

The image above shows an interior corridor within the Loftallah Mosque in Isfahan, Iran. Isfahan's construction under Shah Abbas I gave the Safavid Empire a glorious new capital. Long considered among the most beautiful cities ever built, today the city is listed as a World Heritage Site by the United Nations. Source: "Mosques and Islamic Architecture of Iran," located at <http://www.skyscrapercity.com/showthread.php?t=736388>.

NGCSU E-Text for History 1112

Essay Module

The Islamic Gunpowder Empires

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Unit Goals

After reading this essay you should be able to:

- 1) Describe the origins and important features of the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal empires.
- 2) Explain the role of Islam in the development of these empires.
- 3) Outline and discuss features of the military organization and weapons systems of these empires.
- 4) Understand the principal features of the imperial economies.
- 5) Identify the most significant leaders of each of these three empires.
- 6) Explain the key factors that led to the empires' gradual decline.

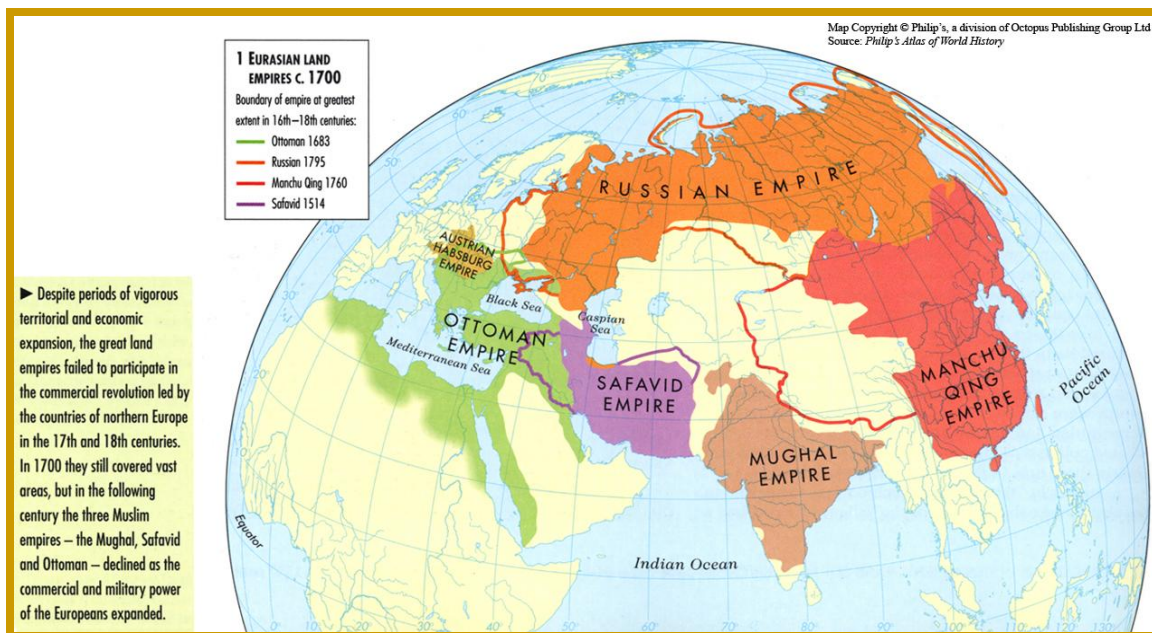
Introduction

Between the late 1300s and the early twentieth century, three large regional Islamic empires controlled a vast area of the Old World, stretching from southeastern Europe to the Bay of Bengal. These "**Gunpowder Empires**," the three Islamic societies of the Ottomans, Mughals, and Safavids, reached the heights of their power and splendor between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries. Their empires stretched from Eastern Europe to the Himalayas, and were products of the succession battles that swept through the region after the Mongol invasions and the collapse of the Abbasid Caliphate, whose capital, Baghdad, fell to the Mongols in 1258. Exerting control over hundreds of millions of subjects and a myriad of diverse communities, the empires expanded their territories and power through skilful employment of gunpowder weapons and technologies, and later passed these improvements onto Europe. These gunpowder weapons were far more advanced than their predecessors, and allowed the rulers of these empires, and later their European counterparts, with new means of projecting force over vast distances. They also constructed powerful and enduring systems of rulership, bureaucratic administration, and standardized law that exerted enormous influence over their European counterparts, and both directly and indirectly facilitated the European state-building process in dramatic and important ways. It is difficult, if not impossible, to conceive of the emergence of these powerful, modern European state systems without the presence of their more powerful and successful Islamic predecessors.

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Historical Background

By the beginning of the 1st century B.C.E., the Middle East consisted of a conglomerate of loosely-bound tribal confederations connected by blood and other kinship relations. Across the region, succession battles within the confederations continually disrupted any moves toward political centralization or long-term unification. These circumstances changed through the advent and expansion of **Islam** in the sixth and seventh centuries. Islamic beliefs and practices provided a unifying theme; however, differences over religious leadership after the death of Muhammad resulted in a split of the religion, with two groups, the **Sunni** and **Shi'i**, emerged as the two dominant groups within the Islamic world. This religious fragmentation and ongoing regional disputes combined to leave a door of opportunity open for the charismatic and energetic founders of the Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals to establish prosperous and successful empires. These leaders were able to gain power in large part due to their ability to effectively use the new weapon of gunpowder; furthermore these empires' prosperity grew due to Middle Eastern goods becoming increasingly desirable in Europe and elsewhere across the expanding global economy.



The Fall of the Abbasid Caliphate and the rise of the Gunpowder Empires

Two related circumstances allowed for the rise of these empires; the collapse of the Abbasid Caliphate in 1258, and the political fragmentation and power vacuum that resulted from this collapse. The Abbasid Caliphate's legitimacy of power lay in their rulers' claim to be the successors of the Prophet Muhammad, a claim upheld by the Sunni sect of Islam – the word for ruler, *caliph*, means “successor” in Arabic, implying the legitimacy of the ruler as successor to the Prophet. The Abbasids came to power in the 8th century after they overthrew the ethnic-Arab ruled Umayyad dynasty and established their legitimacy as both political and religious

leader of the Islamic world. Over time, however, the Abbasid Caliphate's spiritual power began to wane, as the *ulama*, scholars educated in Islamic law, increasingly assumed this religious leadership role.

The Caliphate's political power also began to decrease, in part due to lower agricultural output, which eroded the dynasty's economic and financial strength. By the middle of the 1200s, the Abbasid Caliphs were little more than figureheads; despite this, the Caliphate's continued existence and presence gave other Sunni Islamic rulers the legitimacy they needed to rule. That legitimizing role ended abruptly in 1258 when the Mongols razed Baghdad and murdered the Caliph by trampling him to death in a royal carpet. The ensuing power struggle gave rise to the three great Islamic Empires of the Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals.¹

The Ottomans

The Ottomans emerged out of tribal groups of **Turkic nomads** who were a part of a loosely bound confederation of tribes known as the Oghuz that began to raid the eastern borderlands of the Byzantine Empire early in the first century. A leading Oghuz tribe, the Saljuqs, scored a major victory over the Byzantine Emperor Romanus IV Diogenes in 1071. This victory opened the door for Turkish settlement throughout Anatolia and also led to the founding of the **Rum Saljuq** sultanate. The Rum Saljuq sultanate lasted until the Mongol invasion and victory at the battle of Köse Dag in 1243. The Mongols' military conquests left the Rum Saljuq sultanate severely weakened, and it continued to decline until 1255-1256, when Mongol military units returned to the area and eventually took over control of the region in 1277. The Mongol invasion caused many Turks to push westward, where they encountered and mixed with the pre-existing Byzantine-Greek settlements and communities. The fall of the Rum Saljuq Sultanate gave rise to smaller Oghuz Turkic *beğliks* (the word bey is used throughout the Turkish language and may be translated into "chief," "lord" or "prince"), or political entities based on loyalty to a charismatic tribal chieftain.²

In 1302 the leader of one of these Turkish *beğliks*, **Osman Bey**, led a successful attack at the Battle of Bapheus against a Byzantine army. Before this battle, popular tradition suggests that Osman experienced a prophetic dream, within which he envisioned an enormous tree, representing his dynasty and its glorious future, whose branches stretched over all of the known lands of the region, foretelling the rise of a great and powerful dynasty. Osman's initial victory over the Byzantines gained him many followers and legitimized his rise to power. For the rest of his life, Osman and his successors continued to expand their territory throughout the region through military conquest. By 1362, the Ottomans had gained control of a significant amount of Anatolia, including the former Byzantine cities of Nicea, Nicomedia, Scutari and Bursa.³

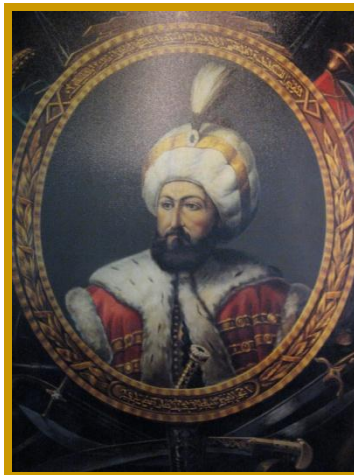
¹ Stephen F. Dale, *The Muslim Empires of the Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 10-17.

² Douglas E. Streusand, *Islamic Gunpowder Empires: Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals* (Boulder: Westview Press), 34-36.

³ Streusand, 34-36.

The **capture of Bursa** proved particularly significant for the development of the Ottoman empire, and for subsequent world history; formerly a center of Byzantine administration and bureaucracy, the city's population included large numbers of professional Byzantine scribes, government officials and civil servants, most of whom agreed to serve their new masters. These professionals provided the Ottomans with a foundation of imperial administration and legal/bureaucratic expertise that by the sixteenth century developed into the most sophisticated and efficient system of state governance anywhere in the world outside of Ming China. Later, the Ottoman bureaucratic and legal system would be widely admired and emulated by the embryonic monarchies of Europe.

Osman's descendants, now known as **sultans** (rulers), continued his legacy of territorial expansion through conquest. In 1453, **Mehmet II**, "the Conqueror," led a successful attack against the Byzantine capital city of **Constantinople**, a city that had long been the envy of the Ottomans. The city symbolized the power of the Byzantine Empire and was perceived by much of the Christian world as the center of Christianity east of Rome. The capture of Constantinople, now renamed Istanbul, legitimized the rule of the Ottomans in the eyes of the rest of the Islamic world. The defeat also profoundly shocked Europeans, as Muslims now controlled the strategic port city and the doorway into Europe.





The two images above depict Sultan Mehmet II, “the Conqueror,” who captured Constantinople in 1453. The second image is an artist’s depiction of Mehmet entering the city after its surrender.

Muslim control of Constantinople also meant a change in patterns of economic activity, as Eastern goods quickly began to flow into the Eastern provinces of Europe, which were then carried westward to other places such as Spain and Portugal. Mehmet II ruled the Empire for another twenty years, expanding its borders until, at his death in 1481, he controlled the Black Sea littoral, the Balkans, the Aegean, the Adriatic and Anatolia.⁴

In 1520, the greatest Ottoman ruler, **Sulayman I**, known in the West as “the Magnificent,” and in his own territories as **al-Kunani**, “the Lawgiver,” assumed the throne. Named after Solomon, the Old Testament model of wise and just leadership, the new sultan proved himself worthy of his namesake. During his long reign of over forty years (1520-1561), Sulayman I increased the empire’s borders westward into Europe, and southwestward into North Africa. He faced increasing opposition from the Caucasian tribes of Russia, and also faced border disputes with the Safavid Empires. Even though a lot of his time was taken by military conquest, Sulayman still effectively managed internal affairs, focusing on combating administrative corruption and expanding sound financial policies.

⁴ Streusand, 40-45.



The above image shows an engraving of Sultan Sulayman I riding into battle on horseback.
Source: <http://www.life.com/image/50696160>.

Sulayman I also established a standardized legal code across his domains for the first time – this code remains the foundation of Islamic legal systems across much of the Islamic world today. By his death in 1561, he had expanded the Ottoman empire’s territories to their greatest extent, extending them deep into southeastern and central Europe, as well as across the Middle East and coastal North Africa. He saw himself, with considerable justification, as the most powerful man in the world. For the next two centuries, the Ottomans ruled a prosperous empire based on trade with the west and military successes that dominated the intersection of Europe, Asia, and Africa.⁵

The Safavids – A Shi’a Empire

Although it would later become closely associated with Shia Islam, the **Safavid Empire** originated out of a **Sufi** religious community near Tabriz, close to the Caspian Sea.⁶ In the beginning of its formation, the order, founded in the twelfth century and led by Safa-al-Din, possessed no real political power or agenda. However, as the order grew in numbers and

⁵ Streusand, 49-51.

⁶ The third primary branch of Islam, Sufism developed out of alternate approaches to spirituality and religious practice common to all world religions. Sufis advocate a less rigid and formal approach to Islamic religious belief, spirituality, and practice, a perspective that threatened the positions and leadership of the *ulama*. Seeking to eliminate this challenge, both Sunni and Shia religious leaders declared Sufi practices to be heretical, and encouraged persecution of Sufi leaders and adherents. For more on Sufism, see the excellent site constructed by Alan Godlas, “Sufism, Sufis, and Sufi Orders,” at <http://www.uga.edu/islam/Sufism.html>. For more information on the differences between Sunni and Sh’ia Islam and the origins of the Sunni-Shi’a split, see <http://www.islamfortoday.com/shia.htm>.

influence throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, it transformed from a religious sect to an empire through military and political conquest, which was spurred on by the order's messianic message. As a result, the leaders of the movement began to develop politically by gaining power among the leaders of the Qizilbash tribal confederation.⁷

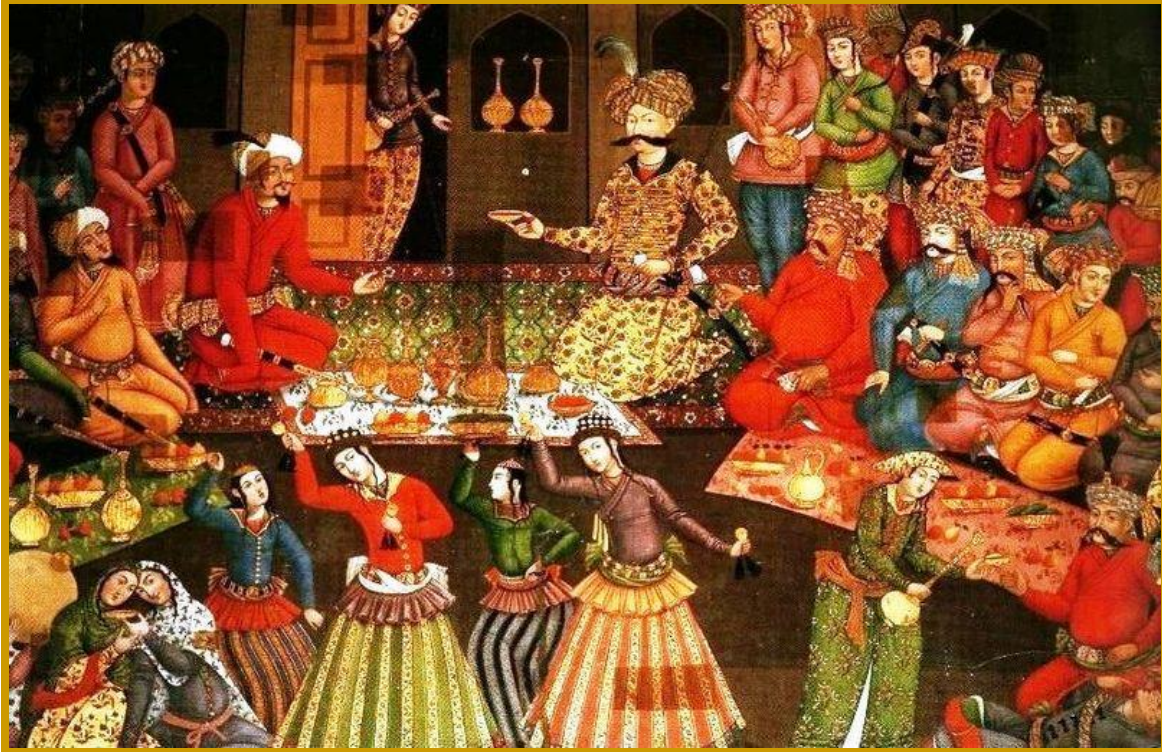
The founder and chief architect of the Safavid dynasty was **Shah Ismail**, who came to power in 1499 following a nine-year period of exile. Only fourteen years old when he assumed power, Ismail, whom contemporaries describe as a charismatic young man with flaming red hair, gained the support of many Turkic tribal leaders and aggressively sought to increase and unify his empire. This period of expansion lasted until the **Battle of Chaldiran** in 1514, when the Safavid military was defeated by a much stronger and technologically advanced Ottoman force. The defeat ended more than just expansion. Ismail's defeat, which within his movement's messianic message declared him as the Shadow of God on Earth, called into question his invincibility and claims to power.⁸ His defeat at Chaldiran caused upheaval and abandonment of the regime by many of the Qizilbash tribes, and necessitated a strong response from the leadership. In order to regain control of the situation, eliminate the threat of Ottoman incursions, and consolidate his power, Ismail unleashed a program of forced conversion to Shi'i Islam within his territories.⁹ Today, the results of this program can be seen in modern Iran: once part of the core territories of the Safavid empire, today Iran serves as the global center of Shia Islam, with its population overwhelmingly Shia in religious orientation.

Abbas Mirza I assumed the throne in 1588, after a bloody succession battle fought by leaders of the Qizilbash confederation. Abbas I (1588-1629) became the greatest Safavid ruler, and is often compared to Sulayman in terms of his power and achievements. Like Sulayman, Abbas I instituted a veritable "Golden Age" of Safavid power and success, characterized by his construction of a glorious new capital, **Isfahan**. It was during his reign that the borders of the empire reached their greatest extent, representing the pinnacle of the empire's growth. During his reign he strengthened the central government through tax revenues, built a new capital at Isfahan, and expanded the borders of the empire east into Mughal territory and west into previously held Ottoman lands.

⁷ Streusand, 140-143.

⁸ Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 241.

⁹ Streusand, 143-146; Dale 167-170.



A contemporary painting showing the beauty and opulence of Shah Abbas' court. Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abbas_I_of_Persia.

Abbas I also established a thriving textile industry within his territories, and developed ties with European merchants to facilitate trade and commerce between the empire and Europe. He also imposed security and order across his domains; during his reign, unarmed travelers could travel more than fifteen hundred miles, from Herat in the East (now in Afghanistan) to Najaf in the West (now in Iraq), in complete safety, a task far more difficult today than in his time. Unfortunately for his successors, these circumstances did not continue. After his reign it would take less than one hundred years before the empire, wracked by internal dissent and external invasions, fell into shambles and ceased to exist.¹⁰

The Mughals

The first Muslim Turkic dynasty in India, the Ghaznavid dynasty, first appeared early in the 1000's. Its rulers were responsible for spreading Islam and the Perso-Islamic culture to the northern parts of India. The region was later controlled by another group of Turks called the Ghurids. The Ghaznavids and Ghurid dynasties represented the first in a long line of sultanates that existed in the northern region of India for the next two hundred years. Throughout the region during this era, Islamic culture and religion flourished. Large tax revenues were gained through the taxation of non-Muslim subjects. A prosperous type of mercantilism developed

¹⁰ Streusand, 146-158.

and religious art and writing were supported.¹¹ The problem that continually plagued the Muslim rulers was their strife with the more populous Hindu sect within their subject society. Muslim rulers aggressively attacked the Hindu culture by destroying temples and replacing them with Islamic mosques. This act was intended to show the power of Islam through the destruction of the Hindu gods and establishment of the Islamic faith, but also led to riots and political and social instability.¹²

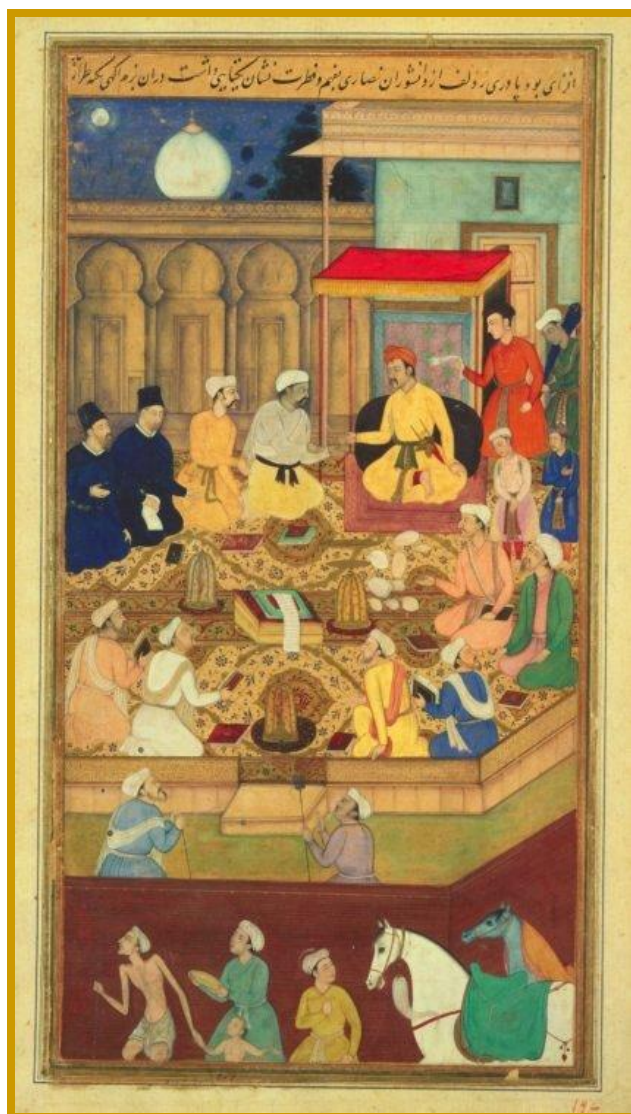
After several failed attempts by Islamic rulers to establish a unified Mughal Empire, Jala al-Din Muhammad Akbar was enthroned as ruler of Hindustan at the age of fourteen. Despite his young age, **Akbar I** soon became the most powerful and significant ruler of the Mughal Empire. Descended from Babur “the Tiger,” the dynasty’s founder who initiated the Mughal empire from his base in Kabul, Afghanistan, over the course of his reign Akbar I (r. 1555-1605) increased the border of the empire east from the Himalayas to the eastern border of the Safavid Empire, and from Qandahar in the north, to Ahmadnagar in the south. In government matters, Akbar strategically incorporated various leaders of religious and ethnic groups in his administration to ensure their allegiance and loyalty to the state. To further encourage their devotion, many religious groups, such as the Hindus, were able to rebuild temples and worship freely. This process was greatly aided by Akbar’s marriage to a Hindu Rajput princess, whose father and brother were then enrolled in administrative duties setting a type of precedence for other political appointees. Akbar is also credited with installing the military organization of the Mughal Empire, which was heavily modeled after the Ottoman and Safavid military.¹³

As a means of further uniting his subjects, in 1582 Akbar promoted a new, state religion known as **din-i-Ilahi**, or “divine faith.” A bold experiment in religious syncretism, din-i-Ilahi incorporated elements of Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, and Christianity, as well as other south Asian religions such as Jainism. Although it ended in failure, Akbar’s experiment is significant for two reasons. First, it shows how common and widespread this process was across Eurasia during this period—think of Henry VIII in England as a comparative example—and secondly, it represents the first and only time that anyone has attempted to fuse together all of the world’s major religions.

¹¹ Dale, 17-31.

¹² Dale, 96-100.

¹³ Dale, 96-100; Streusand 213-223.



Prior to promulgating din-i-Ilahi, Akbar I engaged in a prolonged analysis of all the world's major religious beliefs, in order to distill their best elements and combine them into his new state religion. This painting shows him receiving Jesuit missionaries as part of this venture at his capital city in Fatehpur Sikri in the late sixteenth century. Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Jesuits_at_Akbar%27s_court.jpg.

Late in 1605 Akbar died, leaving a large, flourishing empire for his descendants. Akbar's successors continued the task of imperial expansion and consolidation. They persistently pushed north into Uzbek territory and south into the Deccan Peninsula. One of his descendants, Shah Jahan, built one of the most famous examples of early modern world architecture: the **Taj Mahal**, a mausoleum for his deceased wife, Mumtaz Mahal. Many of their campaigns in these regions were unsuccessful and cost the empire dearly. Eventually, plagued by succession disputes, administration issues and encroaching armies the Mughal Empire fragmented and began its decline early in the 1700s.¹⁴

¹⁴ Dale, 96-105; Lapidus, 356-361; Streusand, 214-243.



A view of the Taj Mahal from the east. Located in Agra, India, it is another example of the glorious wealth and sophistication typical of the Islamic gunpowder empires. Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Taj_Mahal_East_Side.JPG. For an amazing 3-D view of the Taj Mahal and its interiors, visit <http://www.taj-mahal.net/>.

Military Organization

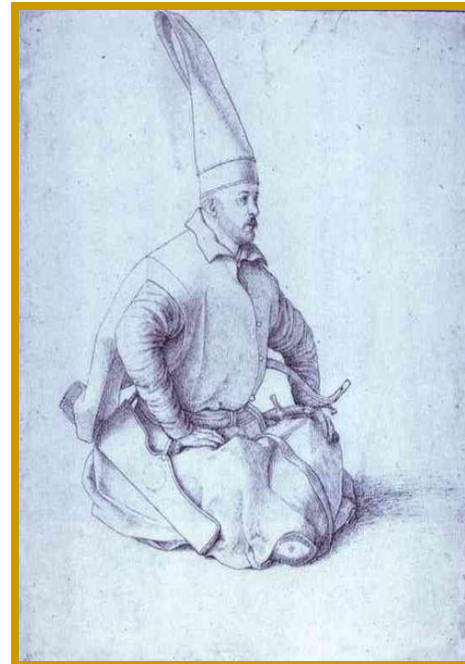
The success of the three Empires was due in large part to their strong militaries, which effectively incorporated gunpowder weapons into existing nomadic styles of warfare. Mounted archers, who were very skilled marksmen, had been employed in the region for centuries. Gunpowder weapons, though still challenged by powerful re-curve bows, were becoming more abundant and effective. The military leaders of the three empires designed armies that incorporated the best of both styles of fighting. Large guns were used in concentrated areas where accuracy was not as important as mass devastation and confusion. Mounted archers and foot soldiers were then used to move in quickly, surrounding and defeating the enemy. The leaders also devised revenue plans that supported these technologically advanced armies in ways that garnered their soldiers' loyalty and avoided military coups.

The Ottomans

The Ottoman military force was organized into two main groups, the central and provincial. Sultan Murad I began the recruitment of a new central army that he called the *qapiqullar* (slaves of the sultan's gate).¹⁵ The central army was composed of **Janissaries**, Sipahis of the Port, and Artillery units. In the beginning the Janissary Corps, which included a few hundred

¹⁵ Streusand, 82.

men, served as the bodyguard for the sultan. Recruited as young boys from non-Muslim families through the *devshirme* system—a form of human tax on non-Muslim subjects—they were trained as infantry using bows and edged weapons. However, they eventually adapted to using firearms and soon became the first all-firearm unit in the world. The Janissaries' superior training and skilled use of military tactics and technological innovations—they were the first to construct and effectively deploy grenades—gained power, prestige and political influence throughout their service to the sultan, and by 1597 may have numbered as many as 45,000.¹⁶ By this time they were also regarded as the toughest and most dangerous military forces anywhere in western Eurasia.

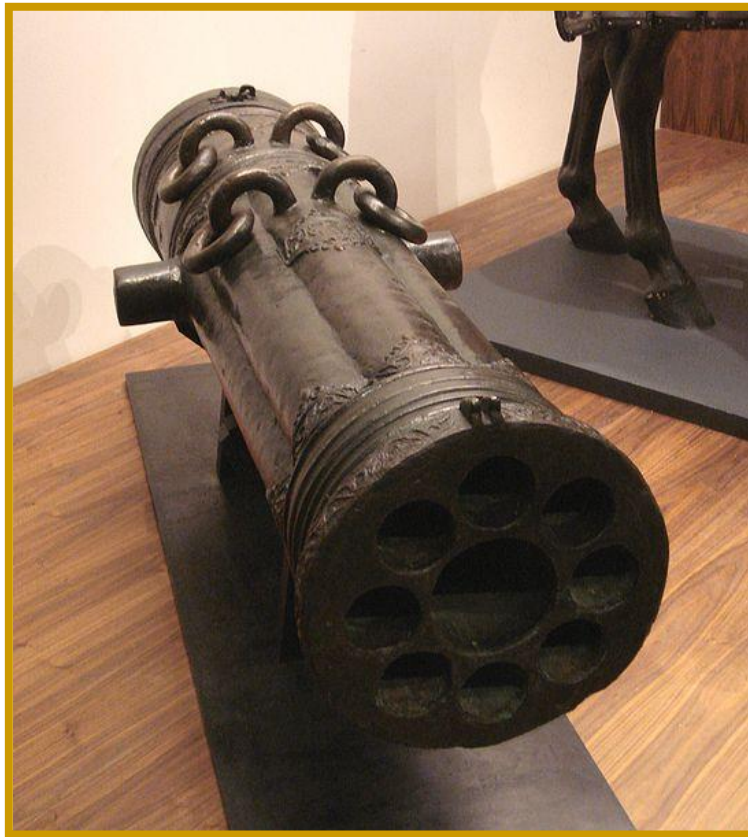


Two contemporary depictions of Janissaries from the sixteenth century. Both were drawn by European observers. Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Janissary>.

The artillery units were also an important part of the central army. In 1453 under Mehmet II, these Ottoman artillery units were credited with crushing the previously impenetrable walls of Constantinople. During their existence the Ottomans continued to improve their artillery units.¹⁷ Ottoman cannon designs represented a quantum leap forward in reliability and accuracy, and were copied extensively by Europeans throughout the early modern period.

¹⁶ Streusand, 82-83.

¹⁷ Streusand, 83-84.



Ottoman cannons were the best of their kind anywhere in the world until the early 1700s. Using new casting technologies unknown elsewhere for decades, the Ottomans deployed cannons such as this one (above), a nine-barreled version from the early sixteenth century, and the massive siege cannons (below), over 20 feet long and able to hurl stone projectiles weighing 1200 pounds more than a mile, in the mid-fifteenth century. These weapons gave the Ottomans a decisive firepower advantage over their rivals. Sources: http://obviousmag.org/en/archives/2008/12/the_ottoman_cannon.html, and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Early_16th_century_Ottoman_volley_gun.jpg.

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The last component of the central army was known as the *sipahis* of the Porte or the cavalry units. They derived from the Mongol and Turkic horseman that had previously controlled the region. Their main source of power was the composite re-curved bow that was effective at a distance of up to 280 yards; a distance that was not achievable by any other piece of weaponry at the time.¹⁸ Because these three units were directly controlled and paid for by the central government, it gave the Ottomans an enormous edge over their European counterparts, who derived their power from local rulers.¹⁹



Engraving of an Ottoman sipahi cavalryman. Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Sipahi3.jpg>.

The Ottoman provincial army was also more tightly controlled by the central government than were other provincial armies of the day. The *timar* system, which was modeled in part after the Byzantine *pronoia*, reflected a land-revenue assignment. In the Byzantine system an officer would control a small garrison of men, thereby giving authority to that officer. In the Ottoman model each *timar* supported about one mounted soldier and his equipment during a campaign. The *timar* holder was known as a *sipahi*. If the *timar* could support twice the normal level, then the *sipahi* had to provide the army with another mounted archer. There were *timars* that supported many troops; however, these larger *timars* never grew to a size that would have threatened the central government. The Ottoman *timar* allowed the central government more

¹⁸ Streusand, 84.

¹⁹ Streusand, 84-85.

control over its provincial army, which limited the threat of uprisings and ensured that the state had its army when needed.²⁰

The Safavids

The Safavid army deployed their military in similar ways to their Ottoman rivals. Sultan Tahmasp began to form a slave unit known as the *ghila-man-I khassay-I sharifa* (slaves of the royal household; also called *qullar*).²¹ The *qullar* was equivalent to the Ottoman Janissary units. They mostly likely rode on horses, carrying both firearms and edged weapons. The *qullar* units were very effective as a result of their intense military training and were held to a high regard because of their loyalty to the empire. Other areas of the Safavid military were not as loyal or dependable.²²

Unlike the Ottomans, who had developed a system that garnered loyalty from the provincial army to the sultan, the Safavid regime failed to fully unite the empire. Therefore, much of the provincial army was still closely tied to tribal allegiances, of which many were part of a larger group of tribes known as the Qizilbash confederation. Under this system the central government had to depend on tribal leaders for support. Abbas I successfully reformed the provincial army by installing *qurchi* as provincial governors over or instead of Qizilbash chiefs. This way the power of the tribal chief was circumvented, meaning that the central government gained some control of the army. Still, the system did not totally supplant tribal leaders, which meant that close family ties were intact and sometimes a nuisance for the empire.²³

The military units themselves were implemented in battle in a way resembling Ottoman warfare. Slave units were used in the center formation using firearms and light artillery. The provincial army operated as cavalry and infantry using their traditional weapons. When attacked at the Battle of Jam in 1528, it was the center group that eventually won the battle after the Uzbek army fled the field in disarray following heavy attacks from this artillery firepower.²⁴

The Mughals

Like the Safavids, the Mughals owed much of their military success to the Ottomans. Babur “the Tiger,” the founder of the Mughal dynasty, employed an Ottoman military expert, Ustad Ali Quli, who arranged the Mughal forces into the traditional Ottoman formation with a strong center that deployed wagon fortresses and infantry armed with gunpowder weapons, and was supported by mounted archers on either side.²⁵ The Mughal cavalry constituted one of the most important factors in their success. Their success was a direct result of the Mughal’s

²⁰ Streusand, 85-86.

²¹ Streusand, 170.

²² Streusand, 170-171.

²³ Streusand, 168-172.

²⁴ Streusand, 169-170.

²⁵ Streusand, 255.

monopoly over the horse trade, which were imported from Iran and central Asia, as well as their background as archers; a technique not common to India.²⁶

Despite their effective use of gunpowder, the Mughals never developed the use of gunpowder weapons to the extent that the Ottoman and Safavid empires did. The empire imported gunpowder from central Asia instead of manufacturing it themselves. They also failed to continue to enhance their weapons causing them to gradually fall behind in their gunpowder superiority. Yet still, Mughal military technique and use of gunpowder proved very effective for the most part against their regional foes throughout their early years of conquest.²⁷

The organization of the army itself was much different than either of the other two empires. Instead of dividing the military into two groups, central and provincial, the Mughal military was split into three groups, central, *mansabdars*, and *zamindar* forces. This division is due in large part to the way the Mughals incorporated territories into the empire. Because of the expense and time it took to completely dismantle existing principalities, the Mughals commonly entered into agreements with rulers, which allowed the ruler to continue their governance of the area while becoming part of the Mughal bureaucracy, known as *mansabdars*. This position required them to support the empire with tax revenues and fully equipped soldiers when needed, meaning the mansabdar forces were private armies used by the imperial force.²⁸

Zamindars were different than mansabdars in that they governed lands that were conquered. The *zamindars* collected taxes from the people living in the region. Even though they were required in some instances to provide military assistance to the empire they were autonomous for the most part, fielding peasant armies for the protection of their own provinces.²⁹

The complex political agreements and responsibilities of the provincial society meant that the Mughal central force was relatively small, since the population of the empire never expanded. The central force did contain a cavalry and infantry that possessed firearms and field artillery used during sieges. Still, the Mughal Empire relied heavily on private armies that were largely out of their control, leaving room for rebellion.

Economics

Three major economic goals were present in most imperial, warrior dynasties: for the rulers to live a comfortable life; for them to have the ability to fund future conquests and gain additional resources; and to have funds for large, elaborate building projects that legitimize their rule in the eyes of their subjects and their posterity.³⁰ Like the military organizations, the economics behind the three empires were interconnected, complex institutions that benefited from the demand of Europeans for their trade products. Ottoman and Iranian silk along with Indian

²⁶ Streusand, 256-257.

²⁷ Streusand, 256.

²⁸ Streusand, 258-264.

²⁹ Streusand, 258-264.

³⁰ Dale, 106.

spices, indigo, cotton, and sugar, were all in high demand throughout Europe. The absence of an all-water route from these three countries into Europe meant that the goods had to pass overland through the empires, which was costly in some aspects while beneficial in others.

The economy of the Ottoman Empire prospered greatly from the transportation of goods through their territories. Because—prior to 1498—no all-water routes had been discovered directly from Europe to Asia, most commerce was transported by land. The trade passed directly through Ottoman territory to places like Istanbul (formerly Constantinople) and Cairo. Once there, the goods were sold to European merchants, who transported them across the Mediterranean Sea into Europe. The empire became rich off of the taxes that were charged on the commerce that passed through the territory. Trade revenue allowed the leaders of the Ottoman Empire to fund large building projects such as the Blue Mosque in Istanbul. It also allowed them to continue to develop military technology.³¹

Aside from trade revenue, silk production also provided large sums of revenue to the Ottoman Empire as well as the Safavid Empire. Silk was produced in the region for centuries, but as the European demand for silk grew so did its production and importance in the region. The silk trade provided the Safavid Empire with silver, the primary form of coinage in the region. Because the empire had no silver deposits of its own it relied on the silk trade to generate the silver. In order to capitalize on silk revenue, Shah Abbas I incorporated silk producing territories into the land owned by the Crown. This allowed him to manage and oversee the production of silk, ensuring maximum profits for the Crown.³²

The Mughal Empire prospered perhaps more than the other two empires. Even though, like the Safavids, they lacked in silver deposits, they were abundant in arable land. Due to the abundance of arable land the Mughals were able to produce exponentially more goods with greater diversity. The Mughals produced cotton, sugar, spices, indigo and even tobacco in the seventeenth century. The greater diversity in trade goods and capabilities of production meant that the empire could control, to an extent, the markets of the other two empires. Trade goods made the empire very wealthy, and as a result the Mughals were able to create a lavishly thriving economy that lasted up until the Industrial Revolution.³³

Trade with Europe created thriving economies in all three empires. However, Europeans, who were seeking an all-water route to the east, eventually disrupted the trade networks that allowed the Mughal, Safavid and Ottoman Empires to flourish. The influx of silver gained by conquest in the Americas caused rapid inflation, devastating the balance of trade. The Ottomans were also hurt by the arrival of Portuguese, Dutch, and English trading vessels in the Indian Ocean, which meant that tax revenues made on trade goods were lost. European desire for the goods produced in the three empires eventually led to the empires' downfall as

³¹ Dale, 112-116.

³² Dale, 118-126.

³³ Dale, 126-130

Europeans pushed into their territories in search of the items, and control of their production and distribution networks.³⁴

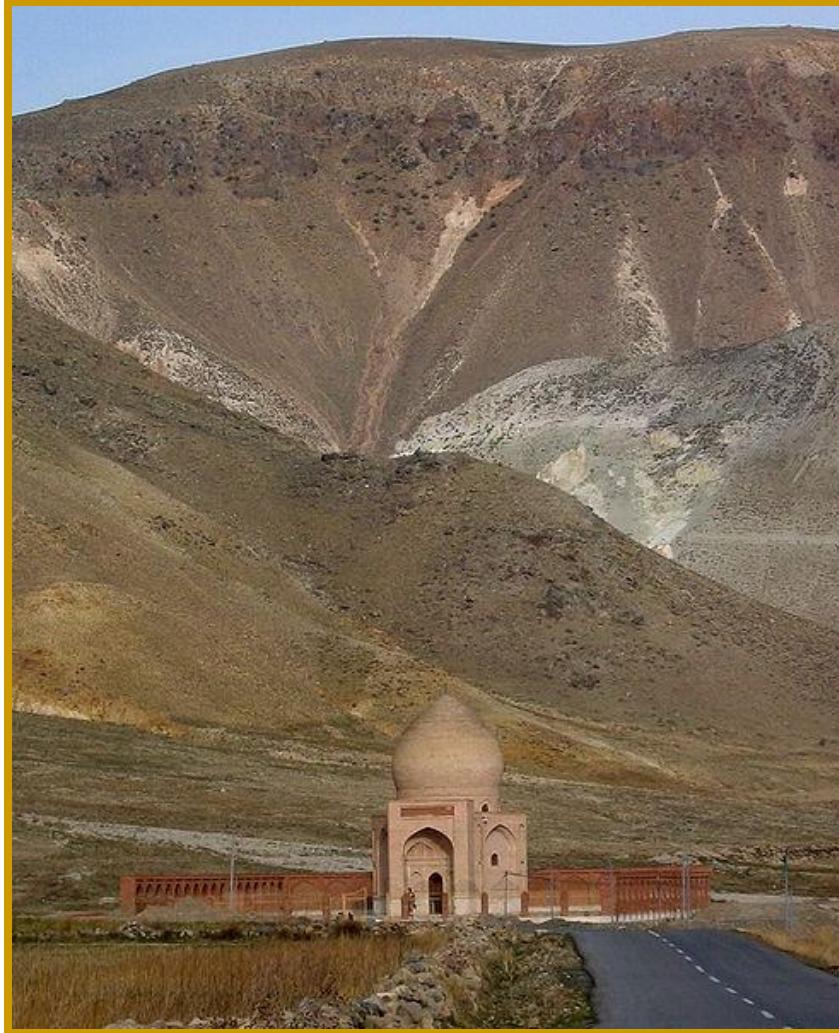
Religion

Religion was a driving force in the empires. All three of the empires were predominantly based on the teachings of Islam. However, each employed different variations of the religion, such as Sunni or Shi'i. Religion greatly affected each of the empires in several ways; it fueled military conquest and administrative goals, shaped trade and economic policies, and fueled imperial projects and culture. Overall, religion created a unifying theme that held the empires together and allowed them to prosper.

For the Ottoman Empire, Islam provided a cohesive bond for all the territories the empire conquered, as well as unifying other Islamic lands. The victory over the Byzantines at Constantinople and the push into Europe that preceded it carried the Islamic faith into many areas of the Mediterranean basin and southeastern Europe. The conversions of these regions to Islam resulted in these regions supporting the empire—the Balkan regions provided large numbers of Christian boys who, through the **devshirme** system (a form of human tax on non-Muslim subjects), supplied the manpower needs of the Janissary corps. At the same time, it alarmed a predominantly Christian Europe, sparking wars between the two groups for the next two centuries. The Ottoman victory at **Chaldiran** over the Safavids in 1514 also legitimized Ottoman rule across the Muslim world. Many supporters of the Safavid leader abandoned that empire and allied with the Ottomans. Furthermore, the Ottomans controlled the important Islamic centers of Mecca and Medina, providing more legitimacy to imperial rule. The large base of support unified the faith in the territories controlled by the Ottomans. Islamic scholars flocked to flourishing religious centers in Istanbul, while the empire launched large Islamic building projects. The Ottoman Empire greatly promoted the unification and spread of the Islamic faith in the territories it controlled.³⁵

³⁴ Dale, 130-134.

³⁵ Lapidus, 248-268. For more on this crucial battle and its historical significance, see the essay located here: <http://historyofislam.com/contents/the-land-empires-of-asia/the-battle-of-chaldiran/>.



Built on the battlefield site in eastern Iraq, this memorial commemorates the Battle of Chaldiran in 1514. Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Chaldiran_Battlefield_Site_in_2004.JPG.

While the Ottoman Empire gained support from its victory at Chaldiran, the defeat caused the leaders of the Safavid Empire to change its religious institutions. The leaders of the empire followed a sect of Islamic teachings known as Sufism, which emphasized personal devotion to the faith and the advent of a messianic figure to rule. Ismail, ruler of the empire during the Battle of Chaldiran, assumed the role of the messianic figure. After his defeat, his claims as the messiah lost credibility. Therefore, the administration embarked on a campaign to convert the empire to a particular type of Shi'i Islam known as "Twelver." This sect taught that the messianic figure would come in the form of the twelfth Imam, meaning that the order's claims of a coming messiah were upheld.³⁶ The only problem was that the majority of people living in the Safavid Empire were Sunni Muslims. Ismail brought in Shi'i scholars and teachers to convert the population. Religion was institutionalized throughout the empire, as government programs

³⁶ Lapidus, 94-96.

and laws required the teaching of Shi'i Islam. Conversion was encouraged through violence and persecution. Sunni leaders' tombs were desecrated; Sufi disciples were murdered, and other religious groups faced retribution. In the end, Shi'i festivals and traditions bound the people of the Safavid Empire together, creating a common thread throughout, Shi'i Islam.³⁷

The range of religiously diverse groups within the Mughal Empire gave it a unique blend of Islam and Hindu religions. Prior to the Muslim conquests, the majority of the population practiced Hinduism. At the empire's inception, Muslim clerics from a vast array of Islamic orders flocked to the new kingdom looking to build followings and gain conversions. The popular teaching of Sufism became prevalent across the empire in various forms, as it was easily meshed with Hindu teachings. The empire's enormous diversity did little to unite the empire under one religion in the way it had in the other two territories. However, Akbar changed the way the empire viewed religion. He gave a variety of religious leaders imperial jobs. He also allowed previously persecuted groups to rebuild places of worship and to study their religions freely. The result was a unified empire in the name of a type of religious tolerance where the emperor was viewed as the spiritual leader and protector of all.³⁸

Decline of the Gunpowder Empires

The sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries would mark the highpoint of the gunpowder empires' influence and global power. It is important to understand that the process of decline and reduced influence was a **gradual** process, evolving over several centuries. Several reasons for this gradual decline are recognizable. As military states founded by charismatic and talented leaders, problems of succession and generational conflict complicated transitions of power and placed enormous responsibility on the ruler: when these rulers were talented and effective, the empires prospered; in the opposing instance, they suffered and stagnated. The Ottoman **process of succession** exacerbated this problem. Lacking a primogenital tradition (where the eldest son automatically accedes to the throne upon the death of his father), the sons of the sultan engaged in a vicious struggle for primacy, which ended with the victor killing his siblings to prevent instability and leadership challenges. These struggles often led to a loss of talent and initiative within the Ottoman empire, and similar succession struggles complicated the leadership processes of the Safavids and Mughals.

The rapid growth and success of imperial territory also played a role in imperial decline. The vast territories incorporated into the empires through conquest presented enormous logistical and administrative challenges, as rulers struggled to maintain consistent control over these far-flung regions—a process known as “**imperial overstretch.**” The **increasing influence of military elites** in this process is also a factor—powerful military organizations such as the Janissaries became increasingly politicized, and sought to influence and control their rulers.

³⁷ Lapidus, 234-244.

³⁸ Lapidus, 367-372.

Economic stagnation was another feature of this gradual decline. Although the empires initially stood at the center of global trade and commerce, the development of alternative, sea-based trade routes by Europeans in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries increasingly marginalized them, leading to losses of revenue and further strains on the agricultural base of the economy. The lack of an educated middle class, and the increasing prevalence of foreign, primarily European, merchants and traders further weakened the empires' economic and financial foundations.

Cultural conservatism also plagued the empires. Seeing themselves as superior to their European and Asian counterparts, Islamic elites ignored or downplayed the significance of innovative and emerging technologies, such as the printing press, and also the rise of scientific and applied thinking that would lead to industrialization. As an example, the Ottomans banned all use of the printing press across their realms until 1729, even though it had been introduced by Jewish merchants as early as the late fifteenth century. Lack of interest in all things Western also discouraged Islamic elites from foreign travel, keeping them ignorant of the rapid pace of change in Europe during this era. Seeing themselves as increasingly surrounded by hostile, foreign forces, many of these elites retreated into a xenophobic isolationism, leading to increased tensions between religious and political elites, and also between the upper and lower social classes of society, many of whom turned increasingly to banditry and crime as the empires' economic situation deteriorated. Within elite groups, particularly those involved in governmental administration, frustration and boredom encouraged corruption and bribery, which led to losses of tax revenues and further destabilized the imperial structures.

Conclusion

The rise of the three Muslim Empires of the Ottomans, Safavids and Mughals were due to their leaders' ability to use effectively three things: (1) new military technology and forms of organization to gain power; (2) religion to unify the populations; and (3) trade in valuable goods to bring prosperity to the empires. Gunpowder weapons mixed with traditional mounted archers allowed for quick effective military conquest across the regions. Islam, in varying forms and degrees, provided a bond among the subject peoples. It also legitimized the imperial leadership in the eyes of surrounding populations. Irrespective of religious beliefs, Europeans greatly desired the trade goods that were produced in the gunpowder empires. The trade fueled imperial building projects and lavish lifestyles. However, it also pushed Europeans to find alternative water routes to the regions in order to circumvent high taxes and restrictions placed on the goods. European ambition, intervention, and subsequent domination eventually led to the downfall of the three great empires, which by the late nineteenth century had either collapsed or been incorporated, either formally or informally, into European imperial systems. The last of the empires to perish would be the Ottoman Empire, which finally collapsed in 1920, after the end of World War One.

Further Reading

Dale, Stephen F. *The Muslim Empires of the Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Lapidus, Ira M. *A History of Islamic Societies*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Streusand, Douglas E. *Islamic Gunpowder Empires: Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals*. Boulder: Westview Press, 2010.

See also the excellent bibliography constructed by the Humanities Department at the University of Alberta, Canada, located at <http://www.humanities.ualberta.ca/ottoman/bibliogr.htm>.

Recommended Visual Resources

"Islam: Empire of Faith," (2005) This three-part PBS documentary series, narrated by Ben Kingsley, traces the origins and development of the Islamic empires. Available in the NGCSU Library on VHS and DVD.

Recommended Online Resources

For the Ottomans, see the outstanding online class module, with full-text lectures and online tutorial essays, created by the University of Alberta and CMEAS (Consortium for Middle Eastern and African Studies), located at <http://www.humanities.ualberta.ca/ottoman/schedule.htm>.

For the Safavids, see the comprehensive essay and accompanying bibliography constructed by Rudolph (Rudi) Mathee, Professor of Middle Eastern History at the University of Delaware, located at <http://www.iranica.com/articles/safavids>.

Selected Primary Source Reading List

El-Halaby, Muhammad. "The Liberation/Fall of Constantinople: 1453," *Nida'ul Islam* 14, (July-September 1996), located at <http://web.archive.org/web/20001209110900/http://www.islam.org.au/articles/14/consta.htm>.

This short narrative describes the fall of Constantinople from a Muslim viewpoint. Note how it provides information about the use of gunpowder artillery, as well as other military operations. The narrative allows the reader to understand the type of siege warfare that took place at this battle. It also reveals the importance of the city strategically and economically.

Sidi Ali Reis, *Mirat ul Memalik (The Mirror of Countries)* in Internet Medieval Source Book, located at <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/16CSidi1.html> .

This document is a little lengthy and full of names and places; however, there is a lot of good information pertaining to life in the three empires. The narrator covers the majority of the Middle East and India. He discusses travel, trade, religion and politics.

Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq, *The Turkish Letters, 1555-1562* in Medieval Source Book under Modern History Sourcebook, located at <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1555busbecq.html> .

In this narrative, Busbecq describes life inside the Sultan's court in Constantinople. It is an interesting source because it identifies and analyzes differences between life in Europe and in the Islamic World during this era through the eyes of a European. It also mentions some key terms and elements about the military culture of Ottoman society.