

## **Chapter Four, “Imperial Control,” for *Lessons from Early Empires***

The creation of empires called for strong central governmental control of resources to generate wealth and retain power. The elites who ran the imperial governments had to create means of political and religious legitimacy to justify their control of the masses and ensure that commoners would continue to provide agricultural labor, farm management, and military manpower. Military coercion and economic sanction could hold the masses down for a while, but ultimately the elite needed a rationale for ruling that normally would engender widespread support of royal rule.

The details of imperial control differed among our studied empires, but all of the rulers used religion and chauvinism to justify their controlling actions. Empires were vulnerable structures, woven together by intricate balances of power, tradition, compromise, and mutual exchange of favors. They could break apart quickly when political balances were upset.

Successful emperors or kings legitimized and perpetuated their hierarchies through adroit combinations of religious and chauvinistic beliefs and bureaucratic, military, and economic controls. In this chapter, I investigate the various means of imperial control typically employed by ruling elites in early empires. I have chosen to focus on three key mechanisms of imperial control – the use of religion to legitimize political rule, the establishment of bureaucracies to underpin government administration and security, and the creation of tax-collecting agencies and procedures to transfer wealth from the masses to the elite.

This focus on individual means of imperial control can be misleading, however, because the essence of imperial success lay in the package of control mechanisms not in its specific components. Longstanding ruling dynasties had to blend religious persuasion, political administration, economic controls, and military coercion to maintain imperial power and extract wealth. In my illustrations of imperial control in this chapter, I demonstrate

how successful rulers blended control mechanisms and maintained political balances.

## **Religious Persuasion as a Means of Imperial Control**

Imperial rulers needed political legitimacy. Brute force was not sufficient for enduring control of the masses. Religious persuasion was a prime candidate to underpin the legitimacy of imperial dynasties. If the rulers could convince the masses that their submission was preordained by religious dogma, dynasts could use religion to justify their political control. In my examination of the use of religion as a means of imperial control in early empires, however, I discovered two contrasting patterns.

Among my twelve case studies, the five regional kingdoms were all theocracies. Religion was the central means of political control, and imperial rule was justified as necessary for the accepted religion to be practiced correctly. I provide an illustration of this theocratic phenomenon in the Khmer Kingdom of Cambodia, which blended Hinduism and Buddhism to justify kingship.

In sharp contrast, in the seven multinational empires that I studied, I found that only in Dynastic Egypt did rulers justify their control on religious grounds. In all other instances, the dynasts found it preferable to practice religious tolerance, especially if they ruled a kaleidoscope of cultures with different religions. I illustrate that pattern of religious tolerance and eclecticism with a case study of imperial control in the Tang Empire of China.

**Religious Persuasion in the Khmer Kingdom of Cambodia.** The Khmer Kingdom ruled much of today's Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. At its peak in the 11<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries, Khmer controlled a huge swath of mainland Southeast Asia. Yet the Khmer people never numbered more than two million during their imperial era.<sup>1</sup>

From 550 to 800, the Khmer lived in numerous small kingdoms, known collectively as Chenla. In 802, Jayavarman II, an exceptional Khmer leader of one of the Chenla kingdoms,

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<sup>1</sup> David Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2007, pp. 34-36.

founded the Khmer Kingdom by defeating and expelling the Sailendras, a Javanese dynasty who had conquered Chenla two decades earlier.<sup>2</sup> Jayavarman II, Khmer's founder-king, used military campaigns, marriage alliances, and land grants to consolidate and unify his kingdom. Like most successful founder-kings, he was both a strong military leader and a capable public administrator.

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<sup>2</sup> Claude Jacques and Philippe Lafond, *The Khmer Empire, Cities and Sanctuaries Fifth to the Thirteenth Centuries*, Bangkok: River Books, 2007, p. 103.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at  
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map-of-southeast-asia\\_900\\_CE.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map-of-southeast-asia_900_CE.png)>

*Khmer Kingdom (Red), Champa Kingdom (Yellow). and Tang Chinese Vietnam (Orange) – c. 900*

Most of Khmer's wealth was generated by rice agriculture.<sup>3</sup>

The state taxed agriculture to transfer the wealth from the

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peasantry to the elite. The Khmer rice systems were decentralized, based on small fields, and used flood retreat, rainfed, or shifting cultivation technologies.<sup>4</sup> New varieties of *indica* rice were introduced from India that gave higher yields than the *japonica* varieties that they replaced. Khmer kings made land grants to nobles and temples, and both used animals for traction to improve rice yields. Temple societies expanded rice output by providing financing, technical information, and farm labor. Khmer rulers, nobles, and temples together improved rice yields and extended rice acreage and thus created a sizeable rice surplus that paid for the creation of religious monuments and the protection of the empire.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> John Tully, *A Short History of Cambodia, From Empire to Survival*, Crows Nest, NSW, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 2005, pp. 45-47.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Higham, *The Civilization of Angkor*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2001, pp. 156, 165.

<sup>5</sup> Nicholas Tarling (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia, Volume One, Part One, From Early Times To c. 1500*, Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 230-231.

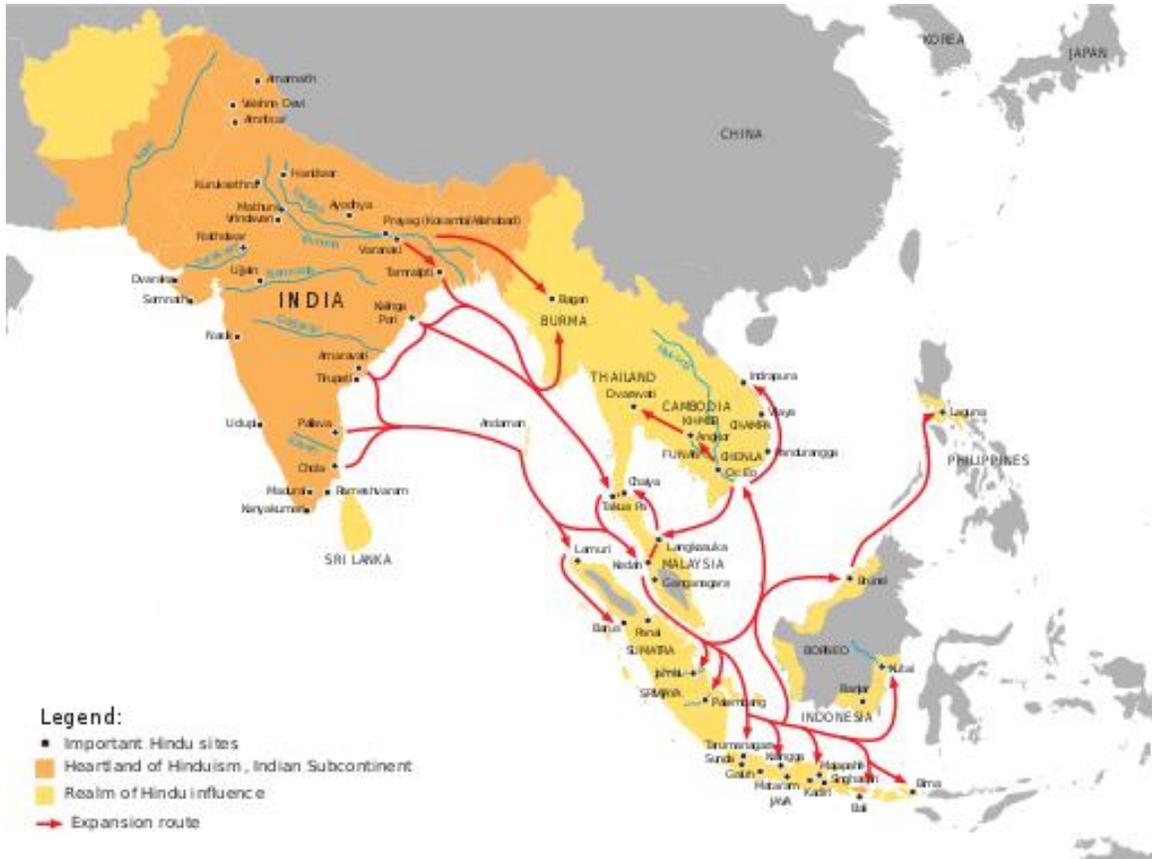
International trade was only a supplemental source of wealth for the Khmer Kingdom. The high costs of transportation restricted trade to valuable, light-weight goods. The primary exports from Khmer were high-value products – elephant ivory, aromatic woods, and cardamom. Khmer imported luxury goods – porcelain, silk, crafts, and sugar.<sup>6</sup> Foreign conquest of productive rice land was a much more important supplement to Khmer's rice wealth.

At its peak in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the Khmer Kingdom controlled Cambodia, southern Vietnam, southern Laos, central-southern Thailand, and the northern Malay Peninsula. The areas not under direct Khmer control paid annual tribute to the central government. Khmer power waned in the 13<sup>th</sup> century when the empire lost the Thai plain, Laos, and southern vassal states. By the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the area under Khmer control had shrunk to the

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<sup>6</sup> Ian Mabbett and David Chandler, *The Khmers*, Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 1996, pp.175-177.

Khmer heartland – the Tonle Sap and Mekong River Valleys and the Mekong Delta in today’s Cambodia and southern Vietnam.<sup>7</sup>



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hinduism\\_Expansion\\_in\\_Asia.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hinduism_Expansion_in_Asia.svg)

### *Hinduism Expanded on the Asian Trade Routes*

What forms of political organization, economic sanction, military coercion, and religious persuasion did the rulers in the

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<sup>7</sup> David Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 1998, pp. 70-71.

Khmer Kingdom use to extract wealth for the elite and maintain imperial power? The underlying bases of the new Khmer Kingdom were productive wet rice agriculture, Hindu temples devoted to Siva, a small elite who communicated in Sanskrit, a large peasantry who spoke only the Khmer language, and a system of corvée labor through which peasants provided regular labor services to nobles, the state, and temples.<sup>8</sup> The forms of religious beliefs and political organization in the Khmer Kingdom were adaptations from India.<sup>9</sup>

The Khmer religion was primarily Saivite Hinduism with some Mahayana Buddhism. Both were replaced by Theravada Buddhism in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Hinduism and Buddhism were used by the royalty as political control mechanisms. Khmer monarchical government was an adaptation of the Indian concept

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<sup>8</sup> Charles Higham, *The Civilization of Angkor*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2001, pp. 89-90.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Higham, *The Civilization of Angkor*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2001, pp. 151-152.

of Devaraja, or God King.<sup>10</sup> The universal monarch was head of the bureaucracy, the military, and the church. Indian culture also influenced Khmer social organization (elite castes), writing (in Sanskrit), religious rituals, and art and architecture.

Power and wealth rested principally on rice-based agriculture. The Hindu and Buddhist religions served as justifications for the elite to gain control of the rice surplus generated by better techniques of production, improved varieties of *indica* rice, and investments in irrigation and water control.<sup>11</sup> The God King gave grants of land and bonded laborers to local nobles (*pons*) who in turn gave some of the land and bonded laborers to temple societies. That act of philanthropy earned religious merit for the nobles.

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<sup>10</sup> John Tully, *A Short History of Cambodia, From Empire to Survival*, Crows Nest, NSW, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 2005, p. 34.

<sup>11</sup> Ian Mabbett and David Chandler, *The Khmers*, Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 1996, pp. 147-153.

To earn his own religious merit, the God King granted land and bonded laborers directly to the temple societies, which carried out construction and irrigation projects to open new rice-producing land. The rural masses either served as bonded laborers or as free farmers who earned their religious merit by paying taxes in kind and in labor time to the state and by making donations of produce and labor time to the temple societies. Religion, social structure, politics, rice production, and taxation thus were woven together intricately in a sustainable system of elite control of the masses.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at  
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ta\\_Prohm\\_Angkor\\_giant\\_tree.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ta_Prohm_Angkor_giant_tree.jpg)>

*Strangler Fig Tree Roots Strangling a Gallery, Ta Prohm*

Khmer kings, reigning between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, followed three phases in royal monumental construction, as noted by art historian Philippe Stern in the 1930s. Each king first built a large reservoir to honor his subjects and the agricultural gods and to demonstrate his political power. He next created statues in temples to honor his parents, ancestors, and (sometimes) ruling predecessors by portraying them as gods. Finally, each king constructed a temple-mountain to honor himself and eventually serve as his sarcophagus. Thirteen kings of Angkor had sufficient political control and accumulated wealth to create temple-mountains.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> David Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 1998, p. 37.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map-of-southeast-asia\\_1300\\_CE.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map-of-southeast-asia_1300_CE.png)

*Khmer Kingdom (Red), Champa Kingdom (Yellow). and Dai Viet Kingdom (Blue) – c. 1300*

The impressive monumental architecture of the Khmer Kingdom can be illustrated with reference to the creations of two significant kings. Suryavarman II (ruled 1113-1150) reigned

during the peak of Khmer wealth and power and created Angkor Wat, the world's largest religious monument. Angkor Wat was a temple dedicated to the Hindu god, Vishnu (most Khmer temples were dedicated to Siva). Angkor Wat eventually served as a mausoleum for Suryavarman, and it likely contained a palace and government buildings. The five central towers represented Mount Meru, and the moat symbolized the oceans. The colossal monument served as a representation of the immortality of Suryavarman and symbolized him as a God King merged with Vishnu.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ian Mabbett and David Chandler, *The Khmers*, Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 1996, pp. 190-197.



Source: *Wikimedia Commons*, available at  
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cambodia\\_2638B - Angkor Wat.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cambodia_2638B_-_Angkor_Wat.jpg)>

*Angkor Wat, Dedicated to Hindu God, Vishnu*

Jayavarman VII (ruled 1181-1218) was the last of the great Khmer royal-builders. He built the new city of Angkor Thom around the Bayon Temple where the king is represented as a Buddhist *bodhisattva*, an enlightened human who chooses to help others attain nirvana. The outer walls of the Bayon Temple are decorated with bas-reliefs that portray battles, games, feasts, markets, cooking, and a wide range of other scenes from ordinary

life during Jayavarman's reign. Jayavarman also dedicated two large temple complexes outside of the walls of Angkor Thom – Ta Prohm (Rajavihara) for his mother and Preah Khan (Nagara Jayasri) for his father – to honor and earn religious merit for his parents.<sup>14</sup>

After Jayavarman VII's magnificent, massive, and costly building program, the Khmer Kingdom could no longer afford to devote endless royal resources to the construction of religious monuments. The Khmer era of monumental architecture thus came to an inglorious end. In the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, the Khmer rulers converted to Theravada Buddhism and undercut their Hindu-oriented theocracy. Under the new religion, there was no longer divine kingship, strict social castes, Hindu temples, or the need to earn Hindu merit by making donations. The Khmer imperial system of imperial control thus unraveled because it devoted

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<sup>14</sup> Charles Higham, *The Civilization of Angkor*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2001, pp. 121-127.

excessive resources to religious monuments and orders and then lost its socio-religious rationale.<sup>15</sup>

**Summary of Control in the Khmer Kingdom of Cambodia.** The Khmer Kingdom of Cambodia was governed by representatives of a majority ethnic group (the Khmer people). Governing elites used effective combinations of religious, political, bureaucratic, military, and economic mechanisms – incentives and sanctions – to maintain control of their kingdom. The Khmer rulers based their legitimacy on being universal, omnipotent, and divine monarchs – God Kings in the Hindu/Buddhist belief structure adapted from India. Indian culture also influenced Khmer social organization (elite castes), writing (in Sanskrit), religious rituals, and art and architecture. Religion, social structure, politics, rice production, and taxation were woven together intricately in a sustainable system of elite control of the masses.

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<sup>15</sup> Ian Mabbett and David Chandler, *The Khmers*, Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 1996, pp. 219-220.

The Khmer religion was primarily Saivite Hinduism with some Mahayana Buddhism, although both were replaced by Theravada Buddhism in the 13<sup>th</sup> century when the kingdom was in decline. The God King gave grants of land and bonded laborers to local nobles who in turn gave some of the land and bonded laborers to temple societies. That act of philanthropy earned religious merit for the nobles. To earn religious merit for himself, the God King also granted land and bonded laborers directly to the temple societies, which carried out construction and irrigation projects to open new rice-producing land. The rural masses served either as bonded laborers or as free farmers who earned their religious merit by paying taxes in kind and in labor time to the state and by making donations of produce and labor time to the temple societies. Khmer religious and political controls thus were linked intricately.

### **Religious Persuasion in the Tang Empire of China.**

During the first two centuries of Tang rule, China entered its Golden Age – a period of political power, expanding wealth, and

artistic creativity. Tang emperors installed a centralized bureaucracy, collected taxes efficiently, created a powerful military, and expanded Chinese territory to its greatest historical extent.<sup>16</sup> The Tang Empire was eclectic religiously – accommodating two million Buddhist monks in 30,000 monasteries, powerful exam-based Confucian officials in its government bureaucracy, and Daoist cults for its urban and rural masses.<sup>17</sup>

The Tang government also was cosmopolitan – welcoming foreign merchants, technologies, and ideas and creating in Chang’an the world’s largest (one million inhabitants) and wealthiest city. Sui-Tang economic expansion was based on improvements in agriculture, expanded trade within the wider

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<sup>16</sup> John E. Wills, Jr., *Mountain of Fame, Portraits in Chinese History*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994, pp. 127-128.

<sup>17</sup> Patricia Buckley Erbey, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China*, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 101-102.

market of reunified China, huge public investments in transportation (the Grand Canal system, the road network, and upgraded ports), a remarkable openness to foreign influences, the effective intermarriage of two cultures (Chinese and Turkic), and the promotion of artistic creativity (especially poets, such as Li Bo, Du Fu, and Wan Wei).<sup>18</sup>



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at  
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dunhuang\\_mural\\_flying\\_apsarasa.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dunhuang_mural_flying_apsarasa.jpg)>

*Flying Apsaras (Buddhist Dancing Spirits) –  
Mural, Cave 285 Mogao Caves, Dunhuang, Gansu Province*

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<sup>18</sup> Valerie Hansen, *The Open Empire, A History of China to 1600*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000, pp. 196, 213-215.

The strength and territorial expanse of the eclectic Tang Empire peaked in its first century and declined thereafter. The second emperor, Taizong (626-649), was the principal empire builder.<sup>19</sup> His successful, expansionary reign was marked by strong bureaucratic control, effective taxation, and development of a powerful, centrally-controlled military. He embarked on an aggressive foreign policy against the Eastern Turks in Mongolia and Turkestan, conquering along the Silk Road into Central Asia.<sup>20</sup> Although the Chinese had invented gunpowder (probably in the 7<sup>th</sup> century), for several centuries gunpowder was used only in fireworks and thus the cross-bow continued to be the main weapon in Tang warfare.

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<sup>19</sup> John Fairbank and Merle Goldman, *China, A New History*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998, pp. 78-79.

<sup>20</sup> John E. Wills, Jr., *Mountain of Fame, Portraits in Chinese History*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994, pp. 130-132.

Taizong, employing a skilled cavalry of horse archers in stirrups, absorbed the key trading oases of Hami (630) and Turfan (640) and other small western states as Chinese protectorates.<sup>21</sup> The Tang military machine crossed the Pamir Mountains and claimed Sogdiana on the eastern border of Iran. However, Tibet, a rising power, defeated China in 663 and became a threat on the Tang's western border for the next 150 years.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier, Nomadic Empires and China, 221 BC to AD 1757*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Inc, 1992, pp. 143, 154-157, 164.

<sup>22</sup> Stephen G. Haw, *A Traveller's History of China*, New York: Interlink Books, 2003, pp. 101-103.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at  
 <[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tang\\_Protectorates.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tang_Protectorates.png)>

### *The Tang Empire and Its Six Major Protectorates, c. 750*

Between 660 and 755, the Tang Empire rose to the peak of its power. In 660, Empress Wu Zhao took control of the empire after her husband, Emperor Gaizong (649-683), suffered a debilitating stroke.<sup>23</sup> Once a concubine, Empress Wu murdered her two

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<sup>23</sup> Patricia Buckley Erbey, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China*, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 116-117.

emperor sons to retain her own power and had scandalous affairs, often with much younger men. She was the only woman to serve as emperor of China (690-705), after proclaiming herself the head of a new dynasty, the Zhou (a name she selected to link her regime to pre-Qin/Han and pre-Sui/Tang glories in Chinese history).<sup>24</sup>

Most of the Chinese aristocracy, especially the Confucian scholar-officials, viewed the female emperor as a “violation of the natural order.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> John E. Wills, Jr., *Mountain of Fame, Portraits in Chinese History*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994, pp. 134-136, 138-143, 146-148.

<sup>25</sup> John E. Wills, Jr., *Mountain of Fame, Portraits in Chinese History*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994, pp. 134-136, 138-143.



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<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:A\\_Tang\\_Dynasty\\_Empress\\_Wu\\_Zetian.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:A_Tang_Dynasty_Empress_Wu_Zetian.JPG)  
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*Empress Wu Zhou – Tang China’s Only Woman Ruler*

To solidify her power base at court, Empress Wu went around the bureaucracy and created her own advisors and bureaucrats – the North Gate Scholars.<sup>26</sup> To legitimize her rule with the commoners, she installed one of her lovers as a Buddhist

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<sup>26</sup> Arthur F. Wright and Denis Twitchett (ed.), *Perspectives on the T’ang*, New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1973, pp. 64, 79.

monk and had him write the *Great Cloud Sutra* to establish her role as a female Maitreya Buddha (a Buddha of the future).<sup>27</sup>

Empress Wu proved to be a strong and effective ruler until she was deposed by another son in 705. She broke (at least temporarily) the power of the old aristocracy, promoted men from the provinces to important governmental positions, and protected the Tang central power base. Wu Zhou died of natural causes in late 705, a few months after she was deposed. She was then eighty-two years old.

Empress Wu's grandson, Emperor Xuanzong (712-756), introduced military and tax reforms and promoted the arts. Under his capable rule, Tang China reached the height of its power, wealth, and creativity. Xuanzong was a very talented emperor who improved tax collections, reduced the size and power of the military, created prosperity, and reigned in largely peaceful times. During Xuanzong's long reign, Tang China reached the acme of its

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<sup>27</sup> Valerie Hansen, *The Open Empire, A History of China to 1600*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000, pp. 199-202.

cultural prowess and creativity.<sup>28</sup> Xuanzong promoted state ceremonies and ritual, spread Tantric Buddhism, created an academy for poets, encouraged music at court, and even had a troupe of dancing horses.<sup>29</sup>



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at  
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tang\\_XianZong.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tang_XianZong.jpg)>

*Emperor Xuanzong (712-756) –  
Led Tang China To Its Greatest Power, Wealth, and Creativity*

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<sup>28</sup> Valerie Hansen, *The Open Empire, A History of China to 1600*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000, pp. 231-233, 243-244.

<sup>29</sup> Patricia Buckley Erbey, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China*, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 121.

Some say this admirable leader lived too long. Late in his rule, he became infatuated with China's most infamous *femme fatale*, Yang Guifei (Precious Consort Yang), his favorite concubine, and he became her dotting lackey. With Yang's connivance, Xuanzong's later court was dominated by sycophantic advisors, palace eunuchs, and alien generals.<sup>30</sup> Her adopted son and likely lover, An Lushan (a Sogdian Turk), exploited his position as a regional military commander to precipitate a long rebellion (755-763) that ended the Golden Age of the Tang Dynasty.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Valerie Hansen, *The Open Empire, A History of China to 1600*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000, pp. 202, 222-227.

<sup>31</sup> D. C. Twitchett, *Financial Administration under the T'ang Dynasty*, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1970, p. 91.



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<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tang\\_Dynasty\\_-\\_Greatest\\_Extent.PNG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tang_Dynasty_-_Greatest_Extent.PNG)>

*The Tang Empire At Its Greatest Territorial Extent, c. 750*

**Summary of Control in the Tang Empire of China.** The religious control mechanisms of the Tang rulers were an eclectic blend of newly-introduced Buddhist ideals, Confucianist governing principles, and Daoist mysticism. Tang China accommodated two million Buddhist monks in 30,000 monasteries, powerful exam-based Confucian officials in the government bureaucracy, and

Daoist cults for their urban and rural masses. Buddhism was an especially effective means of hierarchical control because it required that the masses do the bidding of the elite in an effort to free themselves from reincarnation and reach nirvana, a heavenly state of complete spiritual peace.

The cosmopolitan Tang governments were flexible and welcoming of new ideas, creations, and philosophies. Tang rulers effectively inter-married two cultures (Chinese and Turkic), welcomed foreign merchants, technologies, and ideas, and promoted artistic creativity (notably poetry). They ruled border regions, populated by ethnic minorities, with well-understood Turkic-led bureaucracies and the ethnic majority Chinese regions with long-standing Confucianist principles and Chinese chauvinism. The early Tang emperors in China installed a centralized bureaucracy, collected taxes efficiently, and created a strong military machine. That well-organized system of government deteriorated during the last 150 years of Tang rule, leading to the ultimate fall of the dynasty.

**Comparison of Imperial Control in the Khmer Kingdom and the Tang Chinese Empire.** The system of imperial control in the Hindu/Buddhist and rice-based Kingdom of Khmer was theocratic. Religious and political legitimacy was closely linked, but nationalistic chauvinism also played an important role in Khmer. In contrast, the early Tang emperors designed eclectic systems of imperial control that attempted to overcome their alien origins. The Tang rulers were Turkic-Chinese from Turkestan but soon received full legitimacy in Chinese society. The Tang emperors encouraged a broad blend of religions and philosophies in China – Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism – and relied heavily on long-practiced Confucianist principles of governance and status attainment to promote Chinese chauvinism.

The Khmer Kingdom had a modest-sized and well-run government bureaucracy to collect taxes, but not a dominant bureaucracy akin to that in Confucianist Tang China. Khmer had to confront the dilemma of excessive religious philanthropy – donations of rice land earned religious merit for kings and nobles,

but tax-free temple societies drained scarce resources from the state. Tang rulers understood well that their eclectic means of political and religious persuasion had to be buttressed strongly by military control.

### **Political Administration as a Means of Imperial Control**

After achieving political legitimacy, imperial dynasties had to run the show – by establishing the means of political administration. That task had two broad dimensions. One was to create a loyal military to control dissident regions, conquer new territory, and provide security from invasion by enemies. The other was to set up well-functioning bureaucracies to run the ruler's government, provide police services, mete out justice, and collect taxes. A central question was the extent of government ownership and management of the country's means of creating wealth – land, labor, capital assets, and infrastructure. Should the imperial government attempt to operate important segments of the economy itself, or should it leave production and trade largely to private entrepreneurs?

In my twelve case studies of early empires, I found that imperial success typically required the control of a loyal military, the establishment of an effective bureaucracy, and the reliance on commoners outside the government to generate most primary wealth. But those phenomena evolved in interesting ways within each empire or kingdom. I illustrate the importance of political administration as a means of imperial control by contrasting the experiences of the Roman Empire and the Han Empire of China. Those two powerful states overlapped in time for four centuries, but were linked only indirectly via long-distance trade along the Silk Road. So far as we know, no Roman ruler or subject ever encountered a Han Chinese emperor or citizen face-to-face.

**Political Administration in the Roman Empire.** The Roman Empire was top-heavy. By the end of the first century BCE, the capital city of Rome had a population of 1 million permanent residents and other Italian cities were home to another

million.<sup>32</sup> The total population of the Roman Empire was comparable to that of the Han Empire in China, about 60 million. Perhaps one-tenth lived in cities, mostly in peninsular Italy. The Romans' imperial strategy was to use strong military power and effective public administration to create and transfer wealth from conquered provinces to Rome and the Italian peninsula.<sup>33</sup> Heavy taxation of agriculture in the provinces provided food and entertainment – bread and circuses – for Rome, public amenities and religious monuments in all Roman cities, food and pay for a standing army of 300,000 troops, and public investment in infrastructure (roads, ports, and irrigation works).<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Peter Garnsey, *Famine and Food Supply in the Graeco-roman World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 244.

<sup>33</sup> Peter Garnsey and Richard Saller, *The Roman Empire, Economy, Society and Culture*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987, pp. 6-9.

<sup>34</sup> Peter Garnsey and Richard Saller, *The Roman Empire, Economy, Society and Culture*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987, pp. 199-203.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Amphi-Rome.PNG>

## Amphitheatres of the Roman Empire, mid-3<sup>rd</sup> century CE – Constructed Mostly With Agricultural Taxes

Provincial agriculture was the key source of Roman wealth.<sup>35</sup> The principal farm commodities were the familiar Mediterranean triad – cereals (wheat and barley), grapes, and

<sup>35</sup> Peter Garnsey and Richard Saller, *The Roman Empire, Economy, Society and Culture*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987, pp. 51-52, 58.

olives – supplemented by leather, milk, and meat from cattle, sheep, and goats.<sup>36</sup> The provincial expansion of agriculture resulted from political stability, improved water control, and effective taxation.<sup>37</sup> There were few new crops, improved seed varieties, or better farming or processing technologies.<sup>38</sup>

The backbone of Roman political administration was a militaristic ethos. Rome initially constructed a strong military machine by striking alliances with defeated Italian states.<sup>39</sup> The expanding Roman state established military strength and discipline

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<sup>36</sup> Peter Garnsey, *Famine and Food Supply in the Graeco-roman World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 274.

<sup>37</sup> Barnaby Rogerson, *North Africa, A History from the Mediterranean Shore to the Sahara*, London: Duckworth Overlook, 2012, pp. 58, 64-65.

<sup>38</sup> Peter Garnsey and Richard Saller, *The Roman Empire, Economy, Society and Culture*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987, pp. 62-63.

<sup>39</sup> Tim Cornell and John Matthews, *Atlas of the Roman World*, New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1995, p. 39.

by placing career citizen soldiers in its legions and paying and feeding them well.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Galea\\_\(helmet\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Galea_(helmet))

*Militaristic Ethos in Roman Administration –  
Decorated Roman Officer's Helmet (Galea)*

Military discipline led to political stability.<sup>40</sup> Rome's territorial expansion outside of peninsular Italy created immediate wealth

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<sup>40</sup> Tim Cornell and John Matthews, *Atlas of the Roman World*, New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1995, pp. 82-83.

(booty and tribute) and eventual tax and food transfers.<sup>41</sup> The military was a critical part of provincial development. Legion camps became Roman towns, and ex-soldiers settled on provincial lands and became tax-paying farmers. A military career for officers was prestigious and lucrative in imperial Rome.

Rome's strict socio-political hierarchy allowed the rich to control the poor, but permitted social mobility. The three aristocratic ranks – senators (elected officials at the top of the pyramid), equestrians (military officers and officials of the central government), and decurions (members of local governments) – usurped political power, while free citizens, non-citizens, and slaves produced most of the agricultural wealth. During the Republic (509-27 BCE), the Senate elected the rulers. But under the Principate (27 BCE-476 CE), imperial succession prevailed, often decided by military prowess.

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<sup>41</sup> Tim Cornell and John Matthews, *Atlas of the Roman World*, New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1995, pp. 50-51.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at  
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:0\\_Sarcophage\\_d%27Acilia -  
\\_Pal. Massimo alle Terme.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:0_Sarcophage_d%27Acilia_-_Pal._Massimo_alle_Terme.JPG)>

*Roman Senators, 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE – Debating Imperial Succession*

Effective public administration was a central pillar of the pragmatic Roman Empire. The government maintained law and order, collected taxes, and ran on a cash basis (without borrowing).

The central bureaucracy was small, about one-twentieth that of

contemporary Han China.<sup>42</sup> Much administration was done in cities.<sup>43</sup> The state did not directly control production or trade and built no state factories.<sup>44</sup> The effective enforcement of Roman law encouraged the development of private trade and enterprise.<sup>45</sup> It carried out regular provincial censuses to facilitate the collection of agricultural (property and head) taxes. Peninsular Italy was exempted from those taxes.

The Roman Empire thus was based on a disciplined army, a hierarchical society, and a small but effective bureaucracy to

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<sup>42</sup> Peter Garnsey and Richard Saller, *The Roman Empire, Economy, Society and Culture*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987, pp. 20-21.

<sup>43</sup> Peter Garnsey and Richard Saller, *The Roman Empire, Economy, Society and Culture*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987, p. 26.

<sup>44</sup> Peter Garnsey, *Food and Society in Classical Antiquity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 30-31.

<sup>45</sup> Peter Garnsey and Richard Saller, *The Roman Empire, Economy, Society and Culture*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987, p. 56.

collect agricultural taxes.<sup>46</sup> That solid basis encouraged a wide variety of technological innovations – aqueducts, concrete, vertical water-wheels, Roman arches, and hydraulic mining.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at  
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Roma06\(js\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Roma06(js).jpg)>

*Bread and Circuses in the Roman Empire –  
The Colosseum (Flavian Amphitheater), 80 CE*

**Summary of Control in the Roman Empire.** Imperial control in the Roman Empire was based on a disciplined army, a

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<sup>46</sup> Peter Garnsey, *Famine and Food Supply in the Graeco-roman World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 245.

hierarchical society, and a small bureaucracy to collect agricultural taxes. The pantheistic Roman religion was only a supplemental dimension of elite control. Effective public administration was a central pillar of the Roman Empire. The government maintained law and order, collected taxes, and ran on a cash basis without borrowing. The central bureaucracy was very small, only about one-twentieth that of Han China. The Roman state did not directly control production or trade and built no state factories. The effective enforcement of Roman law encouraged the development of private trade and enterprise.

In the east – Greece, Asia Minor, and the Levant – Rome preserved the advanced Greek culture, made little effort to impose Roman religious beliefs, ruled indirectly through existing local governments, and taxed enough to pay provincial expenses (including Roman troops). Leaders in Rome hoped that taxes raised in the east would cover local military and administrative expenses. In the west – northern Africa, Iberia, Gaul, and Germany – Roman administrators introduced Roman culture and

religion, ruled directly, expanded agricultural estates, and taxed heavily to transfer resources and food to Rome. Roman leaders relied on tax revenues from the west – and those from Egypt – to support the one million residents of Rome and fund the empire.

### **Political Administration in the Han Empire of China.**

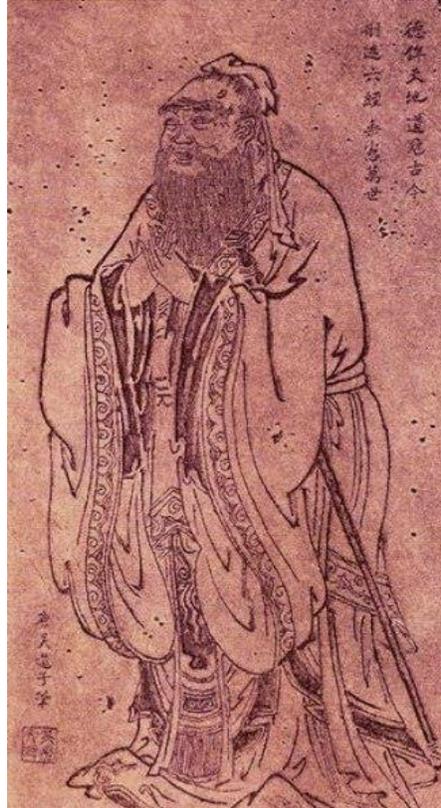
The Han Empire (206 BCE-220 CE) was the longest reigning dynasty in Chinese history.<sup>47</sup> The early Han emperors relied mainly on Daoism, using magicians, astrologers, seers, and shamans to interpret omens and set policies.<sup>48</sup> Later, Emperor Wudi (ruled 141-87 BCE) introduced Confucianism as the basis of government, employing highly literate scholar-officials who ran

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<sup>47</sup> John Fairbank and Merle Goldman, *China, A New History*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998, p. 60.

<sup>48</sup> Patricia Buckley Erbey, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China*, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 71.

the large Han bureaucracy according to principles, rituals, self-restraint, and loyalty.<sup>49</sup>



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at  
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Confucius\\_Tang\\_Dynasty.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Confucius_Tang_Dynasty.jpg)>

*Confucius (551-479 BCE), Created the Philosophy of Chinese Government – Painting by Tang Artist Wu Daozi, 8<sup>th</sup> century*

The agricultural sector employed the vast majority of Han China's workers, and agriculture was the primary source of Han

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<sup>49</sup> Patricia Buckley Erbey, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China*, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 77-79.

wealth and power.<sup>50</sup> Emperor Wudi's goal was to promote independent, land-owning peasants (who would pay their taxes directly to his government) in preference to tenant farmers on large aristocratic estates (who would pay half their crop as rent to landlords who, in turn, often found ways to evade paying taxes).<sup>51</sup> Farms, freehold or tenant, were small, typically only about four to five acres, and average farm households contained five adult or child workers. Less than one percent of Han China's population was enslaved (usually prisoners of war used in domestic service), and slavery was unimportant in agriculture.<sup>52</sup> Although tenancy

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<sup>50</sup> 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.

<sup>51</sup> Patricia Buckley Erbey, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China*, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 64-66.

<sup>52</sup> 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. 64-66.

increased in the Later Han period, free peasants operated about three-fourths of China's farmland at the end of the Han dynasty.<sup>53</sup>



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at  
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:China\\_Harvest.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:China_Harvest.jpg)>

*Wheat Harvest in North China –  
Modern Techniques Are Similar To Those Used in the Han Era*

Han governments set reasonable tax rates in hopes of encouraging agricultural production and avoiding tax evasion. To

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<sup>53</sup> Patricia Buckley Erbey, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China*, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 73-75.

facilitate tax collection, Han officials maintained annual registers of land and farming households.<sup>54</sup> Land taxes (paid in grain or silk) were light – initially one-thirtieth of the harvest, although they later evolved into fixed rates based on acreage.<sup>55</sup> Poll (head) taxes per adult were set at 120 *cash* (round coins with square holes containing about 80 percent copper and 20 percent tin, lead, or iron – the main form of money in Han China).

Land and poll taxes were affordable in normal times. But one year in three was not normal. In its 446 years in power, the Han dynasty suffered endless major natural disasters – 43 droughts, 68 floods, and 37 locust and other insect infestations. The government responded with policies of food relief, assistance to resettle farmers in the south or on the northern frontiers (most

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<sup>54</sup> Michael Loewe, *Everyday Life in Early Imperial China*, New York: Harper & Row, 1968, pp. 68-73.

<sup>55</sup> 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. 72-74.

displaced peasants moved south), and loans of operating capital to free peasant farmers.

The Han government also constructed a network of public grain storage depots to provide food in emergencies and to stabilize grain prices. But that system (the ever-normal granary) did not work well. Many free peasants and tenants thus were devastated by the frequent natural disasters. Despite the growing concentration of landholdings in large aristocratic estates and the negative buffeting of natural disasters, the wealth and power of the Han Empire rested on the backs of its millions of small-scale farmers.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Arthur F. Wright, *Buddhism in Chinese History*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1959, pp. 8-9, 18-20.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at  
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Yuanyang\\_hani\\_farmer.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Yuanyang_hani_farmer.jpg)>

*Chinese Farmer, Yunnan Province –  
His Ancestors Demanded Food Relief During Famines*

Though renowned and romanticized in history books, the Silk Road – the land-based trade route linking China with India, Persia, and Rome – was not a major source of wealth for the Han Empire.<sup>57</sup> During the last three Han centuries, beginning with the first caravan in 106 BCE, trade on the Silk Road was brisk because

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<sup>57</sup> Stephen G. Haw, *A Traveller's History of China*, New York: Interlink Books, 2003, pp. 83-85.

of relative stability in Turkestan (contemporary western China).<sup>58</sup>

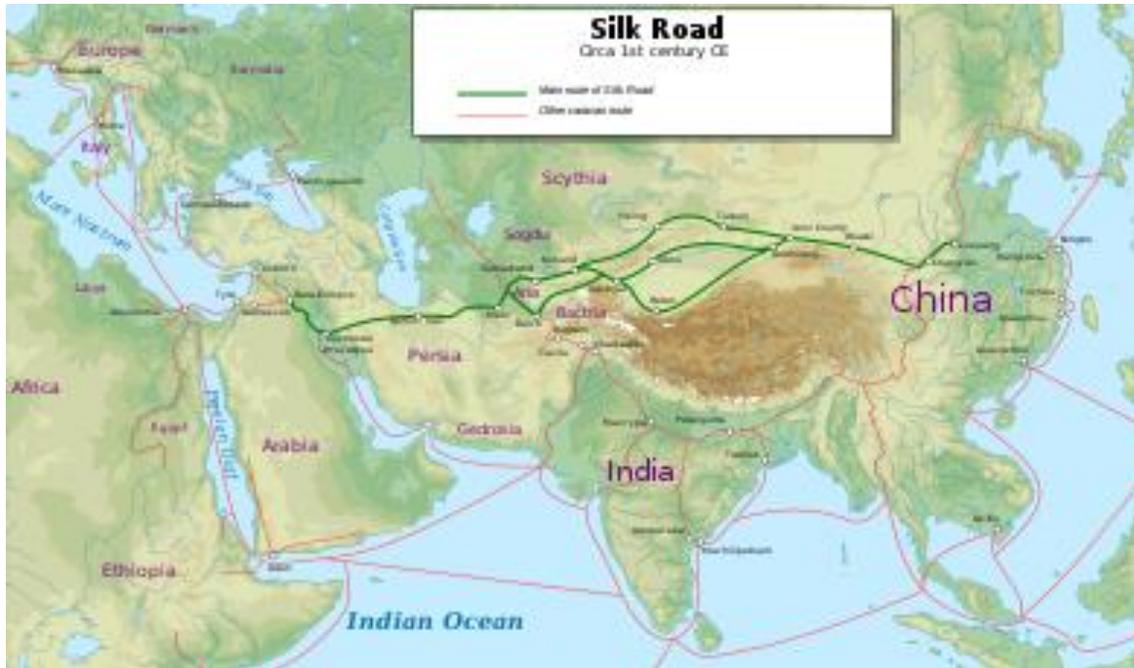
The primary exports from Han China, traded along the Silk Road, were luxury items of low bulk and weight – silk (thread, cloth, and textiles), lacquer-ware, bronze utensils, pottery, and jade. The highest quality trade goods – silk, lacquer-ware, bronze, and ceramics – were made in government-owned factories, but the largest quantities of those items were produced in smaller private-owned factories. In return, Han China obtained Silk Road imports of horses, furs, cattle, and sheep from the steppe and of gold, silver, glassware, jewelry, gemstones, and woolen and linen textiles from Rome, Persia, and India.

Agricultural innovations as well as goods moved along the Silk Road. China received the grape, alfalfa, chives, coriander, cucumber, figs, safflower, and sesame from regions in India or the

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<sup>58</sup> John Fairbank and Merle Goldman, *China, A New History*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998, pp. 57-62.

Middle East, whereas the peach, apricot, rice, and soybeans moved from China westward.<sup>59</sup>



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Silk\\_Road\\_in\\_the\\_I\\_century\\_AD\\_-\\_en.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Silk_Road_in_the_I_century_AD_-_en.svg)>

*The Silk Road –  
Linking the Han Chinese and Roman Empires, 1<sup>st</sup> c. BCE-3<sup>rd</sup> c. CE*

Han government officials, imbued with the Confucian philosophy, down-graded the importance of trade and merchants. Because they suspected merchants of profiteering, they attempted to regulate trade and prices through government controls. But

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<sup>59</sup> Stephen G. Haw, *A Traveller's History of China*, New York: Interlink Books, 2003, pp. 83-85.

trade controls never had much success, in part because the Confucian bureaucrats overcame their anathema about trade to cut private deals with merchants. Bribery helped the merchants obtain licenses and avoid taxes and provided the officials with supplementary income. In 117 BCE, Emperor Wudi established government monopolies on the production and trade of salt and iron.<sup>60</sup> Those monopolies were intended to generate government revenue, assert Han imperial power, and control untrustworthy merchants.<sup>61</sup>

**Summary of Control in the Han Empire of China.** The early Han emperors in China relied mainly on Daoism, using magicians, astrologers, seers, and shamans to interpret omens and set policies. Their expansionist policies were justified by mystical religious beliefs and practices. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE, Han

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<sup>60</sup> Valerie Hansen, *The Open Empire, A History of China to 1600*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000, p. 130.

<sup>61</sup> Caroline Blunden and Mark Elvin, *Cultural Atlas of China*, Abingdon, England: Andromeda Oxford Limited, 1998, p. 125.

Emperor Wudi introduced Confucianism as the basis of government, employing highly literate scholar-officials who ran the bureaucracy according to strict principles, rituals, self-restraint, and loyalty. Confucianism was a philosophical guide to correct behavior rather than a religion, and it served as the basis of scholarly bureaucratic rule in China for nearly two millennia.

At the peak of its efficiency under Wudi, the Han government had strong bureaucratic control, effective taxation, and a powerful, centrally-controlled military. All of those effective means of imperial control subsequently unraveled, and in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries CE the later Han rulers encountered massive peasant rebellions. Lacking a strongly-held religious justification for imperial rule, Han China disintegrated when its ruling Confucianist bureaucracy turned corrupt and ineffective.

**Comparison of Imperial Control in the Roman Empire and Han China.** The pattern of imperial control in these two early multinational empires shows variations on some criteria and commonalities on others. Daoism in Han China was important

only at the beginning of the dynasty, and the pantheon of Roman gods played only a small part in Rome's imperial control. The political legitimacy of elite rule was based on nationalistic chauvinism in Han China and on purported Roman superiority in the diverse Roman Empire. Strong, well-organized bureaucracies governed both empires and taxed effectively, but the government service of Rome was small and very efficient whereas that of Han China was bloated and employed much of the Confucianist elite. During their formative and peak periods, both imperial states had centrally-controlled and well-led militaries. Eventually the quality and effectiveness of their armies declined in tandem with the other aspects of imperial control.

### **Effective Taxation as a Means of Imperial Control**

Effective taxation was essential for the survival of early empires. Dynasties first had to create political legitimacy, and then they had to set up militaries and bureaucracies to buttress the structure of their states. Political stability was necessary for the creation of wealth – through agricultural production, international

trade, or foreign conquest (to control additional farmers and merchants). Yet all of those accomplishments were not enough to sustain imperial rule. Imperial dynasties (represented by central governments) needed to find ways to transfer parts of the nation's wealth to the center – that is, from the masses to the elite. To do that, dynasts had to create strong tax-collecting agencies within the government's bureaucracy.

Effective tax collection had several components. The rates of taxation needed to be set so that tax burdens would not severely reduce production incentives or precipitate political rebellions. Tax collectors had to be able to estimate levels of agricultural production so that farmers could not easily understate their output to avoid taxation. Customs officials needed to be able to control the smuggling of traded goods. The taxing agents ideally would not be corrupt and encourage farmers or traders to pay them off to avert taxation. To demonstrate the perils of taxation in early empires, I have chosen to contrast two Islamic states – the Mughal Empire and the Ottoman Empire. Both of those Turkish-led

empires reached their peak in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, and both featured innovative means of collecting agricultural taxes.

**Effective Taxation in the Mughal Empire of India.** In 1555, the Mughal Empire consisted of the Delhi plain, the Punjab, and Afghanistan. Jalal-ud-din Muhammad Akbar (1542-1605) became *padishah* (emperor) in that year at age 13. Akbar was the most versatile and talented of all the Mughal emperors.<sup>62</sup> He was a brilliant Turcoman warrior who combined his skill in military strategy, organization, and use of gunpowder with substantial resources that permitted a large standing infantry and cavalry (90 percent of tax revenue was devoted to military purposes).

Akbar personally led Mughal military victories and political takeovers in Rajputana (Rajasthan, 1568), Gujarat (1572), Bengal (1574), Kabul (Afghanistan, 1581), Kashmir (1586), Orissa (1592), and Baluchistan (1595).<sup>63</sup> Under Akbar, the Mughals often

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<sup>62</sup> John F. Richards, *The Mughal Empire*, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 56-57.

conquered through impressive displays of military power rather than the application of brute force, and they occasionally had to rely on diplomacy, bribery, and sowing the seeds of dissension within enemy ranks.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal, *Modern South Asia, History, Culture, Political Economy*, London: Routledge, 1998, pp. 37-38.

<sup>64</sup> Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760*, Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1993, pp. 140-143.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at  
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mughal\\_Empire,\\_1605.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mughal_Empire,_1605.png)>

### *Mughal Empire Under Akbar, 1605*

Unlike many skilled militarists, Akbar was an exceptional public administrator and self-promoting publicist.<sup>65</sup> He adopted Perso-Islamic methods of governing and used Persian as the

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<sup>65</sup> John F. Richards, *The Mughal Empire*, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 58.

language of government.<sup>66</sup> Akbar's main goal was to introduce a remunerative yet consistent program of taxation on agriculture and trade. To that end, he instituted a data-intensive system of taxing farmers based on farm size and expected crop yield, and he improved the road network and built new customs posts to tax trade. He also put all public officials on salary except for *mansabdars* (a hierarchically graded corps of soldiers-administrators) who were responsible for collecting taxes.<sup>67</sup>

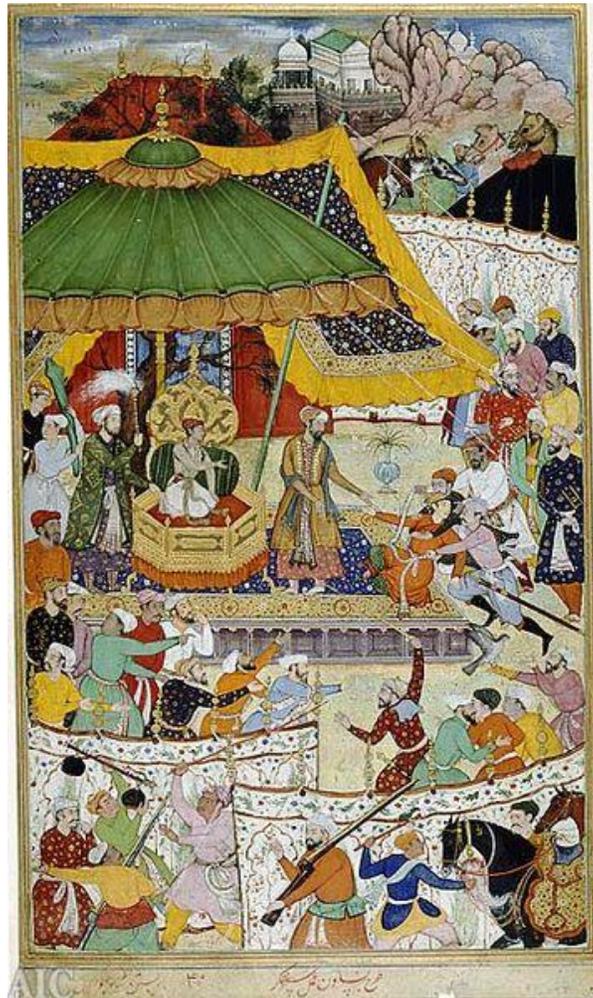
Akbar was an unusually astute politician. To rule the majority Hindu population, he adroitly accommodated the Rajput-Hindu culture. He wooed Rajput chieftains by offering them places in the official nobility ledgers in return for military loyalty. The Mughals thus allowed the Rajputs to retain their honor as Hindu warriors. By serving the Mughals, the Rajput chieftains

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<sup>66</sup> Stanley Wolpert, *India*, Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2009, pp. 40-42.

<sup>67</sup> Andrew Robinson, *India, A Short History*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2014, p. 127.

acquired power and wealth outside of Rajputana within the entire Mughal Empire. The Mughal-Rajput political alliance endured for two centuries.<sup>68</sup>



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at  
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Court\\_of\\_Akbar\\_from\\_Akbarnama.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Court_of_Akbar_from_Akbarnama.jpg)>

*Scene from Akbarnama – Depicting Akbar’s Court, c. 1590*

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<sup>68</sup> Gordon Johnson, *Cultural Atlas of India*, Abingdon, England: Andromeda Oxford Limited, 1996, pp. 87-88.

Akbar abolished the annoying tax on Hindu religious pilgrimages in 1563 and the hated *jizya* (non-Muslim poll tax) a year later.<sup>69</sup> Akbar, though illiterate, was a thoughtful and curious intellectual, and he designed his own form of Islam, based on Sufism (the mystical version of the Islamic religion). Through military, administrative, and political skill, Akbar, at his death in 1605, left as his legacy a powerful, multi-regional, and politically centralized Mughal Empire.

During the height of the Mughal Empire in India (1526-1707), there were no marked improvements in agricultural technology or in the pattern of farm sizes. But Indian agriculture generated large surpluses because the Mughals expanded their territory, improved roads, and opened up fertile virgin land, notably in eastern Bengal.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 126-127.

<sup>70</sup> Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760*, Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1993, pp. 200-202.

The Mughal emperors introduced an effective Persian method of agricultural taxation – the *zabt* system – into India.<sup>71</sup> To implement that system, tax officials determined pre-set tax rates by carrying out detailed land surveys and collecting crop production and price data over lengthy periods. For each farm plot, they estimated expected yields and revenues, based on ten years of historical data. The *zamindars* (tax collectors) then charged each farmer a pre-set tax rate. The tax was paid in cash, which encouraged sales of agricultural produce and developed local commodity markets.<sup>72</sup>

The tax rate charged differed by commodity. Grains (wheat, rice, millets, and barley) were usually charged one-third of the harvest, whereas cash crops (sugar, indigo, and cotton) were taxed

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<sup>71</sup> John F. Richards, *The Mughal Empire*, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 185-187.

<sup>72</sup> Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760*, Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1993, 228-229.

at the rate of one-fifth of the harvest.<sup>73</sup> Those high rates apparently were not onerous, because agricultural growth was vibrant and the population of India expanded gradually but steadily – from roughly 150 million in 1600 to about 200 million in 1800.<sup>74</sup>



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at  
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Traditional\\_ploughing\\_-\\_Karnataka.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Traditional_ploughing_-_Karnataka.jpg)>

*Traditional Plowing Technique in Bihar –  
Unchanged Since the Mughal Era*

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<sup>73</sup> John F. Richards, *The Mughal Empire*, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 84-85.

<sup>74</sup> John F. Richards, *The Mughal Empire*, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 190.

The Mughal Empire levied moderate and predictable rates of international trade taxes, usually about five percent of the value of goods imported or exported. Mughal wealth from trade was much less than that from agriculture, but trade-based wealth grew during the nearly two centuries of effective Mughal rule (1526-1707). During the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Mughal commerce occurred mostly within a regional trade network that linked India with Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and East Africa.<sup>75</sup> India exported cotton and silk textiles, grain, and pepper and imported mostly specie (silver and gold), supplemented by horses, ivory, and exotic consumer goods.<sup>76</sup>

Foreign trade grew in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when exchange with Europe accelerated. Textile and pepper exports expanded and were accompanied by raw silk exports (to France and Italy) and

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<sup>75</sup> Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal, *Modern South Asia, History, Culture, Political Economy*, Abingdon, Oxon, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2018, pp. 37-38.

<sup>76</sup> John F. Richards, *The Mughal Empire*, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 4.

sales of indigo dye. In return, the Mughals continued to receive mostly gold and silver (more than 34 tons of silver per year) plus limited amounts of English woolens, European luxuries, and metals (tin, lead, and copper).<sup>77</sup> Mughal tax collection was very effective. About nine-tenths of government revenue came from rural taxes on agriculture and the remaining one-tenth from urban taxes on trade.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:16th\\_century\\_Portuguese\\_Spanish\\_trade\\_routes.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:16th_century_Portuguese_Spanish_trade_routes.png)

### *Global Trade Routes to India, 16<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries*

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<sup>77</sup> John F. Richards, *The Mughal Empire*, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 196-198.

**Summary of Control in the Mughal Empire of India.** The Turcoman rulers of Mughal India were alien in ethnicity, culture, and religion. Although large parts of India had been ruled by Muslim outsiders for five centuries when the Mughals took command in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, less than one-fourth of the population of the Indian subcontinent had converted to Islam. The Mughals thus governed north-central India through military force, religious tolerance, and political alliances. The Mughal empire-builder, Akbar, introduced the practice of religious tolerance of non-Muslims. Non-Muslims Indians were encouraged to practice their traditional religions – Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism – and there was little pressure placed on them to convert to Islam. But they also were expected to revere the Mughal emperor, at least nominally.

In India, the Mughal emperors installed the same Perso-Islamic system of bureaucracy and culture at court that they had employed in Central Asia. However, the Mughal monarchs ruled much of their empire indirectly, allowing local rulers to govern so

long as they paid taxes and provided troops and war elephants. Following Emperor Akbar's lead, the Mughal emperors adroitly accommodated the Rajput-Hindu culture to maintain key allies in Rajasthan. The Mughals accorded their allied non-Muslim rulers high official status in their ruling hierarchies. Mughal officials also installed a complete and very efficient method of collecting agricultural taxes. That well-conceived governing system provided a stable, but fragile, system of political and military control for the Mughals. The system of control fell apart in the later Mughal era when Emperor Aurangzeb and his successors discarded religious tolerance and attempted to force their Indian allies to convert to Islam.

**Effective Taxation in the Ottoman Empire.** Food agriculture was the primary source of wealth in the Ottoman Empire. During the Ottoman era (1300-1923), agriculture continued to be practiced much as it had been under the Roman and Byzantine Empires. The major crops were cereals (wheat and barley), olives, and grapes, and the principal animal products and

services came from raising cattle, horses, and sheep. The key agricultural regions in the Ottoman Empire were those that supported the largest rural populations – the Balkans, the Anatolian valleys, the Nile Valley of Egypt, and Hungary.

Farm structure in the Ottoman heartland (Anatolia and the Balkans) was small (12-40 acres) reflecting the state-sponsored feudal organization. The state owned the land (*miri*). The government allocated the land to peasant (*raya*) households who farmed it and received rights of perpetual tenancy (which passed through the male line).<sup>78</sup> The profit per acre farmed did not change much because there was little new agricultural technology.

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<sup>78</sup> Jason Goodwin, *Lords of the Horizon, A History of the Ottoman Empire*, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1998, pp. 18-21.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at  
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Wheat\\_close-up.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Wheat_close-up.JPG)>

### *Wheat – Food Staple in Anatolia Since Agriculture Began 10,500 Years Ago*

To broaden the agricultural tax base, the government expanded farmed area through resettlement or reclamation schemes.<sup>79</sup> Survey registers indicate that both land under production and tax revenue peaked in the 16<sup>th</sup> century when the

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<sup>79</sup> Lord Kinross, *The Ottoman Centuries, The Rise and Fall of the Turkish Empire*, New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1977, pp. 152-154.

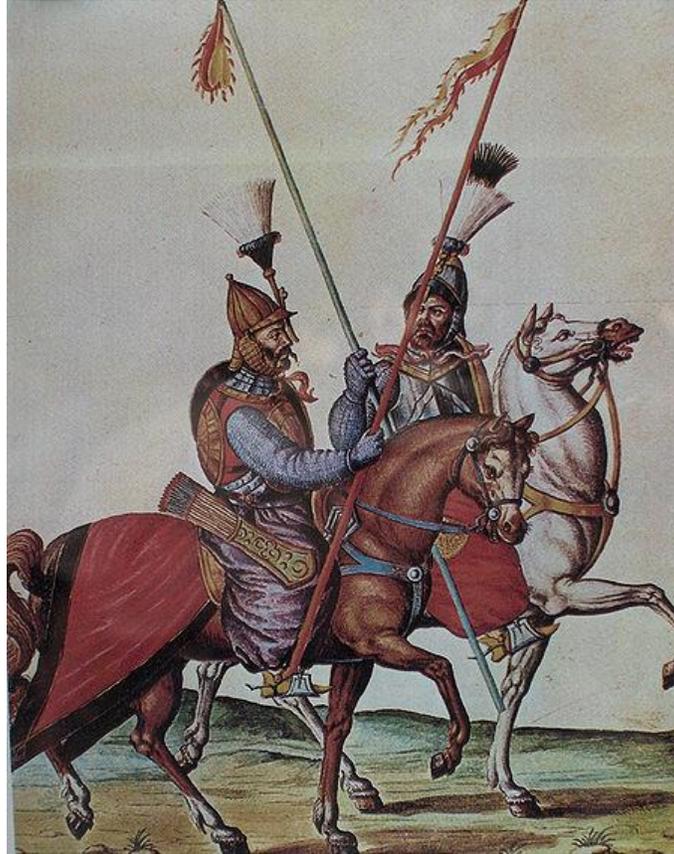
government was expanding farmed area aggressively. Farmers paid taxes equal to 10 percent of the expected value of farm output. The tax liability was calculated from cadastral surveys that registered crops, cropped area, and yields and from averages of recent regional prices.<sup>80</sup> Farmers could earn tax exemptions if they farmed reclaimed land or if they gave gifts to tax-free Islamic foundations (*vakifs*).<sup>81</sup> The government allocated rights to collect certain taxes (*timars*) to military officers (*sipahis*) who retained a portion of the tax revenues in return for their military service.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Halil Inalcik, *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire, Volume One, 1300-1600*, Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 135-139, 150.

<sup>81</sup> Jason Goodwin, *Lords of the Horizon, A History of the Ottoman Empire*, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1998, pp. 142-143.

<sup>82</sup> Douglas A. Howard, *The History of Turkey*, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2001, pp. 47-48.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at  
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Battle\\_of\\_Vienna.Sipahis.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Battle_of_Vienna.Sipahis.jpg)>

### *Ottoman Light Cavalrymen (Sipahis) Collected Taxes (Timars)*

The earnings from foreign trade provided an important supplementary source of wealth for the Ottoman Empire. Its principal exports were cloth – silk from Bursa, cotton from Anatolia, and mohair from Ankara – carpets, furs, and bees' wax.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Halil Inalcik, *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire, Volume One, 1300-1600*, Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 219-223.

The Ottomans imported grain and meat (from Russia), fine woolen cloth (from Florence), raw silk (from Iran), metals (from Europe), and slaves (Caucasians and Africans).<sup>84</sup> Ottoman government intervention in trade was limited, except for state monopolies on salt, soap, candle wax, and armaments. The government imposed trade taxes at a rate usually of 20 percent on both imports and exports and either auctioned the taxing rights to consortia of financiers (tax farmers) or appointed government tax collectors (*emins*).

Although a few of the merchants in the Ottoman Empire were Turkish, most were Greeks and Jews, notably Marrano Jewish immigrants (exiles from Catholic Spain).<sup>85</sup> Ottoman trade was centered in three cities in northwestern Anatolia – Bursa (14<sup>th</sup>-

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<sup>84</sup> Douglas A. Howard, *The History of Turkey*, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2001, pp. 49-50.

<sup>85</sup> Halil Inalcik, *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire, Volume One, 1300-1600*, Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 209-213, 266-267.

16<sup>th</sup> centuries), Istanbul (16<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries), and Izmir (Smyrna, 17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries). Those three cities specialized in transit trade, transshipping goods made elsewhere along with products of the empire. Bursa and Izmir were the Ottoman entrepôts on the lucrative Asia-Europe trade routes in which Indian spices (especially pepper) and Iranian raw silk were exchanged for European fine woolen cloth.<sup>86</sup> Istanbul was the nexus of the critical Black Sea trading system in which Russian and Danubian grain, meat, and furs moved south and Turkish silk, cotton, and woolen cloth went north.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Halil Inalcik, *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire, Volume One, 1300-1600*, Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 237-239.

<sup>87</sup> Halil Inalcik, *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire, Volume One, 1300-1600*, Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 179-181.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at  
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:UluCami,Bursa\\_-\\_panoramio.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:UluCami,Bursa_-_panoramio.jpg)>

*Grand Mosque (Ulu Cami), Bursa –  
First Ottoman Capital and Later Silk Production Center*

Foreign conquest was a major source of Ottoman wealth.<sup>88</sup>

The Empire began with a military ethos – conquest in an Islamic  
jihad created Sultanic pride and personal prestige for warriors.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, New York: Warner Books, 1991, pp. 225-228.

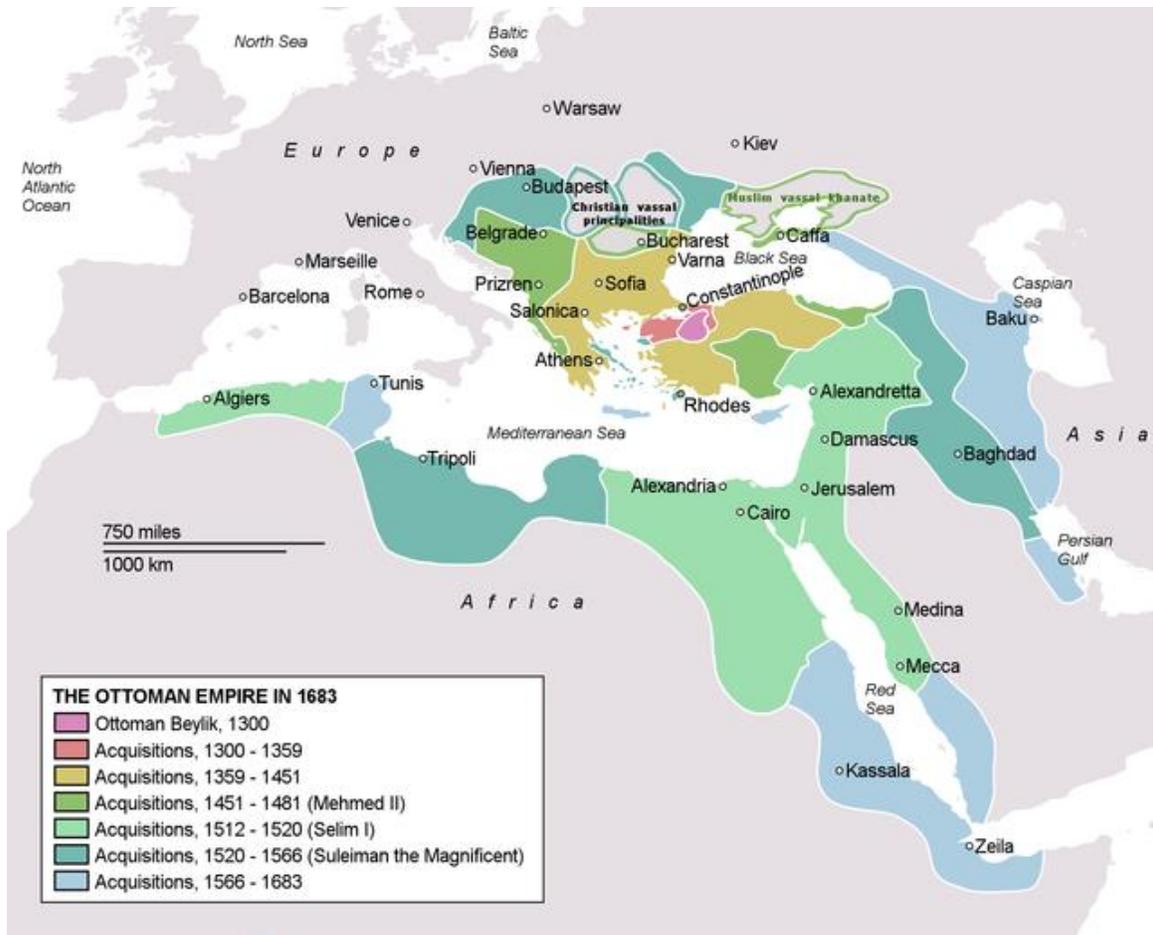
<sup>89</sup> Halil Inalcik, *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire, Volume One, 1300-1600*, Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1997, 132-133.

But the main imperial motive was financial gain by collecting booty, tribute, or taxes.<sup>90</sup> Between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Ottoman Empire had better discipline, training, military intelligence, and field mobility than its foes did. The Turkish artillery then had cutting-edge heavy cannons. Ottoman conquest occurred in two phases – of the heartland (Southeastern Europe and Anatolia) in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, and of Syria, Egypt, Arabia, North Africa, and Mesopotamia in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The Ottomans could not conquer either Austria or Persia because their lines of supply and communication were overextended.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Jason Goodwin, *Lords of the Horizon, A History of the Ottoman Empire*, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1998, pp. 65-72.

<sup>91</sup> Lord Kinross, *The Ottoman Centuries, The Rise and Fall of the Turkish Empire*, New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1977, pp. 195-196.



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

### *Expansion of the Ottoman Empire, 1300-1683*

The pragmatic Ottoman rulers employed different modes of governance and taxation in their two areas of conquest. In the heartland, they settled Turks, organized ethnic *millets* (self-governing units), assimilated diverse cultures, and taxed heavily.<sup>92</sup>

But in Asia and Africa, they sought to pacify existing Islamic cultures, rule indirectly (using Ottoman governors and local administrations), and effect only moderate tax transfers to Istanbul. That complex system of control began to unravel during the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century when the Empire started to experience weak leadership.<sup>93</sup>

**Summary of Control in the Ottoman Empire.** The Turkish sultans of the Ottoman Empire ruled areas containing a diverse mélange of ethnicities – Turks, Kurds, Armenians, Slavs, Greeks, Arabs, Albanians, and many others. Although the Turks were the majority population in Anatolia, they were a minority within the multinational Ottoman Empire. To control their non-Turkish subject peoples, the Ottoman rulers chose not to attempt to impose their religion, Sunni Islam, throughout the empire. Instead,

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<sup>92</sup> Jason Goodwin, *Lords of the Horizon, A History of the Ottoman Empire*, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1998, pp. 91-96.

<sup>93</sup> Jason Goodwin, *Lords of the Horizon, A History of the Ottoman Empire*, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1998, pp. 235-236.

they ruled through religious tolerance, military force, and political alliances, although all Ottoman subjects were expected to revere the sultan and his royal family.

Agriculture was the primary source of wealth and government revenue in the Ottoman Empire. Ottoman officials astutely devised an agricultural taxation system that was similar to that used in Mughal India. To prevent tax avoidance, the tax liabilities of farmers were based on cadastral surveys of crops, planted area, and yields plus averages of recent regional prices. The typical tax rate was ten percent of the value of farm output.

Earnings from foreign trade generated significant wealth in the Ottoman Empire. Istanbul was critically located at the crossroads of trade routes connecting Europe with Asia and linking the Black and Mediterranean Seas. Ottoman officials supplemented their revenue from agriculture by taxing both imports and exports, usually at a rate of 20 percent.

Ottoman sultans gained control of their key agricultural regions (the Balkans, Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Hungary) through

foreign conquest. In their Balkan-Anatolian heartland, the pragmatic Ottomans governed directly and taxed heavily, whereas elsewhere in Western Asia and North Africa they ruled indirectly and taxed moderately.

**Comparison of Imperial Control in the Mughal and Ottoman Empires.** The pattern of imperial rule in our two Islamic multinational empires strongly reflects the ethnicity of their imperial elites. The Mughal and Ottoman rulers designed eclectic systems of imperial control that attempted to facilitate their rule of peoples of differing ethnicity or religion. The Mughal rulers were Turcomans from Central Asia and had to work very hard to legitimize their rule of India. The Ottoman sultans were Seljuk Turks, as were many of their Anatolian subjects, but non-Turkish peoples constituted the majority in the empire. The Mughals and the Ottomans both practiced Sunni Islam yet promoted religious tolerance as a key means of political alliance and control.

Both Mughal and Ottoman rulers used farm surveys and expected yields and prices to estimate agricultural tax liabilities, and both taxed foreign trade heavily. Both followed Perso-Islamic rules at court and in bureaucratic governance, but permitted regional rulers to use their own governing methods so long as they paid their taxes. Mughal and Ottoman rulers understood well that their pragmatic means of political and religious persuasion had to be underpinned by military control.

During their periods of strength, both imperial dynasties used judicious blends of carrots and sticks to maintain imperial control of their large and diverse populations. Following Emperor Akbar's lead, the Mughal emperors adroitly accommodated the Rajput-Hindu culture to maintain key allies in Rajasthan. Ottoman sultans, beginning with Sultan Suleiman I, chose to placate non-Turkish subjects by ruling indirectly and taxing moderately.

### **Comparison of Imperial Control in Early Empires and Kingdoms**

How did the elite control the masses in early empires? Some of the systems of government and forms of political legitimacy had deep religious roots. But not all of them did. At first glance, it might seem that the large, multinational empires would be more likely than smaller, regional kingdoms to employ religious-based rationales to justify their imperial rule. A broad, religious *raison d'être* might work well to control an ethnically heterogeneous population. However, that pattern did not appear in our twelve case studies.

Among our seven multinational empires, only Dynastic Egypt used religion as an integral rationale for political legitimacy. Achaemenid Persia, Han and Tang China, Mughal India, and the Ottoman Empire prided themselves on practicing religious tolerance and on not imposing an official government religion on their ethnic minority populations. Rome exported its pantheistic religion to its newly-settled territories in the western Mediterranean and in northern Africa, but it permitted conquered

peoples in the eastern Mediterranean and Egypt to continue to practice their traditional religions.

Religio-political control was much more important in our five regional kingdoms than it was in our seven larger empires. All five of our regional kingdoms were theocratic – pantheistic and later Christian Axum in Ethiopia, Hindu Gupta in India, Hindu/Buddhist Khmer in Cambodia, Buddhist Pagan in Burma, and Islamic Mali/Songhai in West Africa.

After establishing their political legitimacy, imperial states had to find effective means of maintaining control and collecting taxes. The elite desired to create wealth and then transfer much of it to themselves. How did the imperial governments collect taxes that supported the elite? All twelve of our studied governments maintained strong militaries to effect control, enforce taxation, and patrol vassals. But armies were expensive and potentially threatening to ruling elites. Effective states thus created efficient bureaucracies to govern and tax and minimized the size and strength of their armies.

The methods of collecting taxes differed according to the sources of wealth, but not according to the size or period of empire. Crop agriculture was easier to tax than animal agriculture because animals were mobile and fields were not. Trade taxes were easier to collect in large ports and entrepôts servicing few potential trade routes than in small collection centers that permitted widespread smuggling. All ten of our states that depended on agriculture effectively taxed their farmers. Mughal India and Ottoman Turkey perfected the best systems of agricultural taxation by forcing farmers to pay according to their past history of plantings and yields. The two trade-based states – Axum (Red Sea) and Mali/Songhai (Sahara Desert) – taxed international trade effectively because both dominated trade in their regions and controlled the key entry points for goods. The sources of wealth, therefore, affected methods of taxation more than the types of empire did.

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Early empires were extraordinary balancing acts when they were running well. It is impressive, and a bit surprising, that so many imperial dynasties were able to sustain their rule for generations and even centuries. So many variables had to fit together to underpin imperial control. Political legitimacy, always backed by brute force, was the first requirement. Most multinational empires relied on nationalistic chauvinism, whereas smaller and more ethnically homogeneous regional kingdoms were often theocratic. Among our five studied kingdoms were Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic theocracies. But six of our seven large empires practiced religious tolerance (Dynastic Egypt, whose pharaohs were deemed gods, was the exception).

Public administration came next. Enduring empires and kingdoms had loyal militaries and effective bureaucracies, at least much of the time. Finding the right balance between volunteer, conscripted, and mercenary forces was always a challenge. Rome set the standard for having a lean bureaucracy. Han China's government service was twenty times larger, because it employed

huge numbers of elite Confucianist scholars who spent their professional lives passing exams to earn status and promotions.

Effective taxation was a central dimension of administration, for empires as for all governments. The key was to set reasonable tax rates and systems, control tax avoidance, and employ generally non-corrupt tax collectors. Both the Mughal Indian and Ottoman Turkish Empires astutely used agricultural tax systems that limited tax avoidance by forcing farmers to pay taxes according to historical crop acreages and yields. Empires and kingdoms gradually disintegrated when political instability eroded these means of effective imperial control. I look at the causes of instability and subsequent decline in the next chapter.