CHAPTER 2

Gunpowder Empires

Previous to the Ottomans and Safavids, Turkic and Mongolian rulers brought to the Middle East a new form of state that historians often refer to as the "military-patronage state." Numerous military-patronage states existed in the post-Turkic, post-Mongol Middle East. Nevertheless, they all shared three essential characteristics. First, military-patronage states were, like the name suggests, essentially military. At the head of society was a chief military leader who would rely on subleaders for local governance. Society was divided into two "classes": a ruling military class, which performed military and other services for the rulers, and the remainder of the population, which produced taxable surplus. The second characteristic of military-patronage states was that nearly all economic resources belonged to the chief military family or families. The ruling family or families could and did redistribute these resources as they wished. They often did so in return for the aforementioned services rendered by subchiefs or local notables; hence, the "patronage" in the "military-patronage state." Finally, the laws of military-patronage states combined dynastic law, local custom, and Islamic law (*shari'a*).

As mentioned, the military-patronage states that arose before the Ottomans and Safavids were naturally unstable. While the family of a military or tribal chieftain might carve out such a state, it was dependent on other military leaders to control local areas. These leaders, often other tribal leaders, had little loyalty to the dynasties they were supposed to support. Furthermore, because the territory governed by a military or tribal chieftain was frequently large, it was difficult to rule. After all, military chieftains had none of the advantages of modern communications or transportation. Turkic and Mongolian chiefs therefore frequently divided their territories among their sons, thus splitting up empires after a single generation. Finally, the boundaries of the states were constantly in flux and were defined by incessant warfare. And because there was rarely a permanent site of government in such a state, no permanent bureaucracy could be established to maintain the authority of the state over time.

The instability inherent to military-patronage states was ended by the introduction of a new technology into the Middle East: gunpowder. Gunpowder weapons were a technological marvel and they gave their user an extraordinary advantage in warfare. But gunpowder weapons were expensive and required a certain level of trade and industrial development to produce. Those dynasts who could harness gunpowder weapons could do a number of things that rival military chieftains had difficulty doing: They could subdue tribes and less technologically advanced military chiefs; they could protect their realms against invasion from other dynasts; they could build stable bureaucracies to collect revenue; and they could provide security for agriculture. This last factor was key: After all, in the early modern period almost all state revenues were derived from agriculture or pastoralism. Commerce, on the other hand, did not actually produce wealth; it merely rearranged it.

The Ottoman Empire was the first of the two empires to harness gunpowder. Some historians claim that the Ottomans first learned of gunpowder weapons from renegade Christians and used them, to devastating effect, to win the Battle of Kosovo in 1389. The Ottomans certainly used gunpowder weapons effectively during their siege of Constantinople—a siege that finished off the last remnants of the fifteen-hundred-year-old Roman Empire. Historian Edward Gibbon describes the final days of Constantinople in his famous *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* as follows:

> After a siege of forty days the fate of Constantinople could no longer be averted. The diminutive garrison was exhausted: the fortifications, which had stood for ages against hostile violence, were dismantled on all sides by the Ottoman cannon; many breaches were opened, and near the gate of St. Romanus four towers had been levelled with the ground.... From the lines, the galleys, and the bridge, the Ottoman artillery thundered on all sides; and the camp and city, the Greeks and the Turks, were involved in a cloud of smoke, which could only be dispelled by the final deliverance or destruction of the Roman Empire. The single combats of the heroes of history or fable amuse our fancy and engage our affections: the skilful evolutions of war may inform the mind, and improve a necessary, though pernicious science. But in the uniform and odious pictures of a general assault, all is blood, and horror, and confusion.

The Ottomans again used gunpowder weapons against the Safavids at the Battle of Chaldiran. Learning from their mistakes, the Safavids adopted the weapons soon thereafter.

It is interesting to note that the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople took place in 1453, the same year that the Hundred Years' War (which, in fact, lasted 116 years) ended. The group that turned the tide in that war and forced the British invaders to withdraw from all but a small foothold on the European continent was the Burgundians, the most advanced cannon makers in Europe. As of at least 1453, then, the use of gunpowder weapons had become essential for the survival of states. It also affected the internal dynamics of states.

Harnessing gunpowder weapons enabled the Ottoman and Safavid empires to adopt important features of the military-patronage model while at the same

time avoiding many of the problems of their predecessors. Just as a military chief stood at the head of previous military-patronage states, at the top of Ottoman society was the sultan, a member of the house of Osman. At the top of Safavid society was the shah, a descendent of Isma'il. But, unlike their predecessors, the sultans and shahs did not divide their lands among their sons. They did not have to: Gunpowder weapons gave them the ability to establish a central government whose reach, when applied, could be felt throughout a vast empire.

While sultans and shahs remained at the center of imperial governments throughout the Ottoman and Safavid eras, the function each played in governance evolved over time. During the initial stages of conquest, the sultans and shahs were warriors-in-chief. They led campaigns of conquest and even met each other on the field of battle. When the two empires reached the limits of their expansion—which some historians place as early as the seventeenth century—the role of warrior-in-chief was no longer necessary. In fact, because continuous military campaigning brought no new sources of revenue and few other benefits to their empires, it could be downright detrimental. Sultans and shahs thus became less warriors-in-chief than ceremonial icons at the center of a well-oiled bureaucracy. The fact that they withdrew from public view, emerging for infrequent but spectacular religious or dynastic events, only enhanced their iconic status and the ability of the bureaucracy to function without disruption.

Historians used to look at the loss of a warrior ethos among the leaders of the Ottoman and Safavid empires and call it "decline." It was not decline so much as a shift in the function of the sultan or shah. As a matter of fact, it might be argued that after states get established and stabilized, the more a leader interferes with the day-to-day running of an empire the more trouble he will create. Think of how fortunate Americans are that many of our presidents have not been quite on top of things. On the other hand, one of the reasons for the longevity of the Ottoman Empire and the Persian empires of the Safavids and their successors, the Qajars, was that these empires could and did respond to changing circumstances. Thus, during the nineteenth century sultans and shahs once again sought to reassert themselves against an entrenched bureaucracy that opposed their plans to restructure their empires along the lines of European states.

Other factors link the Ottoman and Safavid empires to the military-patronage model as well. Both empires divided their populations into two categories (military and nonmilitary), much as their predecessors had done. Very often, the members of the military class were considered property of the sultan or shah. The Ottomans recruited potential soldiers and bureaucrats from among the children of their Balkan Christian subjects. This process of recruitment (*devshirme*) remains a sore spot in Balkan historiography: While many contemporary Turks prefer to look at the process of recruitment as purely voluntary, the word "kidnapping" is not unknown in histories written by Greek scholars. Although Islamic tradition forbade what was, in effect, the enslavement of Christians or, indeed, any of the peoples of the book, the Ottomans were able to get around this injunction with an extraordinarily creative legal maneuver. Ottoman jurists argued that Balkan

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The Battle of Kosovo

In his famous essay, "What Is a Nation?" nineteenth-century French philosopher Ernest Renan wrote, "Where national memories are concerned, griefs are of more value than triumphs, for they impose duties, and require a common effort." No grief is more important to the Serbian national myth than the defeat inflicted on the Serbian leader Tsar Lazar by the Ottomans at the Battle of Kosovo in 1389. For Serbs, the memory of the battle was sustained through time by a tradition of epic poetry. One such poem, "Musitch Stefan," recounts Tsar Lazar's admonition to his followers on the eve of battle as follows:

> *Whoso is a Serb, from Serbian mother,*
> *Who has Serbian blood and Serbian lineage,*
> *And comes not to battle, to Kosovo,*
> *May there never to his heart be granted*
> *Children, neither yet a maid or man-child.*
> *Underneath his hands shall nothing prosper,*
> *Neither vineyards nor the silver wheat fields,*
> *And from him shall misery be oozing*
> *Till his name and race die out and perish.*

Christians were different from Christians encountered by Muslims previously. Balkan Christians, they argued, had converted to Christianity after the advent of Islam, not before, and therefore should have known better when choosing their religious preference. Besides, those enlisted in this way were not really slaves; they were "war booty." Regardless of the legalities, these recruits were converted to Islam, then underwent rigorous training. Some recruits remained soldiers, entering the elite Ottoman infantry as "janissaries." Others were siphoned off into the bureaucracy, where they could become scribes or even governors of provinces. In other words, former Christian subjects of the Ottoman Empire might rise to high imperial positions.

A similar process took place in the Safavid Empire. To break the power of the Qizilbash and strengthen the central government, Shah Abbas (r. 1588–1629) imported slaves from the Caucasus: Georgians, Armenians, Circassians, and so on. In one year alone (1616), his armies brought 130,000 Georgians back to Persia. In Persia, these slaves were called *ghilman* (singular: *ghulam*). Shah Abbas not only used these slaves in the bureaucracy and royal household, he made them into a forty-thousand-man standing army equipped with firearms. As in the Ottoman Empire, some were able to rise to high rank in Persia. By the end of Shah Abbas's reign, about half of the provincial governors were ghilman.

Overall, the use of slaves offered sultans and shahs a way out of perhaps the most serious problem of military-patronage states: their tendency to fragment. Sultans and shahs created an army and bureaucracy loyal to the central

After the emergence of Serbian nationalism in the nineteenth century, Kosovo came to be regarded by many Serbs as "our Jerusalem." Unfortunately for Serb nationalists, during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries much of the ethnically Serbian population of the region had left and had been replaced by Albanian Muslims. In the aftermath of World War I, Serbia became a province of Yugoslavia, a state established as a homeland for southern Slavs. Because of its distinct history and ethnic composition, the Yugoslav government granted Kosovo autonomous status within the province of Serbia in 1974. Soon after the Serbian nationalist Slobodan Milosevic became leader of Yugoslavia in 1987, he revoked Kosovar autonomy, sparking resistance and calls for Kosovar independence. With the breakup of Yugoslavia in 1991, Milosevic began a campaign to end this resistance and, more ominously, "protect" the ethnic Serbian population of the region by driving ethnic Albanians from their homes. In the resulting "ethnic cleansing," upwards of five thousand ethnic Albanian Kosovars were killed and nine hundred thousand displaced. Ethnic cleansing only ended after a NATO bombing campaign forced Milosevic to relent. Throughout it all, Milosevic exploited the potent symbol of the original battle. Standing on the battlefield, he exhorted Serbs to stand united: "The Kosovo heroism has been inspiring our creativity for six centuries and has been feeding our pride and does not allow us to forget that at one time we were an army, great, brave, and proud, one of the few that remained undefeated when losing."

government alone. This enabled them to break the power of local warlords and potentates.

Two other aspects of the Ottoman and Safavid system link them with their predecessors. Like the rulers of previous military-patronage states, the ruling dynasties of the Ottoman and Safavid empires laid claim to the most important economic resource: land. Under this system, called prebendalism, land was considered to be the possession of the ruling dynasty, and the peasants who lived on the land enjoyed a number of freedoms. Peasants had the right to live on, work, and consume the fruits of their lands, in exchange for which they surrendered much of the surplus of their harvests in the form of taxes. But they did not own the lands they worked as "freehold" and could not sell them.

Sometimes, the Ottomans and Safavids bestowed on military leaders, governors, and local notables the right to keep the profits from parcels of land. In exchange, these select individuals had to provide military or administrative services. In the Ottoman Empire, these land grants were called *timars*, in the Safavid Empire, *tiyul*.
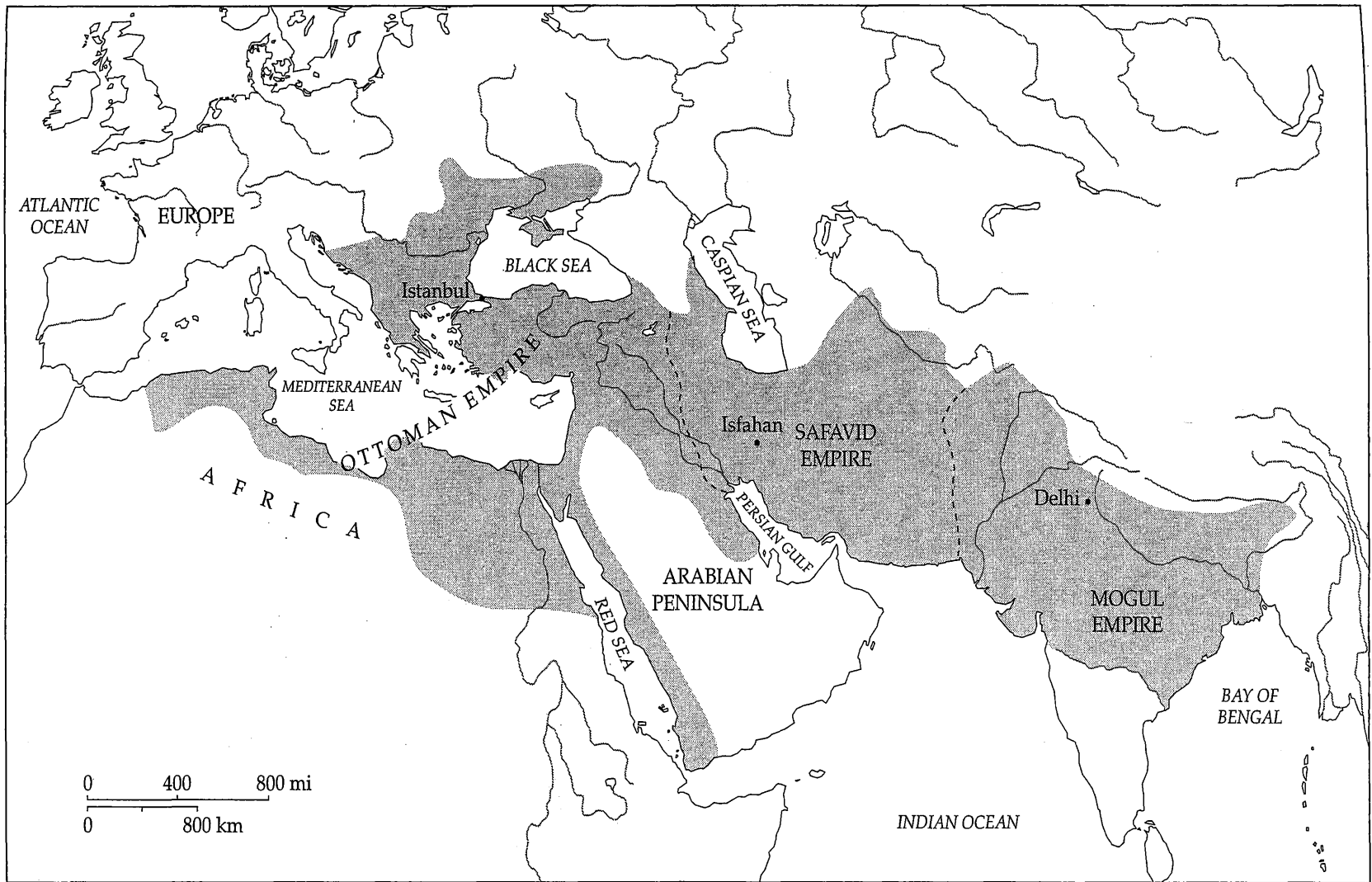
Unfortunately, the Ottoman and Safavid empires were early modern empires that attempted to govern huge expanses of land. The imperial governments were therefore not particularly adept at collecting revenues, especially revenues from far-flung provinces. This was not a problem for these empires alone: All early modern empires, from Europe to East Asia, were in the same boat. Different empires attempted to resolve this difficulty in various ways. Over time, to help with the

collection of taxes, both the Ottoman and Safavid empires auctioned off the right to collect profits from plots of land for a specified period of time to enterprising notables, merchants, civil servants, and the like. This arrangement was known as tax farming. Historians dispute whether this system was beneficial or detrimental to imperial governance. Some assert that tax farming, combined with imperial inefficiency and the increasing length of time tax farmers were allowed to maintain control of the revenues from their lands, alienated land and revenue from the central government. Others claim just the opposite. The latter assert that tax farming was actually a novel solution to a problem faced by all early modern empires and, in fact, might have been the best that an early modern empire could hope to do in order to collect revenues, tap into privately held wealth, and thereby give local elites a stake in the imperial system.

To expand the wealth of the central government or ruler, and to direct economic resources into vital areas, such as important cities, the Ottoman and Safavid governments sometimes created government monopolies over agricultural and industrial products. For example, because silk was the largest Persian export, Shah Abbas established a silk monopoly. He took one-third of all silk produced in Persia as tax, and paid the producers a fixed rate for the remainder. The Ottoman and Safavid governments also encouraged the formation of guilds. Guilds consisted of all practitioners of a given industry—from apprentices to master craftsmen—in a given city or region. There were guilds for those involved in metalwork, textiles, building, baking, transport, and even entertainment. Government sponsorship of guilds enabled the Ottomans and Safavids to regulate prices and help gather taxes. The government assigned each guild a certain amount of taxes that was to be collected from its members; the masters of each guild divided responsibility for its payment.

Finally, like earlier military-patronage states, law in the Ottoman and Safavid empires was derived from a combination of Islamic and dynastic law. This brings us to an important aspect of both empires: the role of religion.

Both the Ottoman and Safavid empires used religion to legitimate their rule. In the case of the Ottomans, it was Sunni Islam; in the case of the Safavids, it was Shi'i Islam. Again, putting religion to use in this way was not unique to the Islamic world: Henry VIII of England, for example, established his own church (which most kings and queens of England have headed ever since), and other European monarchs claimed that they had a divine right to rule. In the early modern world, dynasties throughout Eurasia used religion to legitimate their rule in one of two ways. Sometimes, dynasties presented themselves as protectors of religion. The Ottoman sultans occasionally asserted their role as caliph, took part in religious ritual, sought legitimacy as protectors of Mecca and Medina, appointed judges in the Muslim courts, and sponsored religious endowments. Since making the trip to Mecca and Medina (*hajj*) was a requirement for all Muslims who could do so, sultans even organized the hajj caravan from Istanbul to the Arabian holy cities. Each sultan took his religious responsibilities more or less seriously. Suleiman the Magnificent (r. 1520–1566), for example, attempted to demonstrate his religiosity

ATLANTIC
OCEAN

EUROPE

BLACK SEA

Istanbul

CASPIAN SEA

MEDITERRANEAN
SEA

OTTOMAN EMPIRE

A F R I C A

Isfahan   SAFAVID
EMPIRE

Delhi

RED SEA

ARABIAN
PENINSULA

PERSIAN GULF

MOGUL
EMPIRE

BAY OF
BENGAL

0   400   800 mi

0   800 km

INDIAN OCEAN

Gunpowder Empires, 1700

by reconstructing and refurbishing Jerusalem, the third holiest city in Islam. He rebuilt the walls of the city (which exist to this day), and constructed aqueducts, fountains, hospitals, and schools there. Likewise, the Safavids claimed to be the protectors of Shi'i Islam. In some cases, they went even further: They attempted to fit themselves into the Shi'i narrative of history. For example, at various times, according to different sources, Shah Isma'il represented himself as a descendent of 'Ali, a representative of the hidden imam, the hidden imam, 'Ali, or even God.

As had been the case earlier, religious minorities were allowed to organize many of their own affairs, including education, social services, charities, and law. Later—it is not known exactly when but probably varied from community to community—each minority religious community in the Ottoman Empire was represented in Istanbul by a religious dignitary from the sect. Each religious community came to be known as a *millet*, and this system of organizing the relationship between the state and religious communities came to be known as the millet system.

Before we can leave the discussion of the institutions of the Ottoman and Safavid empires, it is necessary to emphasize two points. What has so far been presented has been the ideal, which likely differed from the way things actually worked. Unfortunately, historians are forced to work mainly from official texts— which is like reading the *Federalist Papers* to understand how the United States government actually operates. Second, both the Ottoman and Safavid empires began as early modern empires. Their ability to control events and territory waxed and waned over time. In the past, historians assumed that direct political control was a sign of imperial strength, while lack of direct political control was a sign of decline. We know better now: The Ottoman Empire lasted more than four hundred years. The Safavid Empire lasted more than two hundred. Each empire was either very lucky or was able to adapt. At times, adaptation demanded decentralization. As we shall see, during the eighteenth century the power of local warlords was greater than the power of the central government to control them. These local warlords, such as Dhahir al-'Umar and Ahmad Jazzar in Palestine and 'Ali Bey al-Kabir and Mehmet Ali (Muhammad 'Ali) in Egypt, were able to take control of tracts of territory that were sometimes huge. We also shall see that, by applying techniques of political organization associated with modern states, the Ottoman Empire was able to reassert central control, albeit over a geographically diminished empire. The Safavids were not so lucky: The power of the central administration began to decline following the death of Abbas the Great, and the Safavid dynasty was overthrown by Afghans in 1722.