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978-0-521-87095-5 - The Muslim Empires of the Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals

Stephen Frederic Dale

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Introduction

Between 1453 and 1526 Muslims founded three major states in the Mediterranean, Iran, and South Asia: respectively the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal empires. By the early seventeenth century their descendants controlled territories that encompassed much of the Muslim world, stretching from the Balkans and North Africa to the Bay of Bengal and including a combined population of between 130 and 160 million people. By that time also members of these dynasties had demonstrated their palpable self-confidence by constructing many of the fortresses, mosques, bazaars, and tombs that still stand as emblems of their military strength, wealth, sovereign pride, religious commitment, and aesthetic sophistication. Their record of stunning architectural achievement climaxed when in 1643 the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan completed the last exceptional building of this Muslim imperial era, the Taj Mahal.¹ Muslims and non-Muslims alike look back to the history of these states as collectively representing the last great moment of Muslim sovereignty. It is a world that Muslims lost in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. Many twenty-first-century Muslims are still profoundly saddened when they contemplate this imperial past and compare it with the community's loss of power, wealth, influence, and cultural splendor in the contemporary world.

These empires are significant because of what they represented and achieved, and because their complexity reminds us that Muslim civilization, like the predominantly Christian European civilization, cannot be equated solely with rigid, narrowly doctrinal interpretations of the faith. In the memoirs and monuments of kings, in the lyrics of poets, in the luminous paintings of artists, a world is revealed in the history and culture of these empires that is scarcely to be imagined by contemporary Middle Eastern Muslims or by Western observers familiar only with the

¹ Begun in 1632, the tomb complex was largely completed in 1643, but work on its decoration continued until 1647/48. Ebba Koch, *The Complete Taj Mahal* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2006), 97–100.

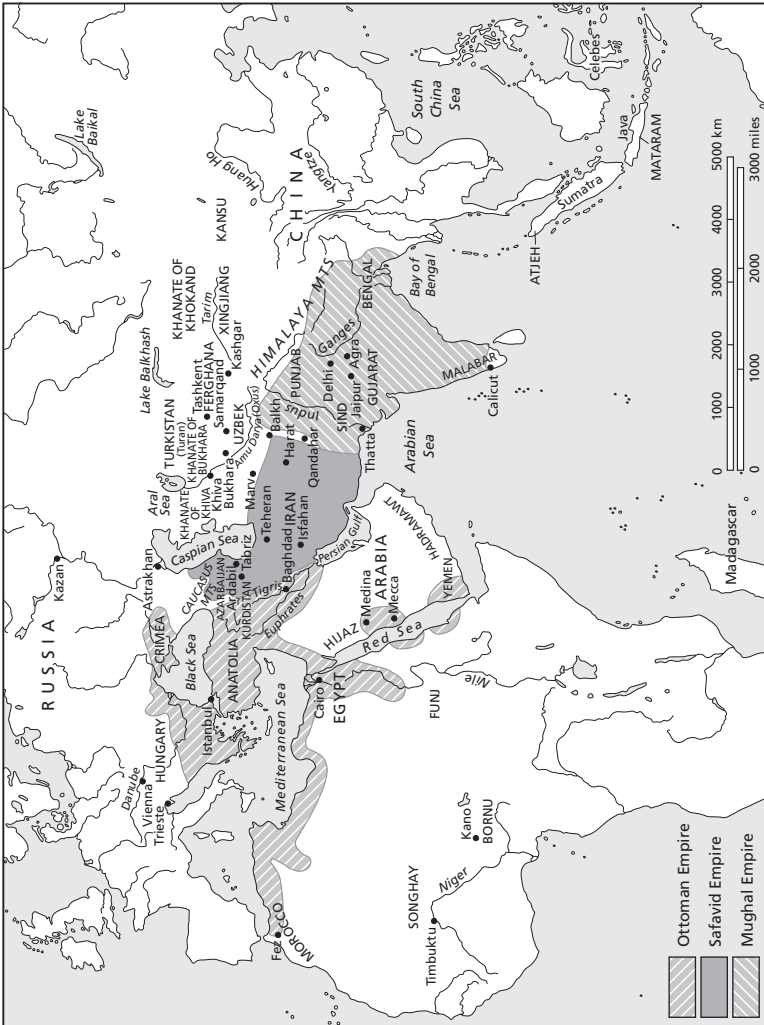
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Map 1. The Muslim Empires in 1700

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crabbed views of narrow-minded clerics or the simplistic distortions of their own popular media.

The Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal empires are also important as a group because they, like the diverse but related states of Western Europe, comprised an imperial cultural zone within the broader Islamic civilization, which included parts of Southeast Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. Muslims in these contiguous empires jointly inherited political, religious, literary, and artistic traditions, and their shared inheritance was reinforced by the circulation of individuals along well-established and protected trade routes linking Istanbul with Isfahan and Delhi.² Merchants, poets, artists, scholars, religious vagabonds, military advisors, and philosophers all moved with relative ease along these caravan routes and across political boundaries.

While the history of these empires illumines a shared, complex culture, it also serves as a reminder that Muslim empires were not just Muslim but also empires. This means several things. First, Islam played an important but not always a dominant role in their policies, institutions, and court culture. The Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal states are characterized here as Muslim empires because they were ruled by Muslim dynasties, whose individual monarchs embraced Muhammad's revelation and, to varying degrees, observed the tenets of the Islamic faith.³ They patronized Islamic religious and social institutions, driven by either genuine piety or enlightened self-interest or by differing combinations of these motives. In this they were no different from rulers in Europe or in Asia; they were complex and distinct individuals, not stereotypes of twenty-first-century religious debates.

Some monarchs were especially pious and attempted to impose their vision of an imagined Quranic society on their subjects, but Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals were also, like contemporary European Christian monarchs, dynastic rulers, whose first and last concern was the security, prosperity, and longevity of their lineages. Most members of these dynasties followed policies and established institutions primarily in order to perpetuate dynastic rule rather than to please God or their religious classes, although many felt formal piety and religious patronage to be inseparably linked to political survival. This rankled with some of their subjects, especially clerics, many of whom believed and sometimes openly asserted that

² An important article that notes these empires' analogous political institutions and common commercial traditions, while carefully delineating their shared religious knowledge, is Francis Robinson's, "Ottomans–Safavids–Mughals: Shared Knowledge and Connective Systems," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 8, No. 2 (1997), 151–84.

³ Iqtidar Alam Khan dissents from this characterization of the Mughals and prefers to characterize their state as "Indian" rather than "Muslim": "State in Mughal India: Re-Examining the Myths of a Counter-Vision," *Social Scientist* 29, No. 1/2 (January–February 2001), 16–45.

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imperial administrative codes were incompatible with religious law derived from the Quran and the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad.⁴

Many of these men or their advisors were also acutely conscious of pre-Islamic Iranian, Roman, and Turco-Mongol imperial traditions that bequeathed legitimizing concepts and prestigious precedents for the administration of diverse populations in far-flung territories. Thus, members of all three dynasties invoked pre-Islamic imperial Iranian nomenclature such as *shah*, *padishah* or *shahanshah*, as well as manipulating ideas of kingship derived from the pre-Islamic Iranian dynasty, the Sasanians (226–651 CE). Ottomans also reveled in the title *Kaysar* or *Caesar* after they occupied Constantinople (between 330 and 1453 CE the capital of the Byzantine or Eastern Roman Empire), and it is difficult to overestimate the influence that the possession of the city had on the Ottomans' sense of themselves as heirs to a grand imperial tradition, now possessed by Turkish Muslims. Descent from the Central Asian rulers, Chinggis Qan and Temür, legitimized the Mughals, and originally Central Asian Turkic traditions comprised a common heritage of rulers in all three empires. Most Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal monarchs also patronized common literary and artistic cultures that were at least partly secular, and which especially pious individuals sometimes criticized for that reason.

The word “empire” also implies in this case, as in other periods and civilizations, that these Muslim monarchs ruled extensive territories with diverse populations. In the case of these empires this diversity involved different ethnicities, social groups, and religious communities: most prominently Turks, Iranians, Indians, and Arabs; agriculturalists, landed elites, nomads, clerics, merchants, and urban artisans, and Muslims and Christians of various ethnicities, social identities, and professions as well as Jews, Indians of many religious persuasions, and Zoroastrians, who might be Iranian or Indian.

The question of religious identity was especially important in states where rulers were Muslims who patronized Muslim clerics, whom the Mughal emperor, Jahangir (r. 1605–27), referred to as the “army of prayer.”⁵ There were both internal doctrinal differences within the Islamic world and also large non-Muslim populations in each of these states. Within the Islamic world and in these three empires, doctrinal and/or sectarian differences sometimes coincided with political, ethnic, or social divisions. The most

⁴ See especially Cornell H. Fleischer's discussion of “Muslim and Ottoman” in his seminal work *Bureaucrat and Intellectual in the Ottoman Empire: The Historian Mustafa Ali (1541–1600)* (Princeton University Press, 1986), 253–72.

⁵ Jahangir, *Tūzūk-i-Jahāngīrī* or *Memoirs of Jahāngīr*, trans. Alexander Rogers and ed. Henry Beveridge (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, repr. 1978), 10.

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obvious instance was the distinction between Sunnis and Shi'as, which had both theological and political dimensions, as was illustrated by the hostility between the Sunni Ottomans and the Shi'i Safavids of Iran. There was also a divide within both Sunni and Shi'i communities between government-sanctioned or approved, emotionally restrained orthodoxy and popular, sometimes ecstatic or even socially disruptive millenarian beliefs of different social groups within the population.

Apart from Muslim doctrinal and sectarian divisions, all three empires also included substantial and diverse non-Muslim populations, whose presence Muslim rulers tolerated or welcomed for a number of practical and sometimes personal reasons. As a Eurasian state, the Ottoman Empire included a Christian population of various denominations, and it also welcomed Jews expelled by the intolerant Catholic monarchs of Christian Spain. Prior to its conquest of Egypt, the Empire was numerically more Christian than Muslim. Iran also contained substantial Christian minorities, as well as Hindus, Zoroastrians, and Jews, and the Mughals always ruled over a predominantly non-Muslim population, composed primarily of Hindus, but which also included other religious communities too numerous to mention. Members of the non-Muslim communities participated in the imperial rule of all three Muslim dynasties in a variety of important political and economic roles, as imperial aristocrats, as slaves, as influential wives, or as merchants.

The Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal states, here designated as Muslim empires, have also been characterized in several other ways, some more useful than others. Three of the most common labels, also meant to be explanatory categories, are "patrimonial-bureaucratic," "gunpowder" and "early modern." "Patrimonial-bureaucratic" is the most useful of these, because it describes a real and important functional aspect of all three states at various times in their histories. All three dynasties, that is, operated as governments that involved both elements of Max Weber's idealized categories of personal and impersonal or bureaucratic rule.⁶ The Ottomans notably evolved from a patrimonial state early in their history into a centralized, highly bureaucratic slave empire after conquering Constantinople. The Safavid and Mughal dynasties displayed both characteristics during their histories, with the Safavids the least bureaucratic and centralized, while the Mughals occupied a middle position on Weber's theoretical spectrum, possessing an elaborate bureaucracy, but always retaining a high degree of personal rule.

⁶ Based on Max Weber's distinction but elaborated for the Muslim imperial case by Stephen P. Blake, "The Patrimonial-Bureaucratic Empire of the Mughals," *Journal of Asian Studies* 39, No. 1 (November 1979), 77–94.

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As for “gunpowder” and “early modern,” terms which might be seen as two sides of the same Western European coin,⁷ neither term is easily applicable to all three empires, nor does it explain much about the nature of these states or the organization of their societies. Firearms, both artillery and guns, were a critical factor in Ottoman victories over Europeans and non-Europeans alike, but they did not play a significant role in the establishment of the Safavid or Mughal states, although members of these Iranian and Indian dynasties successfully employed them to varying degrees in later campaigns. The suggestive idea that firearms triggered fundamental changes in the organization of a particular Muslim empire is often alluded to but rarely demonstrated in a systematic fashion, and has not yet been applied to these three states. The “gunpowder empire” label is particularly questionable for the Safavids, who never really warmed to the use of heavy artillery.

The term “early modern” is even more problematic, for it involves tortured debates over the criteria of modernity at any given moment and is often evoked in a casual fashion rather than being rigorously employed to explain the nature of states. Many of the factors cited to illustrate “early” modernity – long-distance Asian or Eurasian trade, commercial capitalism, centralization, or rationality – can also be found in earlier empires, whether Roman, pre-Islamic Iranian or Mongol.⁸ “Early modern” is a particularly difficult term to deploy as a concept to categorize or explain more than six centuries of Ottoman rule. Were the Ottomans “early modern” before they captured Constantinople in 1453 or during their sixteenth-century “golden age” or in 1800?

More important than controversial labels is the issue of the rise and fall of empires. Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406), the Greco-Islamic philosophical historian, was the most important Muslim theorist of dynastic states, utilizing an analytical method he derived primarily from Aristotle’s logical writings known collectively as the *Organon*.⁹ Ibn Khaldun was preoccupied with the problem of explaining the cyclical history of the dynasties of

⁷ William H. McNeill summarized this concept in his pamphlet, *The Age of Gunpowder Empires 1450–1800* (Washington D.C.: American Historical Association, 1989). For one of the more stimulating discussions of “early modern” history as a definable period see Joseph F. Fletcher, “Integrative History: Parallels and Interconnections in the Early Modern Period 1500–1800,” in Beatrice Manz, ed., *Studies on Chinese and Islamic Central Asia: Collected Articles of Joseph Fletcher* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1995), 1–35.

⁸ See especially Jack Goldstone, “The Problem of the Early Modern World,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 41, No. 3 (1998), 249–84, and Peter Van Der Veer, “The Global History of Modernity,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 41, No. 3 (1998), 285–94.

⁹ In his remarkable work *The Muqaddimah*, Ibn Khaldun offers an analytical methodology for historical study and, using that methodology, proposes an explanation for the chaotic, cyclic history of tribal dynasties in North Africa and Spain. See *The Muqaddimah*, trans. and ed. Franz Rosenthal (Princeton University Press, 1980), 3 vols. See also Muhsin

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nomadic origin that ruled North Africa and Spain in his era. Yet his dismissal of the significance of transient political and military events in understanding historical change, and his conviction that historical change could only be understood by studying underlying social, psychological and political factors, raise fundamental questions about the fate of the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal empires. In the present book, the chapters devoted to political history focus on individual rulers as a stylistic device to introduce important lineaments of complex dynastic histories in a limited number of pages. This emphasis is not meant to suggest that Ottoman, Safavid, or Mughal monarchs were autonomous individuals who always controlled their own destiny and that of their empires. Individual rulers' intelligence and dynamism were often critical in establishing and shaping the character of empires. Yet not only was Ibn Khaldun prescient in understanding that the social and political environment and psychology of later members of a dynasty inevitably differed from that of their ancestors: in addition, he realised that both founders of empires and their descendants were subject to a variety of social, political, and economic forces beyond their control.

This is a short history of culturally related and commercially linked imperial entities from their foundation, through the height of their power, economic influence and artistic creativity and then to their dissolution. It focuses on monarchs and the aristocratic elite – men whose distinct subculture exhibited the same seemingly dissonant elements as typified their Italian near-contemporaries, the Medici, or the ruling classes of many other societies: ruthless brutality, self-indulgence, and aesthetic sophistication.¹⁰ It necessarily ignores or gives short shrift to a variety of topics, most particularly the daily life of non-aristocratic urban and rural Muslim families, their religious rituals and social life, and their relatively short lives, truncated by poverty, disease, and war. Women and members of non-Muslim communities also receive relatively little attention, although both exerted formidable influence in their societies. Royal women are particularly visible in the histories of these dynasties for their political influence, both inside and beyond the confines of the *haram*, especially as wealthy patrons of religious and charitable institutions. Many of these women, particularly Safavid and Mughal royalty, were also well

Mahdi, *Ibn Khaldun's Philosophy of History* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1957) and Stephen Frederic Dale, "Ibn Khaldun, the Last Greek and First Annaliste Historian," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 38 (2006), 431–51.

¹⁰ One of a Muslim ruler's most explicit assertions that indulgence was a requisite of kingship is included in the memoir of the eleventh-century Berber Amir of Granada, Ibn Buluggin, who wrote, rhetorically, when defending his indulgence of young boys at court, "is not kingship or wealth intended for enjoyment and adornment?" *The Tibyān*, ed. and trans. Amin T. Tibi (Leiden: Brill: 1986), 192.

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educated and wrote religious treatises or poetry. Members of non-Muslim communities also receive relatively little attention, except for their critical commercial functions in all three states and their administrative, political, and military role in the Mughal Empire, where some Hindus became imperial aristocrats.¹¹ Finally, limitations of space have made it impossible to do justice to the full range of architecture in these empires or to discuss gardens. The architectural focus here is on mosques and tombs, omitting any sustained discussion of fortresses, palaces, bazaars, or even, in the Mughal case, new cities. And gardens, which had such social and cultural importance in the royal and aristocratic life of all three empires, are only mentioned in passing.

The sources for these and other subjects also vary tremendously. Ottoman records of their elaborate, centralized bureaucracy have been preserved in Istanbul, a city last besieged and plundered in 1453, whereas most Safavid and Mughal administrative documents were destroyed during the political turmoil, recurring warfare, and destruction which occurred in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Similarly, many more local court records survived the disintegration of the Ottoman state than have been preserved in Iran and India; in the latter case the semi-tropical climate is partly responsible for their disintegration. Such legal documents have preserved the voices not only of women but also of otherwise unknown farmers and merchants. The Mughals, in contrast, produced an especially rich autobiographical and historical literature, which offers unusual insight into individual character and motivation of both men and women, while in Iran, the religious debates of Shi'i scholars generated an extensive corpus of essays and tracts that illumine the country's clerical attitudes and its organization. The following chapters inevitably reflect the nature of the extant sources available for the study of each empire.

A community of outstanding scholars in Turkey, Iran, India, and the West have used both imperial and local records, travel accounts and

¹¹ Three important studies of Ottoman, Iranian, and Mughal women are: Leslie Peirce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Guity Nashat and Lois Beck, *Women in Iran from the Rise of Islam to 1800* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2003); and Ruby Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* (Cambridge University Press, 2005). Religious minorities in each of these states are discussed in Suraiya N. Faruqi, ed., *The Cambridge History of Islam*, III, *The Later Ottoman Empire 1603–1839* (Cambridge University Press, 2006); Aftin Khanbaghi, *The Fire, the Stone and the Cross: Minority Religions in Medieval and Early Modern Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), and Father Pierre du Jarric, S.J., *Akbar and the Jesuits: An Account of the Jesuit Missions to the Court of Akbar* (London: Routledge, 1926). See also Suad Joseph et al., *The Encyclopaedia of Women in Islamic Cultures* (Leiden: Brill, 2003–6).

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memoirs, religious treatises, poetry, and art to produce the articles and books which constitute the intellectual basis for this synthesis. Cited in footnotes throughout this volume, they individually represent guides for future study, though any such study should begin with an examination of contributions to two outstanding encyclopedias available for students of Islamic history and the history of these particular empires: *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* and *The Encyclopaedia Iranica*. *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* contains articles on all aspects of Islamic faith, society, and history, and it is particularly strong on Ottoman history, while the still incomplete *Encyclopaedia Iranica* is a superb source, not only for pre-Islamic and Islamic Iran, but also for Indo-Persian history, including the Mughal Empire. The forthcoming multi-volume *The New Cambridge History of Islam* (2010) also contains a wealth of chronological and thematic essays on these empires and broader Islamic civilization.

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1 India, Iran, and Anatolia from the tenth to the sixteenth century

Introduction

Founders of the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal empires established their states in territories long characterized by political fragmentation, religious distinctions, the flowering of Greco-Islamic philosophy, the pervasive influence of Iranian administrative traditions and cultural norms, and Turco-Mongol military dominance. It is impossible to comprehend either the continuity or the novelty of these three empires without both being aware of these legacies and also understanding how they affected the histories of northern India, Iran, and Anatolia in the centuries prior to the founding of the Ottoman state in the early fourteenth century and the Safavid and Mughal states two centuries later.

The decline and eventual destruction of the 'Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258) was the first of two fundamental, interrelated changes that altered the political landscape of these contiguous regions between the tenth and sixteenth centuries.¹ In the eighth century, Muslim rulers governed a vast multi-ethnic, religiously diverse empire stretching from Spain to Central Asia; by the tenth century 'Abbasid Caliphs had lost control of Baghdad, their capital, as well as more distant Muslim-ruled territories. While the 'Abbasids retained their status as the legitimate leaders of the Sunni Muslim world, in the mid-tenth century the Buyids (r. 945–1055), a Shi'i dynasty from northern Iran, occupied Baghdad and its adjacent territories, while independent Muslim dynasts, usually known as sultans, controlled most of the former provinces of the Caliphate.²

¹ Ira Lapidus provides a comprehensive political and religious history of the Islamic world in *A History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge University Press, 2nd edn. 2002).

² By the early tenth century this process was far enough advanced to stimulate Muslim scholars to produce political theories rationalizing the decline of the Caliphate and justifying the rule of independent Muslim sultans. One such individual, al-Mawardi (d. 1052) argued for the necessity of what already existed in the persons of Ghaznavid sultans of Afghanistan and Iran and other regional Muslim rulers. See Erwin J. Rosenthal, *Political Thought in Medieval Islam* (Cambridge University Press, 1968), 27–37 and 243, n. 2, where al-Mawardi is quoted as codifying the process by which Caliphs legitimized rulers like Mahmud of Ghazna by formally investing them with authority.