

Chapter 3

The Islamic Heartland and India

In the early thirteenth century Mongol warriors under the legendary conqueror Chinggis Khan descended on Southwest Asia. After overrunning Persia, defeating the Seljuk Turks in 1243 in Asia Minor, and obliterating the enfeebled Abbasid Empire in 1258, the Mongols incorporated much of the region into their vast empire that stretched from Hungary to Korea. As Mongol political authority declined in the fourteenth century, Southwest Asia became a battleground for local dynasties, religious sects, nomad armies, and military adventurers, the most notable of whom was Timur the Lame, the Turko-Mongol conqueror whose large but short-lived empire collapsed after his death in 1405. Although India was spared the Mongol onslaught, its political history, especially in the north, was as chaotic and turbulent as Southwest Asia's. In the fourteenth century it was nominally ruled by the sultanate of Delhi, but the regime had already been undermined by revolt and warfare by the time Timur the Lame's devastating raid into northern India dealt it a death blow in 1398. Following the sultanate's demise India fractured into hundreds of states of varying sizes and degrees of effectiveness.

Following these years of conquest and upheaval, three dominant empires emerged in South and Southwest Asia between the mid fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. The first empire to take shape was that of the Ottoman Turks, a seminomadic people who migrated to Anatolia in the 1200s and almost immediately embarked on conquests that expanded their state in Anatolia and extended it into southeastern Europe. In 1453 they conquered the last remnant of the Byzantine Empire when they captured the imperial city, Constantinople, and, as Istanbul, made it the seat of their sultan's expanding state. During the 1500s the Ottomans ruled an empire that included Egypt, Anatolia, Syria, and lands in

North Africa, and the western coast of the Arabian Peninsula, and southeastern Europe. Meanwhile, on the Ottoman Empire's eastern flank in the early sixteenth century, Ismail I created the Safavid Empire in Persia, distinguished by its rulers' fervent devotion to Shi'ite Islam. Finally, during the 1500s, the Mughal Empire emerged in India as a result of the conquests of Babur (1483–1530), a military adventurer from central Asia who won control of northwest India, and his grandson, Akbar (1542–1605), who extended Mughal authority to the east and south.

In addition to their leaders' common allegiance to Islam, these three empires resembled one another in several respects. Each was established through military conquest, each was ruled by an all-powerful emperor, and each was a formidable military power. In each, the arts and literature flourished. Each at first rested on a strong economic foundation, and each experienced the weakening of that foundation by inflation, high taxation, bureaucratic corruption, and broad changes in the world economy.

Differences among the three empires were most pronounced in the sphere of religion. The intense devotion of the Safavids to Shi'ism antagonized the Sunni Ottomans, and led to frequent Ottoman-Safavid wars. Furthermore, Safavid Persia was unique in that it lacked a substantial non-Muslim population. In contrast, the Ottomans' subjects in Europe were overwhelmingly Christian, and a smaller number of Christians and Jews was scattered throughout the rest of their empire. Most of the Mughals' subjects were Hindus.

The three empires also had different experiences with Europeans during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Ottomans and Europeans were archrivals, each representing to the other a despised religion, and, moreover, a threat to their territory and commerce. European and Ottoman fleets clashed over supremacy in the Mediterranean, and their armies fought for control of southeastern Europe. Nonetheless, European merchants continued to trade and even reside in Ottoman cities, and European powers such as France forged military alliances with Christendom's enemy when it suited their purposes.

Relations between Europeans and Safavid Persia, on the other hand, were more cordial. Shah Abbas I (r. 1587–1629) relied on European military advisers and sent two missions to Europe in 1599 and 1608 to explore the possibility of joint action against the Ottoman Turks.

In India the Portuguese quickly capitalized on the success of Vasco da Gama's voyage around Africa to Calicut in 1498. They undercut the monopoly of Arab merchants in the spice trade on the west Indian coast and established a base of operations on the island of Goa, which they forcibly annexed from the local Muslim ruler. The Dutch, English, and French became seriously involved in India only after 1600. They, too, established commercial operations on the coast, but only after having gained the permission of a local ruler or a Mughal official. Emperors Akbar and Jahangir were interested in European art and religion, but overall the Mughals viewed Europe neither as a threat nor a potential trading partner or ally of any significance.

By the mid seventeenth century all three Islamic empires were beginning to decline. The Mughal and Safavid empires disappeared in the eighteenth century, and the Ottoman Empire, although it survived until after World War I, gradually became a symbol of decrepitude and decay. Yet in the 1500s and 1600s, few other societies, if any, could rival these three empires' wealth, cultural sophistication, and military strength.

Rulers and Their Challenges in the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal Empires

Many factors — resources, wealth, technological development, social coherence, cultural unity, and military strength — contribute to the rise and fall of states. But as the histories of the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal empires confirm, quality of rule is also significant, especially when authority is exercised by a single all-powerful ruler. Each of these empires flourished under strong, energetic rulers who quashed dissent, maintained bureaucratic rigor, acted decisively, and provided effective military leadership. But gradually the quality of rulers declined, and this, along with other factors, contributed to economic stagnation, territorial loss, and military decay.

The emergence of all three empires confirms the importance of leadership, especially on the battlefield. The Ottoman state resulted from the conquests of three men — Mehmet II (r. 1451–1481), who directed the siege of Constantinople in 1453; Selim I (r. 1512–1520), who conquered Egypt, Syria, Palestine, and parts of southern and western Arabia; and Suleiman I (r. 1520–1566), who added Hungary, the Mediterranean island of Rhodes, and some Persian territory to Ottoman domains. The Safavid Empire was forged through the exploits of Shaykh Ismail (r. 1501–1524), a military and religious leader whose original power base was Azerbaijan in northern Persia. Believed by his followers to be a descendant of the

Prophet Muhammad's son-in-law, Ali, he conquered Persia and in 1501 assumed the title *shah*, or emperor. Babur, the founder of the Mughal Empire in India, was a military adventurer of Mongol-Turkish ancestry who invaded India after having lost his original kingdom in Afghanistan. In 1526 he led an army of twelve thousand troops into northern India and, with superior tactics and firepower, defeated the much larger army of the ruling Muslim Lodi Dynasty.

The cultural achievements of these Islamic empires also depended on the interests and patronage of individual rulers. Akbar (r. 1556–1605), a brilliant military commander whose conquests substantially expanded the Mughal Empire, patronized painters, poets, historians, and religious thinkers. Under his free-spending successors, Jahangir (r. 1605–1627) and Shah Jahan (r. 1627–1658), Mughal culture reached new heights. The Taj Mahal, one of the world's most beautiful buildings, is only one of many masterpieces they planned and paid for. Under Shah Abbas I (r. 1587–1629) the Safavid capital, Isfahan, was transformed through the construction of hundreds of mosques, formal gardens, palaces, royal tombs, and public squares. Similarly, the early Ottoman sultans, following the precedent of Mehmet II, who had the Greek Orthodox church of Hagia Sophia converted into an impressive mosque, all sought to leave their mark on Istanbul and Islamic culture by sponsoring ambitious building programs and the work of scholars, poets, and artists.

The sources in this section provide insights into the personalities and policies of three of the most renowned Islamic rulers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries — Suleiman I, Jahangir, and Abbas I. They allow us to analyze their styles of leadership and the strengths and weaknesses of their regimes.

A European Diplomat's Impressions of Suleiman I

21 ▼ Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq, *TURKISH LETTERS*

Suleiman I, known to Europeans as *Suleiman the Magnificent*, is remembered largely for his military conquests, but his accomplishments go beyond battlefield exploits. He was a patron of history and literature, oversaw the codification of Ottoman law (hence his honorific title *the Lawgiver*), and contributed to the architectural grandeur of Istanbul. He was one of the outstanding rulers of the age.

The following description and analysis of Suleiman and his reign was written by Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq (1522–1590), a Flemish nobleman who spent most of his life in the service of the Hapsburgs, in particular Ferdinand I, the archduke of Austria, king of Hungary and Bohemia, and, from 1558 to 1564, Holy Roman Emperor. In 1555 Ferdinand sent Busbecq to Suleiman's court in Istanbul to represent his interests in a dispute over Transylvania, a region that had been part of Hungary and today is in Romania. After six years of discussions, the two sides agreed on a compromise by which Transylvania became an autonomous state in theory but paid an annual tribute to the sultan.

During his six years in Ottoman lands Busbecq recorded his observations and impressions and sent them in the form of four long letters to a friend and fellow diplomat, Nicholas Michault. All four letters were published in Paris in 1589. Subsequently appearing in numerous Latin versions and translated into the major European languages, Busbecq's letters provide a wealth of information about Ottoman society.

The following excerpt begins with a description of Busbecq's first meeting with Suleiman I in 1555. It then goes on to comment on the Ottoman military. It concludes with a summary of the events surrounding the murder of Suleiman's oldest son and most likely successor, Mustafa, in 1553. As Busbecq explains, Mustafa's interests clashed with the ambitions of Roxelana, Suleiman's Russian-born wife and the mother of two sons and a daughter by Suleiman. To ensure that her elder son, Selim, would become sultan after Suleiman's death, she convinced her aging husband that Mustafa was plotting against him and that he and his son must be killed. With power passing on to one of the ruler's sons, but not necessarily the eldest, such incidents were not uncommon in all three Islamic empires.

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. What does Busbecq's first meeting with Suleiman reveal about the sultan's attitudes toward Europeans? What further insights into his attitudes are provided later in the excerpt?
2. What does Busbecq see as the main difference between Ottoman and European attitudes toward social privilege and inherited status? How do these attitudes affect Ottoman government?
3. What insights do Busbecq's observations provide about the sources of Ottoman military power?
4. What does the episode of Mustafa's assassination reveal about the power and influence of Roxelana? About Ottoman attitudes toward the imperial succession? About Suleiman's character?
5. What advantages and disadvantages were there in the Ottoman practice of not making the eldest son the automatic heir of the reigning sultan?
6. Shortly after Suleiman's reign the Ottoman Empire began to decline. What in Busbecq's account points to future problems for the Ottoman state?

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

On our arrival . . . we were taken to call on Achmet Pasha (the chief Vizier) and the other pashas¹ — for the Sultan himself was not then

in the town — and commenced our negotiations with them touching the business entrusted to us by King Ferdinand. The pashas . . . told us that the whole matter depended on the Sultan's pleasure. On his arrival we were admitted to an

audience; but the manner and spirit in which he . . . listened to our address, our arguments, and our message was by no means favorable. . . .

On entering we were separately conducted into the royal presence by the chamberlains, who grasped our arms. . . . After having gone through a pretense of kissing his [Suleiman's] hand, we were conducted backwards to the wall opposite his seat, care being taken that we should never turn our backs on him. The Sultan then listened to what I had to say; but the language I used was not at all to his taste, for the demands of his Majesty² breathed a spirit of independence and dignity, which was by no means acceptable to one who deemed that his wish was law; and so he made no answer beyond saying in an impatient way, "Giusel, giusel," i.e. well, well. After this we were dismissed to our quarters.

The Sultan's hall was crowded with people, among whom were several officers of high rank. Besides these there were all the troopers of the Imperial guard, and a large force of Janissaries,³ but there was not in all that great assembly a single man who owed his position to anything save his valor and his merit. No distinction is attached to birth among the Turks; the respect to be paid to a man is measured by the position he holds in the public service. There is no fighting for precedence; a man's place is marked out by the duties he discharges. . . . It is by merit that men rise in the service, a system which ensures that posts should only be assigned to the competent. . . . Those who receive the highest offices from the Sultan are for the most part the sons of shepherds or herdsmen, and so far from being ashamed of their parentage, they actually glory in it, and consider it a matter of boasting that they owe nothing to the accident of birth; for they do not believe that high qualities are either natural or hereditary, nor do they think that they can be handed down from father to son, but that they are partly the gift of God, and partly

the result of good training, great industry, and unwearied zeal. . . . Among the Turks, therefore, honors, high posts, and judgeships are the rewards of great ability and good service.

OTTOMAN MILITARY STRENGTH

Against us stands Suleiman, that foe whom his own and his ancestors' exploits have made so terrible; he tramples the soil of Hungary with 200,000 horses, he is at the very gates of Austria, threatens the rest of Germany, and brings in his train all the nations that extend from our borders to those of Persia. The army he leads is equipped with the wealth of many kingdoms. Of the three regions, into which the world is divided,⁴ there is not one that does not contribute its share towards our destruction. . . .

The Turkish monarch going to war takes with him over 40,000 camels and nearly as many baggage mules, of which a great part, when he is invading Persia, are loaded with rice and other kinds of grain. These mules and camels also serve to carry tents and armor, and likewise tools and munitions for the campaign. The territories, which bear the name of Persia, . . . are less fertile than our country, and even such crops as they bear are laid waste by the inhabitants in time of invasion in hopes of starving out the enemy, so that it is very dangerous for an army to invade Persia if it is not furnished with abundant supplies. . . .

After dinner I practice the Turkish bow, in the use of which weapon people here are marvelously expert. From the eighth, or even the seventh, year of their age they begin to shoot at a mark, and practice archery ten or twelve years. This constant exercise strengthens the muscles of their

¹Pasha was an honorary title for a high-ranking military or government official; the *grand vizier* was the sultan's chief advisor and head of the Ottoman administration.

²Archduke Ferdinand, Busbecq's employer.

³An elite military force in the service of the sultan. Its ranks were filled originally by young Christian boys who were converted to Islam.

⁴Asia, Europe, and Africa.

arms, and gives them such skill that they can hit the smallest marks with their arrows. . . . So sure is their aim that in battle they can hit a man in the eye or in any other exposed part they choose.

No nation in the world has shown greater readiness than the Turks to avail themselves of the useful inventions of foreigners, as is proved by their employment of cannons and mortars, and many other things invented by Christians. . . . The Turks are much afraid of carbines and pistols, such as are used on horseback. The same, I hear, is the case with the Persians, on which account someone advised Rustem,⁵ when he was setting out with the Sultan on a campaign against them, to raise from his household servants a troop of 200 horsemen and arm them with firearms, as they would cause much alarm . . . in the ranks of the enemy. Rustem, in accordance with this advice, raised a troop of dragoons,⁶ furnished them with firearms, and had them drilled. But they had not completed half the journey when their guns began to get out of order. Every day some essential part of their weapons was lost or broken, and it was not often that armorers could be found capable of repairing them. So, a large part of the firearms having been rendered unserviceable, the men took a dislike to the weapon; and this prejudice was increased by the dirt which its use entailed, the Turks being a very cleanly people; for the dragoons had their hands and clothes begrimed with gunpowder, and moreover presented such a sorry appearance, with their ugly boxes and pouches hanging about them, that their comrades laughed at them and called them apothecaries. So, . . . they gathered around Rustem and showing him their broken and useless firearms, asked what advantage he hoped to gain from them when they met the enemy, and demanded that he should relieve them of them, and give them their old arms again. Rustem, af-

ter considering their request carefully, thought there was no reason for refusing to comply with it, and so they got permission to resume their bows and arrows.

PROBLEMS OF THE SUCCESSION

Suleiman had a son by a concubine who came from the Crimea. . . . His name was Mustafa, and at the time of which I am speaking he was young, vigorous, and of high repute as a soldier. But Suleiman had also several other children, by a Russian woman.⁷ . . . To the latter he was so much attached that he placed her in the position of wife, and assigned her a dowry. . . .

Mustafa's high qualities and matured years marked him out to the soldiers who loved him, and the people who supported him, as the successor of his father, who was now in the decline of life. On the other hand, his step-mother [Roxelana], by throwing the claim of a lawful wife onto the balance, was doing her utmost to counterbalance his personal merits and his rights as eldest son, with a view to obtaining the throne for her own children. In this intrigue, she received the advice and assistance of Rustem, whose fortunes were inseparably linked with hers by his marriage with a daughter she had had by Suleiman. . . .

Inasmuch as Rustem was chief Vizier, . . . he had no difficulty . . . in influencing his master's mind. The Turks, accordingly, are convinced that it was by the calumnies of Rustem and the spells of Roxelana, who was in ill repute as a practitioner of sorcery, that the Sultan was so estranged from his son as to entertain the design of getting rid of him. A few believe that Mustafa, being aware of the plans, . . . decided to anticipate them, and thus engaged in designs against his father's throne and person. The sons of Turkish Sultans are in the most wretched position in the world, for, as soon as one of them succeeds his

father, the rest are doomed to certain death. The Turk can endure no rival to the throne, and, indeed, the conduct of the Janissaries renders it impossible for the new Sultan to spare his brothers; for if one of them survives, the Janissaries are forever asking generous favors. If these are refused, the cry is heard, "Long live the brother!" "God preserve the brother!" — a tolerably broad hint that they intend to place him on the throne. So that the Turkish Sultans are compelled to celebrate their succession by staining their hands with the blood of their nearest relatives. . . .

Being at war with Shah Tahmasp, Shah of the Persians, he [Suleiman] had sent Rustem against him as a commander-in-chief of his armies. Just as he was about to enter Persian territory, Rustem suddenly halted, and hurried off dispatches to Suleiman, informing him that affairs were in a very critical state; that treason was rife; . . . that the soldiers had been tampered with, and cared for no one but Mustafa; . . . and he must come at once if he wished to preserve his throne. Suleiman was seriously alarmed by these dispatches. He immediately hurried to the army, sent a letter to summon Mustafa to his presence, inviting him to clear himself of those crimes of which he was suspected. . . .

There was great uneasiness among the soldiers, when Mustafa arrived. . . . He was brought to his father's tent, and there everything betokened peace. . . . But there were in the tent certain mutes — . . . strong and sturdy fellows, who had been appointed as his executioners. As soon as he entered the inner tent, they threw themselves upon him, and endeavored to put the fatal noose around his neck. Mustafa, being a man of considerable strength, made a stout defense and fought — there being no doubt that if he escaped . . . and threw himself among the Janissaries, the news of this outrage on their beloved prince would cause such pity and indignation, that they

would not only protect him, but also proclaim him Sultan. Suleiman felt how critical the matter was, being only separated by the linen hangings of his tent from the stage on which this tragedy was being enacted. When he found that there was an unexpected delay in the execution of his scheme, he thrust out his head from the chamber of his tent, and glared on the mutes with fierce and threatening eyes; at the same time, with signs full of hideous meaning, he sternly rebuked their slackness. Hereon the mutes, gaining fresh strength from the terror he inspired, threw Mustafa down, got the bowstring round his neck, and strangled him. Shortly afterwards they laid his body on a rug in front of the tent, that the Janissaries might see the man they had desired as their Sultan. . . .

Meanwhile, Roxelana, not content with removing Mustafa from her path, . . . did not consider that she and her children were free from danger, so long as his offspring survived. Some pretext, however, she thought necessary, in order to furnish a reason for the murder, but this was not hard to find. Information was brought to Suleiman that, whenever his grandson appeared in public, the boys of Ghemlik⁸ — where he was being educated — shouted out, "God save the Prince, and may he long survive his father;" and that the meaning of these cries was to point him out as his grandsire's future successor, and his father's avenger. Moreover, he was bidden to remember that the Janissaries would be sure to support the son of Mustafa, so that the father's death had in no way secured the peace of the throne and realm. . . .

Suleiman was easily convinced by these arguments to sign the death-warrant of his grandson. He commissioned Ibrahim Pasha to go to the Ghemlik with all speed, and put the innocent child to death.⁹

⁵Pasha Rustem, the grand vizier, was also Suleiman's son-in-law. He married the daughter of Suleiman and Roxelana, originally a Russian slave girl in the sultan's harem.

⁶Heavily armed mounted troops.

⁷The reference is to Roxelana.

⁸A town in northwest Turkey.

⁹The assassination was carried out by a eunuch hired by Ibrahim Pasha, who had succeeded Rustem Pasha as grand vizier.