The Muslim Empires

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.

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 Sā'il al-Dīn 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 Ismā'īl 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 Ismā'īl, 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 imans, 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 Mehmmed 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.
Asian Transitions in an Age of Global Change

Asian Trading World and the Coming of the Europeans

- The Asian trading network linked the Pacific and Indian oceans in three commercial zones. The Arab zone, including the Red Sea and Persian Gulf, furnished glass and textiles from the Middle East. From the Indian zone came cotton textiles, and from China paper, porcelain, and silks. Valuable spices still dominated the trade, coming from Ceylon and Indonesia. Coastal routes were preferred by all. At the time the Portuguese arrived in the region, no central power controlled trade, and military power was rarely used. The Portuguese changed the rules.

- Lacking goods desired in the East, the Portuguese resorted to force to obtain the spices they came for. From 1502, when da Gama first entered Asian waters, the Portuguese used their advantage to capture ports. To fortify their growing network, they took Goa and Ormuz. The Portuguese aimed to establish a system in which they would control all traffic in the Indian Ocean.

- The Portuguese were never able to extend the monopoly they desired, even by using the most brutal measures. The Dutch and English arrived in the 1600s, with the Dutch taking an early lead. They built the port of Batavia on Java, well positioned for the spice trade. The Dutch trading empire followed the same lines as the Portuguese. Yet the Dutch eventually turned to peaceful cooperation, concentrating on transporting goods.

- In general, the Europeans remained on the coastlines, with a few exceptions. For example, the Dutch controlled the north of Java, installing coffee plantations. The Spanish conquest of the Philippines in the 1500s, starting with Luzon and the nearby islands, failed to take Mindanao and the northern islands. Tribute systems were established, leaving local rulers in place.

- Converting Asians to Christianity was made difficult by the secure position of Islam in many areas. Francis Xavier, a Jesuit missionary, made headway in converting low-caste Hindus. Robert di Nobili learned Sanskrit, to help convert high-caste Indians, but had little success. Spanish work in the Philippines led to more converts. Christianity there, however, was a Filipino blend of traditional and Christian beliefs. Great continuity of customs and religious practices in the Philippines mitigated the impact of Christianity.

China: A Global Mission Refused

- The Ming dynasty was founded by Zhu Yuanzhang, of peasant stock. Influenced by time spent in a Buddhist monastery, he led a rebel group and defeated the
Mongol ruler. He claimed the title of Hongwu emperor in 1368, and began a purge of Mongol influences.

- The Ming emperors reestablished and extended the examination system.
- Hongwu cleaned up corruption at court. In addition, he tried to rid the palace of intrigues of royal wives and eunuchs.
- His programs included public works, improving agricultural irrigation and encouraging farming on abandoned lands. The increasing power of the landlords greatly lessened the impact of these improvements. This gentry class created its own culture to justify its increasing power. Under the Ming emperors, the low place of women and the young was intensified.
- Agricultural expansion and imports from the Spanish and Portuguese stimulated an economic boom. Maize, sweet potatoes, and peanuts were imported and became staples. The high demand for Chinese goods meant an influx of American silver. Foreign traders were allowed only on Macao and Canton, and Chinese merchants fared well. In imitation of the gentry, merchants invested in land. The fine arts flourished as well, mainly along traditional lines. The novel achieved its classic form.
- Under Emperor Yunglo, admiral Zenghe led seven expeditions to the west. The size and scope of these undertakings demonstrated the Chinese capacity to undertake global expansion.
- Yet the Chinese retreated instead, closing themselves off more firmly than ever. Missionaries to China such as Matteo Ricci and Alan Schall, chose to convert the country from the top down, but they met with little success.
- Toward the end of the 16th century, the Ming court was weakened by corruption, and the rulers distanced themselves from the people. Public works lapsed, and disaffected farmers turned to banditry. Rebellion brought the Ming dynasty down in 1644, when the last emperor hanged himself to avoid capture.

Fending Off the West: Japan's Reunification and the First Challenge

- A series of military rulers brought an end to daimyo warfare in Japan. The first, Nobunaga, used European firearms to depose the Ashikaga shogun in 1513. After his death, Toyotomi Hideyoshi pursued his predecessor's killers. Ambitious as well as able, Hideyoshi undertook the conquest of Korea, but failed. His successor, Tokugawa Ieyasu, was acknowledged shogun by the Emperor. Ruling from Edo, the Tokugawa shoguns ended daimyo warfare.
- European contacts with Japan were increasing in the period of unification, and indeed influenced events. In their own way, firearms and commerce each helped the Tokugawa rulers. Nobunaga patronized Christian missionaries, hoping to lessen the power of militant Buddhist orders. However, under Hideyoshi, Christians came to be seen as a threat.
- Hideyoshi expelled the Christian missionaries and then persecuted their converts. Ieyasu went further, attempting to rid the islands of all Europeans. By the mid-17th century, European contact was limited to Dutch trade on Deshima island. In this climate, the School of National Learning focused on the uniqueness of Japanese history and culture.