The Muslim Empires

Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals
These empires are sometimes referred to as the Gunpowder Empires. Why?

Each made successful use of gunpowder, cannon and muskets in defeating adversaries wedded more to old technologies and tactics (such as castles, longbows, etc.)

(Cf. European powers like France and Spain, which later made use of cannons and muskets also)
These three Muslim Empires were all built by Turkic (and not Arab) Nomadic Peoples.
Major Ottoman Sultans:

- Osman Bey (r. 1299-1324)
- Mehmet II (r. 1451-1481)
- Selim the Grim (r. 1512-1520)
- Suleiman the Magnificent (r. 1520-1566)
The Ottoman rise to power coincided with the decline both of the Seljuk Turks and of the Byzantine Empire; the Ottoman Turks also benefitted from victories over the Serbs in the Balkans (e.g., at Kosovo in 1389)
The capture of Constantinople in 1453 linked the disparate parts of the Ottoman empire together and signaled to European, Asian and African states that the Ottoman Turks had become a formidable military power.
Mehmet the Conqueror (r.1451-1481)

- The conquest of **Constantinople** (subsequently renamed **Istanbul**) was the most important event of his sultanate
- Mehmet accomplished this at the age of 21
- Other notable military achievements by Mehmet included the conquest of additional territory in Albania, Bosnia, and Serbia
- Mehmet was also known for the sincerity of his faith, his facility with foreign languages (he knew perhaps as many as 8), and his interest in education and the arts (see his **tughra** (signature or calligraphic seal) in the picture to the right)
- On a less positive note, Mehmet was notorious for his cruelty
Topkapi (i.e., “Cannon-gate”) Palace -- built by Mehmet in Constantinople

- This palace served not only as the sultan’s primary residence but also as the administrative hub of the Ottoman Empire
- It is a sprawling complex full of many different buildings and courtyards
- The main section of the palace is the sultan’s residence, called the Harem
- Traditionally the Harem was off-limits to all except the Sultan, his wives and concubines, his non-adult children, other female relatives, and his bodyguards (normally eunuchs)
- The Queen Mother often ruled this household
The Ottoman Religious Policy

- This policy is somewhat complicated
- Officially the Ottoman Turks were Sunni Muslims
- However, the Ottomans were essentially a military caste ruling over significant religious and ethnic minority populations
- Even within Islam, there were differences with various groups (e.g., Sufis and Shi’ites)
- Sufis were mystics
- Whirling Dervishes – members of a Sufi religious order who often expressed their religious fervor via trances
- A further complication ensues from the fact that the sultan was also caliph (beginning with Selim the Grim and his conquest of Mecca and Medina)
Non-Muslim subject populations were often arranged in millets, or religious communities. These millets enjoyed a certain amount of autonomy in the Ottoman system. They had their own leaders (e.g., in the case of the Greek Orthodox, a patriarch) and their own laws regarding marriage, etc. They were usually obliged to pay a special head tax, or jizya. This tax sometimes took the form of a devshirme, in which Christian families in the Balkans or Anatolia were forced to part with some of their male children, who then converted to Islam and later became Janissaries, or elite troops.
The Role of **Slaves** in the Ottoman Empire was very important:

1) They often came from non-Muslim subject populations and prisoners of war
2) Females were recruited to serve as concubines and even as wives for the sultans
3) Males formed the bulk of the sultan’s elite troops, or **janissaries**
4) Slaves also served as bureaucrats and administrators, sometimes even in the top ranks of the government (e.g., as vizier/wazir or grand vizier/wazir (=prime minister); see Ibrahim Pasha)

Note: In contrast to slaves elsewhere (including those in the pre-Civil War South), Ottoman slaves were **never** used to work on farms or plantations.
Suleiman the Magnificent, aka Kanuni or the Lawgiver (r. 1520-1566)

- Undoubtedly the most important sultan
- He expanded the Ottoman holdings into N. Africa and Europe (he conquered much of Hungary, for instance)
- His forces tried to seize Vienna also but were stopped at its gates in 1529
- Later, in 1536, Suleiman becomes allied with France
- Domestically, Suleiman is remarkable for his efforts to codify Ottoman law and for his encouragement of cultural activities
- The only major blemish on his reign is his decision to condemn to death his two most able sons on suspicion of plotting against him, which meant that a notably less qualified son, Selim the Sot, succeeded Suleiman as sultan
Suleiman also supported the construction of many new mosques, hospitals, schools, etc. An important collaborator was the architect Sinan, originally an Armenian Christian.
The Aya Sofya and the Blue Mosque
After Suleiman, the Ottoman empire remained strong for another 150 years. Then it began a slow but seemingly unstoppable decay. The causes of its decline were several-fold:

1) The ability of individual sultans to rule declined;
2) Western Europe and Russia grew more powerful and began to challenge the Ottoman state militarily;
3) The bureaucracy became corrupt and local officials retained increasing amounts of revenue for their own purposes;
4) The intense conservatism of the Janissaries and religious leaders blocked adoption of new technology and other reforms necessary to counter various internal and external threats; and
5) Nationalism (Arab, Greek, Kurdish) undercut support for the central government and led in some cases to new countries (Greece, e.g.)
The Safavid (Persian) Empire
Major Rulers:

- Shah Isma’il (r. 1502-1524)
- Tahmasp I (r. 1525-1576)
- Shah Abbas I (r. 1587-1629)
- Nadir Shah Afshar (r. 1736-1747) – not a Safavid
The Safavids were Shi’ite Muslims from a family of Sufi mystics and imams. In the early 14th century, under Safi al-Din, they gained influence among a group of Turkic tribesmen called the Kizilbash or Redheads (after the red turbans they wore). After seizing Tabriz and several neighboring areas in 1501 C.E., one of Safi al-Din’s descendants, Isma’il, age 14, declared himself shah, or king, of Persia. In 1510 his forces defeated the Sunni Uzbeks but in 1514 his troops were defeated by a Sunni Ottoman army at Chaldiran. Isma’il’s rigid Shiism causes conflict with Sunni Ottoman Turks.
- Abbas took over as ruler from his father Muhammad Shah when he was 16
- Abbas made his new capital, Isfahan, into a beautiful city
- Under Abbas, Persian art and architecture enjoyed a golden age; splendid miniatures, paintings, carpets, and ceramics were produced
- The Dutch, Portuguese and English all competed for trading privileges with the Persians
- Abbas granted some religious tolerance to Christians and other groups
Riza-i-Abbasi (1565-1635) – perhaps the best-known Persian minaturist (see e.g. his *Girl in a Fur Hat*)
Nadir Shah Afshar (r. 1736-1747)

- Cruel and ruthless leader
- Had been born into a Sunni Turkic family
- Gained success first as a bandit, then as a general for Shah Tahmasp II
- Fought the Ottoman Turks in a series of battles
- Later overthrew Tahmasp II and ended state support for the Shi’ite religion
- Paranoid, he had his own son Reza blinded on suspicion of conspiracy
- Fought costly war with Mughals over control of parts of Northern India
- Assassinated by the captain of his palace guard; his death led to a time of troubles for Persia
Mughal India
Major Mughal Rulers:

- Babur, “The Tiger” (r. 1526-1530)
- Akbar the Great (r. 1556-1605)
- Jahangir (r. 1605-1627)
- Nur Jahan
- Shah Jahan (r. 1627-1658)
- Aurangzeb (r. 1658-1707)
Babur, aka the Tiger (r. 1526-1530)

- Founder of the Mughal dynasty
- A Sunni Muslim, he was born in Afghanistan; he was a descendant of both Tamerlane and Genghis Khan
- His childhood was very unsettled
- After father’s premature death, Babur took over leadership of a group of Turkic clans and tribes and made Kabul his base
- Near end of life, almost as an afterthought, he decided to invade northern India
- In a swift campaign, he conquered extensive territory there, defeating first the Turkish Sultan of Delhi and then the Rajputs in W. Hindustan
- His autobiography, *Baburnama*, details aspects of this campaign
- Was as much a scholar as a military leader; spoke Persian, other languages
- Charismatic, he had a short reign as Mughal leader but his influence was substantial
- Son Humayun (r. 1530-1556) was less successful than Babur, losing much of the Mughal territory his father had taken over; Sher Shah and Humayun’s brothers challenged his right to rule
Akbar the Great (r. 1556-1605)

-Was born in Umarkot, Sindh (present-day Pakistan), in 1542, while his parents, Humayun and Hamida Bano, were fugitives.

-He grew up in Afghanistan; there he learned to ride horseback, hunt, and fight but, ironically, not to read or write.

-With help of Bahram Khan, he deposed his brother Muhammad Hakim and took over throne at age 13.

-Mansabdari ranking system instituted for military and administration.

-Great patron of art and culture – see the Nine Gems (incl. the musician Tansen), e.g. (cf. “Living Treasures”)

-Oversaw building of the Red Fort of Agra and the city of Fatehpur Sikri.

-Very tolerant of other religions; often invited representatives of other religions to discussions with him and other members of his court.

-At least one of his 30+ wives, Jodha, was Hindu (N.B. Some scholars think Jodha was Jahangir’s wife, not Akbar’s).

-Devised eclectic new religion called Divine Faith (Din-I-Illahi).

-Tried to prohibit sati, encourage widows to remarry.
Jahangir (r. 1605-1627)

- The third and eldest surviving son of Akbar; at one time, had been involved in a rebellion against Akbar
- Not a strong ruler
- Had more of a scholarly disposition; was also a drunkard
- Tolerant of other religions except for Sikhism
- Eventually his wife, Nur Jahan, a Persian princess, became the de facto ruler
Nur Jahan
The status of women under the Mughal regime varied greatly, with women at court sometimes receiving education under the Emperor Akbar. On the other hand, in lower social strata, women were sometimes barred from associating with men outside the home. This practice was known as purdah.
Shah Jahan (r. 1627-1658) and Mumtaz Mahal, his wife

- Shah Jahan was a spendthrift ruler
- Neglected country’s defense, lost territory
- Known for the **Taj Mahal**, a resplendent mausoleum he built for his wife, who had died at age 38 in 1631 giving birth to the couple’s 14th child
- Construction of the Taj Mahal cost his country huge sums that could have been used to help lower food prices and alleviate poverty in other ways
- Tolerant religious policy
- Deposed and imprisoned by his son Aurengzeb
The Taj Mahal
The tombs of Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal inside the Taj Mahal. Materials used included marble and pearl inlays. N.B.: This building took 20,000 workers 22 years to build. (Cf. the manpower and time needed to build some of the Egyptian pyramids)
Aurangzeb (r. 1658-1707)

- Conducted an aggressive policy of military expansion, particularly into southern India
- Initially very successful militarily; under his nearly 50-year reign, the Mughal empire attained its greatest size geographically
- Over time, though, his incessant warfare depleted the empire’s resources
- Not very tolerant of other religions; he persecuted Hindus, others
- He also strictly enforced Islamic laws, outlawing gambling and drinking; censors were appointed to police peoples’ morals, and to make sure that they prayed at the prescribed times
- Moreover, Aurangzeb reimposed a tax on non-Muslims and ordered the destruction of many Hindu temples
- The Rajputs, Marathas (in S. India), and Sikhs all rebelled at various times against Aurangzeb
After Aurangzeb’s death, Mughal fortunes declined. By 1857, the last Mughal ruler was but a figurehead when the British put down the Sepoy Rebellion. Why, then, did Mughal power erode?

1. Regional rulers (Maharajahs and others) gained more and more power over time
2. The diverse population was large and difficult to keep together in one unified state
3. The economy stagnated under Mughal rule in the 18th, 19th centuries
4. The British seized control of much of India’s foreign trade