

## Comparison in Land-Based Empires

*Foreigners appreciate only military power. . . . Thus, they submit to us wholeheartedly and do not dare to despise China once we display our hunting techniques to them.*

—Quinlong, Emperor of China, 1735

**Essential Question:** By what methods did empires increase their societal and cultural influence from c. 1450–c. 1750?

**B**uilding and maintaining large land-based empires is a major theme in the period c. 1450–c. 1750. These empires grew as they incorporated lands they conquered. Their rulers implemented policies to solidify or legitimize their rule over a diverse population. However, the conquered often did not totally assimilate to the life and culture of their conquerors. In some cases the conquered influenced the conquerors, helping to shape a blended culture. The interconnection of hemispheres also led to blended cultures.



**Source:** Wikimedia Commons

As part of its conquest of present-day Hungary, the Ottoman Empire under Suleiman I besieged the Habsburg-controlled city of Esztergom in 1543 with the help of French artillery. The figure at the far left is a Janissary. Suleiman is on horseback.

Not all empires were able to maintain their authority. For example, the Gunpowder Empires declined, unable to compete with European trading companies, especially the British, and unable to resolve conflicts of heirs motivated by harem politics (see Topic 3.1). Other factors in the decline included weak or corrupt leadership and failure to keep up with developments in military and naval technology. The expensive armies each empire needed to maintain control placed harsh financial burdens on the peasants and villages in the form of taxes and other obligations. Religious conflicts also divided and weakened the Gunpowder Empires.

A deep religious schism divided Muslims and Hindus in Mughal India, just as a schism divided Sunni Ottomans and Shi'a Safavids and set the stage for conflict between the present-day countries of Iraq and Iran. (Connect: Write a paragraph comparing the decline of Mughal India with the decline of the Mongol Empire. See Topic 2.1.)

## Military Might

The armies of these land-based empires were well trained, well organized, well equipped, and well led. Empires in Eurasia all relied on gunpowder weapons, including large cannons, in support of more traditional cavalry and infantry units. In the Americas, the fierceness of both the Aztec and Incan warriors allowed them to intimidate and conquer neighboring territories.

**Soldiers** In some cases, the rulers of land-based empires developed an elite group of soldiers to use in solidifying their control over their territories. For instance, both the Ottoman sultan and Safavid shah used slave soldiers to offset the power of troops who had more loyalty to their tribe or local governor than to the sultan or shah. The Janissaries in the Ottoman Empire helped to preserve the power of the Ottoman sultan and the Ghulams helped to protect the Safavid shah from rival clans. Both the Janissaries and the Ghulams were often recruited from minority religious or ethnic groups found within the empires. The Janissaries were often slaves taken from Christian areas of the Ottoman Empire, while the Ghulams came from the Georgian, Armenian, or Circassian populations within the Safavid Empire. The system of taking slaves as part of a “blood” tax (in the Ottoman Empire this was known as *devshirme*) or tribute was not limited to the Ottomans or Safavids. Aztecs also required slaves or prisoners as part of the tribute offered by conquered states.

**Warfare** These strong militaries did not prevent conflict among the land-based empires. The Ottoman Empire and Safavid Empire went to war over the territorial claims each had at its border. However, religion also played a role as an underlying cause of this conflict. The Ottoman Empire was a predominantly Sunni Muslim state, while the Safavids were mainly Shi'a. Each believed the other to practice a heretical type of Islam and was willing to go to war over this split. Religion was not as important a factor in the conflict between the





Safavids and the Mughals as it was in the Ottoman-Safavid War. Instead, control over resources and trade routes in present-day Afghanistan was at the core of the war between these two land-based empires.

Two Muslim powers conflicted when Morocco invaded the Songhai Empire in 1591. Moroccan forces sacked the capital of Gao and ended the empire. However, Morocco was unable to hold onto all the Songhai territory.

## Centralized Bureaucracy

Controlling a large area with such diverse populations required land-based empires to establish an organized and centralized bureaucracy. Recruiting bureaucratic elites took several forms. In the Ming and Manchu dynasties of China, the civil service examination system was used to assess the abilities of the members of the scholar-gentry who wished to enter government service. In the Ottoman Empire, the *devshirme* system provided the sultan with a ready-made pool of civil servants strictly loyal to him, while in the Safavid Empire, the shah would enlist a class of bureaucrats from the Persian population of the empire, known as “the men of the pen.”

Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal Empires, 1450–1750			
	Ottoman Empire	Safavid Empire	Mughal Empire
<b>Taxes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taxes on non-Muslims</li> <li>• Taxes on peasants</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taxation policies used to encourage adherence to Shi'a Islam</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taxes on unbelievers were abolished by Akbar but reinstated later</li> <li>• Taxes on peasants</li> </ul>
<b>Military</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Warriors (often trained Janissaries) were granted villages to provide for their subsistence</li> <li>• The military functioned as a dual authority with central government</li> <li>• Strong navy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Warriors were the Qizilbash, Turcoman militants who helped establish the empire</li> <li>• Leaders made the military independent of central government</li> <li>• No significant navy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Warriors were granted villages to provide their upkeep</li> <li>• Officials known as zamindars made the military independent of central government</li> <li>• Small navy</li> </ul>

In the Songhai Empire, the *mansa*, a Mandika word meaning “sultan,” employed bureaucrats from the scholarly class educated in the schools, or *madrasas*, of Timbuktu. While the Incas did not use a dedicated scholarly class to rule their empire as the Ming and Manchus did, they did organize

their empire into a federal system of provinces headed by nobles loyal to the emperor. Further, these nobles oversaw a very organized political structure that was divided on the basis of a decimal system.

Despite its many similarities to other land empires, the Aztec Empire was less centralized and bureaucratic than the other land empires. The Aztec created a tributary empire and had little to no direct control over the territory within the region of Mesoamerica. It kept control over this region through force, fear, and intimidation rather than through a centralized bureaucracy.



Source: Wikimedia Commons

A portrayal of Aztec warriors from the Florentine Codex, written between 1540 and 1549.

**Taxation** Some form of taxation or revenue collection was necessary to support the bureaucracy and military of the land-based empires of this period. Taxation took many forms in these empires:

- **Mughal zamindar tax collection:** Mughal emperors appointed tax officers or zamindars to collect taxes from the peasant class based on land and production.
- **Ottoman tax farming:** Rather than employing government tax collectors, the Ottoman sultans appointed “tax farmers” to pay an annual fixed sum of money for an area to the central government and then recoup the outlay by collecting money or salable goods from the residents of the area. Many Janissaries were paid their salaries in this manner by collecting more money than they paid out to the central government.
- **Aztec tribute lists:** As the Aztecs (or Mexica) formed a tributary empire, the main source of revenue that supported the Aztec noble class and military came from yearly offerings or tributes from the surrounding areas. The lists included whichever local product was made or valued but could also include a demand for people, many of whom became human sacrifices in Aztec religious rituals.





- **Ming collection of “hard currency:”** The Ming Empire, like its predecessors, issued paper currency as a means to facilitate trade and tax collection; however the use of paper money led to rampant counterfeiting and hyperinflation. The Ming then ordered that all taxes should be paid in the form of rice, and later silver coins, known as “hard currency.”

## Striving for Legitimacy

While the diversity of the populations of the land-based empires was beneficial to the economic and political strength of the empires, ruling over populations that included many ethnicities, religions, and tribal ties was challenging. Therefore many rulers turned to other than political means to unite their subjects in their loyalty to the state. Rulers used religion, art, and monumental architecture to legitimize their rule. Akbar attempted a syncretic approach to religion in the Mughal Empire, but he had little success in that area.

Sources of Legitimacy	Examples
<b>Religion</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rulers in Islamic empires used references to the title “caliph,” or successor to the Prophet.</li> <li>• European monarchs claim to “divine right” that gave the monarch the mandate to rule by the Christian God.</li> <li>• Conversion to Islam of Songhai rulers and noble class provides a religious and legal structure to the empire.</li> <li>• Aztec (Mexico) use human sacrifice in religious rituals.</li> </ul>
<b>Art</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Portraits of the Qing emperors and other high officials</li> <li>• Miniature paintings in the Ottoman Empire</li> <li>• Financial support of artists by European rulers</li> </ul>
<b>Monumental Architecture</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mausolea, such as the Taj Mahal and mosques in the Mughal Empire</li> <li>• European palaces, such as the Palace of Versailles in France and El Escorial in Spain</li> </ul>

### REFLECT ON THE ESSENTIAL QUESTION

1. **Comparison** Create a chart comparing the effects of transoceanic connections in the Eastern and Western Hemispheres. Include the impact on trade, on relations with other empires, and on culture.
2. In one to three paragraphs, explain the methods empires used to increase their societal and cultural influence from c. 1450 to c. 1750.