After the Abbasid Caliphate became the strongest Muslim kingdom in the 8th century, the Islamic Golden Age produced incredible art, architecture, and new scientific learning. The center of this golden age was the Abbasid capital city of Baghdad, in modern-day Iraq, right next to the ruins of the ancient city of Babylon. The Islamic Golden Age came to a sudden end, though, in the year 1258. During their invasion of Europe, the Mongols had been unimpressed with the region's wealth and culture. So after returning home from Europe, they decided to conquer Baghdad, which they knew to be much richer and more advanced than any city in Europe at that time. The Mongols then raided Baghdad, stole countless valuable items like gold and jewels, and left the city in ruins, causing the Abbasid government to fall apart. Once the Abbasids were no longer in power, their territory split into many small Muslim kingdoms.

Reaction of Byzantines to Ottoman Rule

When the Ottoman Turks conquered Constantinople in 1453, they renamed the city Istanbul, and made it their capital. Ottoman rule meant major changes for the people living in former Byzantine lands. The great Hagia Sophia church, built during Justinian's reign, was turned into a mosque. The old Roman palace of Constantine was torn down. Most Byzantines felt that Ottoman rule was better, though, than the only alternative (Venetian rule) because of one reason: religion. The Ottomans guaranteed religious freedom, while the Byzantines knew that the Catholic Venetians would make them stop practicing their Orthodox Christianity. To remain Christian, though, carried an actual price: a special religious tax that you had to pay the Ottoman government in order to practice a religion besides Islam. This tax was not a problem for wealthier Byzantines in large cities, but it was difficult for poor farmers. Many wealthy Byzantines decided to convert to Islam because it was the only way to get a government job, or marry into an important Ottoman family.

On top of the religious tax, poor non-Muslim farmers had to pay an even steeper price, called the devshirme (Turkish for "collection"). Every 5 years,
Ottoman officials travelled around non-Muslim areas to collect children to join a special Ottoman army unit called the Janissaries. Each family had to give up one son out of every five they had. Because farming families usually had a lot of children, this affected most non-Muslim families. The young boys (usually around the age of 5 or 6), were then taken away to Istanbul, where they were forced to convert to Islam and stop speaking their native language. They were cut off from any contact with their families so that they would have no loyalties outside their army unit. The boys were then trained to become elite fighters, much like the ancient Spartans.

Suleiman the Magnificent

After the Ottomans fully established their empire in the former Byzantine lands, they began to set their sights on new territories to conquer. One important Ottoman sultan (Turkish for "king") named Selim I, expanded the empire dramatically by conquering all the Muslim kingdoms going around the Mediterranean coast, including Egypt. The reign of Selim's son Suleiman, though, turned out to be the Ottomans' golden age. Nicknamed Suleiman the Magnificent, he led the Ottomans into victory many times. He successfully conquered the Christian kingdom of Hungary (which made other European kingdoms very nervous) and defeated the Persians in Mesopotamia. The economy of Istanbul was very prosperous during Suleiman's reign, and he greatly expanded and enriched the city by building several new mosques and universities.