

## CHAPTER 21

### *The Muslim Empires*

#### CHAPTER SUMMARY

The Mongol invasions of the 13th and 14th centuries destroyed theoretical Muslim unity. The Abbasid and many regional dynasties were crushed. Three new Muslim dynasties arose to bring a new flowering to Islamic civilization. The greatest, the Ottoman Empire, reached its peak in the 17th century; to the east, the Safavids ruled in Persia and Afghanistan, and the Mughals ruled much of India. Together the three empires possessed great military and political power; they also produced an artistic and cultural renaissance within Islam. They contributed to the spread of Islam to new regions. All three dynasties originated from Turkic nomadic cultures; each possessed religious fervor and zeal for conversion. They built empires through military conquest based on the effective use of firearms. Each was ruled by an absolute monarch and drew revenues from taxation of agrarian populations. There were differences. The Mughals ruled mostly non-Muslim peoples, the Safavids mostly Muslims, and the Ottomans a mixture of Muslims and Christians. The Safavids were Shi'a Muslims; the others were Sunni.

**The Ottomans: From Frontier Warriors to Empire Builders.** The Turkic peoples entered Anatolia after the Mongols defeated the Seljuks of eastern Anatolia in the middle of the 13th century. After a period of turmoil, the Ottomans secured dominance. During the 14th and 15th centuries, they moved into the Balkans. In 1453, they captured Constantinople and ended the Byzantine Empire. During the next two centuries, they brought their rule to much of the Middle East, north Africa, and southeastern Europe. Their navy dominated the eastern Mediterranean. Even though the Ottomans failed to capture Vienna in sieges during the 16th and 17th centuries, they continued as a serious threat to western Europe.

**A State Geared to Warfare.** Military leaders had a dominant role in the Ottoman state, a polity geared to war and expansion. The Turkic horsemen became a warrior aristocracy supported by control of conquered land and peasants. When their power shrank before that of an expanding central bureaucracy, they built up regional power bases. From the middle of the 15th century, imperial armies were dominated by Janissary infantry divisions composed of conscripted youths from conquered lands. Their control of artillery and firearms gave them great power; by the middle of the 16th century, they intervened in dynastic succession disputes.

**The Sultans and Their Court.** Ottoman rulers survived by playing off the competing factions within their state. The groups included religious and legal scholars. Muslim, Christian, and Jewish merchants were important. The latter two were “peoples of the book” who often were satisfied with the sound administration of their Muslim rulers. As the empire grew, the sultans lost contact with their subjects. A large bureaucracy headed by a vizier had great power in the state. Early rulers and their sons participated in the administration. Vague principles of imperial succession led to protracted strife and weakened the empire.

**Constantinople Restored and the Flowering of Ottoman Culture.** The imperial capital at Constantinople combined the disparate cultures under Ottoman rule. The new rulers restored the city after 1453; the church of St. Sophia became one of Islam's grandest mosques. Most sultans tried to add to the city's splendor: Suleyman the Magnificent built the great Suleymaniye mosque in the 16th century. Constantinople became the commercial center dealing in products

from Asia, Africa, and Europe. Many urban inhabitants belonged to merchant and artisan classes. The government closely regulated both activities. Artisan guilds were very important. By the 17th century, the Turkish language became the preferred vehicle for literature and government. The Ottomans left a significant artistic legacy in poetry, ceramics, carpet manufacturing, and architecture.

**The Problem of Ottoman Decline.** The empire continued to be vigorous until the late 17th century. By then, the empire was too extensive to be maintained from its available resource base and transport system. As a conquest state, the Ottoman Empire began to decline once acquisition of new territory ceased. The bureaucracy became corrupt, and regional officials used revenues for their own purposes. Oppressed peasants and laborers fled the land or rebelled. Problems at the center of the state added to the decline. Sultans and their sons were confined to the palace; they became weak and indolent rulers managed by court factions. Civil strife increased and military efficiency deteriorated.

**Military Reverses and the Ottoman Retreat.** The weakening within the empire occurred when outside challenges increased. The conservative Janissaries blocked needed military reform and allowed their state to lose ground to European rivals. The weakness in technology included the imperial navy. A Spanish-Venetian victory at Lepanto in 1571 ended Turkish control of the eastern Mediterranean. By then, Portuguese mariners had outflanked the Muslim world by sailing around Africa into the Indian Ocean. Portuguese naval victories there broke the Muslim dominance over Indian trade. The problems caused by loss of commercial revenues were exacerbated by inflation stimulated by the importation of New World bullion. A few able sultans attempted during the 17th century to counter the empire's decline. The collapse of the Safavids removed an important rival. Still, the major changes occurring within the European world were not matched by the Ottomans. The intense conservatism of the Janissaries and religious leaders blocked Western-inspired innovation.

**The Shi'a Challenge of the Safavids.** The Safavids also profited from the struggles of rival Turkic groups after Mongol invasions. The Safavids were Shi'a Muslims from a family of Sufi preachers and mystics. In the early 14th century under Sail al-Din, they fought to purify and spread Islam among Turkic peoples. After long struggles, in 1501, Ismâ'il seized Tabriz and was proclaimed shah. His followers conquered most of Persia and fought against the Ottomans, who defeated them at the important Battle of Chaldiran in 1514. The loss meant that Shi'ism was blocked from further westward advance.

### **In Depth: The Gunpowder Empires and the Shifting Balance of Global Power.**

Each of the three great Muslim dynasties gained power with the support of nomadic warriors. But past conditions had changed. The Battle of Chaldiran demonstrated that firearms were a decisive factor in warfare. Global history had entered a new phase. States used technology to reorganize their land and naval forces, and the changes influenced both social and political development. Once-dominant warrior aristocracies crumbled before governments able to afford expensive weapons. The Chinese scholar-gentry and Japanese shoguns had some success in limiting their effect, but nomads no longer were able to dominate sedentary peoples. Nomadic dynasties similarly declined when confronted by smaller, technologically superior rivals. The efficient use of firearms by European nations was a major factor in their rise to world power.

**Politics and War under the Safavid Shahs.** Tasmaph I, after a period of turmoil, became shah in 1534 and restored dynastic power. Under Abbas I (1587-1629), the empire reached its zenith.

The rulers brought the Turkic warriors under control; they were assigned villages and peasant labor for support. Some leaders gained important posts in the state and posed a constant threat to the shahs. Persians were recruited into the imperial bureaucracy as a counterbalance. The Safavids, as the Ottomans did, recruited captured slave youths into the army and bureaucracy. They were very important during the reign of Abbas I. They became the backbone of his army and held high civil posts. They monopolized firearm use and received training from European advisors.

**State and Religion.** The Safavids originally wrote in Turkish, but Persian, after Chaldiran, became the language of state. They also adopted elaborate Persian traditions of court etiquette. The initial militant Shi'a ideology was modified as the Safavids drew Persian religious scholars into the bureaucracy. Religious teachers received state support, and teaching in mosque schools was supervised by religious officials. The population of the empire gradually converted to Shi'a Islam, which developed into an integral part of Iranian identity. When the power of the dynasty declined, religious leaders became more independent, but they continued to serve its rulers.

**Elite Affluence and Artistic Splendor.** Abbas I attempted to make his empire a major center of international trade and Islamic culture. Internal transport conditions were improved, and workshops were created for silk textiles and carpets. Iranian merchants were encouraged to trade with other Muslims, Indians, Chinese, and Europeans. Abbas devoted special attention to building projects, especially mosques, in his capital of Isfahan.

**Society and Gender Roles: Ottoman and Safavid Comparisons.** Both dynasties had much in common. They initially were dominated by warrior aristocracies who shared power with the monarch. The warriors gradually left the rulers' courts for residence on rural estates where they exploited the peasantry. When central power weakened, the result was flight from the land and rebellion. Both empires encouraged the growth of handicraft production and trade. Imperial workshops produced numerous products, and public works employed many artisans. Policies encouraging international trade were followed, although the Safavids were less market-oriented than the Ottomans were. Women endured the social disadvantages common to Islamic regimes. The earlier independence within nomadic society was lost. Women were subordinate to fathers and husbands and had few outlets, especially among the elite, for expression outside of the household.

**The Rapid Demise of the Safavid Empire.** Abbas I, fearing plots, had removed all suitable heirs. The succession of a weak grandson began a process of dynastic decline. Internal strife and foreign invasions shook the state. In 1722, Isfahan fell to Afghani invaders. An adventurer, Nadir Khan Afshar, emerged from the following turmoil as shah in 1736, but his dynasty and its successors were unable to restore imperial authority.

**The Mughals and the Apex of Muslim Civilization in India.** Turkic invaders, led by Babur, invaded India in 1519 after being driven from Afghanistan. They sought booty, not conquest, and remained only when prevented from returning northward. Babur's forces, using military tactics and technology similar to those of the Ottomans, crushed the Muslim Lodi dynasty at Panipat in 1519 and in 1520 defeated a Hindu confederation at Khanua. Within two years, Babur held much of the Indus and Ganges plains. The first Mughal ruler was a talented warrior who also possessed a taste for art and music, but he was a poor administrator. His sudden death in 1530 brought invasion from surrounding enemies. Babur's successor, Humayan, fled to

Persia; he led successful return invasions into India that restored control in the North by 1556. He died soon after.

**Akbar and the Basis for a Lasting Empire.** Humayan's 13-year-old son Akbar succeeded to the throne and immediately had to face pressure from Mughal enemies. Akbar and his advisors defeated them, and the young monarch became a ruler with outstanding military and administrative talent. His armies consolidated Mughal conquests in northern and central India. Akbar advanced a policy of reconciliation with his Hindu subjects; he encouraged intermarriage, abolished head taxes, and respected Hindu religious customs. Hindus rose to high ranks in the administration. Akbar invented a new faith incorporating Muslim and Hindu beliefs to unify his subjects. The Hindu and Muslim warrior aristocracy were granted land and labor for their loyalty. Hindu local notables were left in place if taxes were paid.

**Social Reform and Social Change.** Akbar attempted to introduce social changes that would benefit his subjects. Among them were reforms to regulate the consumption of alcohol. He strove to improve the position of women. Akbar encouraged widow remarriage and discouraged child marriages. He prohibited sati and attempted to break seclusion through creating special market days for women.

**Mughal Splendor and Early European Contacts.** Even though most of his reforms, including the new religion, were not successful, Akbar left a powerful empire at his death in 1605. Not much new territory was added by successors, but the regime reached the peak of its splendor. Most of the population, however, lived in poverty, and India fell behind Europe in invention and the sciences. Still, by the late 17th century, the Mughals ruled over a major commercial and manufacturing empire. Indian cotton textiles were world famous and gained a large market in Europe.

**Artistic Achievement in the Mughal Era.** The 17th-century rulers Jahangir and Shah Jahan continued the policy of tolerance toward Hindus along with most other elements of Akbar's administration. Both preferred the good life over military adventures. They were important patrons of the arts; they expanded painting workshops for miniatures and built great architectural works, including Shah Jahan's Taj Mahal, often blending the best in Persian and Hindu traditions.

**Court Politics and the Position of Elite and Ordinary Women.** Jahangir and Shah Jahan left the details of daily administration to subordinates, thus allowing their wives to win influence. Nur Jahan, Jahangir's wife, dominated the empire for a time through her faction. Mumtaz Mahal, wife of Shah Jahan, also amassed power. While the life of court women improved, the position of women elsewhere in society declined. Child marriage grew more popular, widow remarriage died out, and seclusion for both Muslim and Hindus increased. Sati spread among the upper classes. The lack of opportunity for a productive role and the burden of a dowry meant that the birth of a girl became an inauspicious event.

**The Beginnings of Imperial Decline.** Aurangzeb, Shah Jahan's successor, inherited a declining empire and was not able to reverse the process. He pushed two disastrous ambitions: to control all of India and to rid Islam of Hindu influences. By 1707, Aurangzeb had conquered most of India, but the warfare had drained the treasury and weakened the bureaucracy and military. The time spent on warfare diverted the rulers' energies from other vital tasks. Internal revolt and the growing autonomy of local leaders were not dealt with. Aurangzeb's religious

policies increased internal weaknesses. Hindus in imperial service were kept from the highest posts, and measures against Hinduism were commenced. The head tax was restored. By the end of Aurangzeb's regime, his large empire was plagued by internal disruption. The Marattas of western India and the Sikhs in the Northwest strained imperial resources. Foreign enemies were ready to strike. By the beginning of the 18th century, state revenues and power passed to regional lords, a return to a pattern previously predominant in south Asia. There were tempting openings for foreign intervention.

**Global Connections: Gunpowder Empires and the Restoration of the Islamic Bridge Between Civilizations.** The early modern Muslim empires had sufficient internal reasons for destruction, but their demise was made more certain by a common ignoring of the rising European threat. Little effort was made to incorporate European technological advances. The failure to meet the European challenge weakened the economic base of their empires as revenues and profits were drained off by foreigners. Importation of European bullion brought damaging inflation. Muslim leaders and scholars ignored these trends and caused serious difficulties for the world of Islam in the future.

## KEY TERMS

**Ottomans:** Turkic people who advanced into Asia Minor during the 14th century; established an empire in the Middle East, north Africa, and eastern Europe that lasted until after World War I.

**Mehmed II:** Ottoman sultan called the "Conqueror"; captured Constantinople and destroyed the Byzantine Empire.

**Janissaries:** Conscripted youths from conquered regions who were trained as Ottoman infantry divisions; became an important political influence after the 15th century.

**Vizier:** Head of the Ottoman bureaucracy; after the 15th century often more powerful than the sultan.

**Suleymaniye mosque:** Great mosque built in Constantinople during the 16th-century reign of the Ottoman ruler Suleyman the Magnificent.

**Safavid dynasty:** Founded by a Turkic nomad family with Shi'a Islamic beliefs; established a kingdom in Iran and ruled until 1722.

**Safi al-Din:** Sufi mystic and first ruler of the Safavid dynasty.

**Ismâ'il:** Safavid leader; conquered the city of Tabriz in 1501 and was proclaimed shah.

**Chaldiran:** Important battle between the Safavids and Ottomans in 1514; Ottoman victory demonstrated the importance of firearms and checked the western advance of their Shi'a state.

**Abbas I (the Great):** Safavid shah (1587-1629); extended the empire to its greatest extent; used Western military technology.

**Imams:** Shi'a religious leaders who traced their descent to Ali's successors.

**Mullahs:** Religious leaders under the Safavids; worked to convert all subjects to Shi'ism.

**Isfahan:** Safavid capital under Abbas the Great; planned city exemplifying Safavid architecture.

**Mughal dynasty:** Established by Turkic invaders in 1526; endured until the middle of the 19th century.

**Babur:** Turkic leader who founded Mughal dynasty; died in 1530.

**Humayan:** Son and successor of Babur; expelled from India in 1540, but returned to restore the dynasty in 1556.

**Akbar:** Son and successor of Humayan; built up the military and administrative structure of the dynasty; followed policies of cooperation and toleration with the Hindu majority.

**Din-i-Ilahi:** Religion initiated by Akbar that blended elements of Islam and Hinduism; did not survive his death.

**Sati:** Ritual burning of high-caste Hindu women on their husband's funeral pyres.

**Taj Mahal:** Mausoleum for Mumtaz Mahal, built by her husband Shah Jahan; most famous architectural achievement of Mughal India.

**Nur Jahan:** Wife of ruler Jahangir, who amassed power at the Mughal court and created a faction ruling the empire during the later years of his reign.

**Aurangzeb:** Son and successor of Shah Jahan; pushed extent of Mughal control in India; reversed previous policies to purify Islam of Hindu influences; incessant warfare depleted the empire's resources; died in 1707.

**Ottomans:** Turkic people who advanced from strongholds in Asia Minor during 1350s; conquered large part of Balkans; unified under Mehmed I; captured Constantinople in 1453; established empire from Balkans that included most of the Arab world.

**Red Heads:** Name given to Safavid followers because of their distinctive red headgear.

**Shah:** Turkic term used for emperor.

**Padishah:** Safavid term used for king of kings.

**Nadir Khan Afsher:** (1688 – 1747) Soldier-adventurer following fall of Safavid dynasty in 1722; proclaimed himself shah in 1736; established short-lived dynasty in reduced kingdom.

**Jizya:** Head tax paid by all nonbelievers in Islamic territories.

**Mumtaz Mahal:** (1593 – 1631) Wife of Shah Jahan; took an active political role in Mughal court; entombed in Taj Mahal.