



Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal Empires

The Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal Empires emerged out of a Mongol-dominated Eurasian zone—and they all had Turko-Mongolian origins. Led by Muslim rulers that reigned over diverse regions, each of these empires adapted to local conditions. Though they had some similarities, like the use of gunpowder, some historians question whether the term “Gunpowder Empires” is accurate.



00:01

We are now going to go further in our study of the evolution of the empires in Asia. And in this video, we're going to focus on what happens in North India, Persia, the Middle East, and the Anatolian peninsula, what we would consider modern-day Turkey. So right here is roughly what Asia looked like around the year 1300.

Map shows: Ilkhanate, Chagatai Khanate, the Yuan Dynasty, Delhi Sultanate, and the Golden Horde

As you might remember from previous videos, as we entered into the 13th century, you have Genghis Khan, or Jenghiz Khan, take over much of Asia from Mongolia. But by the time you get to 1300, the empire has fragmented into these various khanates: the Yuan Dynasty in China, Chagatai Khanate in Central Asia, the Golden Horde in Northwest Asia, and the Ilkhanate in Persia and the Middle East.

00:57

Now, two things to keep note of as we look at this map that are relevant to this video, is, notice this tiny little kingdom right over here. This is one of the many fragmented kingdoms that result after the Sultanate of Rum collapses in the middle of the 13th century. This kingdom in particular is founded by someone by the name of Osman, or the Arabic version of the name would be Uthman or Othman. And so this is the nascent Ottoman Empire forming right over here. Now, over here, you have the Delhi Sultanate, which was the first significant Muslim empire over North India. And notably, they were one of the few empires that were able to fend off the Mongols.

01:43

Map shows Ming Dynasty in place of the Yuan Dynasty; The Ilkhanate is replaced by the Timurid Empire

But now let's fast-forward roughly 100 years. Now, a few things have changed. The Ming Dynasty has taken over the Yuan Dynasty in the middle of the 14th century. The Mongols in the East are now relegated to the Northern Yuan Dynasty, but there still is the Chagatai Khanate and the Golden Horde. But much of their territory, including the Ilkhanate, has now been taken over by Timur, who we talk about in previous videos. And Timur famously sacked Delhi and really brought the Delhi Sultanate to its knees, and as we will see, it will only last for roughly another 100 years. Now, you might also notice that the Ottoman Empire, founded by Osman or Uthman, is continuing to grow and continuing to conquer.

02:36

Now, one thing to keep in mind. In previous videos, we talk about the invention of gunpowder in Tang China and the early Song Dynasty, which was about 400 to 500 years before the period that we're talking about right now. But as we get into this period, we are now starting to see the use of gunpowder for guns and, in particular, artillery. And when I say artillery, think cannons. So let's fast-forward another 200 years to see how the empires of Asia have evolved.

03:12

The map now shows: The Ottoman Empire, The Mughal Empire, Safavid Dynasty, Kazakh Khanate, the Ming Dynasty, the Tsangpa Dynasty, and Northern Yuan.

So now we see several things. The Ming Dynasty is still in control of much of China. The Northern Yuan are still in Mongolia. You have a Kazakh Khanate, descendant from the Mongols. By the late 16th and early 17th century, the Ottoman Empire has now expanded significantly, encompassing much of the Middle East. In Persia, you see that the Timurid Empire fell within a few decades after the death of Timur. And as we enter into the 16th century, you have the Safavid Dynasty take over. And then also in the 16th century, almost coincident with the founding of the Safavid Dynasty in Persia, you have Timur's grandson's great-grandson, Babur, who's born in current-day Uzbekistan, is able to defeat the Delhi Sultanate and establish the Mughal Empire. And "Mughal" is just the Persian word for "Mongol," and Babur is a direct descendant of Timur on his father's side and of Jenghiz Khan on his mother's side.

04:22

*“these three empires”:
the Ottoman Empire, the
Safavid Dynasty, and the
Mughal Empire*

*Ottoman Empire:
Founder: Osman/Othman
Sunni Islam
Turkish
Devshirme system (until
1648)
Janissary standing army
Early use of gunpowder*

Now, many historians often group these three empires or dynasties together, because they do share some commonalities. And so let's think about each of them individually and think about where they are similar and where they are different.

Not a lot is known about Osman, who founds that first kingdom in the Anatolian peninsula. It's a Sunni Islamic empire. In fact, the leader is eventually named a caliph. The ruling class of this empire is Turkish. Now, one of their distinguishing characteristics is what's known as the Devshirme system, in which the sultan, the emperor, would have a personal army of what could be called slaves, these Janissaries. These Janissaries were actually Christian boys taken at a young age and then indoctrinated into the Janissary system. The reason why I said you can kind of call them slaves is that although they were forced to become Janissaries and taken from their families, they were given many privileges, and over time, many of these Janissaries became some of the most notable figures in the Ottoman Empire, some of them even becoming the grand vizier, effectively ruling over the empire.

05:42

*Safavid dynasty:
Founder: Ismail
Twelver Shia Islam
Turkish -> Persian
Persian identity
Ghulams*

Now, the Ottomans are also known for one of the earliest empires to very successfully to use gunpowder in battle. The Safavids, as you can see here, were really founded in the very early 16th century, officially 1501, by their founder Shah Ismail, sometimes known as Ismail I. And he is the heir to a religious dynasty, the Safavias. It is a Muslim dynasty, like the Ottoman Empire, but unlike the Ottoman Empire, it is based on Twelver Shia Islam. Twelver Shia is the major group of Shias today, and it is based on the belief of 12 imams following Muhammad, starting with Ali, and we have videos on the Sunni-Shia split.

06:35

Now, even though Ismail spoke Turkish and was raised in a Turkic society, this dynasty brought back much of the culture of Ancient Persia. In fact, it's viewed as the first dynasty since the Sassanids that actually had native Persian rule and brought back that Persian culture, part of which is using the word “shah.” You remember Cyrus the Great, the Shahanshah, the King of Kings. Now, they had what is known as Ghulams, which is very similar to the idea of a Janissary. These are slave soldiers which are taken as captives but then are raised to be an elite military unit, and eventually often have significant wealth and significant power.

07:21

Now, you might be wondering, why did any of these empires—and these aren't the only ones, you have the Mamluks and other Muslim empires—why would people create these elite soldiers out of slaves and give them that much power? Well, the answer is: they were the safest people to give power to. Remember, these empires are ruling over many tribes and many groups and many kingdoms that are constantly vying for power, trying to establish their own dynasties. And if you allowed people from those various tribes to protect you as emperor, well, there might be a good shot that one of them might want to kill you and establish their own dynasty. But from a young age, if you could indoctrinate these young boys as Ghulams, or as Janissaries, well, they might be more loyal to you. And indeed, it did provide an unusual amount of stability.

08:19

As I mentioned, the Mughal Empire was able to be founded by Babur, who was Timur's great-grandson's grandson, and he, too, was born in a Turco-Mongolian tradition. As he's able to famously defeat the Delhi Sultanate—which is, which was,

*Mughals:
Founder: Babur
Turkish -> Persian
Came to power with
gunpowder
Sunni Islam
Tolerant until Shah Jahan
& Aurangzeb*

had already been significantly weakened, one, on its own, but then by Timur over 100 years before—he famously comes to power with the aid of gunpowder, being able to defeat a significantly larger Delhi Sultanate army. The Mughals practiced Sunni Islam, but they ruled over a large Hindu majority, and so the first several Mughal rulers were actually quite tolerant. Perhaps the most tolerant was Akbar, often known as Akbar the Great, who we'll do other videos on, who actually tried to create a religion which was a merger between Islam and Hinduism and Jainism and Christianity. But then they become less tolerant under Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb—Shah Jahan famous for building the Taj Mahal for his wife, but what's often not noted is, he was building this fairly grand mausoleum at a time when there was a famine in India, and he was also known as being fairly intolerant and persecuted many Hindus and Sikhs. And his son, Aurangzeb, continued to do so.

09:46

Now, some historians will refer to these three empires as the Gunpowder Empires. If someone says "Gunpowder Empires," they're referring to these three. The reason why they're called that is this view that these major centralized empires were able to form only with the power of gunpowder: the Ottomans, famous for early use of artillery; the Mughals—Babur in particular—came to power with gunpowder. But today, historians are somewhat skeptical of grouping just these three empires as Gunpowder Empires. You had many other large centralized empires form before the use of gunpowder. So that whole thesis is not as popular today.