CHAPTER 22 - THE LAST GREAT ISLAMIC EMPIRES (1500-1800)

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter examines the apogee and subsequent decline of global Islamic power in the Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal empires from 1500 to 1800. By the late seventeenth century, Islamic power was in retreat before the rising tide of western European economic and military imperialism.

The Ottomans were a Turkish dynasty that rose to prominence in the thirteenth century and established hegemony with the capture of Constantinople in 1453. By the 1540s, Ottoman military might was unmatched by any state in the world with the possible exception of China. Their empire held sway over the homelands of Anatolia, Syria-Palestine, Egypt, most of North Africa, Yemen, western Arabia, Mesopotamia, Iraq, Kurdistan, Georgia and Hungary. The state was held together by a strong, hereditary sovereign and was organized as one vast military institution.

Ottoman power began to decline after the reign of Selim II (1566-1574) because of military corruption, governmental decentralization, maritime setbacks, commercial and agricultural failures, and cultural and religious stagnation. In addition, Christians in the empire looked to Europe and Russia for eventual liberation from Ottoman control. After 1683, the Ottomans were driven out of Hungary and never again posed a serious threat to Europe. By 1774, with the loss of the Crimea, the Ottomans were prey to the West before their final demise in 1918.

The Safavid dynasty began in the fourteenth century as hereditary Turkish spiritual leaders of a Sufi order in Azerbaijan. There developed a Shi’ite ideology in the fifteenth century that united traditional Iranian lands for the first time since the Abbasid caliphate. However, Ottoman pressure forced the Safavids to focus their control eastward. After 1722, the empire gradually declined because of continued pressure from Ottoman and Uzbek armies, economic decline in the empire as a whole, and the increasing power and religious bigotry of the more conservative Shi’ite ulama. The lasting legacies of Safavid rule were the firmly Shi’ite character of the whole Iranian region and the Persian culture that was established under their patronage in literature, theology, philosophy, painting and architecture.

The Mughals or Timurids were the Cathay Turks descended from Tammerlane, who established their empire in northern India during the sixteenth century under the direction of Akbar the Great (ruled 1556-1605). He completely reorganized the central and provincial
governments and rationalized the tax system. Under his leadership, the Mughal empire became a truly Indian empire. Akbar was a religious eclectic who showed tolerance to all faiths. His successors could not match his foresight, but established a golden age of Mughal culture, especially in architecture and painting. The seventeenth century saw a general political decline, however, due to the burdens of new building projects (Taj Mahal), military campaigns, and the erosion of Akbar's administrative and tax reforms. Religious fanaticism and subsequent intolerance also contributed to the decline. The dominance of the British East India Company had utterly eclipsed Mughal power by 1819, although the Timurid line came to an official end only in 1858.

The chapter then discusses religious developments in India from 1500 to 1650. Akbar's religious eclecticism mirrored the atmosphere of sixteenth century India. On the Hindu side, there was an upsurge of bhakti devotionalism; Muslim eclectic tendencies came primarily from the Sufis. But the many opportunities for Hindu-Muslim rapprochement vanished under the reactionary policies of Awrangzeb. There is also a section on the Sikhs and Marathas.

In central Asia, between the Aral and Caspian Seas, two Islamic states were founded by Uzbek and Chaghatay Turks, both of whom were descendants of Genghis Khan. The Uzbek line ruled as the independent Khanate of Kiva to 1872 and even to 1920 under Russian control. The Chaghatay Turks controlled the Tarim basin area and lasted until 1678.

The focus of the chapter now shifts to the southern Asian seas and notes that maritime competition between Islamic and European Christian states was the one identifiable pattern there. The keys to European success were the national support systems for their naval and commercial ventures and their superior warships. The Portuguese were particularly active along the west coast of India and yet Islamic influence remained strong because of their assimilation with the native populations. Muslim control of the "Spice Islands" and other neighboring regions was evidenced by the success of Acheh, an Islamic state on northeastern Sumatra. It provided a counterweight to the Portuguese presence in Malaysia during the height of its influence in the early seventeenth century, before it finally yielded to the Dutch. At the other end of the southern trade route, in East Africa, the Islamic commercial monopoly was disrupted even more by the arrival of the Portuguese. The strong eastern Arabian state of Oman centered its power in Zanzibar and dominated the region after 1660 until the nineteenth century.
KEY POINTS AND VITAL CONCEPTS

1. **Ottoman Organization**: The Ottoman state was organized as one vast military institution. This included the emperor, his grand vizier and privy council, civil bureaucracy, and the officers and standing army of the state. The state also gradually coopted the legal-religious and educational-intellectual role of the Muslim scholars or ulama. The Ottomans kept their military leadership from threatening central power by controlling land-revenue grants and by the use of slave soldiers, whose loyalty was to the emperor alone. The provincial slave levy (devshirme) recruited young Christian and Jewish boys to be raised as Muslims to serve in the army and bureaucracy at all levels. The most famous slave corps was the Janissaries, an elite infantry unit and one of the most promising career vehicles in the empire.

2. **Consequences of the Shi'ite Rift**: On the surface, the Ottoman, Safavid, and central Asian Islamic states had much in common: all were Muslim in faith and culture, Turkish rulers were predominant, all shared similar systems of taxation and law, and in all, the language of cultured Muslims was Persian. Yet the deep religious division between the Shi'i Safavids and all their Sunni neighbors proved stronger than their common bonds and thus resulted in a serious geographical division that isolated central Asia Muslims in particular and destined that region to be peripheral to the Islamic mainstream community.

3. **The Last Great Islamic Empires (1500-1800) in World Perspective**: The chapter focuses on two dominant motifs: 1) the striking cultural and political blossoming of Islamic societies and their ensuing sharp decline, and 2) the radically new kinds of European intrusion on the Islamic heartlands and on Africa, southeast Asia and India. For all the Islamic vitality, these were conservative societies (like China and Japan) that did not undergo the kind of generative changes found in the western world. These societies produced much scientific work, but no scientific revolution; commercial prosperity, but no industrial expansion. The ensuing colonialism of the nineteenth century went hand in hand with the relentless advance of Western industrial, commercial and military power.
SUGGESTED FILMS

*The Fall of Constantinople*. British Broadcasting Company. 34 min.

*Afghanistan*. University Film Library Holder. 15 min.