maritime history, particularly concerning naval activities within and beyond the Mediterranean.¹⁵ Building upon these and similar works, the present study narrows its scope to the specific temporal context of the Age of Discovery. Adopting a theoretical lens grounded in the interplay between geography and international relations, it contends that the Ottoman Empire's inability to emerge as a global maritime power during this era was primarily shaped by geographic determinants. Rather than constituting a purely historical analysis, this research employs historical literature to explore the influence of geographical conditions on state power and foreign policy, situating its argument at the intersection of theory and historical case study.

¹⁵ Bostan, Özbaran 2009; Orhunlu 1970.

Mediterranean Prisoners Versus Guardians of Narrow Passages: Ottomans' Geography, Maritime Strategies and Their Rivals During the Age of Exploration

Despite the extensive scholarship on maritime strategies during the Age of Exploration, a significant gap remains in fully addressing the role of geography as an active and dynamic constraint on imperial ambitions. Most existing studies prioritize institutional, technological, or cultural explanations while treating geography as a static backdrop. This study positions geography as a central modifier in the formation and execution of maritime strategies, particularly within the international system of the early modern era. By examining how geographic realities shaped strategic decisions, constrained mobility, and influenced the distribution of power among empires, this research highlights a crucial but often overlooked dimension of international relations. It argues that during the formative period of global maritime competition, geography was not merely a contextual factor but a decisive force that mediated access to power, shaped grand strategy, and ultimately influenced the trajectory of global dominance. This geographic lens distinguishes the present study from prior literature and offers a more integrated understanding of the limitations and possibilities faced by empires like the Ottomans and Venetians in contrast to their Atlantic rivals.

The Role of Geography in Shaping State Power: Strategic, Economic, and Political Dimensions

Geography is not merely a passive stage on which history unfolds; it is a primary actor. Just as it shapes human habits, what people eat, how they build, and where they plant, it also shapes states' habits of foreign policy behavior. The location of a state determines not only its resources but also its vulnerabilities, alliances, and strategic outlook. Throughout history, geographic positioning has elevated certain states to global prominence. Those with access to critical resources, control of trade routes, or strategic maritime chokepoints have projected power across continents.¹⁶ Conversely, nations with potential for influence have often been held back by geographic constraints, unable to overcome the limitations of their location.¹⁷ The decisive role of geography in determining a nation's influence is both enduring and often underappreciated. States situated along key trade corridors or near vital chokepoints naturally accrue leverage in projecting power. Britain's insular geography, for example, provided natural defense while enabling maritime outreach. In contrast, landlocked or geographically isolated nations face challenges securing economic and diplomatic influence. Their foreign policies must navigate significant structural limitations that others are spared. As Nicholas Spykman asserted, natural features

¹⁶Taylor 1993.

¹⁷ Kennedy 1987.

like mountains and seas do not shift with political winds; they persist and define strategic behaviour.¹⁸

Indeed, the rise and fall of powers cannot be fully explained without considering their geography. While military strength, political leadership, and innovation are crucial, geography remains a fundamental modifier. It can either magnify a nation's ambitions or mute its reach.¹⁹ Whether through continental isolation or regional entanglement, a state's spatial position can catalyze power or constrain it. Jeffrey W. Taliaferro considers geography an independent factor that influences emulation, innovation, and the continuation or intensification of current strategies.²⁰ Importantly, geography is not confined to the physical terrain alone. It includes the human and environmental context, regional economics, cultural zones, climatic conditions, and historical borders.²¹ Why did Spain succeed in navigating Atlantic routes despite entering the game late? What gave Atlantic-bordering nations an edge, despite technological and political shortcomings? The answers lie in their spatial advantages, geographic orientation toward the sea, and access to new worlds. As Haushofer defined it, Geopolitics concerns itself with the permanent realities of the Earth's surface, mountains, rivers, oceans, that structure survival and competition.²² These enduring elements form the stage upon which foreign policy unfolds. Political ideologies may change, but the Himalayas do not move; alliances shift, but the Strait of Malacca remains as vital today as it was centuries ago.

Alfred Thayer Mahan underscores that geographic location is not merely a backdrop but an active force in national development, nowhere more apparent than in maritime nations. States such as England, which adopted a resolute maritime focus, reaped strategic advantages by avoiding entanglement in continental defense and expansion. This freedom allowed England to consolidate its naval strength, surpassing rivals like France and Holland, whose attention was fragmented by land-based obligations and dispersed naval operations. Although France possessed a significant colonial empire, England could leverage its insular geography that transformed its maritime potential into durable wealth and seaborne supremacy.²³ Its coastline, marked by favorable harbors and deep-water ports, was ideally suited for the age of sail, offering protection and strategic reach. This positional advantage translated into command over key maritime arteries, notably the English Channel, which served as a defensive buffer and a gateway

¹⁸ Scholvin 2016, p. 274-283.

¹⁹ Mahan 1902.

²⁰ Taliaferro p.214.

²¹ Hansen 1997.

²² Haushofer 2002, p.XXIII.

²³ Mahan 1902, p. 16.

Mediterranean Prisoners Versus Guardians of Narrow Passages: Ottomans' Geography, Maritime Strategies and Their Rivals During the Age of Exploration

to dominate northern European trade routes.²⁴ Nations like the Netherlands and Britain used their fleets and maritime position to compete with larger land powers like France and Germany.²⁵ America's idealism was enabled not just by its oceanic protection, but also by its access to Europe and Asia through the Atlantic and Pacific. Yet, this same distance also fueled a lasting sense of isolationism.²⁶

Geography has long been a silent architect of power, shaping the fortunes of nations through strategic advantage, economic access, and defensive posture. Historical shifts in geopolitical fortune illustrate the enduring value of strategic chokepoints. Spain, once similarly situated, forfeited its maritime prominence following the loss of Gibraltar. Meanwhile, Italy, despite possessing an extensive coastline, found its sea power constrained by the loss of strategically vital islands like Malta and Corsica, an impairment to its maritime projection. Economic integration and global interaction are similarly governed by geographic access. As Mahan notes, a nation's seaboard functions as a frontier, and the ease with which a state accesses the sea often determines its capacity for trade and international engagement.²⁷ In wartime, these geographic determinants become even more pronounced. During the Napoleonic era, France found itself disadvantaged by the absence of a port east of Brest suitable for accommodating ships-of-the-line, while England maintained a robust network of naval arsenals at Plymouth, Portsmouth, and beyond, fortifying its naval supremacy.²⁸ As one of the central arguments of this article suggests, the Ottomans were acutely aware of this strategic disadvantage and consequently undertook considerable efforts to maintain control over regions such as Yemen, a territory positioned advantageously at the mouth of the Red Sea for naval operations. Great Britain's separation from mainland Europe by the English Channel is a geographical fact that neither Julius Caesar nor William the Conqueror, Philip II, Napoleon, or Hitler could ignore.²⁹ Yet even here, France's geography offered compensations. It boasted excellent harbors along the Channel, Atlantic, and Mediterranean coasts, which were not only critical for international commerce but also facilitated internal economic circulation via large river systems.³⁰

Geography, however, does not uniformly confer advantage. In many instances, it imposes severe constraints. The Ottoman Empire, compelled to orchestrate a two-front defense, suffered from overextension and divided

²⁴ Mahan 1902, p. 16.

²⁵ Cohen 2009, p.180.

²⁶ Kaplan 2012, p.31.

²⁷ Mahan 1902, p. 18.

²⁸ Mahan 1902, p. 19.

²⁹ Morgenthau 1948, p.80.

³⁰ Mahan 1902, p. 19.

strategic attention. Likewise, Germany's central position in Europe, exposed to threats from both East and West and lacking natural boundaries, engendered a geopolitical vulnerability that influenced its aggressive military posture and centralized political structures. Bismarck's foremost strategic concern was the prospect of a two-front war, in which Germany would be compelled to confront Russia and France simultaneously. China's geopolitical significance is amplified by its access to key sea lanes and abundant resources, while Brazil, geographically more secluded, remains peripheral in the global strategic calculus. Western Europe exemplifies a classic maritime region, defined by its sea-focused geography and economy, as well as a population shaped by a long-standing, trade-driven relationship with the ocean.³¹ Europe's strong maritime influence is evident in that most people live within 250 miles of the sea, with major rivers and valleys providing easy coastal access. With its extensive coastlines, natural harbors, and access to key sea routes, Europe's geography was pivotal in establishing its dominance in maritime trade and connecting it to global markets.³² Modern European states, often centered on river valleys with sea access, overcame limited land by focusing on trade and colonial expansion.

Historically, the Mediterranean is a crucible of commerce and conflict and remains a testament to the enduring interplay between geography and power.³³ The region's significance as a trade conduit and a naval dominance theatre has attracted the ambitions of empires across millennia. Mahan highlights how control over this vital maritime zone has often dictated the rise and fall of regional powers, a theme deserving deeper exploration in subsequent analyses.³⁴ The contours of the natural world impose constraints and offer opportunities that profoundly shape a state's power. Geography shapes strategy by creating limits and opportunities for specific states. Distance, terrain, and strategic depth influence the security environment in which states operate.³⁵ Whether conferring naval dominance, dictating defensive strategies, or enabling economic expansion, geography remains a silent architect of power, its influence embedded in the harbors, frontiers, and fault lines of world history. As Gray aptly puts it, "physical geography literally is inescapable," and this assertion is made particularly clear in the case of Western Europe's geographical advantages.³⁶

³¹ Cohen 2009, p.179.

³² Cohen 2009, p.180.

³³ See Abulafia 2011 and Braudel 1996 for a detailed history of the Mediterranean world.

³⁴ Mahan 1902, p. 17.

³⁵ Ripsman et al. 2016, p. 42.

³⁶ Gray 2013, p.163.

Guardians of the Narrow Passages: Portugal, Spain and Geography as the Engine of Empire

Geography provides a stable, enduring foundation for understanding the power and behavior of states. Oceans, mountains, rivers, and deserts often act as natural borders and barriers, influencing nations' defense and expansion capabilities. In the unfolding drama of the Age of Exploration, geography conferred power as much as ambition did. Nowhere was this more evident than in the cases of Portugal and Spain, two Iberian powers that stood as the then "Guardians of Narrow Passages." Strategically positioned at the Atlantic gateway to the Mediterranean and along the critical maritime chokepoints of global trade, these kingdoms wielded disproportionate influence over naval routes connecting Europe to Africa, Asia, and the Americas. Portugal's later capture of the outlet of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, a key maritime passage linking the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean, serves as a similar example. Their control over such vital straits enabled their imperial expansion and trade activities.³⁷ It posed a persistent challenge to rival maritime empires, most notably the Ottomans, who were increasingly confined in a Mediterranean world being reshaped from its peripheries. This section examines how Portugal and Spain leveraged their geographic advantages to dominate the seas and reshape early modern global trade and conflict dynamics.

Portugal's ascent during the Age of Exploration was not the result of vast resources, overwhelming military power, or inherited trade dominance; it was a triumph of geography, related vision, and maritime resolve. Positioned at the westernmost edge of continental Europe, Portugal found in its physical setting not limitation but launchpad. Embraced by the Atlantic Ocean on three sides, Portugal turned what many perceived as marginality into strategic centrality. Geography became the decisive force behind one of history's first global empires. Portugal's Atlantic orientation allowed it to escape Mediterranean constraints and pioneer new maritime routes. Its geographic position, jutting westward into the Atlantic Ocean from the Iberian Peninsula, afforded it a unique vantage point in the maritime geopolitics of the early modern world. As the westernmost kingdom of continental Europe, Portugal was not just close to the sea but embraced by it on three sides. This proximity enabled the Portuguese to turn their backs on the continental entanglements of Europe and look instead toward the ocean, making them pioneers of seaward expansion.

Critically, Portugal's command over the Atlantic approaches to the Strait of Gibraltar placed it near one of the most contested maritime chokepoints between Europe and the Mediterranean. Though the strait was shared with Spain,

³⁷ Durdu 2024, p. 111.

Portugal's early ventures southward allowed it to sidestep Mediterranean constraints by forging a new path along the West African coast. Establishing outposts at Ceuta (1415), Madeira, the Azores, and Cape Verde leveraged the kingdom's Atlantic position into a network of navigational stepping stones. These islands facilitated longer voyages and extended Portuguese maritime surveillance far beyond the Mediterranean sphere, giving them a strategic edge in the race for global trade routes. Though lacking the entrenched commercial networks and mercantile sophistication of Italy's Mediterranean city-states, Portugal turned its gaze westward, toward the deepening trade routes between northern and southern Europe. Here, it carved out its niche, humble but vital. It thrived in Atlantic fisheries, reaping cod and tuna from cold waters, and fostered trade in grain, wine, and sugar from its island outposts in Madeira and the Azores, while exporting olive oil and wine from the mainland with growing confidence.³⁸

Portugal's geographic openness enabled it to dominate sea lanes to the Indian Ocean, bypassing Ottoman-controlled routes. This west-facing orientation allowed Portugal to exploit its position to dominate the sea lanes around the Cape of Good Hope, thereby controlling the maritime corridor into the Indian Ocean and effectively bypassing Ottoman-controlled routes through the Levant and Red Sea. In Portugal's case, geography was not merely a backdrop; it was the launchpad for a maritime empire that challenged the overland monopolies of the Islamic world and reshaped global connectivity. Portugal's path to maritime greatness was charted not through immediate strength, but through the quiet resilience of geography and the related strategic foresight of its navigators and monarchs. A nation fringed by a long, unobstructed coastline and blessed with a generous continental margin finds itself uniquely poised to enact maritime policies that secure vast swathes of oceanic space, claiming exclusive economic rights with little contest from neighboring powers.³⁹ In this silent gift of geography, Portugal discovered the foundation for its seaborne empire. Yet Portugal's ambitions soon brought it into conflict with a rising power: the Ottoman Empire. As Portuguese caravels pushed farther into the Indian Ocean, establishing fortified outposts along the coasts of Africa, Arabia, and India, they encountered resistance from local traders and the Ottoman Empire, which sought to secure its own maritime influence. However, unlike Portugal, the Ottomans faced significant geographic constraints. Anchored in the eastern Mediterranean, and reliant on the Red Sea as a maritime corridor, the Ottomans could never project sustained naval power deep into the Indian Ocean. Their maritime reach was inherently limited by a geography prioritizing land-based expansion over

³⁸ Arnold 2012, p.22.

³⁹ Prescott and Schofield 2005, p. 51.

Mediterranean Prisoners Versus Guardians of Narrow Passages: Ottomans' Geography, Maritime Strategies and Their Rivals During the Age of Exploration

oceanic access. Portugal, recognizing this structural weakness, deliberately sought to contain Ottoman influence. By fortifying positions at key chokepoints, such as Hormuz at the Persian Gulf entrance and the Socotra island near the Gulf of Aden, the Portuguese attempted to prevent the Ottomans from pushing beyond the Red Sea and trading freely across the Indian Ocean. The renowned Ottoman admiral Piri Reis, during the Siege of Hormuz, which ultimately led to his execution, confronted the grave threat of the Portuguese seizing control of the Strait of Hormuz, entrapping the Ottoman fleet within the Gulf. Although he wanted to undertake measures to avert this crisis, these efforts proved insufficient, and the episode culminated in the loss of the legendary mariner's life.⁴⁰ Naval clashes and proxy conflicts ensued, but the strategic initiative remained largely Portuguese. Their superior knowledge of Atlantic and Indian Ocean navigation, bolstered by a home front optimized for seafaring, gave them a decisive edge in this imperial rivalry.

The Portuguese case also highlights the dual role of geography as both a transformative factor and compelling force for adaption. Through adaptation and ambition, Portugal transformed its marginal Atlantic position into a strategic maritime epicenter. What initially appeared to be a peripheral and disadvantageous position, removed from the bustling Mediterranean trade, gradually revealed its hidden strength. The winds and currents of the Atlantic were not foes but allies. They carried Portuguese ships farther, faster, and with greater promise. In time, these western ports, shaped by nature and steered by necessity, proved better suited to long-range navigation than those clustered within the confines of the inner sea. The Atlantic, long seen as a hinterland to Mediterranean civilization, began to echo with the sound of sails and ambition. The Atlantic, once a limit, became a launchpad.⁴¹ The arduous six-month journey from Lisbon to Goa was sufficient to transform the ordinary Portuguese sailor into a seasoned mariner.⁴² Oceanic journeys served as formative and enlightening experiences. This transformation was marked indelibly in 1434, when Captain Gil Eannes defied superstition and shattered the symbolic wall of Cape Bojador. For centuries, this promontory had loomed like a final edge of the world. By sailing beyond it, Eannes did more than chart a new course; he tore down the mental barriers of medieval navigation and set in motion an era of boundless oceanic exploration.⁴³ In that single voyage, Portugal claimed not only new waters but also a destiny forged on the open sea. In the end, geography, silent and immutable, spoke louder than armies. While the Ottomans excelled in

⁴⁰ Orhunlu 1970.

⁴¹ Arnold 2012, p.22.

⁴² Özbaran, 2009b, p.109.

⁴³ Arnold 2012, p.26.

administering vast continental domains, their Mediterranean orientation rendered them peripheral in the unfolding global maritime order. Once thought marginal, Portugal had turned its Atlantic frontier into a gateway to the world.

Spain's geopolitical advantage during the Age of Exploration was rooted in its control of the narrow Strait of Gibraltar, a crucial maritime juncture linking the Mediterranean Sea to the Atlantic Ocean. This strategic chokepoint made Spain the natural gatekeeper of Mediterranean access for all western maritime traffic, both commercial and military. Thanks to the union of Castile and Aragon, Spain's coastlines spanned both the Mediterranean and the Atlantic, positioning it as a linchpin in early modern naval geography and a barrier against Ottoman expansion westward through North Africa. The capture of Granada in 1492, the same year Christopher Columbus set sail westward, marked the consolidation of Spain's southern coastline and solidified its presence at the Gibraltar bottleneck. From this vantage point, Spain could monitor and, when necessary, obstruct east-west movement between the two seas, defending Christian Europe's frontier against Ottoman naval strength. Spain's geography also opened the Atlantic, where the Canary Islands became critical bases for transatlantic navigation and launching expeditions that would claim vast American territories. This dual control of the Mediterranean gateway and Atlantic expansion routes enabled Spain to dominate regional and intercontinental maritime spheres. While Portugal looked outward from Europe's edge, Spain stood between seas, functioning as both a barrier and a bridge, challenging Ottoman naval power in the Mediterranean and building an Atlantic empire simultaneously. As Ottoman dominance grew in the Mediterranean, Spain strategically turned westward, viewing overseas expansion as a gamble on new trade routes and a deliberate geopolitical shift. Supporting Columbus's voyage in 1492 reflected this orientation, as Spain sought to sustain and extend its authority beyond the Mediterranean basin.⁴⁴ Although Spain's position appeared less favorable than Portugal's, given centuries of conflict with Islamic powers on the Iberian Peninsula and Mediterranean, the kingdom's geographic advantage of straddling two seas allowed it to act as a hinge between old continental struggles and new maritime opportunities. As oceanic empires reshaped the global balance of power, Spain's Atlantic ports, especially Seville and Cádiz, became vital conduits for exploration and conquest. The Atlantic, once peripheral, became the stage for Spain's new imperial destiny, transforming it into a major player in the emerging oceanic world.

Spain's geographic advantage was complemented by technological innovations such as the carrack, a large ocean-going vessel capable of heavy loads

⁴⁴ Arnold 2012, p. 26.

Mediterranean Prisoners Versus Guardians of Narrow Passages: Ottomans' Geography, Maritime Strategies and Their Rivals During the Age of Exploration

and artillery, and advanced firearms. These developments gave Spain a decisive military edge in overseas conquest, enabling it to claim and defend vast American territories against both European rivals and indigenous peoples.⁴⁵ However, Spain's imperial zenith also revealed the limits of its geography. Under Philip II, the empire stretched across continents, facing enemies from Ottoman fleets in the Mediterranean, Protestant rebels in the Netherlands, French incursions in Europe, and English piracy in the Atlantic. Spain's vast geographic reach outpaced its ability to govern and defend, exposing vulnerabilities that the wealth from the Americas could not fully offset. The Spaniards, having to wage war in the Mediterranean and the Atlantic simultaneously, were forced to maintain two separate types of navies. This division was one factor that caused them to lag behind the English and the Dutch in technological advancement, shipbuilding, cannon production, and expertise in naval gunnery.⁴⁶

Compounding these challenges was Spain's diplomatic rigidity. Philip II's refusal to adapt through alliances or tactical retreats exacerbated the constraints imposed by geography.⁴⁷ Unlike Portugal's more flexible maritime posture, Spain's imperial strategy was burdened by continental entanglements and a stubborn commitment to defending a sprawling realm. Thus, while Spain, alongside Portugal, launched Europe's oceanic empires, its path was fraught, its geographic advantages balanced by inherited conflicts and structural limitations. The Atlantic offered a new stage for glory but also revealed the empire's limits when geography collided with diplomacy and overextension.

Strangled by Geography: Venice's Maritime Decline Amidst Emerging Oceanic Powers

Natural barriers influence national security and international roles. The United States is separated from other continents by vast oceans, which still provide strategic insulation despite advances in transportation and warfare. The English Channel has historically protected Britain from continental invasions.⁴⁸ Many writers viewed Germany's central position in Europe as both advantageous and disadvantageous, offering the chance to dominate the continent while also exposing it to territorial losses and setbacks.⁴⁹ Venice experienced a comparable trajectory, rising to prominence in the central Mediterranean as the Byzantine Empire declined and before the rise of Atlantic trade routes. However, what once gave it an edge eventually became a disadvantage. Trapped between the

⁴⁵ Casale 2010, p. 5.

⁴⁶ Parry 1962, p. 149.

⁴⁷ Murray 2013, p.215.

⁴⁸ Morgenthau 1948, p.81.

⁴⁹ Dodds 2007, p. 29.

expanding Ottoman Empire and the dominant forces at Gibraltar, Venice's prospects for enduring power gradually diminished.⁵⁰

Venice, situated at the middle of the Mediterranean, was once a formidable maritime republic with the potential to exert significant influence over the region. Its geographical positioning, characterized by an extensive coastline and strategic ports, should theoretically have made it a dominant sea power, especially given its access to crucial trade routes such as those leading to the Levant. Historically, the states centered in the Italian peninsula had long capitalized on the strategic advantages conferred by their geographical position. Throughout antiquity, as long as the boundaries of the known world were confined to the Mediterranean, Rome had maintained unchallenged dominance, its influence stretching across vital trade routes that converged in the region. However, this once secure position was irrevocably altered with the advent of new geographical revelations. The strategic significance of the Mediterranean was highlighted in Hannibal's military plans, which underscored the importance of key maritime routes, particularly the west-to-east corridor from Spain to Italy, in shaping Mediterranean dominance.⁵¹ Rome's supremacy in naval affairs, especially within the Tyrrhenian Sea, ensured safe passage for trade and military operations between Italy and Spain. Moreover, Rome's naval presence in the Adriatic, particularly through establishing a naval station at Brindisi, strategically neutralized the ambitions of Macedonia, with King Philip's lack of a war fleet contributing to his paralysis. Rome's naval dominance in Sicily ensured it maintained a decisive edge over Carthage, despite Carthaginian efforts to stir insurrection. This demonstrates how crucial naval supremacy was in determining both the outcome of conflicts and the consolidation of territorial control in antiquity.⁵²

However, while Venice controlled key maritime routes within the Adriatic, its geographical location limited its capacity to exert broader influence within the Mediterranean and, later, the Atlantic. Despite its dominance in the Adriatic and parts of the eastern Mediterranean, Venice's position left it vulnerable to the growing power of Spain and France in the western Mediterranean. This geographical limitation often forced Venice to engage in strategic collaborations with neighboring maritime powers to safeguard its commercial interests and political stability.⁵³ Venice's influence might have expanded if the Adriatic had remained a central hub for global trade. Still, the rise of the Ottoman Empire and the opening of new trade routes around Africa (via

⁵⁰ Abolafia 2011, p. 457-459.

⁵¹ Mahan 1902, p. 10.

⁵² Mahan 1902, p. 10.

⁵³ Libby 1978, pp. 103-126.

Mediterranean Prisoners Versus Guardians of Narrow Passages: Ottomans' Geography, Maritime Strategies and Their Rivals During the Age of Exploration

the Cape of Good Hope) gradually shifted global trade away from the Mediterranean. The geographical disadvantage Venice faced, particularly in the face of Ottoman power and the emergence of Atlantic trade routes, significantly diminished the relevance of Venice's traditional maritime routes. As a result, Venice, though a key player in Mediterranean commerce, found its role diminished, and its influence was preserved through collaborations with Spain and Portugal. This complex interplay of geography, trade, and technological adaptation shaped the trajectory of Venetian maritime power during the Renaissance and beyond.

**Maritime Technology and Transformative Force of Geography:
Diverging Paths between Open and Enclosed Seas**

The Age of Exploration highlighted the profound role of geography in shaping the course of technological and maritime advancements. Nations facing the open Atlantic developed the ships, tools, and knowledge systems required for global navigation. Meanwhile, the Mediterranean's maritime cultures, including the Ottoman Empire and Venice, found their technology increasingly unsuited to the changing demands of oceanic trade and exploration. As the maritime center shifted westward, so did the frontier of innovation and the future of global empires.

Geography, a silent architect of human life, functions not merely as a backdrop but as an active and compelling force in shaping technological, cultural, and political forms. Nowhere is this more evident than in the maritime sphere, where the physical contours of the sea have ceaselessly transformed the seafaring practices, innovations, and epistemologies of coastal states. Geography plays a determining role in the evolution and adaptation of maritime technology. The nature of the seas that nations border, whether open and expansive like the Atlantic, or enclosed and navigationally constrained like the Mediterranean, shapes not only the form of ships but also the systems of knowledge and exploration that emerge. As the Age of Exploration unfolded, the divergent maritime environments of Europe's coastal powers led to equally divergent technological trajectories, distinguishing Atlantic seafaring from Mediterranean maritime practice.

While the expertise of the Venetian navy was honed in the constrained and tactical waters of the Mediterranean, where short-distance navigation and agile maneuvering were essential, their maritime traditions and innovations extended beyond regional confines, leaving a lasting imprint on the technological currents that fueled the Age of Exploration. Nevertheless, this influence was inherently conditioned by geographic context. Italian engagement often remained advisory or financial, not maritime. Italians provided essential map-making,

navigation skills, and Renaissance-era knowledge in exchange for support from Portugal, Spain, or England. For example, Paolo Toscanelli suggested to Christopher Columbus in 1474 that sailing westward could potentially lead to the Indies, although Columbus's miscalculations ultimately led to his discovery of the Americas. Additionally, figures like Alvise da Cadamosto helped document significant discoveries during African expeditions.⁵⁴

Despite their limitations at sea, Italians remained intellectually and financially engaged in the expansion of European exploration. During the 13th to 15th centuries, the Popes were leaders in geographical knowledge and exploration due to their support of studies, translations of classical works, and direct involvement with explorers and envoys, making Rome a central authority on cosmography at the time.⁵⁵ Their collaboration with Spanish monarchs in geographical exploration was a natural consequence of Europe's competitive political environment. Royal patronage was essential for early voyages, as the immense costs and risks associated with such expeditions made individual ventures unfeasible. Navigators required the support of a state to access its harbors, vessels, and sailors, as well as to secure rights to newly discovered lands and protect their claims from other powers. Italian financiers, particularly Genoese merchants, played a pivotal role. Genoese merchants, in particular, played a crucial role in Mediterranean and Iberian trade, controlling North African commerce and funding Madeira's sugar industry. Genoa shifted its focus to the western Mediterranean and the Atlantic as the Black Sea trade declined. Genoese financiers, such as Francisco Pinelo, were instrumental in funding Columbus's voyages and Portuguese expeditions to the East Indies, profiting from the burgeoning trade in spices, sugar, and silver.⁵⁶

During the Age of Exploration, the transformative effect of geography was evident in the fact that, due to their location, Venetians lacked the territorial resources to adopt these technologies independently and could only do so under the auspices of Atlantic-bordering monarchs. While the Italian maritime republics had long excelled within the confines of the Mediterranean, their naval technologies proved poorly adapted for the rigors of Atlantic navigation. Venetian galleys and trading ships, though highly effective in the Mediterranean, were ill-suited for the harsher conditions of the Atlantic. This limitation meant that they, though pioneers in early exploration, often had to collaborate with Spain and Portugal, whose ships, developed in response to Atlantic geography, were built to endure oceanic voyages. Even as navigators, they relied heavily on

⁵⁴ Arnold 2012, p.17.

⁵⁵ Dawson 1899, p. 477.

⁵⁶ Arnold 2012, p. 20.

Mediterranean Prisoners Versus Guardians of Narrow Passages: Ottomans' Geography, Maritime Strategies and Their Rivals During the Age of Exploration

the more capable ships and advanced maritime knowledge of the Portuguese and Spanish to engage in Atlantic exploration and trade.⁵⁷ Thus, the Italians' direct involvement in the Age of Exploration remained minimal, and their participation was mostly indirect.

A similar pattern is evident in the case of the Ottoman Empire, another formidable Mediterranean naval power. Like Venice, the Ottomans developed their naval strength in a geographic context defined by enclosed and strategically constrained seas. Ottoman maritime technology, built primarily for dominance in the eastern Mediterranean and the Red Sea, was well-suited to regional naval warfare but lacked the structural features required for oceanic travel.⁵⁸ The Ottoman use of galleys, a type of oar-powered ship, matched the region's calm, enclosed seas and island-dotted coastlines, offering maneuverability and effective control.⁵⁹ Their fleets relied heavily on galleys and other oared vessels that were effective in calm, narrow waters but vulnerable in the rougher, open conditions of the oceans. Moreover, the Ottomans did not possess stable or accessible Atlantic coastlines, limiting their capacity to launch oceanic expeditions or develop a deep-sea maritime tradition. As a result, their naval technology could not be transformed for use in the open seas and oceans, and their efforts to contest Portuguese expansion into the Indian Ocean were met with limited success. Though the Ottomans projected maritime power within their geographic limits, they never became a true oceanic empire, a reflection not only of policy but of geographic and related technological constraint.

The transformation of global trade routes further illustrates the role of geography in shaping both opportunity and technological necessity. This likewise illustrated geography's driving and transformative influence in a different dimension, an effect that manifested even in the cartographic techniques underpinning maritime technology. Venice's position, once an advantage due to its central location at the crossroads of African and Asian trade routes, became a disadvantage as the focus of global trade shifted westward. As access to the Indian Ocean became possible via the Cape of Good Hope, Mediterranean powers could not fully capitalize on this emerging opportunity. While northern and western European nations, such as Portugal and Spain, enjoyed the geographical advantage of coastal proximity to the Atlantic, Italy's and the Ottoman Empire's orientation to the Mediterranean increasingly marginalized their maritime influence on a global scale. The limitations of Mediterranean navigational tools also reflect this geographic divide. Mediterranean navigators relied on portolans,

⁵⁷ Arnold 2012, p.20.

⁵⁸ White 2017, p.5-8.

⁵⁹ Hess 1970, pp. 1892-1919.

charts that depicted coastal features, ports, and hazards, which, while useful for coastal navigation, were inadequate for navigating the uncharted waters of the Atlantic. In contrast, by the mid-fifteenth century, Portuguese navigators had mastered using wind patterns to sail around the Cape of Good Hope, enabling Vasco da Gama to reach the Indian Ocean in 1497. The Portuguese relied on new instruments such as the astrolabe, the quadrant, and expansive nautical charts, developed specifically for open-sea navigation.⁶⁰ This geographical advantage and the development of specialized maritime technologies positioned Portugal to make significant advances in global exploration, a feat that Venetians and Ottomans, constrained by their Mediterranean focus, could not fully achieve.

The improvements in ship design during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries also underscored the differences between Mediterranean and Atlantic maritime conditions. While adept for short trips and naval warfare, Mediterranean galleys were ill-suited for the rougher conditions of oceans. The fleet led by Suleyman Pasha, which departed from Suez in 1538 for the Indian expedition, was accustomed to the conditions of the Mediterranean and encountered considerable hardship during its nineteen-day voyage to the Indian coast, struggling against the formidable monsoon winds of the Indian Ocean.⁶¹ In contrast, with their sturdier construction and larger sails, northern European cogs were more suitable for longer voyages. These ships' design, durability, and cargo capacity made them ideal for trade and warfare in the Atlantic.⁶² This technological distinction further illustrates how geography influenced the development of maritime technologies. For example, sleds, designed for regions with constant snow cover, are unsuited for Mediterranean climates, showing how geography imposes limitations on technological adaptation. In response to these environmental and strategic challenges, hybrid ship designs like the caravel emerged in Portugal and southern Spain, combining northern and southern shipbuilding techniques. The caravel, a smaller vessel, was ideally suited for exploration due to its maneuverability and ability to withstand the Atlantic and Mediterranean conditions. The emergence of such innovations shows how nations with access to the open sea adapted and evolved technologically in ways unavailable to those hemmed in by inland maritime geography.

⁶⁰ Arnold 2012, p.30.

⁶¹ Afyoncu 2010.

⁶² Arnold 2012, p.31.

Trapped by the Sea: Ottoman Maritime Power and the Boundaries of Geography

Morgenthau writes, "The most stable factor upon which the power of a nation depends is obviously geography."⁶³ Theoretical principles of international relations grounded in geography emphasize the Earth's physical features, such as continental and oceanic configurations, and categorize states as land or sea-based powers⁶⁴. The sixteenth-century Ottoman Empire, while leveraging its strategic geographic position to become a dominant Mediterranean maritime force, simultaneously grappled with the inherent challenges and constraints that position entailed. Armed with advanced shipbuilding technologies, centralized naval infrastructure, and strategic intelligence gleaned from sailors and codified by figures like Piri Reis, the Ottomans achieved dominance over key sea lanes and port cities.⁶⁵ Their fleet, organized around oared galleys and stationed in arsenals modernized under Mehmed II, defeated Venetian adversaries and secured control over eastern maritime trade.⁶⁶ Yet, this naval supremacy remained confined to regional waters of old world, hemmed in by the geography that had initially enabled it. However, the Age of Exploration dramatically altered this dynamic, as European sailors gained the ability to navigate the high seas and expand their reach far beyond the traditional maritime zones. The Ottomans' maritime policy, though innovative and ideologically driven, never evolved into a global naval strategy comparable to the oceanic empires of Spain and Portugal. While the Iberian powers expanded their influence across the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, the Ottomans found themselves constrained geographically and, by extension, related technologically and institutionally. In fact, Ratzel argued that both land and sea offered means and opportunities for territorial expansion and the eventual unification of a state. He believed that a powerful and thriving nation would not be content with its current borders and would strive to acquire more territory to ensure its "living space." Since competing nations would also pursue the same goal, Ratzel suggested that any expanding state would inevitably be caught in a continuous cycle of rise and fall.⁶⁷ But how could this idea be relevant to the Ottoman Empire? Its orientation remained fixed on enclosed seas: the Mediterranean, Black Sea, and Red Sea. Unlike their Iberian counterparts, who turned maritime exploration into an imperial ideology, bolstered by geographical advantages in the new era, the Ottomans, while attempting to overcome this geographical deadlock, operated within a framework shaped by regional offense

⁶³ Morgenthau 1948, p.80.

⁶⁴ Dodds 2007, p. 25.

⁶⁵ White 2017, p.4-6.

⁶⁶ Hess 1970, pp. 1892-1919

⁶⁷ Dodds 2007, p. 28.

and defense strategies imposed by their strategic constraints. This geographic entrapment was not merely a cartographic condition but a structural pressure that shaped Ottoman imperial imagination. Three chokepoints, Italian maritime republics in the central Mediterranean, Spanish control of Gibraltar, and Portuguese dominance at the mouth of the Red Sea, acted as barriers to broader expansion. Gibraltar, in particular, functioned as a strategic "steel door," denying the Ottomans direct access to the Atlantic and preventing any substantive breakthrough into global waters. The inability to bypass these thresholds rendered the empire a regional seapower in an age of transoceanic conquest. Here, it would be appropriate to look at the example of England to illustrate the advantage of geography. England, which had the chance to bypass Gibraltar, was luckier than the Ottomans. It can be seen as evidence that geography does not offer equal opportunities to all. While both England and the Ottomans faced similar challenges with strategic bottlenecks, geography provided England with a significantly more advantageous position at the time. Spanish and Portuguese forces controlled the Straits of Gibraltar, using their naval power to block English ships, especially those of the Levant Company, from passing through. This strategic control posed a significant obstacle to England's eastern trade through the Mediterranean and drove the English to seek alternative routes, most notably around the Cape of Good Hope.⁶⁸ Being situated outside the Mediterranean, and thus beyond Gibraltar's control, gave England a significant advantage in exploring alternative routes, a chance the Ottomans did not have. In the subsequent period, England secured the strategically vital territory of Gibraltar, retaining it permanently, and in doing so, effectively resolved its geographic disadvantage to its own benefit. The Ottomans, by contrast, failed to extend their influence westward across the Mediterranean against the Spanish and the Western alliance, despite persistent efforts at a time when nearly all determinants of power, except geography, were in their favor. They likewise failed to establish a durable and sustainable presence at the exit of the Indian Ocean.

The Ottoman Empire's response to Iberian maritime expansion reveals both its strategic adaptability and the enduring limitations of its naval culture. While often portrayed as a land-based empire, the Ottomans did respond to Iberian expansionism, particularly in the Indian Ocean. Religious imperatives such as defending the holy cities from Portuguese encroachment lent ideological weight to their campaigns and reinforced the legitimacy of imperial intervention. Admirals such as Salman Reis conducted effective defensive operations along the Red Sea coast, and imperial planners even entertained visionary infrastructural projects, including a proposed Suez Canal, aimed at circumventing the

⁶⁸ Parry 1962, p. 231-232.

Mediterranean Prisoners Versus Guardians of Narrow Passages: Ottomans' Geography, Maritime Strategies and Their Rivals During the Age of Exploration

inefficiencies of overland transport. These initiatives underscore the Ottomans' acute awareness of shifting global dynamics, even as geographic and institutional constraints limited their capacity for naval transformation.

Despite their considerable military resources and strategic awareness, the empire never underwent a maritime revolution comparable to that of the Atlantic powers. Anchored in a strategic culture shaped by terrestrial warfare and seasonal naval expeditions, the Ottoman navy remained focused on logistical support, coastal defense, and protection of commercial routes within the eastern Mediterranean, functions that did not necessitate the technological or institutional innovations associated with deep-sea navigation and sustained oceanic projection.⁶⁹ The Mediterranean remained both the locus of their dominance and the limit of their ambition. While Iberian powers embraced the open ocean as a stage for imperial projection, the Ottomans remained tied to a fortified sea, masters of a world they could not transcend. Ultimately, the Ottomans were not undone by a lack of capacity or vision but by the enduring weight of geography. As Spain and Portugal sailed beyond the horizon to carve global empires, the Ottoman fleet patrolled a sea that had become, paradoxically, both domain and prison. Their imperial imagination, shaped by coastlines and chokepoints, remained bound within the maritime walls of the Mediterranean, a power brilliant in regional terms, but one whose reach stopped short of the world ocean.

Between Two Seas: The Ottoman Struggle to Transcend Geography

For much of the sixteenth century, the Ottoman Empire stood at the crossroads of three continents, commanding vast armies and sophisticated bureaucracies. Yet for all its power, the empire remained constrained by geography; sea transportation was limited by natural bottlenecks, political rivals, and the daunting divide between the Mediterranean heartland and the wider Indian Ocean world. The Ottoman response to these constraints was neither passive nor capitulating. Rather, through visionary infrastructure projects, strategic naval expansion, and ideological restructuring, the Ottomans made bold attempts to breach the walls erected by geography. But despite ambition, their reach was hampered by distance, resource scarcity, and political fragmentation; a soft empire pressed against the hard edges of the world.

The naval expansion of the Ottoman Empire during the reign of Bayezid II, which coincided with the beginning of the exploration era, exemplifies a determined effort to overcome geographical constraints and establish dominance in two critical maritime areas. Far from being merely a period of internal consolidation, Bayezid's reign marked a decisive transformation in Ottoman

⁶⁹ Brummett 1994, p.90-95.

naval strategy that challenges the neglect of this period in traditional historiography of naval power.⁷⁰ The empire undertook a deliberate and comprehensive program to build and reorganize a powerful fleet, financed by state treasuries and merchant taxes, with the aim of securing coastal areas and expanding its influence along the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, and the Indian Ocean. This navy transcended its narrow wartime function and simultaneously fulfilled diplomatic, economic, and defensive roles that were instrumental in the emergence of the Ottoman Empire as a global power. In this light, the Ottoman naval project emerges not as a mere military enterprise but as a nuanced response to the empire's geographical impasse: connecting two seas and navigating the complex currents of early modern global politics.⁷¹

The Ottoman presence in the Indian Ocean was not territorial but connective, a web of ports and routes strung along distant coasts. As Giancarlo Casale notes, the Ottoman map of the Indian Ocean would appear not as a block of imperial control, but as scattered coastal outposts "separated by deserts and reliant on ocean trade".⁷² The logistical strain was immense: ships built in Istanbul with Anatolian timber had to be disassembled, shipped to Egypt, and dragged across land to Suez before reaching the Red Sea. This undertaking alone signified the Ottomans' determination to defy the geography that separated their core from their ambitions.

At the center of these efforts stood Sokollu Mehmed Pasha, whose policies revealed both a strategic imagination and a deep awareness of imperial limitation. He expanded arsenals in the Red Sea, established foundries and powder facilities, and initiated regular naval patrols to maintain a foothold in hostile waters. His reform of the spice trade, from passive taxation to active control via Yemen, also demonstrated an attempt to turn commercial geography into imperial geography, reorienting the flow of goods toward Egypt and Istanbul. Yet the deeper ambition lay in engineering geography itself. In 1568, Sokollu ordered a feasibility study for a canal linking the Mediterranean to the Red Sea, an artificial artery to overcome the empire's maritime disconnection. Around the same time, he advocated for another canal system connecting the Don and Volga rivers, envisioning a navigable Muslim corridor stretching from Central Asia to the holy cities.⁷³ These were not mere infrastructure projects but ideological gestures toward geographical unity, a vision of empire as fluid, mobile, and interconnected.

⁷⁰ Hess 1970.

⁷¹ Brummett 1994, p.90-95.

⁷² Casale 2010, p. 201.

⁷³ Casale 2010, p. 135-137.

Mediterranean Prisoners Versus Guardians of Narrow Passages: Ottomans' Geography, Maritime Strategies and Their Rivals During the Age of Exploration

The intellectual and political momentum behind these visions found its most vivid expression in the *Tārīḥ-i Hind-i Ğarbī*, or *History of the West Indies*, authored by Mehmed Suudi Efendi and dedicated to Sultan Murad III. Written between 1580 and 1582, the work offered a comprehensive critique of Portuguese aggression and called for a bold new Ottoman maritime strategy centered on the construction of the Suez Canal.⁷⁴ This canal would not only facilitate fleet movement but symbolize the empire's capacity to overcome geographic confinement. Its advocacy was echoed by Hasan Pasha and even reached the Ottoman court during times of crisis, as when Venetian envoy Lorenzo Bernardo reported in 1586 that growing Spanish power and Ottoman military distraction had revived support for the canal.⁷⁵

Yet despite these ambitions, the Suez Canal remained unrealized, not for lack of vision, but because of deep structural limits. As Mir Ali's failed expedition revealed, the Indian Ocean provinces suffered from resource scarcity, logistical isolation, and political volatility. No matter how many fleets were sent or how elaborate the plans, the Ottoman Empire could not sustain long-term operations in regions it could not efficiently connect or support.⁷⁶ Geographic distance, as Pearson notes, multiplies costs and narrows the scope of state attention.⁷⁷ Geography did not merely resist Ottoman expansion, it redirected it, prioritizing immediate frontiers over distant seas. The Ottoman attempt to conquer the world was not a failure of imagination but a lesson in the friction of terrain. Visionaries like Sokollu Mehmed could conceive of an empire that defied natural limits, but the material and strategic conditions of the sixteenth century offered no clear path through stone, desert, and sea. The empire's greatest challenge was not its enemies, but the stubborn shape of the world itself.

Geographical Distance, Instability in Yemen and Ottoman-Portuguese Competition in Indian Ocean

Geography shapes patterns of conflict and resistance. The Soviet Union and modern Russia's vast territory have historically acted as a powerful defensive asset. Invading armies, such as those of Napoleon in 1812 and Hitler in 1941, were ultimately defeated not just by military resistance but by the sheer scale of the land, harsh winters, and logistical overextension. Maintaining long supply lines and attempting to control such an expansive and sparsely populated terrain drained enemy resources and morale, contributing decisively to their failure. Yet, this same geography also presents a profound strategic vulnerability.

⁷⁴ İzgi 2003.

⁷⁵ Casale 2010, p. 168.

⁷⁶ Casale 2010, p. 177.

⁷⁷ Pearson 1974, p. 432–460.

The Ottoman Empire's efforts to project power beyond the Mediterranean, particularly into the Indian Ocean, were significantly shaped and ultimately constrained by geographic factors such as the great distance from the imperial center and regional instability in key locations like Yemen. The Ottoman Empire was compelled to devise administrative structures in this region that diverged significantly from those employed in the Mediterranean and Western territories. Salih Özbaran, characterizing these areas as peripheral zones, adopted a geographically grounded perspective to explore the inherent difficulties in establishing durable and effective governance systems akin to those functioning in the Mediterranean context.⁷⁸

Yemen held a critical strategic position as a gateway to the Red Sea and a vital point for controlling the maritime trade routes connecting the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean. It was a remote outpost, characterized by its geographical isolation, and it had long remained a difficult region for the Ottomans to govern.⁷⁹ Additionally, the empire faced challenges in controlling key maritime chokepoints like Bab el-Mandeb, limiting its ability to counter Portuguese influence in the region. The geographical distance of Yemen from the Ottoman imperial center in Istanbul, combined with the region's internal instability, significantly hindered the empire's ability to establish firm control, ultimately weakening its strategic position in the Indian Ocean and limiting its capacity to counter growing Portuguese influence in the region effectively.⁸⁰

The Ottoman Empire's naval support for the Mamluks in the early 16th century was a strategic move to challenge Portuguese dominance in the Indian Ocean and to extend Ottoman commercial and religious influence. The Ottoman naval aid to the Mamluks exemplifies their strategic efforts to counter Portuguese control of vital trade routes in the Indian Ocean. Faced with the threat of Portuguese disruption to Muslim shipping and the loss of customs revenue, the Mamluks sought Ottoman assistance in men, ships, and artillery. Though born of necessity, this alliance reflected the Ottomans' broader ambitions to expand their imperial reach and secure their economic interests. Despite initial setbacks, including the defeat of the combined fleet, Ottoman involvement laid the groundwork for their eventual dominance over the region's maritime trade and political affairs.⁸¹ Under Sultan Selim, the Ottoman Empire rapidly expanded its naval capacity, emphasizing control and influence over the Eastern Mediterranean with an eye toward the Mamluk territories. Despite fears from European powers, actual Ottoman naval operations remained primarily defensive

⁷⁸ Özbaran 2013, p.26.

⁷⁹ Özbaran 2009a, p. 345.

⁸⁰ Özbaran 2013, p.28.

⁸¹ Brummett 1994, p.108-111.

Mediterranean Prisoners Versus Guardians of Narrow Passages: Ottomans' Geography, Maritime Strategies and Their Rivals During the Age of Exploration

and logistical until after the Mamluks' defeat. The empire's broader ambitions involved not only Mediterranean power but also assertive naval activities in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean, competing with Portuguese influence and furthering Ottoman commercial and political goals in the early 16th century.⁸²

In this case, the competition between the Ottoman Empire and Portugal in the Indian Ocean region was shaped by both naval technology and strategic considerations. However, one of the significant challenges that the Ottomans faced was the geographical distance of Yemen from their imperial center. Kaplan writes that past foreign policy successes and failures often hinged on geography. The Balkans intervention made sense due to proximity to Europe and historical context. Iraq, which was more distant and complex, was harder to stabilize, a fact that geography could have helped forecast.⁸³ Distance was also effective in Ottoman penetration into the Indian Ocean. This vast distance, compounded by political instability in Yemen, severely limited Ottoman power projection in the region, particularly in their struggle against Portuguese dominance in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean. Three main factors explain how the geographical distance of Yemen, combined with internal instability, undermined Ottoman efforts to challenge Portuguese maritime supremacy effectively: the delayed Ottoman military interventions, the importance of Yemen as a crucial naval staging ground, and the opportunity this distance gave to the Portuguese to exploit the instability to their advantage.

First, the vast geographical distance from the Ottoman center to Yemen significantly delayed Ottoman military interventions in the Indian Ocean. The Ottomans maintained a relatively small permanent military presence in these regions. Salaries for the naval officers and soldiers stationed in Yemen and Suez—excluding those involved in the Indian Ocean campaigns—accounted for only 3 percent of the total military payroll. This limited expenditure reflects the minimal budget allocated to these distant outposts.⁸⁴ Sokollu Mehmed, the Ottoman grand vizier, envisioned Yemen as a strategic base to launch attacks against Portuguese-controlled territories in Southeast Asia. However, reports of the Yemeni uprising in 1567, particularly the rebellion led by Zaydi Imam Mutahhar, complicated Ottoman plans. The uprising led to the loss of control over key cities and forced the Ottoman fleet to withdraw, thereby delaying the planned intervention in Aceh.⁸⁵ The vast geographical distance between Istanbul and Yemen exacerbated the time required to respond to the Yemeni crisis. The long logistical chains made it difficult for the Ottomans to mobilize sufficient

⁸² Brummett 1994, p.108-111.

⁸³ Kaplan 2012, p.33.

⁸⁴ Özbaran 2009a, p. 345.

⁸⁵ Bostan 2013.

forces and resources to stabilize Yemen while simultaneously pursuing their ambitions in Southeast Asia. In a region where naval deployment required considerable time, the instability and logistical challenges at the bases, crucial for maintaining a sustained presence, emerged as a significant disadvantage. The need to transport shipbuilding materials from remote locations created a substantial barrier to the effective repair and rebuilding of the fleet.⁸⁶

Second, Yemen's geographical position at the intersection of the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean was of immense strategic importance to Ottoman operations in the region. The Ottoman navy depended on Yemen's proximity to these critical waterways to control access to the Indian Ocean and challenge Portuguese power. However, the internal instability in Yemen, which escalated by the end of 1567, prevented the Ottomans from establishing a solid presence there. The Ottoman empire's reliance on long supply lines from Istanbul meant that maintaining consistent control over Yemen was increasingly difficult, especially when local uprisings required immediate attention. The rebellion forced the Ottomans to divert resources away from their naval campaigns and to focus on regaining control over Yemen, thus weakening their ability to compete with the Portuguese in Southeast Asia.⁸⁷ The distance from the Ottoman heartland in Istanbul to Yemen made it logistically challenging for the empire to maintain the level of control and coordination needed for successful military operations in the region.

Third, the instability in Yemen allowed the Portuguese to strengthen their position in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean. After their failure to decisively defeat the Ottomans, the Portuguese turned to diplomatic means, forging alliances with regional powers to counter Ottoman influence.⁸⁸ In 1568, as Ottoman forces were preparing to reconquer Aden, the Zaydi commander in Yemen sought Portuguese assistance, offering strategic incentives such as the citadel and customs revenues in exchange for defense against the Ottomans.⁸⁹ This alliance provided the Portuguese with a foothold in the region and allowed them to exploit the Ottoman distraction caused by Yemen's instability. The Portuguese could mobilize more efficiently across their Indian Ocean empire, benefiting from shorter supply lines and fewer logistical obstacles. In contrast, due to their distance from Yemen, the Ottomans struggled to sustain their military efforts in the face of internal rebellions and external threats.

⁸⁶ Orhunlu 1970.

⁸⁷ Casale 2010, p.131.

⁸⁸ Hess 1970, pp.1892-1919.

⁸⁹ Casale 2010, p.33.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of the geography, maritime strategies and imperial fortunes of the Ottoman Empire, Venice, Portugal, and Spain during the Age of Exploration reveals a fundamental and enduring truth about the nature of power in the early modern world: geography functions not merely as a static backdrop but as a dynamic, structural determinant that shapes the capacities, ambitions, and limitations of states. Geography fundamentally shapes national power and policy, establishing the material contours within which empires rise, compete, and decline. While the Ottoman Empire and Venice wielded considerable military prowess, political influence, and cultural vibrancy within the Mediterranean sphere during the Age of Exploration, their geographical realities imposed profound constraints on their ability to project power beyond regional confines. Nestled deep within the Mediterranean basin, these powers found their maritime ambitions curtailed by natural chokepoints such as the Strait of Gibraltar and Bab el Mandep, controlled decisively by their Iberian rivals, thus restricting access to the vast Atlantic trade networks or Indian Ocean that increasingly defined global commerce and empire.

Geography is not obsolete despite technology; the early modern period makes this vividly clear. Technological limitations, especially in ship design and navigational precision, fed by geographic barriers, restrain the maritime horizons of both Venice and the Ottomans. No amount of regional expertise or naval dominance within the Mediterranean could offset their disadvantage in facing the brutal oceanic conditions of the Atlantic. While new technologies emerged, they could not nullify the realities of location and terrain; they only enhanced the ability of those already geographically advantaged to capitalize further.

This geographical bottleneck, technological gaps, and distinct internal political and economic priorities, entrenched a strategic inwardness within Ottoman and Venetian maritime policy. Although both empires maintained dominance within their immediate spheres of influence, their inability to effectively adapt naval technologies suited to the harsh demands of Atlantic navigation and long-distance oceanic voyages fundamentally hindered their capacity to transform into truly global powers. Geography informs but does not absolutely determine outcomes. The Ottomans and the Venetians possessed strategic options that could have altered their historical trajectories, such as technological advancement, institutional reform, and diplomatic engagement, and they tried to use them. However, their responses to geographical constraints were shaped by the unequal advantages enjoyed by their geopolitical rivals. In the face of the momentum generated by these advantages, many of the Ottomans' efforts proved fruitless, and the benefits of the innovations they implemented, or might have implemented, lagged significantly behind those of their competitors.

Lacking access to geographic conditions conducive to subsequent technological transformation, combined with the disproportionate rise in the revenues of rival states and the Ottoman Empire's distinctive economic and political conditions, prevented the Ottomans from executing projects that might have alleviated their structural geographical bottlenecks. To grasp the strategic significance such projects can hold, one need only consider the example of Britain, which, ultimately realizing the Suez Project, an undertaking the Ottomans had failed to complete, secured control over one of the world's most geopolitically vital maritime corridors. The Venetians found themselves in a comparable position.

An understanding of geography should temper overreach and help policymakers make wiser decisions. Spain's story vividly illustrates both sides of this maxim. Initially, Spain leveraged its geographic location at the junction of the Atlantic and Mediterranean worlds to establish one of history's largest empires. Yet its later struggles, with logistical overreach, imperial fragmentation, and economic strain, highlight the dangers of ignoring geography's warning signs. The limits of transoceanic empire became apparent when Spain could no longer sustain its vast holdings with its existing infrastructure and diplomatic models. Strategic foresight gave way to imperial overextension.

On the other hand, Portugal's geographical position and its advantages and disadvantages offer a compelling illustration that, though structural, geography is not inherently deterministic. Once a peripheral actor on the margins of the Mediterranean world before the 15th century, Portugal rose to geopolitical prominence as the global political and economic center of gravity shifted. This transformation underscores the dynamic role of time in reshaping the strategic significance of geographic locations and, by extension, states' position within the international system.

Geography is a stable foundation for power, a constant amid the changing tides of political ambition, religious ideology, and technological change. The Iberian powers succeeded not simply because of innovation or ambition but because their geographic position aligned with the shifting economic and geopolitical center of gravity. As global trade moved westward into the Atlantic, those states along its rim became the new epicenters of influence. Geography, in this sense, does not determine power, but it gives power a durable anchor. Oceans, mountains, and natural borders acted as strategic barriers, structuring the opportunities and limitations of early modern empires. Once the heart of imperial connectivity, the Mediterranean became a semi-enclosed space constrained by its own geography. The geographical distance from the points of exit of Mediterranean powers has significantly limited their operational capabilities, logistical capacities, and, by extension, their ability to establish an enduring presence in the region. The Atlantic, by contrast, opened new realms of conquest

Mediterranean Prisoners Versus Guardians of Narrow Passages: Ottomans' Geography, Maritime Strategies and Their Rivals During the Age of Exploration

and commerce to those with direct access. Control over chokepoints like the Strait of Gibraltar or Bab el Mandep became instrumental in determining which empires could expand and which would be hemmed in.

Geography explains security as much as ambition. Iberian dominance of the Atlantic world offered strategic depth and protection that the Mediterranean empires could not match. While Venice and the Ottomans faced multiple threats from adjacent land and sea powers, the greater Portugal and, to a lesser extent, Spain, buffered by natural borders and sea lanes, could project power abroad with greater security and less vulnerability. Compared to the Ottomans and Venice, this relative spatial isolation allowed them to establish and sustain distant empires with fewer immediate existential threats. From this perspective, distance to conflict zones can confer strategic advantages on rising powers. In particular, the insulation afforded by geographic distance often enables them to conduct operations in alternative regions with greater freedom and fewer constraints.

The divergence in outcomes between these Mediterranean and Atlantic powers thus illuminates a critical lesson in early modern geopolitics: imperial success was never solely a product of military strength, political ambition, or cultural sophistication. Instead, it depended fundamentally on a state's capacity to recognize, exploit, and, when necessary, transcend the geographic realities that delineate the scope of power. The maritime geography of the early modern period, shifting the epicenter of global influence toward the Atlantic rim, reconfigured the hierarchy of states and empires. The waning supremacy of the Mediterranean powers led to the rise of Atlantic-centered empires, heralding new global trade patterns, colonization, and cultural exchange.

More broadly, this historical arc illustrates an enduring and universal principle: geography shapes not only the possibilities but also the constraints of human ambition, transformation, and political strategy. The Age of Exploration thus serves as both a testament to the ingenuity of human navigation and empire-building and a sobering reminder of the immutable limits imposed by the physical environment. Even the most sophisticated technologies, strategic visions, and political wills must contend with the fundamental realities of place and space. As the modern world grapples with geopolitical rivalries, resource distribution, and strategic competition, the lessons gleaned from this early modern encounter between geography and empire remain as salient as ever. The interplay of natural environment and human endeavor continues to mold the fortunes of nations, underscoring the timeless relevance of geography as a foundational pillar in the architecture of global power.

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Mediterranean Prisoners Versus Guardians of Narrow Passages: Ottomans' Geography, Maritime Strategies and Their Rivals During the Age of Exploration

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