

Chapter Two, “Origins of Empires,” for *Lessons from Early Empires*

How did early empires begin? Each one had its own original story, but some intriguing patterns appear in different eras. As we compare the origins of early empires across time periods, three patterns emerge. One focuses on developing river flood-plains, a second depends on poaching the efforts of earlier state-builders, and the third entails a gradual conquest by rulers of varying levels of competence – usually fathers, sons, and grandsons in a dynastic sequence.

Origins of River Flood-Plain Empires in Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and India

The world’s first three empires – Egypt, Sumeria, and the Indus Valley – arose about five thousand years ago, in the early 3rd millennium BCE. What were the links between river valleys, hierarchical political structures, and multinational empires? In all three instances, strong imperial rule was needed to harness flooding rivers by controlling labor at critical times – the two weeks just before and after the annual flood. Nature provided

water and silt (fertilizer). But centralized imperial rulers had to control the labor force – the time-demands of early flood-plain agriculture were not conducive to yeoman farming. Irrigated agriculture then offered wealth to underpin imperial power.¹ We begin our illustrations of early imperial origins by contrasting developments in three river plains – the Nile (Egypt), the Tigris-Euphrates (Mesopotamia), and the Indus (India).

The Nile River Valley and the Origins of Dynastic Egypt.

Modern civilization began with the rise of agriculture, first in the Fertile Crescent of southwestern Asia about 10,500 years ago and within a millennium thereafter in northern China. Crop agriculture demanded that people become sedentary, and food surpluses brought greater economic security, more complicated political organization, written languages, monumental architecture,

¹ Bent Hansen, *Egypt and Turkey: The Political Economy of Poverty, Equity, and Growth*, Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 38.

settlement in cities, and the desire to control other ethnic groups.²

The creation of empires – large political constructs within which one powerful group controlled subservient regions – began several millennia later.³

Dynastic Egypt was the first great multinational empire, and its Nile-based imperial power, which began about 2900 BCE, continued for nearly 26 centuries. Why was Egypt first? The pharaohs (kings) in ancient Egypt built a political edifice that translated agricultural surpluses from the Nile River Valley and Delta into incredible power and wealth, illustrated most strikingly by royal funerary monuments – pyramids, temples, and tombs.

As recently as seven millennia ago, ancient Egypt was nearly empty.⁴ Before agriculture spread to Egypt between 6000 and

² Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*, New York: Norton & Company, 1997, pp. 141-142.

³ A. Bernard Knapp, *The History and Culture of Ancient Western Asia and Egypt*, Chicago: The Dorsey Press, 1988, pp. 39-40.

⁴ Roland Oliver and J. D. Fage, *A Short History of Africa*, London: Penguin Books, 1995, p. 13.

5000 BCE, perhaps only 20,000 nomadic people lived in the Nile Valley and Delta, subsisting by hunting and gathering.⁵ The rise of dynastic Egypt occurred when Egyptians learned how to harness the Nile River. With irrigated agriculture, the population of Egypt exploded. The agricultural productivity of the region might have supported three million people during the middle of the Old Kingdom era (2500 BCE).⁶

⁵ A. Bernard Knapp, *The History and Culture of Ancient Western Asia and Egypt*, Chicago: The Dorsey Press, 1988, pp 34-35.

⁶ Jaromir Malek (ed.), *Cradles of Civilization, Egypt*, Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993, pp. 24-25.



Source: *Wikimedia Commons*, available at
<<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Khafra.jpg>>

Khafra, Pharaoh, Old Kingdom, 4th Dynasty, 26th century BCE

It is crucial to understand how agriculture evolved in the Nile River Valley and Delta. Nature helped Egypt to become so productive by providing ample water and fertilizer (silt), and the demands of the Nile hydraulic system – the need to organize labor efficiently immediately before and after the annual inundations of the Nile – led to a hierarchical social structure. Nile-based farmers could feed their families with only about one-third of their

harvests, so there was plenty of agricultural surplus for the government to appropriate.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ancient_Egypt.png>

The Nile Valley and Delta – The Heart of Ancient Egypt

But the pharaohs needed political legitimacy to tax the farmers, and they found it in divine kingship.⁷ The kings based their ruling power, not just on their being living gods, but also on their perceived ability to communicate between human subjects and the pantheon of gods and thus to maintain order and correctness (*maat*) in Egyptian society.⁸

Herodotus wrote that Egypt was a gift of the Nile River. The annual inundations of the Nile provided two essential contributions – water and silt – to the agriculture of the Nile Valley and Delta. Most of the Nile’s water and silt – about five-sixths – originated in Ethiopia, the source of the Blue Nile branch of the river. The annual rise and fall of the Nile gave natural irrigation and fertilization to Egyptian farmers in the Nile Valley and Delta.⁹

⁷ Joyce Tyldesley, Hatchepsut, *The Female Pharaoh*, London: Penguin Books, 1996, pp. 8-10.

⁸ Ian Shaw (ed.), *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 99-101.

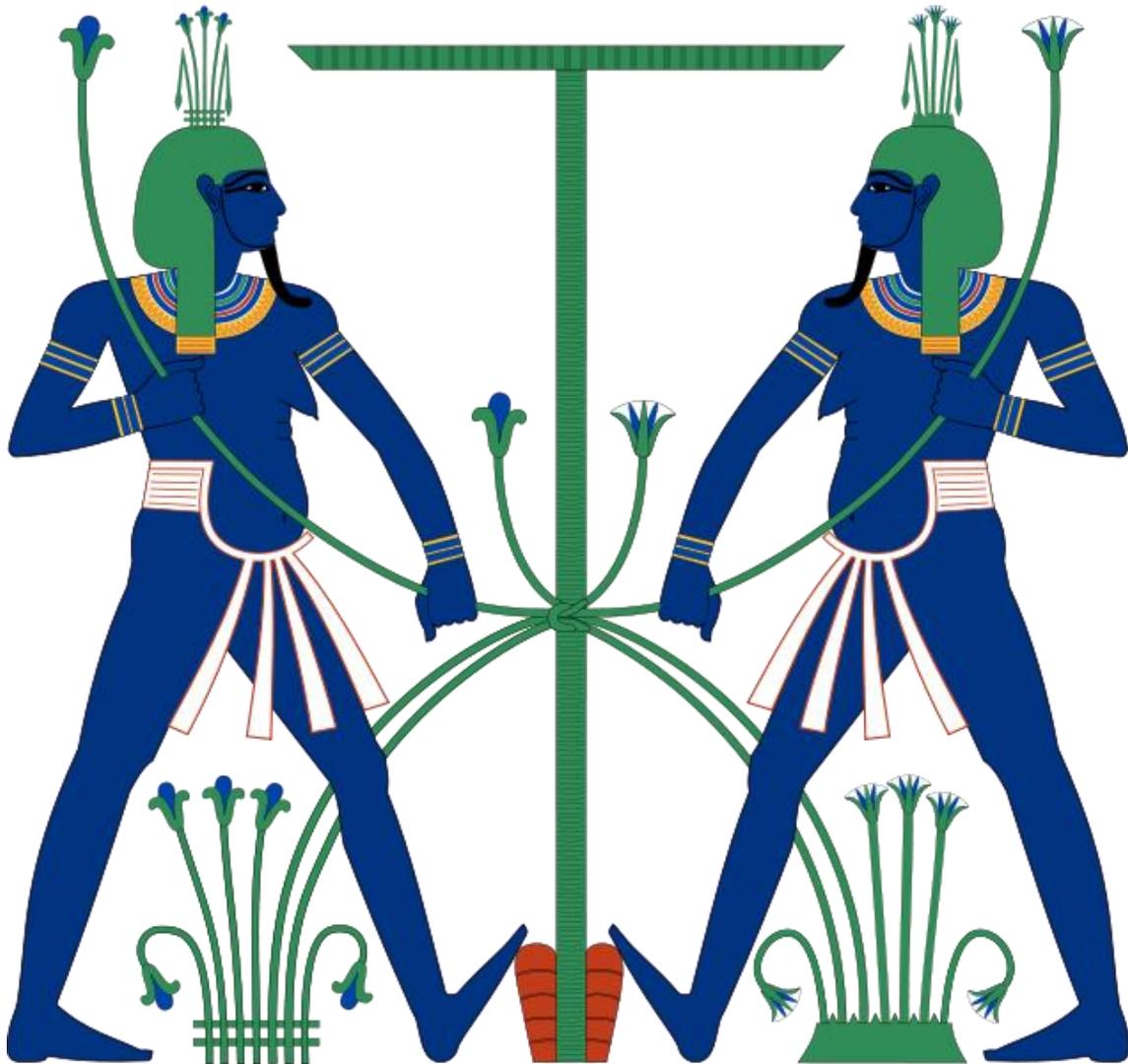
⁹ Cyril Aldred, *The Egyptians*, London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 1998, p. 68.

The average rise of the Nile was 26 feet, but the annual flood levels varied greatly. Along the riverbanks of the Nile, the Egyptians constructed basins surrounded by earth dikes with water intakes and outlets. The basins were filled in July and August, when the annual Nile flood elevated the river level. They were drained in October and November, when the flood receded. After the flood recession, seeds were broadcast into the rich, silty soil, and no further fertilization was required before harvest in April and May.¹⁰

The yearly Nile flood was a boon for agriculture in Egypt, but the hydraulic system required careful organization of labor and was highly risky. To make effective use of water and silt, farmers had to build and maintain dikes, create basins, move water in canals, and operate drainage systems. In ancient Egypt, all of those tasks were done manually, using picks, hoes, baskets, and

¹⁰ Barbara Watterson, *The Egyptians*, Oxford, England: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1997, pp. 130-131.

water-jars. The labor-intensive system was time-specific since critical tasks had to be accomplished just before the Nile waters rose or shortly after they receded.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hapy_tying.svg>

Hapi, God of the Annual Flood of the Nile – Depicted Twice to Symbolize the Unification of Upper and Lower Egypt

The hydraulic system thus required specialists to organize and supervise the work. Egyptologists speculate that authoritarian political organization evolved from the necessities of water control. The risks were great. Too much water damaged dikes and flooded fields and villages, whereas too little water meant a loss of valuable planted area. In Egyptian cosmology, the annual inundation of the Nile was interpreted as a reenactment of the creation of the world by the creator sun-god, Atum.¹¹

The power and wealth of the ancient Egyptian dynasties was based principally on the taxation of agriculture. The inundations of the Nile River contributed to very high agricultural productivity and hence large surpluses that could be taxed away. In average years most Egyptian farmers produced about three times the amount needed by their families for subsistence, so the potential for taxation was great. Agricultural taxation was heavy (from 10-

¹¹ Ian Shaw (ed.), *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 102.

50 percent of output), paid in-kind (usually in grain, sometimes in honey), and varied with the height of the Nile inundation (measured carefully at regular intervals by government devices called nilometers).¹²



Source: *Wikimedia Commons*, available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cairo_Nilometer_2.jpg>

Nilometer With Measuring Shaft – At Rawda, Near Cairo

¹² Barbara Watterson, *The Egyptians*, Oxford, England: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1997, p. 45.

Domesticated plants and animals were transferred from the Fertile Crescent region of southwestern Asia to Egypt between 6000 and 5000 BCE. Ancient Egyptian agriculture relied heavily on the Fertile Crescent package – three cereals (emmer wheat, einkorn wheat, and barley), four pulses (lentils, peas, chickpeas, and beans), one oilseed (flax, for linseed), four animals (cows, sheep, goats, and pigs), three fruits (grapes, dates, and figs), and numerous vegetables (especially onions and garlic). To that package, the early Egyptians added two endemic plants – chufa, a vegetable, and sycamore fig, a fruit. The cereals provided carbohydrate and some vegetable protein, the pulses contained much more protein, and the animals offered milk, wool, plowing, and transport. That diversified agricultural package thus easily met Egypt's basic human needs – carbohydrate, protein, fat, clothing, animal traction (for plowing), and transportation.¹³

¹³ Stephen Quirke and Jeffrey Spencer (ed.), *The British Museum Book of Ancient Egypt*, New York: Thames and Hudson, Inc., 1999, pp. 17-18.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fertile_crescent_Neolithic_B_circa_7500_B_C.jpg

Agriculture Originated in the Fertile Crescent, c. 8500 BCE

The early Egyptians also made and drank beer (brewed from barley and flavored with dates) and wine. Ancient Egypt is one of the first places where beer was brewed, and beer was a very popular beverage. A wide variety of beers, differing by quality and alcohol content, were produced. All strata of the population drank beer regularly, whereas the few wines produced were consumed only by the rich. Grapes were first domesticated about 5000 BCE in Georgia (in the Caucasus Mountains), and wine was

first produced there about a millennium later. Grapes and wine were transferred to Egypt via the Fertile Crescent early in the third millennium BCE.

Along with the pharaoh's omnipotent authority came clearly specified political responsibilities. The king's three primary worldly responsibilities were to guarantee *maat* (by maintaining law and order, ensuring security from foreign invasion, and personally leading his army in battle), encourage agricultural success and adequate food supplies (by managing the Nile hydraulic systems, collecting agricultural taxes, and storing surplus food in public warehouses to forestall famine), and construct religious monuments (by providing design, management, land, labor, and construction materials).¹⁴ In addition to a strong military force, the pharaoh needed an effective politico-economic

¹⁴ Cyril Aldred, *The Egyptians*, London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 1998, pp. 86-88.

organization to wield his unlimited power and carry out his political responsibilities.¹⁵



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pharaoh.svg>>

Typical Depiction of an Egyptian Pharaoh

State bureaucracy was first developed in ancient Egypt to deal with those complex management problems. The bureaucracy depended on educated managers, engineers, and scribes who were literate and numerate. Writing and basic accounting developed

¹⁵ Joyce Tyldesley, Hatchepsut, *The Female Pharaoh*, London: Penguin Books, 1996, pp. 7-8.

initially to serve state bureaucratic needs. A powerful vizier headed the bureaucracy, and his power usually was second only to that of the king.¹⁶ The court often was itinerant to facilitate bureaucratic functions (tax collection and the organization of labor on government projects) in the widespread regions along the Nile.¹⁷

The king had a right to conscript seasonal labor at any time of the year. But that corvée labor system typically was used for monument construction during the Nile inundation, when the Nile flood plain was under water and thus no farm work was possible, and for hydraulic projects (irrigation and drainage) before or after the flood season. The workers despised the conscripted labor (corvée) system because they received only minimal rations and no salary for their labor and the tasks were physically demanding.

¹⁶ Bill Manley, *The Penguin Historical Atlas of Ancient Egypt*, London: Penguin Books, 1996, p.24.

¹⁷ Ian Shaw (ed.), *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 99-101.

Wealthier Egyptians hired proxies or paid bribes to circumvent their corvée obligations. The elite had funerary figurines (*shabti*) placed in their tombs to carry out corvée and other labor tasks during the afterlife. Whether alive or dead, Egyptian nobles found ways to avoid paying harsh labor services to the pharaoh.¹⁸ The origins of the long-standing multinational empire in ancient Egypt thus depended on building a hierarchical political structure to develop Nile agriculture.

The Tigris-Euphrates River Valley and the Origins of Ancient Mesopotamian Empires. The ancient kingdoms and empires based in the Tigris-Euphrates River Valley had shorter lives than those of dynastic Egypt. But the power and wealth of the Mesopotamian states, too, were based on river-floodplain agriculture. Agriculture was first practiced along the Levantine coast of the eastern Mediterranean region (modern Israel, Lebanon,

¹⁸ Stephen Quirke and Jeffrey Spencer (ed.), *The British Museum Book of Ancient Egypt*, New York: Thames and Hudson, Inc., 1999, pp. 96-97.

Syria, and southeastern Turkey) about 8,500 BCE. The domestication of plants and animals spread in a 1,200-mile arc to the Tigris-Euphrates Valley during the following millennium. The generation of food surpluses and the ability to store them led to the creation of cities. Associated innovations in this process included the wheel, writing, metallurgy, and monumental architecture, and, within the agricultural sector, the plow, milking of animals, planting of fruit trees, and production of wine and beer.¹⁹

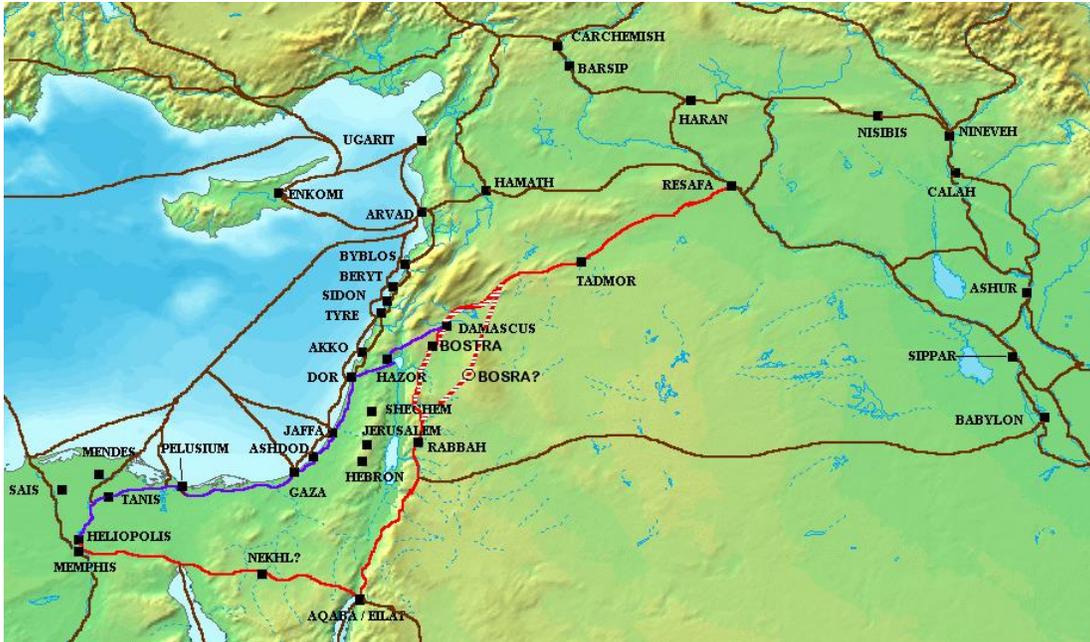
The gradual development of productive agriculture – and of a requisite sedentary life-style – eventually permitted the production of food surpluses and storage along with increases in population densities. Human societies thus were able to feed specialist, non-agricultural groups and afford a division of labor. Craftsmen produced tools, weapons, and art and developed new technologies, while warriors engaged in protection and conquest. With literacy,

¹⁹ A. Bernard Knapp, *The History and Culture of Ancient Western Asia and Egypt*, Chicago: The Dorsey Press, 1988, pp. 11-14.

complex structures of social organization arose. Populations concentrated, and centralized political rule began. Rulers and their armies created and protected cities, nation states, and empires. Mankind thus established four prerequisites for modern civilization – agriculture, writing, advanced social organization, and cities.²⁰

By 5000 BCE, the hills of northern Mesopotamia (modern Iraq) were filled with agricultural villages. Gradually, innovative people invented gravity-fed irrigation and settled the rich alluvial soils of the Tigris-Euphrates basin in southern Mesopotamia, a much more fertile agricultural region. At about the same time, Egyptian farmers began practicing irrigation in the Nile Valley and Delta, using natural water and soil nutrients. Irrigated agriculture in huge river basins then served as the basis of rich and innovative kingdoms in both Mesopotamia and Egypt.

²⁰ A. Bernard Knapp, *The History and Culture of Ancient Western Asia and Egypt*, Chicago: The Dorsey Press, 1988, pp. 46-47.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ancient_Levant_routes.png

The Levant – Trade Crossroads, Linking Egypt with Mesopotamia

Between 5000 and 3000 BCE, the Sumerians in southern Mesopotamia developed irrigated agriculture, introduced the plow and the wheel, and produced large agricultural surpluses (barley and sheep’s wool).²¹

The Sumerians became trade-dependent and exported grain and textiles to obtain much-needed raw materials (wood, metals, and

²¹ A. Bernard Knapp, *The History and Culture of Ancient Western Asia and Egypt*, Chicago: The Dorsey Press, 1988, pp. 26-28.

stone), gold, silver, and precious gems.²² About 3000 BCE, the Sumerians invented pictographic writing with cuneiform symbols to assist mercantile accounting. Sumerian writing later was given the name, cuneiform, from the Latin term for “nail-shaped” because the writing marks resembled nails inscribed in clay.²³

	SUMERIAN (Vertical)	SUMERIAN (Rotated)	EARLY BABYLONIAN	LATE BABYLONIAN	ASSYRIAN
star					
sun					
month					
man					
king					
son					
head					
lord					
his					

Source: Wikimedia Commons available at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cuneiform_evolution_from_archaic_script.jpg

Cuneiform Writing – Originated in Sumeria, Evolved in Assyria

²² A. Bernard Knapp, *The History and Culture of Ancient Western Asia and Egypt*, Chicago: The Dorsey Press, 1988, pp. 42-45.

²³ Daniel C. Snell, *Life in the Ancient Near East, 3100-332 B.C.E.*, New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1997, pp. 16-17.

During the third millennium BCE, three successive dynasties – ruling families that passed political power from one generation to the next – ruled Mesopotamia. Sumer (2900-2350 BCE) was a decentralized collection of independent city-states within Mesopotamia in which the land was owned and farmed by temples and the crown. The language of the Sumerians, who invented cuneiform writing, was unrelated to any other.

Akkad (2350-2112 BCE) was a centralized state within a unified Mesopotamia in which private land ownership and wealth generation were stressed. The Akkadians, who initially ruled the north and then conquered the Sumerian-speaking south, were the first Semitic-speaking dynasts in the Near East.²⁴ (The Semitic language family includes ancient Akkadian, Assyrian, and Aramaic and modern Arabic, Hebrew, and Amharic.)

²⁴ Daniel C. Snell, *Life in the Ancient Near East, 3100-332 B.C.E.*, New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1997, pp. 32-34.

Ur III (2112-2004 BCE) was a centralized and unified state in which most land ownership was held directly by the crown. The Ur III kings re-introduced Sumerian ideas and fused the Sumerian and Akkadian cultures into a single Mesopotamian one.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ancient_ziggurat_at_Ali_Air_Base_Iraq_2jpg>

Ur III Ziggurat (Temple), 21st century BCE, Near Ai Air Base, Iraq

Although the ruling dynasties in Mesopotamia thus shifted, all Mesopotamian kingdoms drew their wealth and power from flood-

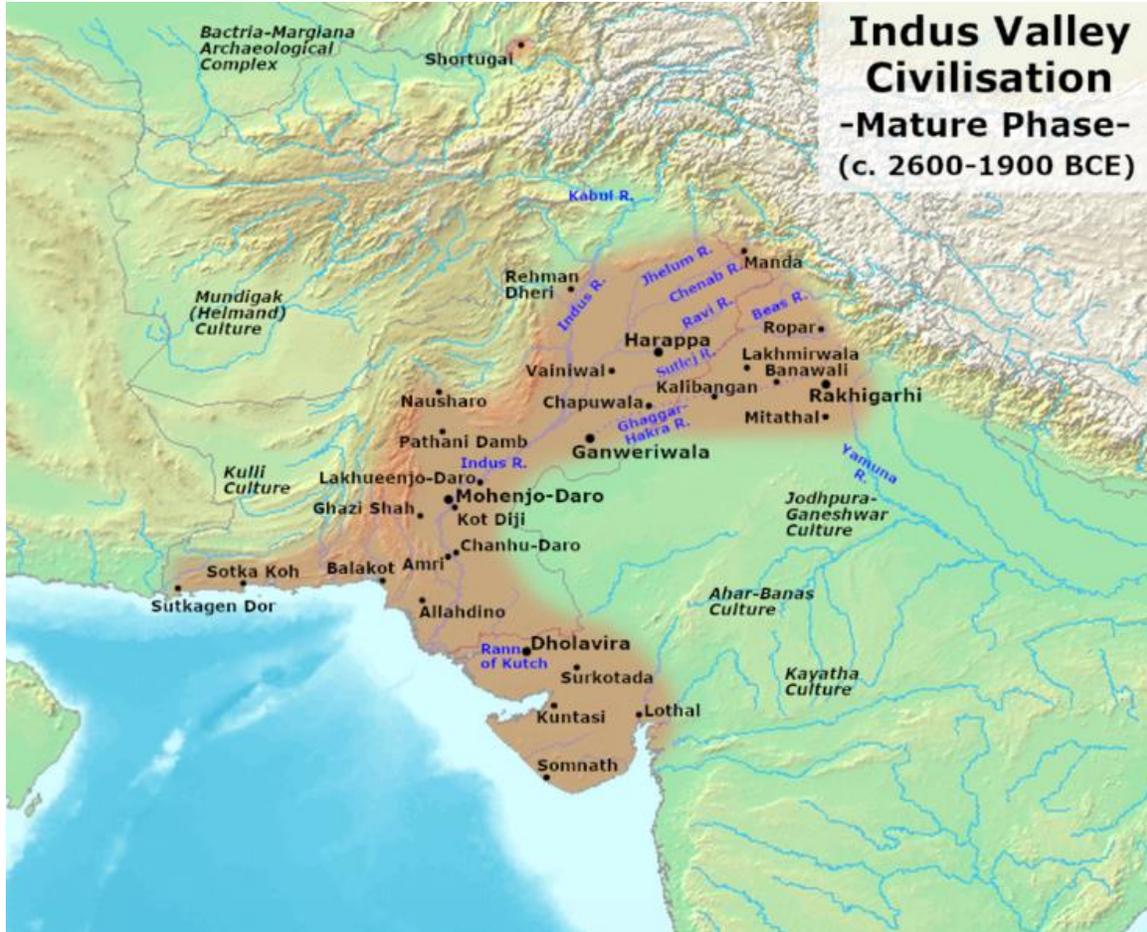
based agriculture, using water and silt from the Tigris-Euphrates system.²⁵

The Indus River Valley and the Origins of the Indus Valley Culture. The first great civilization in South Asia was the Indus Valley Culture (2600-1700 BCE), a rich, innovative, and urbanized agricultural kingdom in contemporary northwestern India and southwestern Pakistan. Excavations, which began in the early 1920s, have uncovered more than 100 Indus Valley Culture sites.²⁶ The people were likely proto-Dravidian, speaking a language close to modern Tamil. (Most scholars agree that the first settlers in much of the Indian subcontinent were speakers of Dravidian languages, such as modern Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam, still in widespread use in southern India). This

²⁵ Rondo Cameron, *A Concise Economic History of the World*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1989, pp. 28-31.

²⁶ Gordon Johnson, *Cultural Atlas of India*, Abingdon, England: Andromeda Oxford Limited, 1996, pp. 58-59, 62.

intriguing Indus Valley civilization derived its wealth from flood-plain agriculture and foreign trade.²⁷



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Indus_Valley_Civilization,_Mature_Phase_\(2600-1900_BCE\).png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Indus_Valley_Civilization,_Mature_Phase_(2600-1900_BCE).png)>

The Indus Valley Culture, 2600-1700 BCE

²⁷ Andrew Robinson, *India, A Short History*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2014, pp. 35-36.

Agriculture spread from the Fertile Crescent in southwestern Asia to the Indian subcontinent. The earliest evidence of agriculture in the subcontinent dates from about 8000 BCE, first in Baluchistan and then in the Indus River Valley, where semi-nomadic farmers grew wheat. To the agricultural package developed much earlier in the Fertile Crescent (consisting of wheat, barley, dates, lentils, peas, cattle, sheep, goats, pigs, and dogs), the Indus Dravidian people added sesame (a local oilseed) and two major innovations – domesticated fowl and cotton, which they spun and wove into cloth. Cotton was indigenous to the Indus Valley region, and early Indus societies were the first to produce cotton cloth.

There is strong evidence of regular and significant trade with the Akkad and Ur III states in Mesopotamia for at least three centuries (2300-2000 BCE). The Indus Dravidians exported surplus grain and newly-invented cotton cloth.²⁸

²⁸ Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 18.

The Indus Valley Culture was organized around two major cities, and in both there is evidence of careful urban planning – standardized bricks for construction, huge granaries to store wheat and barley, and sophisticated sewer systems. Harappa in the eastern Punjab had perhaps 40,000 residents at its peak, and its protective city wall was 40-feet thick at the base for all of its 3.5 miles. Mohenjo-daro, 400 miles distant in the Sind and home to perhaps 50,000 people, was meticulously laid out and constructed, and it featured skilled potters and metallurgists who worked in bronze and copper.²⁹

²⁹ Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal, *Modern South Asia, History, Culture, Political Economy*, London: Routledge, 1998, pp. 13-14.

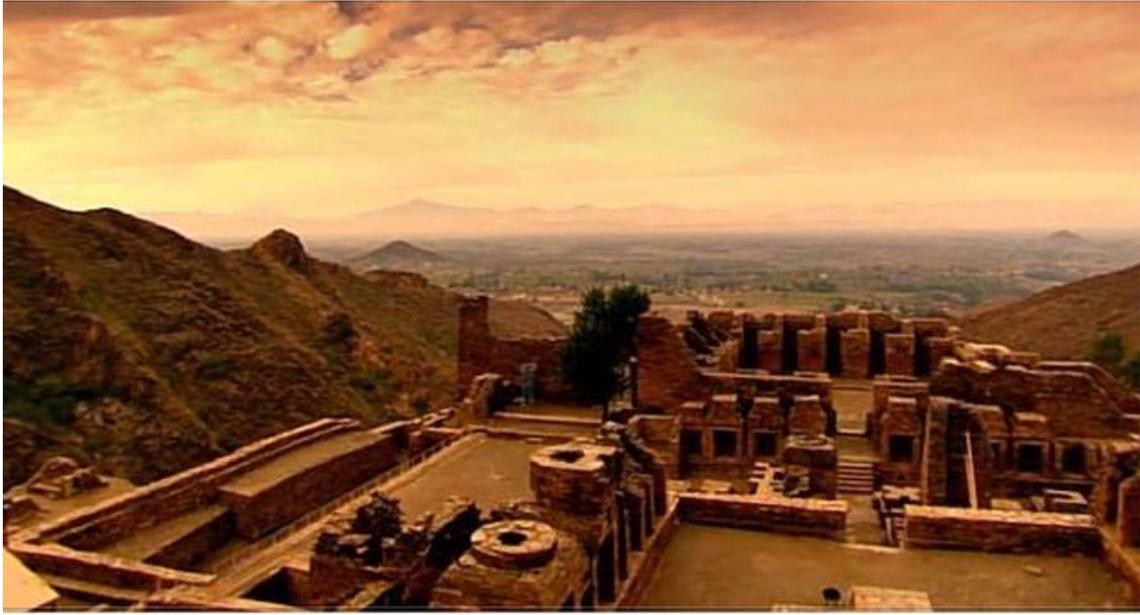


Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mohenjo-daro.jpg>>

*Excavations at Mohenjo-daro –
Great Bath in Foreground, Granary Mound in Background*

The pantheistic religion of the Indus Valley Culture was based on a deified king, a mother goddess, and a hierarchical priesthood.³⁰

³⁰ Stanley Wolpert, *India*, Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1999, pp. 25-26.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ancient_Harappa_Civilisation.jpg>

Harappa – First Indus Valley Culture Site Excavated

The Indus Culture disappeared about 1700 BCE. The probable cause was a catastrophic series of earthquakes and floods that changed the course of the Indus River and ruined agriculture. Other possible causes are over-grazing, deforestation, and the gradual decline of rainfall.³¹ More than 30 skeletons have been unearthed at Mohenjo-daro, showing evidence of people suffering a mass, calamitous death about 1700 BCE. Unlike its counterpart

³¹ Hermann Kulke and Dietmar Rothermund, *A History of India*, New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016, pp. 10.

river-valley-based states in Egypt and Mesopotamia, the Indus Valley kingdom suffered a tragic and sudden ending.³²

Comparative Summary of the Origins of River-based Empires. The world's first three empires arose in the early Third Millennium BCE. All were all based on irrigated agriculture in the flood plains of large river valleys – Dynastic Egypt on the Nile, Sumeria, Akkad, and Ur III in Mesopotamia on the Tigris-Euphrates, and the Indus Valley Culture on the Indus. In all three regions, wealth was generated principally by flood-plain farming. The main crops in all of these early empires were drawn from the Fertile Crescent package, featuring wheat and barley. The Indus Valley Culture first domesticated cotton and made cotton textiles for export to Mesopotamia. In all three flood-plains, regular annual floods brought water and silt, making agriculture very productive. Farm families subsisted on about one-third of their

³² Andrew Robinson, *India, A Short History*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2014, pp. 44-45.

harvests. The governments established bureaucracies to tax agriculture heavily.

The origins of the river-based empires depended on strong rule to allocate labor effectively during the peak labor seasons – the two weeks before and after the annual floods. The ruling hierarchies thus gained great central power, especially in Egypt, including the right to conscript seasonal labor. In addition to managing the hydraulic systems underpinning irrigated agriculture, the ruling elites guaranteed political stability (law and order and security from invasions) and constructed religious and funerary monuments (to buttress their political legitimacy). They also engaged in foreign trade to supplement agricultural wealth. Independent river-based empires and kingdoms persisted in Egypt and Mesopotamia for more than two millennia, but the Indus Valley Culture experienced a catastrophic ending about 1700 BCE (probably caused by earthquakes shifting the course of the Indus River).

Origins of Poached Empires in Ancient China

China was a late entrant into the business of creating empires. China has two important rivers systems – the Yellow River in the north and the Yangzi River in the center. The Han Chinese people created a small kingdom, the Shang, in the middle of the 2nd millennium BCE, based on the Yellow River and its tributaries. But they did not move southward and occupy the larger Yangzi River valley until the end of the 1st millennium BCE.³³ Imperial China and its twenty-one centuries of dynastic rule began with the initial unification of north and south China in the late 3rd century BCE.

Significantly, China's first two imperial dynasties – the Han and the Tang – both were created by poaching the unifying efforts of overly-ambitious predecessor states. The dynasties that did the tough work of conquering to unify (or re-unify) China soon over-extended themselves and imploded, allowing the Han and Tang

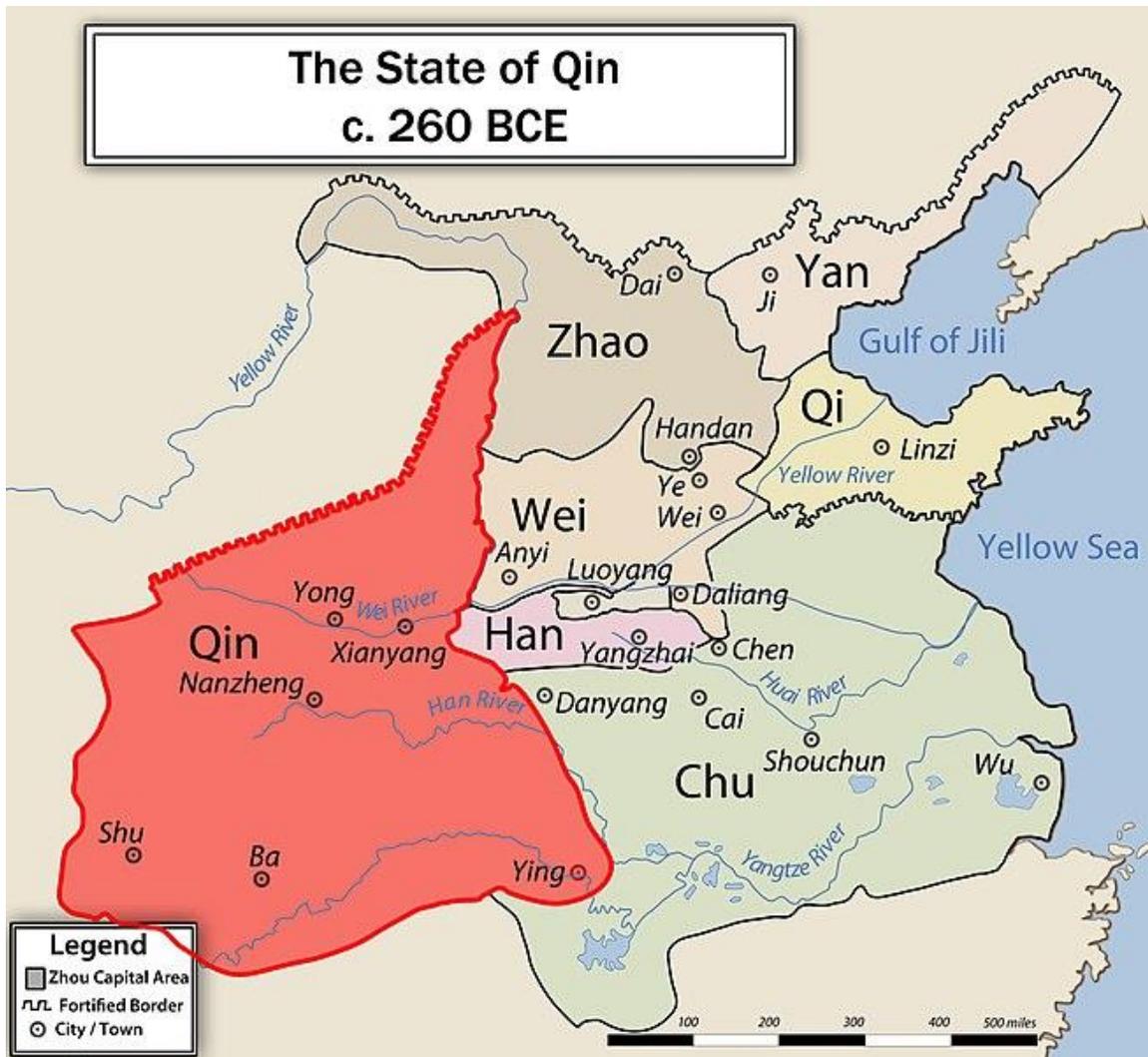
³³ John Fairbank and Merle Goldman, *China, A New History*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998, pp. 35-38.

dynasts to pick up the pieces and move forward. Our second set of illustrations of imperial origin will examine the beginnings of those first two unified Chinese empires.

Qin Unification and the Rise of the Han Empire. During the Warring States Period (481-221 BCE), the Qin kingdom in northwestern China established a military-agrarian meritocracy and expanded from its western frontier base to conquer most of China.³⁴ The Qin heartland (west of modern Xi'an) had important geographic advantages – natural defensive barriers, good loess soil (alluvium from the Yellow River network), irrigation potential, and location on a major Central Asian trade route.³⁵ Qin military power grew out of the effective use of mass infantry and horse cavalry, strong organization and discipline, and emphasis on merit in determining military promotions.

³⁴ Patricia Buckley Erbey, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China*, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 49-51.

³⁵ Valerie Hansen, *The Open Empire, A History of China to 1600*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000, pp. 93-95.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:EN-QIN260BCE.jpg>

Qin Unification of China (400-221 BCE) – c. 260 BCE

The Qin rulers abolished feudalism, created a free peasantry that owed land taxes (paid in grain) and labor services (corvée) directly to the state (not to feudal landlords), and permitted private sale of land. They enforced this anti-feudal revolution in all areas

that they conquered. The Qin government promoted the widespread use of iron plows and constructed irrigation and road networks. Qin leaders thus expanded their tax base – free peasant agriculture.³⁶

The Qin government had an efficient bureaucracy, based on a Legalist philosophy that stressed written rules and laws (originally developed by Shang Yang in the early Qin kingdom during the 4th century BCE). Efficient Qin bureaucrats standardized formerly diverse weights and measures, writing systems, coinage, cart axles, tools, and weapons in all conquered regions. Qin rulers and their advisors in the bureaucracy thus created a near-totalitarian system to underpin their centralized bureaucratic monarchy. Under the Legalist philosophy, the ends justified the means, and very heavy

³⁶ Lothar Ledderose, *Ten Thousand Things, Module and Mass Production in Chinese Art*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000, pp. 62-64.

government intervention was rationalized because it produced significant gains in power and wealth.³⁷

King Zheng of Qin (ruled 246-210 BCE), a brilliant militarist and public administrator, made the final conquests that unified China in 221 BCE. At that time, most Chinese people lived in the north (in or near the valleys of the Yellow and Huai Rivers), and non-Chinese peoples lightly occupied the Yangzi River valley and regions in the south. Upon unifying China for the first time in its history, Zheng took the title, Shi Huangdi (Great August Emperor), and ruled China as a megalomaniacal and increasingly paranoid leader (surviving three assassination attempts).

Shi Huangdi, who spent his later years searching for an elixir to guarantee his personal physical immortality, refused to delegate political power or to prepare his ruling successor. He had expected his Qin dynasty to endure for 10,000 generations, but instead it

³⁷ Caroline Blunden and Mark Elvin, *Cultural Atlas of China*, Abingdon, England: Andromeda Oxford Limited, 1998. Pp. 82-83.

lasted for just fifteen years. Shi Huangdi died of natural causes in 210 BCE, and the Qin dynasty disappeared soon thereafter. Huhai, the second Qin emperor and an incompetent weakling in his father's huge shadow, was murdered by his ministers in 207 BCE. Qin rule collapsed a year later.³⁸

China under the Qin dynasty suffered from economic overstrain caused by extensive military campaigns of conquest within China and massive public works – high quality roads (a 4000-mile network across northern China), workable canals (the first Grand Canal of China stretching for over 1,200 miles), immense irrigation schemes (in the Wei River valley and on the Chengdu plain in Sichuan), a lavish new capital (Xianyang near modern Xi'an), a Great Wall across northern China (on which 300,000 corvée workers were employed), and a costly tomb for the first emperor (containing a retinue army of 8,000 terracotta

³⁸ John Fairbank and Merle Goldman, *China, A New History*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998, pp. 54-57.

warriors that today attracts more than a million tourists to Xi'an every year).³⁹



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:2015-09-22-081415 - Terrakotta-Armee, Grosse Halle.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:2015-09-22-081415_-_Terrakotta-Armee,_Grosse_Halle.jpg)>

*Terracotta Warriors in the Mausoleum of Qin Shi Huangdi,
Xi'an, China*

The Qin government employed harsh administrative measures to expand and build so rapidly. They squeezed the

³⁹ Corinne Debaine-Francfort, *The Search for Ancient China*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1999, pp. 94-98.

peasantry through heavy taxes and corvée labor services (civilian and military), and they burned all books not deemed to have practical value (books on agriculture, iron-working, and craftsmanship were spared, but philosophical works on Confucianism or Daoism were happily destroyed by Legalist officials).⁴⁰ Under Qin rule, the Legalist bureaucrats imposed a rigid social structure – ranking the royalty on top, followed in order by scholars (government bureaucrats), peasants, artisans, and merchants.⁴¹ In the Legalist philosophy (as in Confucianism), merchants were seen as not providing any productive service since they did not produce goods or administer laws.⁴²

⁴⁰ Caroline Blunden and Mark Elvin, *Cultural Atlas of China*, Abingdon, England: Andromeda Oxford Limited, 1998, p. 83.

⁴¹ Valerie Hansen, *The Open Empire, A History of China to 1600*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000, pp. 103-105.

⁴² Patricia Buckley Erbey, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China*, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 61-63.

The free peasantry was at the heart of the Qin Legalist system. Despite their exalted position, China's peasants suffered the most from the economic overstrain created by Qin expansionism. The harsh use of conscripted and penal labor on public works and in military service created widespread resentment that quickly erupted in peasant rebellions.

A commoner named Liu Bang led the peasant rebellion that overthrew the Qin government in 206 BCE. He restored order, cut taxes to one-fifteenth of harvests (from one-tenth), created a new dynasty (the Han), named himself King of Han in 206 BCE, and served as the first Han emperor, Gaozu (ruled 202-195 BCE).⁴³ The resilient Han Empire (206 BCE-220 CE) lasted for more than four centuries – longer than any of its successors in dynastic Chinese history.

⁴³ Patricia Buckley Erbey, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China*, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 64.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Han_dynasty_\(60_BC\).png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Han_dynasty_(60_BC).png)

Han Chinese Empire (206 BCE-220 CE) – c. 60 BCE

The fall of the Han Dynasty, following peasant rebellions, is discussed in Chapter Five. In the aftermath of Han rule, China disintegrated into competing small kingdoms and chieftaincies for three-and-one-half centuries.

Sui Reunification and the Rise of the Tang Empire. In many respects, Chinese imperial history then repeated itself. China was reunified in the second half of the 6th century CE. As in

the first unification of China eight centuries earlier, Turkic-Chinese warrior nobles from the northwest led the process.

Reunification was carried out by two short-lived dynasties – the Northern Zhou (534-581) and the Sui (581-618).⁴⁴ The Northern Zhou reunited northern China by conquering the fertile Sichuan basin and the rich Kingdom of Qi in the northeast.

In 581, a Northern Zhou noble military leader, Yang Jian, engineered a palace coup, ruthlessly killed 59 Zhou princes, and declared himself Emperor Sui Wendi (ruled 581-604).⁴⁵ He solidified his power and tax base by forcing all subjugated nobles to cede their lands and move to his new capital, Chang'an (modern Xi'an). Wendi amassed an enormous military force – 500,000 troops, a huge naval fleet, and an extensive system of grain

⁴⁴ John Fairbank and Merle Goldman, *China, A New History*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998, pp. 76-77.

⁴⁵ Patricia Buckley Erbey, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China*, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 108-109.

supplies – and mounted eight massive sailing assaults up the Yangzi River to conquer the kingdom of Qen in south China. After nearly four centuries of division, China was again united.⁴⁶



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sui_Wendi_Tang.jpg>

Emperor Sui Wendi (ruled 581-604) – Reunited China

⁴⁶ Arthur F. Wright and Denis Twitchett (ed.), *Perspectives on the T'ang*, New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1973, pp. 2-3.

To protect his new conquests, Emperor Wendi introduced a military innovation – a divisional militia (*fu ping*) of 200,000 volunteer farmer-soldiers, who farmed land in government settlements and in lieu of paying land rent served in military rotations between the capital, Chang’an, and the frontiers. Wendi legitimized his rule by claiming he was a Buddhist Cakravartin king (a leader ordained to rule by a decision of the Buddha), promoted the establishment of Buddhist monasteries and temples, and hoped to unify China’s mixed population by popularizing Buddhism as a universalistic religion with appeal for everyone seeking eternal salvation.⁴⁷

Wendi was a popular leader who planned to integrate China through a massive program of public works, constructed by millions of conscripted laborers (who were paying their corvée labor service obligation to the state). He initiated – and his son,

⁴⁷ Caroline Blunden and Mark Elvin, *Cultural Atlas of China*, Abingdon, England: Andromeda Oxford Limited, 1998, pp. 99-100.

Emperor Sui Yangdi (ruled 604-618), completed – the restoration or new construction of two capitals (Chang’an and Luoyang), the 1,200-mile Grand Canal system (linking the Yellow River and Yangzi River valleys to Beijing in the north and Hangzhou in the south), an expanded Great Wall, a new road network to the northern frontiers, and a series of public grain depots. Those public projects required enormous expenditures of forced labor service – 5.5 million workers were employed to repair and extend the Grand Canal and another 1 million to reconstruct the Great Wall (when the entire population of China was no more than 60 million).⁴⁸

Yangdi added guns to butter when he became emperor in 604 upon the death of his father, Wendi, the Sui founding king. In 609, Yangdi embarked on expensive military campaigns in northern Vietnam and Champa (modern central and southern Vietnam) and

⁴⁸ Charles O. Hucker, *China’s Imperial Past*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1975, pp. 138-139.

in Chinese Turkestan (modern Xinjiang Province in northwestern China). Between 612 and 614, he suffered disastrous defeats at the hands of the Koguryo kingdom in Korea, when he stubbornly mounted annual failed assaults that overstretched his supply lines. Like Qin Shi Huangdi, Sui Yangdi was a harsh and megalomaniacal leader who greatly overstrained the resources of his empire. Yangdi, widely viewed as an oppressive tyrant, was assassinated in 618 by one of his generals.⁴⁹

Immediately after the second Sui emperor's death, Li Yuan, a Sui military commander of Turkic-Chinese noble origins and a first cousin of Yangdi, founded a new dynasty, the Tang (618-907), and declared himself Emperor Gaozong (ruled 618-624). During the first two centuries of Tang rule, China entered its Golden Age – a period of political power, expanding wealth, and artistic creativity. As I show in Chapter Five, the Tang Dynasty also fell because of internal erosion leading to peasant rebellions.

⁴⁹ Valerie Hansen, *The Open Empire, A History of China to 1600*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000, pp. 193-196.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at

< https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tang_Dynasty_-_Greatest_Extent.PNG >

Tang Chinese Empire (618-907) – c. 755

Comparative Summary of the Origins of Han and Tang

China. A consistent and intriguing pattern emerges from this comparison of the origins of China’s Han Empire (206 BCE-220 CE) and Tang Empire (618-907 CE). Both empires inherited a unified China from a powerful, but short-lived, founding dynasty

that overextended itself – the Qin (221-206 BCE), which ruled for 15 years before the Han, and the Sui (589-618 CE), which governed for 29 years prior to the Tang. Those earlier building kingdoms each provided a strong central government operated by skilled scholar-officials and an important transportation network – the Qin built 4,000 miles of roads integrating the country, and the Sui constructed the Grand Canal linking north and south China. Both founding kingdoms were led by brilliant, harsh, and megalomaniacal leaders of Turkic-Chinese origin from northwest China – Shi Huangdi (246-210 BCE) of Qin and Wendi (581-604) and Yangdi (604-618) of Sui, who over-strained their economies with extensive military campaigns and massive public works.

The founder-king of the Han dynasty, Liu Bang (Han Emperor Gaozu (ruled 202-195 BCE)), was a commoner who gained power through a peasant rebellion. His counterpart in the Tang dynasty, Li Yuan (Tang Emperor Gaozong (ruled 618-624)), was a Sui military commander who claimed the throne through a military coup d'état. Both early Chinese empires reached the peak

of their power, territory, and creativity about a century after their founding – the Han under Emperor Wudi (ruled 141-87 BCE) and the Tang under Emperor Xuanzong (ruled 712-756).^{50 51} Both empires fell after peasant rebellions.

Origins of Three Islamic Empires during the Late Middle Ages

We next move to the late Middle Ages to illustrate the pattern of gradual imperial development within a dynastic sequence.

Several hundred years after the 7th-century irruption of Muslim Arabs across western and central Asia and northern Africa, a fascinating development occurred. Between the 14th and 16th centuries, three non-Arab, Islamic empires gradually imposed their control across the region extending from southeastern Europe and northern Africa through north-central India. The largest was the

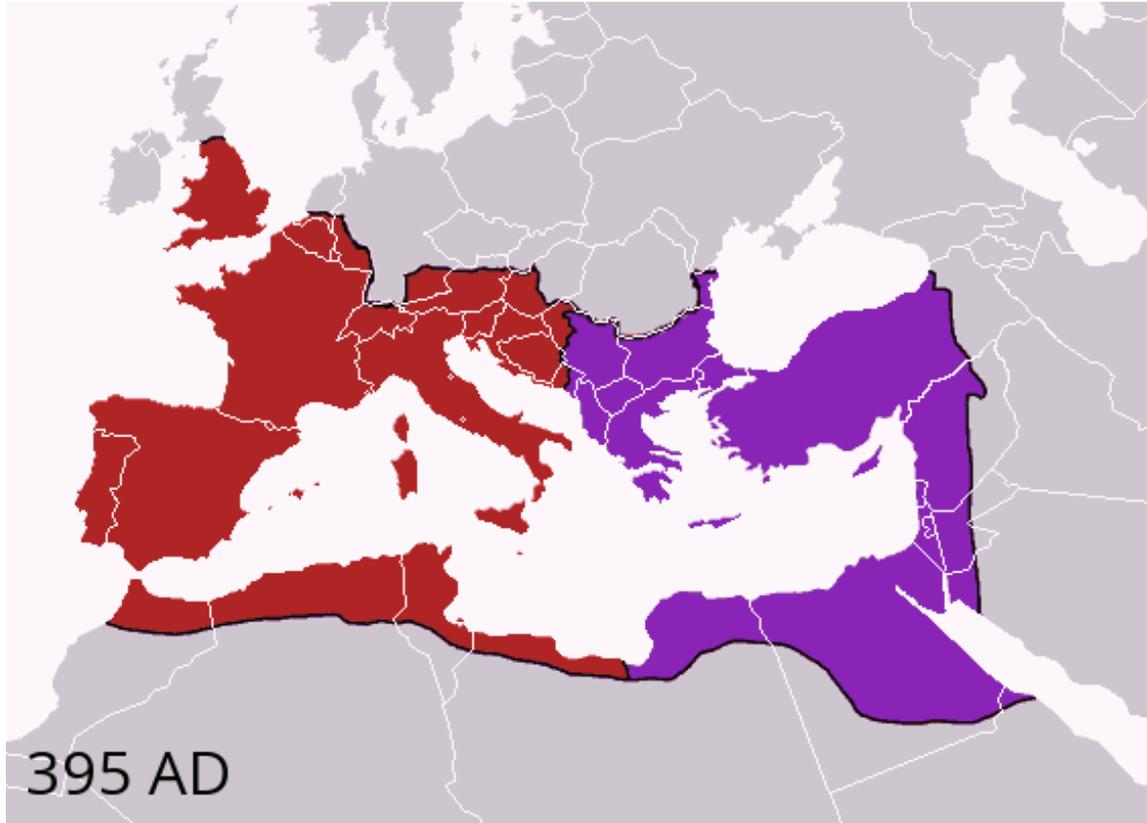
⁵⁰ Cho-yun Hsu, *Han Agriculture, The Formation of Early Chinese Agrarian Economy (206 B.C.-A.D. 220)*, Seattle, Washington: University of Washington Press, 1980, pp. 53-57.

⁵¹ Patricia Buckley Erbey, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China*, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 121-124.

Turkish Ottoman Empire, centered in Istanbul and based principally in Anatolia and the Balkans. The most intriguing was the Turko-Persian Safavid Empire, centered in Esfahan and incorporating Persia and Mesopotamia. The richest was the Turcoman Mughal Empire, centered in Agra (later Delhi) and including most of the Indian subcontinent (except southern India) and Afghanistan. Our final set of illustrations of the origins of early empires will contrast the beginnings of those three Islamic dynastic empires.

Origins of the Ottoman Turkish Empire. The Ottoman Empire arose in western Asia (the Anatolian Plateau) and southeastern Europe (the Balkans) during the 14th through 16th centuries. The Ottoman Turks created their empire by gradually taking territory and people from the declining Byzantine (eastern Roman) Empire. Roman Emperor Constantine (ruled 307-337) built an impregnable fortress in Constantinople (Byzantium) to control the Bosphorus straits and be closer to Rome's principal foe, Sasanid Persia. In 330, he transferred the capital of the Roman

Empire to his new city, divided the Roman Empire in two, and created the Byzantine Empire as the eastern half.⁵²



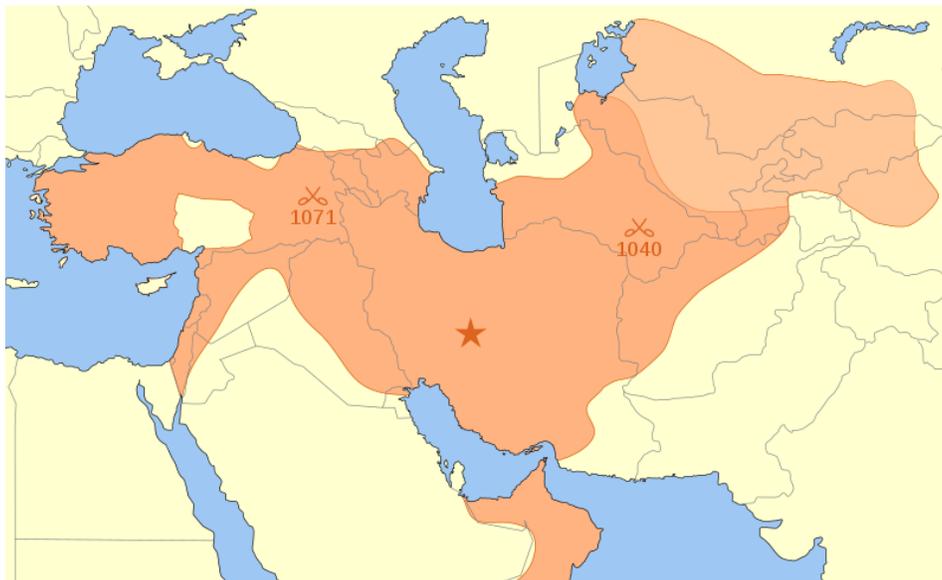
Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Theodosius_I%27s_empire.png>

*The Roman Empire After Division by Theodosius I in 395 CE –
Western Roman Empire (Red) and Byzantine) Empire (Purple)*

The migrations of Seljuk Turks into Anatolia in the 11th-13th centuries precipitated the fall of the Byzantine Empire.⁵³ The

⁵² Peter Frankopan, *The Silk Roads, A New History of the World*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015, pp. 24-25.

Seljuks first enter recorded history as nomads in Central Asia who converted to Islam in the 10th century. In 1064, Seljuk Sultan Alp Arslan invaded Anatolia. At the Battle of Manzikert in eastern Anatolia (1071), Alp Arslan annihilated the Byzantine army and opened eastern Anatolia to waves of Turkish migrations.⁵⁴ The Seljuks set up the Sultanate of Rum in Anatolia in 1080.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Seljuk_Empire_locator_map.svg>

Seljuk Turkish Empire At Its Greatest Territorial Extent, 1092

⁵³ John Julius Norwich, *A Short History of Byzantium*, New York: Vintage Books, 1997, pp. 236-237, 241.

⁵⁴ John Julius Norwich, *A Short History of Byzantium*, New York: Vintage Books, 1997, pp. 241-242.

Hulegu, a Mongol and grandson of Chinggis Qan (also known as Genghis Khan), defeated the Seljuks in 1243 and created the Il-Khanate (1258-1335) to govern Persia and Mesopotamia. The Mongol incursions created a second massive wave of Turkish migrations of refugees and soldiers into Anatolia. Hence, by 1300, the Byzantine Empire was in severe decline.⁵⁵ In Anatolia, the Byzantines controlled only Constantinople, a half-dozen major western cities, and a few Black Sea ports. Numerous Turkish tribes, awaiting political re-organization, inhabited the remainder of Anatolia.

⁵⁵ Douglas A. Howard, *The History of Turkey*, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2001, pp. 33-36.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Asia_in_1335.svg>

The Four Khanates of the Mongol Empire – Yuan Dynasty, Chagatai Khanate, Ilkhanate, and Golden Horde, 1335

In 1300, the Ottoman *beylik* was one of several small Turkish Muslim kingdoms in Anatolia, nominally under the rule of a Seljuk Sultan and a Mongol Ilkhan. Osman (ruled 1300-1326), a talented soldier and administrator, was the founding father of the Ottoman Empire (1300-1923). The keys to Ottoman success were the skilled use of *ghazi* Turkish warriors, seeking better pastures and

fiefdoms, and religious tolerance for the Orthodox Christian Greek majority in western Anatolia.⁵⁶

Murad I (Osman's grandson, ruled 1360-1389) built the Ottoman Empire in southeastern Europe through conquest and diplomacy. He established the first imperial province, Rumelia, and placed his capital at Edirne (in Thrace) in 1365. Murad next took advantage of rivalries among the Balkan fiefdoms to conquer Bulgaria, Macedonia, and Serbia. He defeated a Balkan coalition, led by Lazar of Serbia, at the Battle of Kosovo in 1389 to cement Ottoman control.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, New York: Warner Books, 1991, pp. 81-82, 86.

⁵⁷ Douglas A. Howard, *The History of Turkey*, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2001, p. 38.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:3_Murad_I_map.PNG

Early Ottoman Conquests, 1301-1389

Mehmed II (The Conqueror, Murad's great-grandson, ruled 1451-1481), successfully besieged Constantinople in 1453, and its fall sounded the final death knell of the Byzantine Empire. By then, Constantinople was a poor city of only 40,000 residents, and it had only 7,000 men to defend 14 miles of city walls. After a

courageous defense, the city fell to Mehmed's 300,000 troops, who attacked by land and sea.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Walls_of_Constantinople.JPG>

*The Restored Land Walls of Istanbul –
Re-built by Sultan Mehmed II, Late 15th century*

Mehmed styled himself as the Sovereign of Two Lands (Anatolia and Rumelia) and Two Seas (Mediterranean and Black). He expanded Ottoman control in the Balkans in the 1460s by taking Serbia, Bosnia, Herzegovina, Albania, and Greece. In the 1470s, Mehmed ensured Ottoman control of the Black Sea region by conquering northern Anatolia and by subjugating the Crimean

Tatars (descendants of Mongols) to vassalage. Mehmed's ruling strategy was to create a cosmopolitan empire. He rebuilt Istanbul (formerly Constantinople) as a new city of half a million multi-ethnic residents, only half Turkish. Mehmed also was a devoted scholar, who spoke six languages fluently, had a deep interest in technology, and was a patron of the humanities and arts.⁵⁸

Suleiman I (The Magnificent or The Legislator, Mehmed's grandson, ruled 1521-1566) was the Ottoman Empire's greatest sultan. His army defeated Charles V, the Habsburg Emperor and King of Spain, in the critical Battle of Mohacs in 1526. He negotiated a secret mutual defense pact, against the Habsburgs, with Francis I of France in the Turco-French Treaty of 1536. Hungary became an Ottoman vassal in 1543, and the Ottomans maintained control of Hungary for 150 years.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Lord Kinross, *The Ottoman Centuries, The Rise and Fall of the Turkish Empire*, New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1977, pp. 155-156.

⁵⁹ Jason Goodwin, *Lords of the Horizon, A History of the Ottoman Empire*, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1998, pp. 81-83.



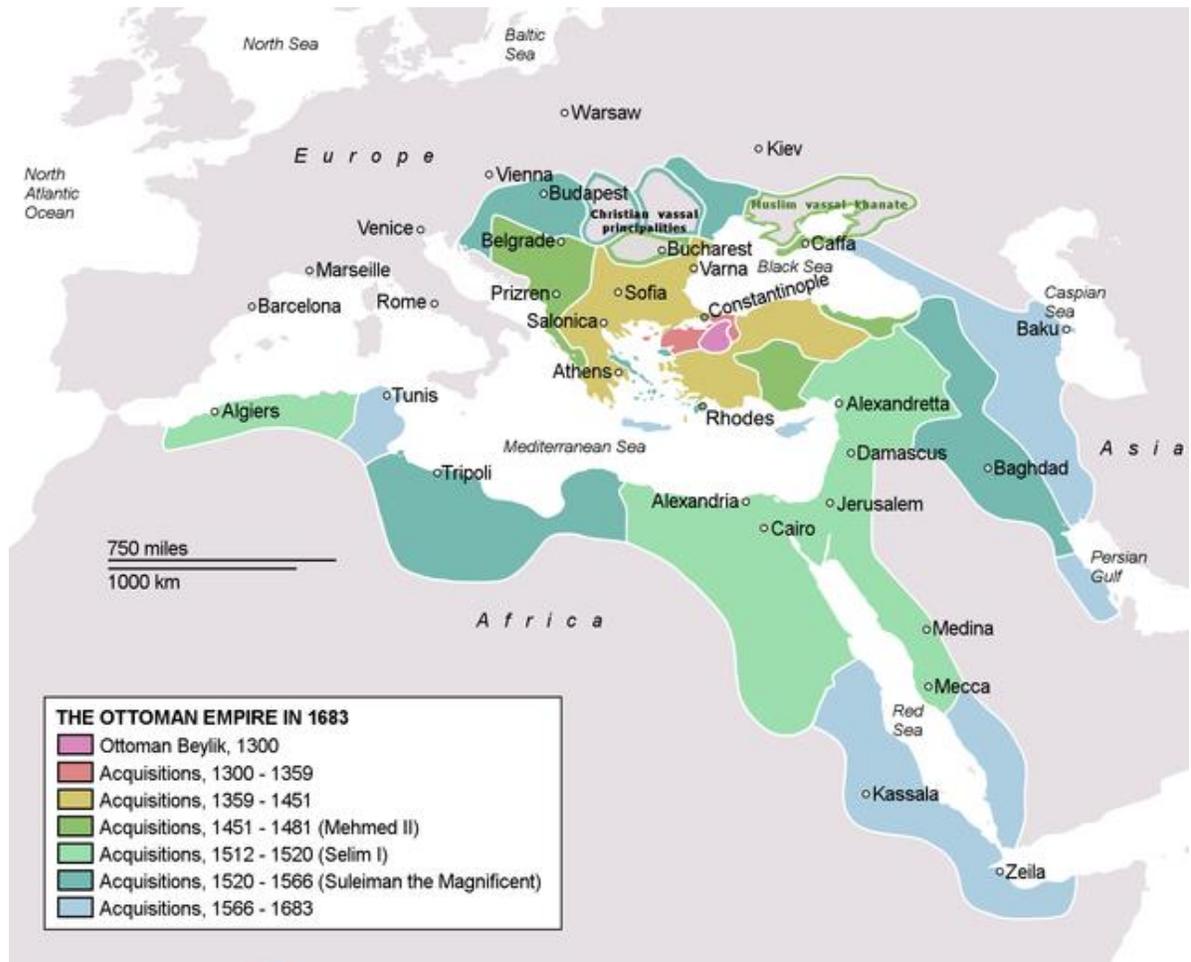
Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at
<<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:EmperorSuleiman.jpg>>

*Suleiman I (The Magnificent or The Legislator, Ruled 1521-1566)
– The Ottoman Empire’s Greatest Sultan*

Suleiman personally led three campaigns against Safavid Persia, the Ottomans’ arch-enemy on the eastern front, between 1534 and 1554, adding southern Mesopotamia, including Baghdad, to his empire. Suleiman also oversaw a full codification of Sultanic and Quranic law, which clarified the rights, duties, and codes of conduct for both Muslims and non-Muslims.⁶⁰ The

⁶⁰ André Clot, *Suleiman the Magnificent*, London: Saqi Books, 2005, pp.73-74, 87.

expanding Ottoman Turkish sultans thus took two and one-half centuries to build their massive empire spanning three continents – western Asia, southeastern Europe, and northern Africa.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:OttomanEmpireIn1683.png>

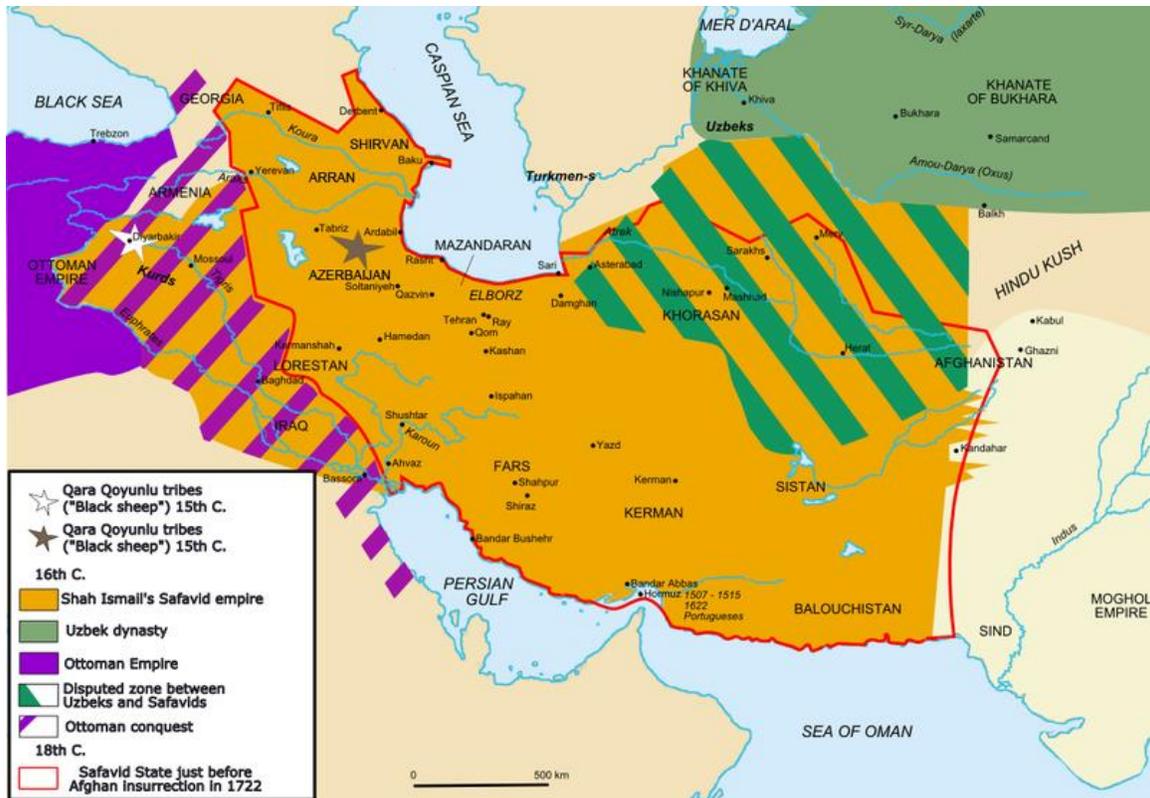
Expansion of the Ottoman Empire, 1300-1683

Origins of the Safavid Persian Empire. The Safavid order, a militant religious brotherhood, was created by Sheikh Safi (1252-

1334) to promote Sufiism (mystical Islam) in Persia. Shah Ismail I (1501-1524), who was of Turkic ancestry, founded the Safavid Persian Empire (1501-1722) by leading Qizilbash (Turkmen) warriors in a series of conquests, starting in Tabriz (northwestern Persia).⁶¹ Ismail's hopes of adding eastern Anatolia to his new empire were quashed by the Ottomans at the Battle of Chaldiran (1514).⁶²

⁶¹ Patrick Clawson and Michael Rubin, *Eternal Iran, Continuity and Chaos*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, p. 23.

⁶² Michael Axworthy, *Empire of the Mind, A History of Iran*, London: Hurst & Company, 2007, pp. 129-131.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at
 <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_Safavid_persia.png>

*The Safavid Persian Empire (1501-1722) –
 Disputes with Ottomans (Purple) and Uzbeks (Green)*

Shah Abbas I (The Great, 1587-1629) consolidated the Safavid Empire. Abbas secured imperial borders by conquering Khurasan (from the Uzbeks), Azerbaijan and Iraq (from the Ottomans), and Kandahar (from the Mughals).⁶³ He used Persian

⁶³ Monika Gronke, *Iran, A Short History*, Princeton, New Jersey: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2008, pp. 78-80.

administrators to underpin his royal absolutism, and he created an elegant capital at Esfahan.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at
<<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:ShahAbbasPortraitFromItalianPainter.jpg>>

*Shah Abbas I (The Great, 1587-1629) –
Expanded and Consolidated the Safavid Empire*

Abbas introduced two key reforms to counter the power of troublesome Qizilbash warriors who had become a land-holding

elite.⁶⁴ He created a permanent army, using Caucasian ex-slaves and gunpowder (firearms and cannons), and he introduced *tuyul* land grants, which were linked to offices rather than individuals and thus were not hereditary.⁶⁵

The Safavid Empire was less wealthy than its two neighboring Sunni Muslim adversaries – the Ottoman and Mughal Empires. The Safavids' main source of wealth and key export was silk (raw and textiles). Shah Abbas captured Gilan (near the Caspian Sea), the main region of sericulture (silk production), and he imposed a monopoly on silk trade and organized the leading Armenian merchants to enforce it. The Armenian traders dominated land-based trade (to the Levant, Anatolia, and Russia), and Indian merchants handled most maritime trade.⁶⁶ The Safavid

⁶⁴ Patrick Clawson and Michael Rubin, *Eternal Iran, Continuity and Chaos*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, pp. 26-27.

⁶⁵ Michael Axworthy, *Empire of the Mind, A History of Iran*, London: Hurst & Company, 2007, pp. 134-138.

⁶⁶ Rudolph P. Matthee, *The Politics of Trade in Safavid Iran, Silk for Silver, 1600-1730*, Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 232-233.

shahs imposed taxes on trade, agriculture (land, crops, and animals), peasant labor (corvée), and non-Muslims (the *jizya* head tax).⁶⁷

Political legitimacy for the absolutist Safavid shahs rested on three pillars – military power (Qizilbash warriors and later Caucasian soldiers), Persian bureaucrats, and the Twelver Shi'ite religion. Followers of Shi'ite Islam believe that only descendants of Ali ibn Abi Talib (Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law) could be legitimate caliphs (leaders of all Muslim people) whereas Sunni Muslims believe that descendants of all original followers of the Prophet could become caliph.⁶⁸ Shi'ites annually mourn the death of Husain ibn Ali, Ali's son, in 680 at the Battle of Karbala, when Sunnis slaughtered Shi'ites. The Iranian followers of Twelver Shi'ism believe that beginning with Ali there were twelve imams

⁶⁷ Rudolph P. Matthee, *The Politics of Trade in Safavid Iran, Silk for Silver, 1600-1730*, Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 239-241.

⁶⁸ Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, New York: Warner Books, 1991, pp. 181-184.

between 656 and 934. The Twelfth Imam is believed to have been in occultation since 934 (living on earth but hidden from human view by Allah) and is expected to appear in the future to bring justice to the world.⁶⁹ Sunni Muslims view those Shi'ite interpretations as heretical. The longstanding conflicts between the Shi'ite Safavid Empire and its two Sunni neighbors, the Ottoman and Mughal Empires, thus were both religious and political.

Origins of the Mughal Indian Empire. Invaders of India from Central Asia established the Mughal Empire (1526-1858), which at its peak controlled about two-thirds of the Indian subcontinent (all except South India) and incorporated much of current Afghanistan as well.⁷⁰ The Mughal leaders were Turcomans – products of a cultural fusion between Turkic and

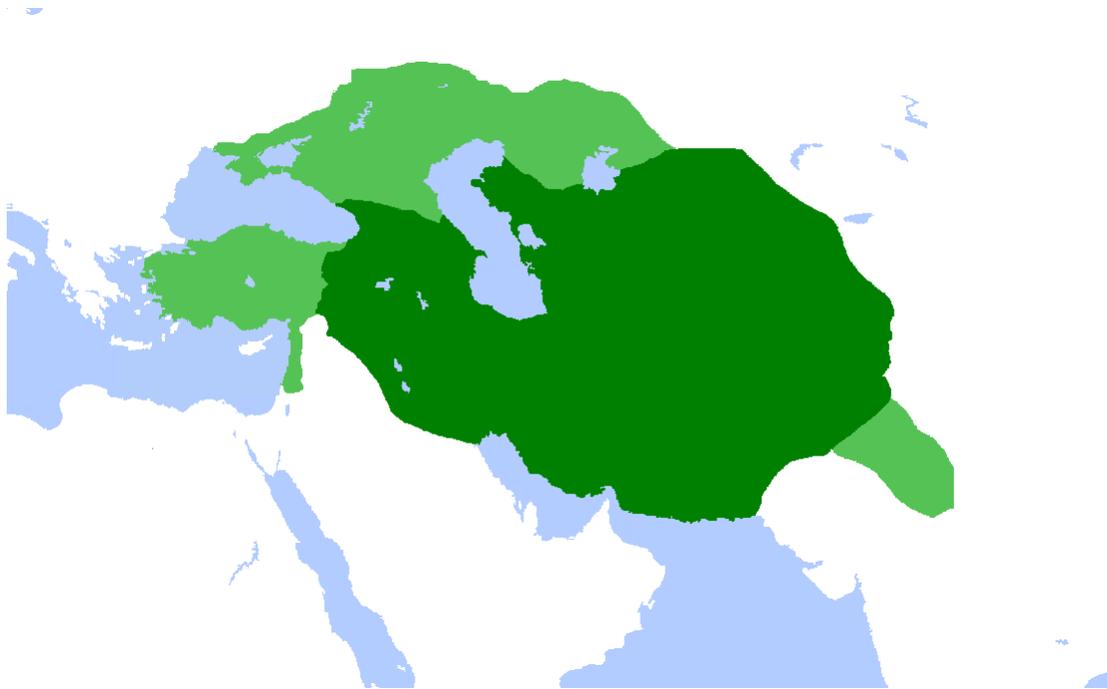
⁶⁹ Monika Gronke, *Iran, A Short History*, Princeton, New Jersey: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2008, p. 16.

⁷⁰ John F. Richards, *The Mughal Empire*, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 6-9.

Mongol peoples that had occurred in the 14th century in Transoxiana (modern Uzbekistan).

Zahiruddiin Muhammad Babur, a strong warrior founder-king, led the Mughal invasion of India. Babur was born in 1483 of a noble Chaghatai Turkish family in Transoxiana, and he inherited the rich Ferghana valley as a child. Babur was a classic Turcoman, descended from Timur (the Turkic leader of Samarkand, who is also called Tamerlane) on his father's side and from Chinggis Qan (the Mongol leader, whose name is sometimes spelled Genghis Khan) on his mother's side. In 1504, at age 21, Babur, nicknamed "The Tiger," conquered the rich trading city of Kabul (modern Afghanistan) and set up his headquarters there. He failed in his goal of ruling Samarkand, where he hoped to follow in the footsteps of his grandfather, Timur.⁷¹

⁷¹ Valérie Berinstain, *India and the Mughal Dynasty*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1997, pp. 19-21.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
< https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Timurid_Empire_Map.png >

Timur's Empire – At His Death, 1405

After three unsuccessful attempts at conquering the Punjab, in 1526 Babur again led his cavalry and cannon through the Khyber Pass and invaded North India. The ruling Delhi Sultanate had been weakened by numerous local insurrections. With only 12,000 troops, Babur defeated Ibrahim Lodi, the Afghan Sultan of Delhi, and his 100,000 soldiers at the battle of Panipat, north of

Delhi.⁷² Babur used cannons to disperse Ibrahim's elephants and create chaos in his ranks, he employed better military tactics, and his troops were superior cavalymen. In 1527, Babur carried his invasion into Rajputana (Rajasthan) and routed the army of Rana Sanga of Mewar, the leading Rajput ruler and warrior.⁷³ He then defeated the last remnant army of the Delhi Sultanate at Gogra River in 1529, ending resistance to his rule.^{74 75}

Babur set up twin capitals at Delhi and Agra. He retained the Delhi Sultanate's decentralized *pargana* (provincial) system of administration. Babur appointed Turcoman governors to rule each province, and they collected agricultural and trade taxes,

⁷² Valérie Berinstain, *India and the Mughal Dynasty*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1997, pp. 24-25.

⁷³ Gordon Johnson, *Cultural Atlas of India*, Abingdon, England: Andromeda Oxford Limited, 1996, p. 84.

⁷⁴ Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal, *Modern South Asia, History, Culture, Political Economy*, London: Routledge, 1998, p. 36.

⁷⁵ Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 121-124.

transferred part to the central government, and maintained their own armies.⁷⁶



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
< https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Emperor_babur.jpg >

Babur, Founder of the Mughal Empire – 17th century Portrait

⁷⁶ Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760*, Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1993, pp. 63-64.

Babur held a low opinion of the Hindu people whom he had conquered. He wrote in his memoirs, *Babur-nama*, in a Turkic language:

“Hindustan is a country of few charms. Its people have no good looks; of social intercourse, paying and receiving visits there is none; of genius and capacity none; of manners none; in handicraft and work there is no form or symmetry, method or quality; there are no good horses, no good dogs, no grapes, muskmelons or first-rate fruits, no ice or cold water, no good bread or cooked food in the bazaars, no hot-baths, no colleges, no candles, torches or candlesticks.”⁷⁷

When Babur died of natural causes in 1530, his son, Humayun, succeeded him and ruled unspectacularly for 25 years. Humayun was more interested in opium and astrology than in power, and he nearly lost his father’s hard-fought territory.⁷⁸ Today, visitors to Delhi marvel at Humayun’s magnificent tomb, a masterpiece of Mughal architecture, built by his wife and son, which greatly exaggerates his place in Mughal history.

⁷⁷ Quoted in Valérie Berinstain, *India and the Mughal Dynasty*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1997, p. 130.

⁷⁸ Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 124-125.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mughal_Empire,_1605.png>

Mughal Empire Under Akbar, 1605

Comparative Summary of the Origins of Three Islamic Empires. Three powerful Islamic states – the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal Empires – arose in the late Middle Ages during the 14th-16th centuries. The three ruling dynasties were all or part Turkish – the Seljuk Turkish Ottomans in Anatolia and the

Balkans, the Turko-Persian Safavids in Iran and Mesopotamia, and the Turcoman (Turko-Mongol) Mughals in north-central India and Afghanistan – and were recent migrants into the regions that they ruled.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Islamic_Gunpowder_Empires.jpg>

The Ottoman (Red), Safavid (Purple), and Mughal (Yellow) Empires, c. 1700

Rulership within the dynasties of the three Islamic empires passed directly from father to son in an effort to avoid succession struggles. The practice of fratricide (the murder of eligible contenders for the crown) was followed in the Ottoman Empire for

three centuries. The three Islamic empires were more often enemies than allies, in part because Safavid Persia practiced the Shi'ite version of Islam whereas the Ottomans and Mughals followed Sunni Islam. The Mughals and Safavids avoided outright warfare, but the Ottomans and Safavids fought over control of Mesopotamia and Azerbaijan.

The Ottoman, Safavid, and Moghul Empires sometimes are referred to as the Gunpowder Empires, reflecting their military make-up and use of gunpowder in expansion. All three states were formed through a series of military conquests, led initially by skilled Turkish warriors who took over declining states. The three founder-kings were talented militarists – Osman (Ottoman), Ismail I (Safavid), and Babur (Mughal). But the main expansion and consolidation of the three empires occurred under their distinguished third rulers (grandsons) – Murad I (Ottoman), Abbas I (Safavid), and Akbar (Mughal). The key to imperial success was the dynasts' ability to forge alliances with the elites in their non-Turkish majority populations and to tax agriculture and trade

effectively. All three Turko-Muslim dynasties discovered that public administration was even more challenging than military conquest.

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So it was with the origins of early empires. In the earliest era, starting five thousand years ago, the empires were based on river-floodplain agriculture. Dynasts drew their political legitimacy principally from the need to control their labor forces at peak times during the flood calendar, make irrigated farming work, and generate wealth from agricultural surpluses.

Later on, beginning about 2,200 years ago, empires were created by conquering warrior-kings. But those founders had to be much more than warriors. After unifying regions of similar ethnicity and subjugating tributary areas, successful founder-kings (and their successors) had to be skilled public administrators and effective self-promoters. For most, it seemed easier to create an empire than to run it.

In the last era of the formation of pre-industrial empires, occurring about 500-800 years ago, the founder-kings were successful militarists who could plunder others' wealth. But the formation of a longstanding empire required additional conquests and, especially, strong leadership from a chain of descendants of the original founder-king. Sequential leaders sustained imperial power by creating wealth through the development and taxation of agriculture and foreign trade.