Chapter 26

The Muslim Empires

OUTLINE

I. Introduction

Between 1450 and 1750, the growth of three great empires continued trading contacts, and the dissemination of the Islamic faith typified the Islamic zone. Although the growth of the Western trade system had relatively little internal impact on the Muslim empires, the Western nations were establishing the commercial bases for economic dominance after the 18th century. In the wake of the nomadic incursion of the Mongols and the armies of Timur, three great empires coalesced: the Ottoman, Mughal, and Safavid. Like Russia and the western European overseas empires, these empires depended on new technology.

II. The Ottomans: From Frontier Warriors to Empire Builders

A. Introduction

The Mongols destroyed both the Abbasid empire and the Seljuk dominance of the Middle East. In the aftermath of the Mongol withdrawal, the Ottomans under Osman became the dominant force in Asia Minor. By the middle of the 14th century, the Ottomans had extended their control over the lands of the Balkans. In 1453, Mehmed II besieged and conquered the Byzantine capital of Constantinople. In the 200 years after the fall of Constantinople, the Ottomans extended their control over much of the Middle East and North Africa. Ottoman navies seized control of the eastern Mediterranean, while land forces pressed into southeastern Europe.

B. A State Geared to Warfare

Ottoman society was based on war. The original Turkic cavalry developed into an aristocracy with much control over land and resources. The aristocracy yielded Constantinople to the sultans but built up local power bases. By the mid-15th century, the sultans came to rely on infantry forces, the Janissaries, who were forcibly conscripted from among the conquered Christian populations of the Balkans. Given control over firearms and artillery, the Janissaries became the most potent part of the Ottoman military and became involved in court politics.

C. The Sultans and Their Court

Sultans maintained power by balancing other sources of authority: the Janissaries, the military aristocracy, and the religious scholars. Ottoman administration, although brutal, was often efficient. Early sultans were politically active and led troops directly into battle. Over time, the elaborate Ottoman court grew isolated from the people. A vizier headed the central bureaucracy of the empire and often wielded the real authority within the government. Without a principle of succession, deaths of sultans often led to civil and external strife among the rival claimants.
D. Constantinople Restored and the Flowering of Ottoman Culture

Following the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople, sultans restored the city and began a campaign of building. The most spectacular additions were mosques, such as the Suleymaniye. Sultans also sponsored the construction of schools, hospitals, and rest houses. Bazaars and markets did business in international goods. Coffeehouses provided a public forum for debate and religious discussion. The artisans of Constantinople formed guilds. By the 17th century, the primary language of the Ottoman court was Turkish.

E. The Problem of Ottoman Decline

The Ottoman Empire managed to maintain its vigor into the late 17th century. At that time, the empire, which was overextended, began to retreat from its most distant borders in Europe and the Middle East. Once the Ottoman Empire began to contract, its administrative structure, which had always depended on military expansion, began to deteriorate. Venality and corruption became more apparent at all levels of the bureaucracy. Oppressive taxation sparked resistance and flight among the peasantry. The ability of individual sultans also declined after the 17th century. Later sultans were often reduced to puppets dominated by viziers or the Janissaries.

F. Military Reverses and the Ottoman Retreat

The Janissaries’ resistance to any military technology that might have threatened their dominance caused the Ottoman Empire to fall behind Western nations. Ottoman armies became less threatening to the West. On the seas, the Ottoman defeat at Lepanto in 1571 signaled the end of their dominance of the Mediterranean. The Portuguese feat of reaching the Indian Ocean ended the Muslim monopoly of trade with Asia. The influx of bullion from the New World in the 16th century unsettled the stagnant Ottoman economy and introduced inflation. Competent sultans temporarily halted the Ottoman decline, but technological and cultural conservatism continued to cause the Ottoman Empire to disregard important changes in Europe. The Ottomans became progressively weaker in comparison to their Western rivals.

III. The Shi’ite Challenge of the Safavids

A. Introduction

Like the Ottomans, the Safavids emerged following the political wreckage of the Mongols. Of the Muslim empires, the Safavids alone adopted Shi’ite theology. The dynasty had its origins in a family of Sufi mystics. The first prominent member of the family, Sail al-Din was a Sufi evangelist among the Turkish tribes near the Caspian Sea. The family achieved military success under Ismā’il. In 1501, Ismā’il was proclaimed shah at Tabriz, the first capital. Although the Safavid successor of Ismā’il extended Safavid control to Iran and what is now Iraq, the Safavids were turned back by the Ottomans at the battle of Chaldiran in 1514 from attempts to penetrate farther west.

B. Politics and War Under the Safavid Shahs

Following the defeat at Chaldiran, Ismā’il’s government deteriorated into a succession crisis. Order was restored under Tahmasp I, and Shah Abbas I extended Safavid territories to their greatest extent. The Turkic cavalry was, as in the Ottoman Empire, eventually established as a
C. State and Religion

After Chaldiran, Persian became the primary language of the court. Shahs also developed elaborate court rituals based, in part, on their claims to be descendants of one of the Shi’ite imams. The state officially supported Shi’ite theology and supervised the education of religious leaders. Much of the Safavid population was converted to Shi’ism, occasionally by force. Shi’ism thus became a critical aspect of Iranian culture.

D. Elite Affluence and Artistic Splendor

Shah Abbas I was most heavily involved in cultural patronage and commercial expansion. Abbas encouraged trade with Asia and Europe. He engaged in a program of public works, particularly at his capital of Isfahan. His financial support for the construction of mosques in Isfahan resulted in a series of spectacular architectural designs.

E. Society and Gender Roles: Ottoman and Safavid Comparisons

The social hierarchy of the Ottoman and Safavid Empires was similar. The elite consisted of the military aristocracy in the countryside and the shahs and their courts. As the central government weakened, depredation of the regional aristocracy led to discontent and flight in the countryside among the peasantry. Both dynasties encouraged the growth of artisan organizations and craft production. Rulers in both governments fostered international trade, although the Safavid economy remained more constricted and less market-oriented. Women in Ottoman societies faced legal and social restrictions. Households were patriarchal. There is some evidence that some women of the Islamic heartlands opposed the increasing social restrictions. Many women remained active in trade.

F. The Rapid Demise of the Safavid Empire

The Safavid decline after the reign of Abbas I was rapid. Abbas removed all obvious successors during his lifetime. Following his death, there was no capable heir. Subsequent rulers proved ineffective. Internal disorder plagued the empire, despite occasional able shahs. In 1722, the capital at Isfahan fell to Afghan tribesmen, effectively ending the dynasty. Order was temporarily reestablished under Nadir Khan Afshar, who proclaimed himself shah in 1736.

IV. The Mughals and the Apex of Muslim Civilization in India

A. Introduction

In 1526, Babur, who had lost his kingdom in central Asia to other Turks, invaded India from Afghanistan, ushering in a period in which Islam became a potent force in South Asia. The booty from his raids in India supported unsuccessful campaigns to recover his initial kingdom. Babur’s troops defeated the last of the Lodi rulers of Delhi at the battle of Panipat. Within two years of his entry into India, Babur controlled much of the Indus and Ganges River valleys. He established a
capital at Delhi, but did little to reform the previous Lodi administration. He was succeeded in 1530 by his son Humayan. Within a decade rival forces drove Humayan into exile with the Safavids. Only in 1556 was Humayan able to restore the Mughal rule in India. He died within a year of his restoration.

B. Akbar and the Basis for a Lasting Empire

Humayan’s successor, Akbar, was the most successful of the Mughal rulers. Akbar rapidly developed a more centralized military and administrative system to govern India. After consolidating his hold on the government by 1560, Akbar expanded Mughal control over the Indian subcontinent. He attempted to join the Hindu and Mughal aristocracies of India through intermarriage. As a further incentive for Hindus to support the Mughal regime, Akbar abandoned the traditional Islamic tax on unbelievers. Hindu advisors and bureaucrats filled the Mughal administration. Akbar’s most imaginative attempt to bridge the cultural differences between the Islamic elite and Hindus was his introduction of a new religion, the Din-i-Ilahi, which sought to combine beliefs of many faiths. The Muslim and Hindu aristocracy were granted lands in the countryside in return for pledges of military support. Local administration remained in the hands of local Hindu rulers who promised loyalty to the Mughals.

C. Social Reform and Social Change

Akbar sought to improve living conditions through public works, living quarters for the urban poor, and the regulation of alcohol. The ruler attempted to improve the condition of women in India. He permitted remarriage of widows, discouraged child marriages, and prohibited the practice of sati. Akbar encouraged merchants to establish separate market days for women.

D. Mughal Splendor and Early European Contacts

Despite his administrative and military successes, Akbar’s attempts to unify Muslims and Hindus failed. Mughal India reached the peak of its prosperity under Akbar’s successors, Jahangir and Shah Jahan. The Mughal cities and military power impressed European visitors, although the more perceptive noted the poverty of the masses and the lack of military discipline and advanced technology. Europeans came to India with products from Asia to exchange for the valuable cotton textiles of the subcontinent. Indian cotton became fashionable among all classes in Britain.

E. Artistic Achievement in the Mughal Era

Neither Jahangir nor Shah Jahan attempted much administrative reform. Fundamental alliances between the Mughals and the Hindu elite remained unchanged. Both rulers favored an elaborate court. Jahangir and Shah Jahan were renowned patrons of the arts. Miniature painting and building were two of the areas that received much royal largesse. The Taj Mahal is only one of the famous structures completed during this era.

F. Court Politics and the Position of Elite and Ordinary Women

In the reigns of Jahangir and Shah Jahan, royal women played an important role. Outside of the elite, the position of women in Indian society declined during the later Mughal era. Child marriage once again became popular, and widow remarriage effectively died out. Seclusion and veiling were common. Sati spread among upper-class Hindus.
G. The Beginnings of Imperial Decline

The last of the powerful Mughals, Aurangzeb, inherited an empire in which expenditures for art and architecture rivaled military outlay. He determined to extend Mughal control to the entire Indian subcontinent and purify Islam of its Hindu influences. His successful campaigns to enlarge the Mughal Empire drained his treasury and increased his enemies. Even during his successful campaigns in the south, rebellions broke out in the north. Local rulers became increasingly autonomous. Aurangzeb’s religious policies threatened to break the long established alliance between the Mughal administration and the Hindu elite. Attempts to halt construction of Hindu temples and reimpose the tax on unbelievers increased resistance to his regime. Following Aurangzeb’s death in 1707, rebellions tore the Mughal Empire apart. Islamic invaders, Hindu separatists, and Sikh revolutionaries weakened Mughal power.

V. Global Connections: Gunpowder Empires and the Restoration of the Islamic Bridge Between Cultures

Internal weaknesses were sufficient to destroy the Muslim empires, but each also failed to recognize the threat to their dominance posed by the rise of the West. In technology and science, the Muslim regions fell behind as European nations advanced. Failure to take account of Europe also resulted in economic weakness. European trade empires in Asia removed one of the sources of profits for Islamic merchants. These changes were gradual, as Muslims dominated central Asian trade and Europeans paid in American silver for luxury goods. But Europeans became more aggressive as the technological gap widened. Mughal decline in India paved the way for British and French intervention, leading to the British Empire in India.
TIMELINE

Insert the following events into the timeline. This should help you to compare important historical events chronologically.

Safavid conquest of Persia completed
fall of Constantinople to Ottomans
death of Aurangzeb, Mughal decline begins
Babur’s conquest of India
Nadir Shah proclaimed sultan of Persia
Ottoman victory at battle of Chaldiran

TERMS, PEOPLE, EVENTS

The following terms, people, and events are important to your understanding of the chapter. Define each one.

Ottomans    Mehmed II    Janissaries
vizier    Safavid dynasty    Sail al-Din
Red Heads    Ismā'il    Chaldiran
Shah Abbas the Great    imams    mullahs
Isfahan    Nadir Khan Afshar    Mughal dynasty
Babur    Humayan    Akbar
Din-i-Ilahi    Taj Mahal    Nur Jahan
Aurangzeb    Jahangir    Shah Jahan
MAP EXERCISE

The following exercise is intended to clarify the geophysical environment and the spatial relationships among the important objects and places mentioned in the chapter. Locate the following places on the map.

boundaries of the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal Empires
Istanbul Delhi Isfahan

1. Of the three empires, which one had direct contacts with the West? What was required for contacts between the other two and the West?

2. How would the growth of Russia affect the three Muslim empires?
MAKING CONNECTIONS

The following questions are intended to emphasize important ideas within the chapter.

1. How were the three Muslim empires similar? How were they different?
2. What were the causes of the Ottoman decline in the seventeenth century?
3. How was the Ottoman decline similar to that of the Abbasids? How was it different?
4. Compare and contrast the social and economic organizations of the Ottomans and Safavids.
5. Discuss the reasons for the failure of the Mughal dynasty.
6. What weaknesses were common to all of the Muslim empires?

PUTTING LARGER CONCEPTS TOGETHER

The following questions test your ability to summarize the major conclusions of the chapter.

1. In some ways the causes for decline in all of the Islamic empires were similar. How do you account for the similar problems in all of the empires and for the similar timing of their demises? How was Muslim decline related to the rise of the West?

2. To what extent were the problems of the early modern Muslim empires simply repetition of problems in the earlier Umayyad and Abbasid empires?
SELF-TEST OF FACTUAL INFORMATION

1. Which of the following represents a similarity between the three Muslim early modern empires?
   a. All were derived from the Ozbek Turks.
   b. All dynasties depended on effective use of firearms on the battlefield and in siege warfare.
   c. Each empire was composed of a majority of Muslims.
   d. All of the empires created slave regiments who dominated the rulers.

2. Mehmed II of the Ottoman Empire was responsible for
   a. enlarging the empire’s territories to their greatest extent.
   b. driving the Venetians from the eastern Mediterranean
   c. the conquest of Constantinople.
   d. the dissolution of the Janissaries.

3. What was the principle of succession within the Ottoman Empire?
   a. The Ottoman Empire lacked a principle of succession.
   b. Succession was based on primogeniture.
   c. Like the Orthodox Caliphs of early Islam, succession to the sultanate was elective.
   d. Ottoman sultans selected their successors prior to their death.

4. Which of the following was a cause for the decline of the Ottoman Empire?
   a. The sultans’ destruction of the Janissaries left them without an effective military force.
   b. The addition of European military technology such as light artillery made the Janissaries so powerful that they could successfully challenge the authority of the sultans.
   c. The conquest of Constantinople by the Holy Roman Empire in 1517 led to the rapid collapse of the Ottoman Empire.
   d. Oppressive demands of local officials caused the peasantry to abandon their holdings and flee.

5. The Safavid dynasty had its origins in the fourteenth century in a family devoted to what variant of Islam?
   a. Sunnite
   b. Isma’ili
   c. Sufi
   d. Sikh

6. Which of the following represents a similarity between the Ottomans and the Safavids?
   a. Both recruited regiments of slave boys.
   b. Each empire extended their territories into eastern Europe.
   c. Both empires lacked substantial non-Muslim populations.
   d. Both empires had their geographical origins in Anatolia.
7. Which of the following represents a difference between the Safavid and Ottoman economies?

a. Only the Ottomans sought to encourage artisans and handicraft production.
b. The Safavid market economy was more constricted than that of the Ottomans.
c. Only the Safavid rulers patronized public works projects.
d. The Ottomans alone pursued policies to increase internal and international trade.

8. Which of the following statements concerning the status of women in the Islamic heartlands during the early modern period is most accurate?

a. Islamic women generally enjoyed more liberties than they did in the nomadic social system.
b. Women readily accepted the diminution of status that accompanied the creation of the Islamic empires.
c. Many women in the Islamic heartlands in this era struggled against social restrictions in dress and confinement.
d. Women were carefully excluded from trade and money-lending.

9. Which of the following was not one of the social reforms of Akbar?

a. Prostitution was eliminated from his realm.
b. He attempted to eradicate the practice of sati.
c. He encouraged the establishment of special market days for women.
d. He discouraged child marriages.

10. Which of the following statements concerning the economy of the Mughal empire is most accurate?

a. Unlike the other Muslim empires, the Mughals successfully banned European merchants from their markets.
b. The Mughal Empire produced nothing of value to the West, but served as a conduit of products from Southeast Asia.
c. French, Dutch, and English merchants brought products from throughout Asia to exchange for the subcontinent’s famed cotton textiles.
d. The Indian markets of the Mughals were flooded with Western products.