

The Muslim Empires

The Ottomans: From Frontier Warriors to Empire Builders

- In the 13th century, the Mongols made it possible for the **Ottoman Turks** to move from a role as servants of the Muslim world to become its masters. The Ottomans quickly moved across the Middle East and into Europe, although the conquest of Constantinople by **Mehmed II** came only in 1453. By 1566, they ruled all of the former eastern Roman Empire. Their land empire was matched by mastery of the Mediterranean Sea.
- The Ottoman state granted great independence to the military aristocracy to which it owed its success. These nobles, granted conquered lands, eventually came to threaten the sultans' power. The **Janissaries**, infantry made up largely of conquered peoples, formed the new military core of the empire.
- Early sultans ruled directly, as political and military leaders. Later, the sultans ruled through their **viziers**, and through manipulation of the powerful groups within the empire. As the empire grew and the sultans became surrounded by ritual and luxury, the power of the viziers grew.
- Mehmed II rebuilt and improved Constantinople. Suleyman the Magnificent's Suleymaniye mosque was built at the apex of Ottoman culture in the 16th century. The city was restored to its position at the point of commercial exchange between east and west. Merchants and artisans were again central to the city's culture. The Turkish language became the official language of court and literature.
- The long success of the Ottoman Empire has been shadowed by the disruption caused by its decline. Like other empires, as conquests ended, some of the Ottoman dynamism was lost. Oversight of the vast empire was hampered by poor communication, and widespread corruption among officials resulted. As concerns about succession led to the sequestering of royal offspring, succeeding emperors were increasingly ineffectual. The power of the sultans was usurped by others in the empire.
- Weakness within the empire coincided with external pressure. The battle of Lepanto in 1571 ended Ottoman naval dominance. As the Portuguese rounded Africa, they were able to bypass Ottoman control of the spice trade. Silver from Latin America led to crippling inflation in the Ottoman Empire. A brief period of able rule in the 1600s strengthened, but did not completely restore, the integrity of the empire.

The Shi'a Challenge of the Safavids

- The Safavids, like the Ottomans, came to power on the eastern fringes of the Muslim world, as champions of Islam. However, they embraced Shi'ism, and struggles with the Ottomans were intensified by religious conflict. Established

by **Saï al-Din** of a family of Sufi mystics, they converted the Turks near Ardabil. Their Shi'a followers, called the **Red Heads**, grew in numbers. The victories of the Safavid leader **Ismâ'il** led him to be named *shah* in 1501. The Safavid expansion led to war with the Ottomans. The great Safavid defeat at **Chaldiran** in 1514 did not end their power, but did stop the spread of their empire and Shi'ism.

- Shah Tahmasp I, a Turkic successor to Ismâ'il, restored the stability of the empire. Shah **Abbas I, the Great** brought the empire to its apogee. The shahs managed to turn the Turkic leaders that challenged their power into a warrior aristocracy. Shah Abbas built up slave regiments, as had the Ottomans.
- Although the Safavid rulers were of Turkic background, they adopted Persian as the court language. Their worldly power was buttressed by claims to be **imams**, or successors of Ali. They also used **mullahs** to add religious support for their rule. Shi'ism came to be an integral part of Safavid distinctiveness.
- Abbas I was a major patron of craft and trade revival, as well as the arts. At **Isfahan**, his capital, the court dominated city life. Magnificent mosques and royal tombs decorated the city.
- The Safavid and Ottoman empires shared many cultural traits. In both, as the nobility grew in power, their exploitation of the peasants increased. Shahs and sultans were important patrons of the arts and crafts. Women were limited in both their public roles and even in creative pursuits allowed to them in other cultures. Women of Turkic and Mongol backgrounds lost ground as their cultures were changed by contact with Arabic and Persian traditions. At court in both empires, women could wield great power, though indirectly. It appears that women could retain some control over inherited property.
- In spite of Abbas's achievements, his empire was short-lived. Weak successors were easily manipulated, although such shahs as Abbas II were more able rulers. In 1722, **Nadir Khan Afshar** usurped the throne, inaugurating a period of unending conflict.

The Mughals and the Apex of Muslim Civilization in India

- **Babar**, founder of the Indian Mughal dynasty, showed the same leadership ability and cultivation of the arts as Shah Abbas I and Sultan Mehmed II. His main goal of reclaiming his kingdom in central Asia was never achieved, but he managed to win much of northern India. His son **Humayan** was an able successor. However, the dynasty reached its high point under Humayan's son **Akbar**.
- Although a minor at his succession, Akbar was able to hold on to his throne. His ambitious program, aimed at unifying his empire, included social reforms, the creation of a new faith, and erasing divisions between Mughals and Hindus. His proclamation of a new religion in 1582, **Din-i-Ilahi** was intended to marry Islam and Hinduism. Like the Safavids and Ottomans, Akbar granted lands to his nobles, yet he left many Hindu rulers in place.
- Akbar's social reforms included improving the plight of the urban poor, and changing marriage customs to protect women. He outlawed sati, and tried to ease the seclusion of women.
- Akbar's ambitious plans were only partially successful. Jahangir and Shah Jahan followed him in succession, but did little to build on his achievements. Under

the Mughals, India fell behind in the sciences, although exports of the textile industry remained important.

- Although Jahangir and Shah Jahan were much more devoted to pleasure than Akbar, their patronage of the arts was substantial. Many of India's finest monuments date from their reign. Mughal architecture blended Persian and Indian traditions.
- **Nur Jahan**, the wife of Jahangir, took the power her husband neglected. Her influence brought able men to court, and was used to help charities. **Mumtaz Mahal**, consort of Shah Jahan, had a smaller role, but her tomb—the **Taj Mahal**—is the grandest of India's monuments. For other Indian women, reforms did little to improve their status.
- **Aurangzeb**, son of Shah Jahan, was an able ruler but devoted his energies to expansion and cleansing Islam of Hindu impurities. He was very successful in the first ambition, but uprisings occurred in the north while he was on campaign in the south. His attack on the position of Hindus was even more disruptive, and overturned Akbar's attempt to bring peace. Although the Mughal empire was large at his death, it was weakened by rivalries. **Marrata** risings and the emergence of new sects added to the strain. Attacks on the **Sikhs** turned the Din-i-Ilahi sect from its original goal of blending Hindu and Muslim traditions, to a rigidly Hindu, anti-Muslim religion.

Multiple-Choice Questions

1. What event was most directly responsible for the rise of the gunpowder empires in Turkey, Iran, and India and similar states in Tsarist Russia and Ming China?
 - (A) the invention of gunpowder
 - (B) the collapse of the Mongol Empire and its khanates
 - (C) the arrival of western European merchants in the area
 - (D) the revival of trade across Eurasia
 - (E) steppe nomads founded all five states
2. The Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal empires shared all of these characteristics EXCEPT:
 - (A) They originated in Turkish nomadic cultures of the steppe.
 - (B) They were Muslim led.
 - (C) They were based on conquest and the use of military technologies.
 - (D) They began with absolutist rulers and efficient bureaucracies.
 - (E) They ruled predominantly Muslim populations.
3. The class which initially dominated the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal states and social hierarchy was
 - (A) descendants of slaves (Mameluks).
 - (B) a military aristocracy.
 - (C) the clergy.
 - (D) the merchant class.
 - (E) largely composed of intellectuals and scholars.
4. In order to supply its elite Janissaries and palace bureaucrats with soldiers, the Turks
 - (A) used feudal levies.
 - (B) relied on old Muslim nobles and aristocrats.
 - (C) forcibly conscripted young Christian boys, converted them to Islam, and trained them.
 - (D) imported trained foreigners and mercenaries.
 - (E) relied on Muslim clergy.

5. All of these developments weakened the rule of the Ottoman government EXCEPT:
- (A) powerful factions within the Janissaries and court bureaucrats.
 - (B) harem politics by rival wives and their sons, who were potential heirs.
 - (C) the hedonistic lifestyles of many sultans.
 - (D) corruption and graft.
 - (E) the development of the office of vizier.
6. The Safavids arose to power in Persia primarily due to
- (A) their support for the Shi'ite cause.
 - (B) an alliance with Portuguese merchants and soldiers.
 - (C) their conversion from Islam to Christianity.
 - (D) a monopoly on military technologies and guns.
 - (E) their control of trade along the silk road.
7. During their reign, Safavid policies in Persia
- (A) alienated the majority of the population.
 - (B) fostered a sense of Persian religious nationalism and social unity.
 - (C) favored Turkish traditions and customs.
 - (D) favored the Arabic language and Arab bureaucracies.
 - (E) favored agriculture over trade and manufacturing.
8. Unlike the Ottomans and Safavids conquerors, Babar
- (A) favored trade.
 - (B) was intolerant of religious differences.
 - (C) avoided the use of advanced military technologies.
 - (D) did not conquer lands for religious reasons.
 - (E) never developed a strong centralized state or government.
9. Akbar used the following to build a stable state in India EXCEPT:
- (A) a well-trained, well-led military.
 - (B) an efficient bureaucracy and administration.
 - (C) patronage of the arts and intellectual developments.
 - (D) religious toleration and reconciliation with the Hindus.
 - (E) promotion of foreigners, especially Europeans, to positions of power.
10. Which of these statements about women in India during the Mughal Empire is TRUE?
- (A) Child-bride marriages were ended.
 - (B) Seclusion (purdah) of upper-class Hindu and Muslim women began.
 - (C) Widow remarriage was temporarily encouraged, but then became rare.
 - (D) The practice of sati ended.
 - (E) The birth of girl children was seen as an unlucky event.

Free-Response Question

Can you account for the similarities between the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal empires, or were they coincidental?

ANSWERS AND EXPLANATIONS

Multiple-Choice Questions

- 1. (B) is correct. The end of the Mongol realm led to a power vacuum, with the five powers stepping into the gap.
- 2. (E) is correct. Although all three were Muslim peoples, the Mughals in India ruled many Hindus, and the Ottomans ruled many Christians.
- 3. (B) is correct. In keeping with their origins as warring steppe nomads, and in

reward for their role in gaining all three empires, the military leaders of each formed a new military aristocracy.

- **4. (C) is correct.** The practice was long used by the Turks to fill the ranks in their armies.
- **5. (E) is correct.** All contributed to division within the state, but the viziers were not in themselves a threat.
- **6. (A) is correct.** Support for Shi'ism is what separated the Safavids from neighboring groups, and was a unifying force.
- **7. (B) is correct.** The Safavids adopted the Persian language and many Persian customs, which, along with Shi'ism, forged a strong national identity.
- **8. (D) is correct.** Babar's conquests were in pursuit of his original kingdom, not for religious reasons.
- **9. (E) is correct.** Foreigners played no part in Akbar's reforms.
- **10. (C) is correct.** Akbar attempted A and D, and tried to ease purdah, but was more successful in promoting widow remarriage. The latter became rare under his successors. While only the birth of a son was a joyous occasion, the birth of girls was not seen as unlucky.

Free-Response Essay Sample Response

Can you account for the similarities between the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal empires, or were they coincidental?

While the three empires arose independently in different areas, they shared common roots, which naturally led to common characteristics. All three emerged from groups of Turkic steppe nomads. All three carved out territories formerly controlled by the Mongols, through military might. To consolidate their control of their new lands, the rulers of each awarded lands to their followers. From the latter a new landed, military aristocracy arose in all three areas. The different paths of development in each area arose from differences in the areas they conquered, attitudes of the conquerors towards other religions, and the abilities of successive rulers.