



THE CANNON AND THE CRESCENT

Muslim Empires of the Near East – 1400 > 1700

Europe & Gunpowder Empires

Remember how the Europeans all of a sudden decided they might want to try out their new boats and see if they could find a shortcut to the East?

Key Questions

- What were the artistic contributions of the Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal empires?
- Why were the gunpowder empires successful militarily?
- What changing role did religion play in the gunpowder empires?

Refresh my memory – why did they do that again? It wasn't that Europeans finally learned how to sail or that they discovered some magical floating wood in a forest far, far away. No. The main reason the Atlantic countries of Portugal, Spain, France, England and Holland went exploring was because their access to all the fineries of Asia had been cut off. They wanted the spices, the jewels, the fancy plates, the carpets, the silks and cottons of the East, and just when their thirst was being whetted, the Muslims started getting other ideas.

You see, the West was late to the world of trade. Sure, the Romans and Greeks had controlled the Mediterranean Sea for great portions of the world's history, but when it comes to truly global trade, Europeans were the new kid on the block, and starting to be a bit annoying. By 1492, the Muslims, the Mongols, the Indians and the Chinese had already been sailing across the oceans for centuries and had established relationships so that goods flowed freely from empire to empire with little interference from outside powers. But then the Europeans decided they might want to wake up from their self-induced technological slumber and start seeing what the world had to offer, and what they saw didn't exactly assuage their inferiority complex.

Between China and Europe sat three empires – the Ottoman, the Safavid and the Mughal – who each alone possessed a technological advancement, a cultural refinement and a military dominance that made the Europeans reconsider their place in the world's hierarchy. These three Muslim empires, these Gunpowder Empires, controlled the lands from Austria in the west, to Mecca in the south, to the far reaches of India in the east. They worshipped at the most magnificent house of God in the world (the Hagia Sophia), they constructed the most beautiful building on the planet (the Taj Mahal) and they amassed a larger percentage of the world's economy than even the Americans today. The Ottomans controlled what we today call the Middle East, the Safavid Dynasties ruled over modern day Iran and the Mughals united the land today known as India.

Each of these empires took advantage of the power vacuum left behind when the Mongols receded into the steppe, and for over three centuries they held on to vast land empires that ensured global power politics would still have to go through the heart of Asia. However, even though their weapons and their religious zeal created three of the most formidable empires of the last millennium, their decadence and their obsessive resistance to Western innovations meant that when they did meet face to face with European might in the 18th and 19th centuries, they were lagging far behind in most areas of economic, social and military achievement.

But in 1400, you'd be hard-pressed to find any intellectual who would claim the Europeans were anything more than merely the annoying younger sibling to the much more mature eastern empires of the Ottomans, the Safavids and the Mughals.

Ottoman Empire

First, the Ottomans. Directly to the east of Europe, these were the people who most immediately threatened Christian Europe. The Church's track record against the Muslim warriors wasn't exactly impressive. After their first victory in the Crusades, the West suffered loss after loss after loss to the Muslims and by 1300, it appeared Europe's claim to the Holy Land would never again be anything more than just a hollow threat. And when bands of nomadic Turks came out of the steppe in the 14th century, the delicate balance that had existed since the Crusades was shattered. This new antagonist sought nothing less than the conquest of all of Europe.

Like the Seljuk Turks centuries before, this new group of Turks were master horse people like their steppe brothers, and they also fought with the religious passion shared by their nomadic Muslim forefathers. Known as ghazis, or warriors of faith, each of these small tribes survived by raiding the agricultural enclaves across the Levant and then retreating back into the security of their homeland. But one of these groups of Turks chose to not retreat to the steppe. Instead they decided once and for all that they would conquer the sedentary peoples of the eastern Mediterranean, destroy their walled cities and then unite an empire under their rule. The leader of these horsemen was Osman, but to the Europeans suffering from perhaps a subtle speech impediment he was Othman, and his followers – Ottomans.

Expansion

Osman led his ghazis on a series of raids and military skirmishes on the eastern fringe of the Byzantine Empire, and in 1302 his horse forces captured parts of Anatolia (the region we today call Turkey). Some of these raids were fought for the will of Allah, others for power and prestige, still others for booty. But unlike his predecessors, Osman's Turks didn't retreat. They settled in previously Byzantine towns like Nicaea (where the Church decided in 381 they'd worship the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit) and then in Bursa (a useful little town right across the water from Constantinople).

Osman would die before stretching deeper into Byzantine lands, but he put the Ottoman foot in the door, allowing successors to push the crack open a bit further over the next hundred years. And with Muhammad II's ascension to the throne in 1444, the European gates were thoroughly blown wide open. Muhammad II (aka Mehmed II) made his number one priority the seizure of Constantinople, the last symbol of the Roman Empire, and the final piece of the Ottoman Middle Eastern puzzle.

Fall of Constantinople

By 1453, the Byzantine Empire was a sad little shadow of its former glory. Its population had peaked centuries earlier at over a million people, but when Mehmed II came pounding on its walls, it was at a mere 50,000. Its control over the Mediterranean region that once stretched across three continents and even down into Italy, had been reduced to a sliver of Christendom, entirely surrounded by the empire of the Ottomans. Like the Roman Empire that saw its 1000-year reign end when the inauspiciously- named Romulus Augustus relinquished authority to the barbarian nomadic hordes, the Eastern Roman Empire likewise saw their 1000-year reign end with the empire's namesake at the throne – Constantine XI.

In one of the most important turning points in world history, the choices made by Constantine XI and Mehmed II flipped the directions of two civilizations – the West and the Kingdom of Islam. Secure in his castle, Constantine XI had no reason to fear this latest challenge to his empire. Sure, Mehmed had over a hundred thousand troops, and Constantine had just seven thousand. Sure, Mehmed had set up a fort on the other side of the Bosphorous Sea where he could launch his final attack. And sure, Mehmed had 125 ships stationed at the ready, while Constantine only had 26. But what did Constantine have to fear? Constantinople had survived

for a thousand years, and the walled behemoth hadn't been conquered yet, so why would these former horse people from the east pose any more of a threat?

Well, this time it would be different because Mehmed had gunpowder, and the hundred-foot-tall, thirty-foot-wide protective walls that surrounded the city would be no match for the iron balls of destruction under Mehmed's employ. Ironically, the cannons and their requisite technology had been offered to Constantine months before the battle by the most decorated metallurgist in all of Europe – Orban of Hungary. Orban's offer of assistance fell on Constantine's deaf ears, so like the free agent weapons manufacturer he was, Orban went across the Bosphorous and entertained a meeting with Mehmed. Mehmed wouldn't refuse, and at his disposal came 50 cannons and one super cannon named Basilica – a 27-foot-long beast, the largest in the world. Had Constantine initially agreed to this offer, history might have played out a bit differently, but the moment he declined this gift of military hardware, his fate was sealed.

Constantine tried one last defense. He extended a massive chained fence across the water so that no boats could enter the sea to attack Constantinople from the north. Mehmed scoffed at this feeble obstacle, simply ordering his men to cut down a bunch of trees, slaughter hundreds of sheep and oxen and then use their boiled fat to grease up the logs so his men could drag 70 of his ships over land. Imagine the faces of the defenders of Constantinople as they gazed across the straits only to see a parade of boats being yanked across the hillside on greased planks. When Mehmed's men dropped their ships back in the sea, the siege began, and after one month of firing everything he had at the last bastion of Christendom in the Middle East, the walls were breached, Constantine was slain and the city finally fell.

For Europe, this meant that the Muslims were now in full control of the eastern European passage to Asia. They could tax any goods entering or exiting, and they showed no signs of stopping at Constantinople. The European nations knew at this point that if they were to fully pull themselves out of the Middle Ages and continue to benefit from their trade with the East, they'd need to find some other routes, thus launching the European Age of Exploration.

Glory of Suleiman

But for the Ottomans, exploration was last on their "To Do" list. First they would need to secure their winnings, then they would commission glorious public works projects to symbolize their unmatched superiority and their spiritual pre-eminence, and then they would see how tough it would be to conquer the rest of Europe.

This task first fell to the hands of Mehmed II and his successors, but it was with Suleiman the Magnificent that the Ottoman Empire reached its true golden age. Suleiman inherited an empire already rich in power and in artistic inspiration. When Mehmed II conquered Constantinople, he transformed the largest church in all of Christendom into a mosque. Take down a few icons of some saints, destroy a bunch of mosaics, throw up some minarets, remove the crosses decorating the halls and...presto – you've got yourself the biggest mosque in the world – the Hagia Sophia.

Suleiman would not merely rest on the achievements of others. He embarked on a series of public works that perched the Ottoman Empire above all rivals. From his childhood, Suleiman was destined for greatness. He was born almost exactly a thousand years after the prophet Muhammad and he was the tenth sultan of the Osman family. He was named after Solomon, the Biblical creator of the first temple of Jerusalem and possibly the greatest political leader in Jewish history. With a pedigree of such import, the expectations for this boy leader were immense.

Yet by the time of his death, Suleiman had surpassed every one of these boyhood expectations, leaving a legacy few could have ever imagined. While in the 16th century, the West was still admiring the works of Michelangelo and da Vinci, the Ottoman Empire claimed a man whose brilliance quite possibly trumped anything the European Renaissance offered.

Suleiman was a philosopher, a warrior, a poet, a patron of the arts, an engineer, a goldsmith and a leader without equal. To his people, he was Suleiman the Lawgiver, but his achievements spread far beyond merely bringing peace to a region known for its instability. His own people praised Suleiman for his ability to be both a ferocious warrior and a restrained politician. Suleiman let his regional ministers rule as they saw fit, as long as criminal laws were stringently enforced, merchants conducted all transactions ethically and the taxes continued to stream into the capital without indiscriminate corruption or exploitation. To the diplomats who made their way to the streets of Constantinople, or by chance found themselves at the foot of the great Suleiman, the Ottoman Empire stood unrivaled. His aqueducts surpassed the engineering of the Romans, his humbly named Mosque of Suleiman almost surpasses the Hagia Sophia in design and opulence (while simultaneously housing the Muhammad-mandated libraries, schools and hospitals) and as he walked amongst his people he demanded total silence. For a religion and a people who preached there is no god but Allah, Suleiman came closer than any other Muslim leader to attaining a status as a god on earth.

And he also had a fairly impressive collection of lady friends, in what became a staple of the Muslim Gunpowder Empires – the harem. A harem is a collection of women – girlfriends, entertainers and servants – who must attend to the sultan's every wish. The Ottoman version of the harem might not have been as naughty as the European stereotypical depiction that has played out time and again in Hollywood flicks dealing with what happened on those lonely Arabian Nights. Nor was it as well-staffed as the harems of their Mughul neighbors (Akbar the Great settled down with 5000 concubines and 26 wives). Yet Suleiman's private residence was still stocked with numerous options for his personal amusement. Most of these female companions were chosen for political reasons by either his advisors or his mother (a Gunpowder sultan wasn't exactly able to tell his mother that the latest offering wasn't his type). Because Muslim law allowed four wives and as many concubines as could be properly supported, there were more than a few male offspring vying for the throne when dear old dad finally kicked the bucket. This led to countless behind-the-scene dramas (oftentimes orchestrated by power-hungry moms) and even the occasional assassination attempt on elder brothers or even dad (Suleiman had his own son executed after a foiled assassination attempt). These hereditary fights would make any dad paranoid. But daddy-mommy-concubine tiffs were the least of the Ottomans' worries. For just outside the empire's boundaries, any number of nomadic Muslim tribes sat waiting for the opportunity to jump in and wrest the crown of the Muslim world away from the House of Osman.

These incessant internal and external risks meant that the Ottoman emperors had to establish a secret military force whose honor and allegiance would never come into question.

Janissaries

Enter the janissaries. Since no Muslim could be trusted to protect the sultan, the Ottoman armies crafted the perfect plan – kidnap Christian boys at a young age, bring them back to the palace and then use the rest of their adolescence to teach them to not only be elite fighters, but be the most educated, reliable men of society. This wasn't the first, and wouldn't be the last, time autocrats appreciated the advantages of having an elite corps of devotees ready to obey any command without complaint. Adolph Hitler tried this out with his Boy Scout-esque Hitler Youth program in the 1930s and Pol Pot perverted the idea even more in Cambodia in the 1970s (no, I'm not saying Boy Scouts follow Hitler...read the sentence again). Both men took the minds and the bodies of the nation's youth and molded them into fanatical protectors of the throne, praising the leader above all. For Mehmed II, Suleiman and every subsequent Ottoman sultan, these janissaries were the empire's elite corps – the best-trained military force, the most trusted political advisors and oftentimes even the highest ranked government leaders. They maintained order throughout the kingdoms and spread the Ottoman reach deep into Europe and far into the fertile crescent of Mesopotamia.

Safavids

But past Mesopotamia, the Ottomans could go no further. They would have to share the Muslim realm with their adversaries to the East – the Safavid Empire. Although also a member of the Gunpowder Empire club, the Safavids were no friend of the Ottomans. Yes, to an outsider, they might look like interchangeable parts, but these same people might erroneously think Iranians and Iraqis see each other today as inseparable brothers-

for-life. Admittedly, both fought for Allah, both used their unique fusion of cannons and nomadic confidence to blow their enemies off the battlefield, and both, once settled, created worlds where some of the most stunning works of art could be produced. Both even lacked trust in their fellow Muslims and looked outside their realm (mostly in Russia) to find young boys to kidnap and then convert to obedient defenders of the empire.

But to be honest, they hated each other. Some art historians might claim it was because the Safavids chose architecture that was far less bold, ostentatious and massive as their neighbors to the west. Nowhere in the Safavid kingdom was there a piece of architecture that came close to rivaling the Mosque of Suleiman. Instead these successors to the Persian realm chose to create what could be the most beautiful city in the world, a city I'll bet you \$47.32 you've never heard of before – Isfahan. Recently deemed a World Heritage Site, this stunning city boasts bridges you could never imagine, mosques more colorful than any in the Muslim world, and because it was the heart of rug manufacturing, a collection of the most intricately crafted Persian carpets you will ever see. Today, it is these carpets that are the most enduring international legacy of the Safavid Dynasty. Today, few will ever get their passports stamped in Iran on their way to visiting Isfahan, but 30% of the world's carpets come from Persia (today known as Iran), and over one million Iranians continue to hand weave these masteries of detail and color. The Safavids had built an oasis in the desert to showcase their creative passion.

Sunni vs Shia

But let's be honest. They didn't hate each other because one's art was a bit fancier than the others. They hated each other because a religious rift dating back to Muhammad could never be reconciled. The Ottomans were Sunni. The Safavids were Shi'a. At the heart of this conflict was who had the right to succeed Muhammad as heir to the kingdom of Islam. Should it be the one who claimed blood relation to Muhammad? Or the one seen as the most fit for the title? The Shi'a believed you must be a descendant of Muhammad. The Sunni didn't. But like the Protestant-Catholic division that evolved over the centuries into so much more than mere ideological quirks, the Sunnis and the Shi'as saw themselves as diametrically opposed sects. In 680, the Shi'a believed only Hussein, the son of Ali (who was the son-in-law of Muhammad...the closest Islam could find to a true relative to the Prophet), should have first dibs on the caliphate and so they met the Sunni on the battlefield. When Hussein was eventually defeated and beheaded, the Shi'a had their martyr, and ever since, the Shi'a faithful have seen themselves as oppressed and the Sunnis as the oppressors. Today, 90% of the world is Sunni, and because it is the Sunni who control most of the leadership roles politically and economically, many Shiites today still see themselves as historical victims.

Another difference between the two Muslim empires was how they dealt with nonbelievers – the jizya. Unlike the Ottomans who practiced religious tolerance, allowing all Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians to continue their practices as long as they continued to pay taxes, the Safavids mandated everyone convert to the Shi'a faith or face exile, or even death.

Continued Tension

So when the Safavids stopped the Ottoman eastern advance at the Battle of Chaldiran in 1514, the Ottomans' desire for an empire stretching through to India was squashed. But the Ottomans refused to retreat and after 150 years of war, the Ottomans took over Mesopotamia (today's Iraq), while their hated enemy resided next door in what today we call Iran. And the Iranians (the Persians of the day) never forgave the Sunnis for stealing their land. In fact, one reason America was so hesitant to pull their troops out of Iraq after the 2002 war was their fear of what Iran would do next. Would they immediately throw their full support behind the Shiite minority, and try to wrestle away the portion of the Middle East the Safavids believed they earned 500 years ago? We're still waiting to see the answer to that question.

But the Safavids and the Ottomans weren't the only Muslim empires laying claim to the Near East. The Mughal Empire ruled the Indian peninsula for three centuries until the British arrived and pushed them out so they could take their turn controlling one of the wealthiest regions in the world.

Mughals

In 1500, India held close to 150 million people, and its economy made up one-fourth of the world's wealth (by comparison America's GDP today is about 22%). They had the only diamond mines in the world, and their spices, jewels and textiles were such the envy of the world, that Europe sent men in boats in every direction just to be the first to control access to the subcontinent. All roads might have led to Rome, but all wallets led to India.

So when the nomadic Muslim prince Babur realized he was never going to recapture his native homeland of Afghanistan, he decided to instead try his hand at the little jungle paradise to the east. Claiming relation to Genghis Khan himself, Babur came from a warrior pedigree and by the time he was in his twenties, he'd already fought in a couple dozen wars and knew how to employ some of the most intimidating military strategies of the era. He taught his 1000 war elephants to use their trunks and feet to rip apart soldiers on the battlefield, he built hundreds of cannons that could launch projectiles over a thousand feet and he ruled over an army of archers who employed a composite bow more powerful than the English longbow that ended the reign of knights in Europe.

At his death in 1530, Babur had expanded his empire across the regions we today call Pakistan and northern India. His successors built upon his military legacy, but then focused on constructing a series of dynamic structures, each coming to define the Indo-Muslim style. Like the Ottomans and the Safavids, the Mughal shahs first wanted to create paradises on earth. The steppe was a harsh, dry, unforgiving ecosystem, and water was always a commodity in short supply. The Quran spoke of heaven being a paradise with rivers flowing from four directions, so because of the geographic realities of the region and the glorious stories of paradise established by their holiest scriptures, the Mughals set out to redefine architecture and synthesize nature and art like no one before.

Akbar the Great

When the grandson of Babur, Akbar the Great, rose to power, he first set out to create a palace where he could keep his enemies close. This palace was Fatehpur Sikri. Like France's King Louis XVI who later secluded and pampered all the regional lords in the gloriously gluttonous palace at Versailles, Babur built a complex where he could display his supremacy, while keeping close any would-be challengers to the throne. Fatehpur Sikri had all the engineering wonders of a Roman bath, while keeping the cultural intricacies of his Mongol heritage. Because Fatehpur Sikri was in the middle of a desolate, arid region miles from any reliable water source, Akbar's engineers and army of laborers had to first dam water to create a man-made lake, and then construct waterwheels that continuously raised the water to the elevated hillside structures. This water then circulated through a series of baths, fountains and aqueducts to keep the buildings essentially air-conditioned in a climate where the sizzling summer temperatures could frequently surpass 110 degrees. With an eye to his past, Akbar laid out the structures in a configuration that mimicked the nomadic tent patterns of his forefathers, actually encasing the very wood from nomadic tents inside the stone pillars. However, despite its engineering innovations and its reverence to the past, Fatehpur Sikri could not survive the elements, and the harsh climate forced it to be abandoned less than 50 years after its founding (though it still exists today as it did four hundred years ago, just a short drive away from the Taj Mahal).

Fatehpur Sikri's place on the world's stage might have only been a blip, but for those few decades, it was a place to behold. Like Suleiman to the west, Akbar was a man of the ages, and he treasured the art and the philosophy of those in his presence. His unquenchable desire for knowledge brought thousands of spiritual, philosophical and cultural leaders to his doorstep. Weekly he met with Christian, Muslim and Hindu envoys, debating the intricacies of each sect's dogma. Though illiterate himself, he was an astute listener and even attempted to design a new religion which fused the major tenets of Islam and Hinduism - Din-e-Ilahi. This religion wasn't exactly popular – only a couple dozen ever converted and even his kids ignored him and his attempt at spiritual harmony. When it comes to religion, Akbar also uniquely interpreted the Quran's edict that no man shall have more than four wives. In his harem of over 6000 women, each protected by her own personal eunuch, he maintained relations with a couple hundred wives and countless other lady friends. As

Akbar continued to expand his realm through war, his wealth continued to surpass even the gaudiest of heights.

Shah Jahan

By the time Shah Jahan took the throne, the Mughal Emperors had made the Indian population their ticket to opulence. And speaking of thrones, Shah Jahan set his artisans to making a royal chair like nothing the world had ever seen – the Peacock Throne. The Ottomans might have started the idea of making a fancy throne adorned with every gem they could get their hands on, but Shah Jahan went just a bit over the top. At over six feet long and four feet wide, it used over 2500 pounds of gold, over 500 pounds of emeralds and rubies and a 186-carat diamond. Considering the average wedding ring has a diamond that is less than a carat in size, this Koh-i-Noor diamond was fairly impressive. If the throne was around today, it'd fetch over a billion dollars on the open market (and who knows how much the folks at Ebay would splurge). But alas, the Persians claimed it as booty from the Mughals in the 1700s, and since it's been stripped and sold off across who knows where.

But Shah Jahan didn't stop there. Considering his name actually means "king of the world," it's fair to say this man didn't do anything on a small scale. The Peacock Throne was an impressive piece of furniture, but Shah Jahan truly outdid himself when it came to architecture. For it was Shah Jahan who designed and orchestrated the construction of what many believe is the most striking, most recognizable (sorry Eiffel Tower) building in the world – the Taj Mahal. Taking 22 years and 20,000 expert artisans from across Europe and Asia, his masterpiece cost over 32 million rupees (about \$1.1 billion dollars in today's US money). Its minarets, domed ceiling and marble walls were adorned with countless precious stones, mosaics and careful brushwork. Unlike the European works of the Renaissance that showcased the splendor of the human form, Muslims weren't allowed to paint or sculpt any type of mammal – be it human or otherwise. It would have been an affront to Allah.

So the Taj Mahal, like other Muslim works, showcased the skill of its artisans through ornate lettering of sacred texts, elaborate geometric patterns and meticulous carvings. According to legend, Shah Jahan didn't ever want another ruler to build a temple better than the Taj, so he cut off the hands of every artist and architect who worked on the memorial (not exactly the severance package they were expecting).

Unfortunately for the average Indian, these grandiose projects meant a continual tax burden and perpetual need for expansion through military conflict, leaving the masses forced to live in a state of permanent starvation at the mercy of the whims of regional lords. These pricey pet projects also meant that the Mughal shahs were ill-prepared for the growing power of the Europeans. And when the British finally arrived in the 1700s, they were met with a civilization facing collapse. Famine, constant civil wars, natural disasters and disease all weakened the subcontinent's ability to fend off the advances of a persistent and well-armed foe. The age of India being ruled by foreigners had only just begun, but this time, instead of the invading forces coming from the steppe, they arrived by boat from the far off British isles.

But that is for another chapter.