

## Ottoman Empire

The Ottoman Empire rose to prominence in the late 13th century amid the decline of the Byzantine, Mongol, and Seljuk empires. By 1453, Sultan Mehmed II conquered **Constantinople**, renaming it Istanbul and making it the center of a powerful, multiethnic empire. The sultans ruled with both political and religious authority, claiming the title of sultan and caliph, leader of the Islamic world. They governed through a centralized bureaucracy staffed by officials recruited from the **devshirme system**, in which Christian boys from conquered regions were taken, converted to Islam, and trained as elite soldiers (**janissaries**) or administrators. In order to fund military expansion, the Ottomans also used **tax farming**, auctioning off the right to collect taxes to private individuals. They invested in massive architectural projects such as the Hagia Sophia's conversion into a mosque and the building of the Suleymaniye Mosque, which symbolized both imperial power and religious legitimacy.

The empire's position astride Europe and Asia made it a hub for trade and diplomacy. The Ottomans profited from controlling routes that connected the Mediterranean with the Silk Roads and Indian Ocean, taxing goods and facilitating cultural exchange. At times they clashed with European powers, especially the **Habsburgs** of Spain and the Holy Roman Empire. These clashes were shaped by Ottoman attempts to expand into Europe and by European attempts to expand in the Indian Ocean. But perhaps the Ottomans' biggest rivals were fellow Muslims—the **Safavids**—a Persian dynasty in Iran that claimed religious legitimacy through Shia Islam, in contrast to the Sunni Ottomans. Adopting the latest **gunpowder technology**, the Ottomans successfully defeated both the Safavids and Mamluks, bolstering their claims as **ghazis** (defenders of the faith) who once again combined the role of sultan and caliph.

But the Ottomans also engaged in trade and diplomatic exchange with various Muslim and non-Muslim powers and tolerated diverse religious communities under the millet system. Christians and Jews could practice their faiths in exchange for loyalty and taxes. The combination of military might, administrative innovation, and strategic geography allowed the Ottomans to become one of the most influential empires of the early modern period. The empire reached its zenith under **Suleiman the Magnificent** (1520-1566) a renaissance man in his own right who ruled over a golden age of expansion and artistic, literary, and economic development.

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## Safavid Empire

The Safavid Empire emerged in Persia (modern-day Iran) in the early 16th century under Shah Ismail I. Unlike their Sunni Ottoman rivals, the Safavids established **Shi'a Islam** as their official religion, which created a distinct religious and cultural identity that unified the empire but also contributed to centuries of political and religious rivalry with the Sunni Ottomans and Mughals in India. After their defeat by the Ottomans in 1514, the Safavids adopted the most recent **gunpowder technology** to maintain their influence in the region. As part of this military modernization, Shah Abbas also recruited slave soldiers called **ghulams**—Christian boys taken from the Caucasus region, converted to Islam, and trained into loyal, elite soldiers. Some also became administrators. To finance the new army and reduce the power of local elites, shahs also taxed agricultural land directly.

The Safavids maintained a centralized government, with shahs claiming both political and spiritual authority. The capital at Isfahan became famous for its architecture, gardens, and vibrant markets, symbolizing the empire's prosperity and cultural achievements. Economically, the Safavids profited from a strong agricultural base and their location between Europe, the Middle East, and South Asia. They exported **luxury goods** such as Persian carpets, silk, and ceramics that were prized across Eurasia. Yet they lacked access to the sea, which limited their global trade compared to the Ottomans. Their military relied heavily on firearms and cavalry, but constant wars with the Ottomans and internal struggles drained resources. By the early 18th century, the Safavid state weakened, leaving it vulnerable to outside invasions. Still, the Safavid legacy endured in shaping Iran's Shi'a identity and its rich artistic traditions.

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## Mughal Empire

Founded in 1526 by **Babur**, a descendant of Timur and Genghis Khan, the Mughal Empire unified much of the Indian subcontinent under a powerful centralized state after using modern tactics and weaponry to defeat regional powers. Its most famous ruler, **Akbar** (1556–1605), expanded the empire through conquest and diplomacy while promoting policies of religious tolerance. He integrated Hindus into government service, abolished the *jizya* (tax on non-Muslims), and created a centralized bureaucracy under the **mansabdari system**, which ranked officials based on merit and service. **Mansabdars** were assigned a rank (*mansab*) that determined how many troops they had to maintain and their salary. Some mansabdars were also granted the right to collect revenue from certain lands. **Zamindars**, in contrast, were local landholders who collected taxes from peasants and could also hold *mansab* ranks. This system ensured that the emperor maintained control over the military, administration, and taxation across the empire.

The Mughal Empire was one of the wealthiest states in the world, benefiting from India's fertile agriculture and booming textile trade. Fine cotton textiles like **calicoes** were exported across Asia, Africa, and Europe, fueling global commerce. The empire also patronized monumental architecture, most famously the **Taj Mahal**, blending Persian, Islamic, and Indian styles. However, later rulers such as Aurangzeb reinstated more orthodox Islamic policies, alienating non-Muslim communities and straining the empire's unity. Combined with European maritime expansion, these internal tensions set the stage for Mughal decline and the eventual rise of British influence in India.

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## Europe

By 1450, Europe was emerging from the crises of the late Middle Ages—plague, war, and rebellion—as monarchs in Spain, France, and England strengthened royal authority, curbed the power of feudal nobles, and built professional armies supported by growing **bureaucracies**. Officials reported directly to the crown rather than to local lords, and record-keeping and legal codification improved. Revenue came from both direct taxes on land and property and indirect taxes such as customs duties and sales taxes. Some states also sold offices or privileges to raise funds. These systems allowed monarchs to maintain **professional armies** (rather than private armies of knights), build bureaucracies, and pursue overseas exploration and expansion. Monarchs like Louis XIV of France and Philip II of Spain centralized power by appointing loyal bureaucrats and military officers, reducing the influence of hereditary nobles. In contrast, monarchs in England and the Holy Roman Empire had to negotiate with nobles—through Parliament in England and with German princes in the Holy Roman Empire.

The Renaissance fostered artistic and intellectual revival, and Johannes **Gutenberg's printing press** (1440) revolutionized communication by spreading ideas more quickly and widely, strengthening monarchies and the Church while also planting the seeds of reform aimed at those very same institutions. The **Protestant Reformation** fractured the Catholic Church and sparked a century of religious wars during a period in which no single state dominated: the Habsburgs briefly united the Holy Roman Empire and Spain, while England under the Tudors and Stuarts and France under Louis XIV also emerged as powerful rivals. In the aftermath of these wars of religion, monarchs increasingly used religion to legitimize their authority, presenting themselves as defenders of Catholicism or Protestantism. Fierce competition pushed rulers to seek new revenues and global opportunities, fueling the **decline of feudalism and the rise of capitalism, and setting the stage for the Scientific Revolution**.

Maritime expansion also stemmed from these rivalries and transformed Europe's place in the world. Drawing on technologies and knowledge from Asia and the Islamic world—improved shipbuilding, the compass, cartography, and gunpowder weapons—Spain and Portugal launched transoceanic voyages, followed by the Dutch, French, and English. These efforts created **trading-post empires** in Africa and Asia and **settler colonies and plantation economies** in the Americas, where **joint-stock companies** and **mercantilist policies** (focused on exporting more than importing) financed long-distance trade and the Atlantic slave system. Overseas wealth fueled the rise of stronger monarchs who claimed **divine right** and built monumental projects like Versailles, while in England and the Netherlands, resistance to absolutism produced constitutional governments that offered alternative models of rule.