

Topic 3.1 – Empires Expand

Thematic Focus: Governance (GOV)

Standards Table

| Framework | Standard |
|----------------------------------|--|
| AP World History: Modern | Unit 3 Learning Objective A: Explain how and why various land-based empires developed and expanded from 1450–1750. Theme GOV: States develop, maintain, and expand power through military, administrative, and cultural strategies. KC-4.3.II: Imperial expansion relied on gunpowder, cannons, and armed trade. KC-4.3.II.B: Major land empires included the Ottoman, Safavid, Mughal, and Manchu empires. KC-4.3.III.i: Political and religious disputes generated conflict and competition among states. |
| NCSS Standards | <i>Power, Authority & Governance; Time, Continuity, & Change.</i> |
| Florida BEST SS Standards | Analyze how political and military innovations shaped the expansion of early modern empires; compare state formation processes across regions. |

Lesson Overview

Between 1450 and 1750, several large land-based empires rose to dominate vast regions of Afro-Eurasia. Known as the **Gunpowder Empires**, the Ottoman, Safavid, Mughal, and Manchu dynasties expanded through new military technologies—including cannons, muskets, and siege artillery. These innovations transformed warfare by reducing the power of feudal warriors and strengthening central governments.

Expansion was not only military. States built **complex administrative systems**, including tax farming, centralized bureaucracies, imperial examinations, and elite military groups such as the Ottoman Janissaries. These institutions allowed rulers to control diverse populations and manage large territories. Religion also played an important role in unifying or dividing societies. Conflicts between Sunni Ottomans and Shi'a Safavids fueled rivalry, while Mughal rulers negotiated religious diversity in the Indian subcontinent.

These empires shaped the political landscape of the early modern world. Understanding how and why they expanded requires examining military innovation, governance structures, and the cultural and religious disputes that both strengthened and challenged imperial power.

Student Learning Objectives

By the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

- Explain how gunpowder and artillery enabled imperial expansion.
- Identify similarities and differences among the Ottoman, Safavid, Mughal, and Manchu empires.
- Describe how empires used administration and elite military groups to maintain control.

- Explain how political and religious conflicts shaped interactions between states.
- Analyze primary sources describing early modern imperial power.

Essential Vocabulary

1. **Gunpowder empire** – A state that expanded using firearms, cannons, and other gunpowder technologies.
2. **Janissaries** – Elite Ottoman soldiers recruited through the devshirme system and trained with firearms.
3. **Centralization** – When a government increases its control over people, taxes, and territory.
4. **Legitimacy** – The way rulers justify their right to rule (through religion, tradition, law, or military power).
5. **Religious conflict** – Disputes between groups over beliefs or authority, often affecting politics.

Background Reading

The Ottoman Empire emerged out of Anatolia and expanded rapidly after capturing Constantinople in 1453. Using gunpowder artillery to break through city walls, the Ottomans extended control into Southeast Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. Their elite Janissaries and flexible administrative systems allowed the empire to manage a diverse population. The Safavid Empire formed in Persia, unifying its empire under **Shi'a Islam**, which frequently brought it into conflict with Sunni Ottomans.

In South Asia, the Mughal Empire used cannons and cavalry to conquer much of the Indian subcontinent. Mughal leaders such as Akbar built a centralized government and promoted policies of religious tolerance to rule over a mixed population of Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, and others. Meanwhile, the Manchu in East Asia conquered the Ming dynasty and established the Qing dynasty. Their success came from gunpowder weapons, strong alliances with steppe groups, and administrative continuity drawn from earlier Chinese systems.

Despite their differences, these empires shared key patterns: they used gunpowder for expansion, they developed complex bureaucracies, and they faced ongoing religious and political challenges. Their rise demonstrates how technological and administrative innovation reshaped global power in the early modern era.

Primary Sources

Primary Source 1 — Ottoman Conquest of Constantinople (1453)

Source: Kritovoulos, *History of Mehmed the Conqueror* (Fordham Internet Sourcebook)

<https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/1453kritovoulos-const.asp>

The Sultan brought up the great cannon, which was unlike anything previously seen, both in size and in the power of its shot. When it was fired, the sound echoed across the land like thunder, and the force of the stone it hurled shattered the strongest parts of the wall. Sections that had stood firm against countless enemies were cracked, loosened, and finally broken apart. The defenders were struck with fear, not

only because of the destruction itself but because they realized that their walls, which they had long trusted as their greatest defense, could no longer protect them.

Day after day the cannon was fired without rest, until the walls were worn down and collapsed in several places. The Sultan carefully directed where the shots should fall and pressed the attack where the damage was greatest. Seeing the walls breached, the soldiers of the city lost hope, while the Ottomans gained confidence. By means of this weapon and the skill with which it was used, the city that had resisted so many sieges was finally taken, and the empire of the Romans came to an end.

Primary Source 2 — Babur’s Description of Gunpowder at Panipat (1526)

Source: *Baburnama* (Fordham Internet Sourcebook)

<https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/babur-inv-india.asp>

We set up our cannon and matchlock men behind carts fastened together, so that the enemy could not easily break through. When the army of Ibrahim advanced, the cannon were fired, and the sound and smoke astonished them. The matchlock men also fired continuously. The war elephants, unable to endure the noise and the fire, turned back in confusion and trampled their own men. The enemy’s formations were broken, and their courage failed them.

Although their army was much larger than ours, they could not withstand the fire of our guns. Many of their soldiers were killed, and the rest fled the field. By God’s favor and by the use of these weapons, victory was won in a short time. This battle opened the way to the conquest of Hindustan, and from that day the foundations of our rule were firmly established.

Guided Source Analysis Questions

Source 1 — Kritovoulos

1. How does the author describe the role of cannons in the Ottoman conquest?
2. What does this suggest about changing military technology in the 15th century?
3. How did these technologies help the Ottomans expand politically?

Source 2 — Babur

1. What gunpowder technologies does Babur mention?
2. How did these weapons shape the outcome of the battle?
3. What does this reveal about the military foundations of the Mughal Empire?

AP Skill-Aligned Activity — Comparative Governance Organizer

| Empire | Key Technology | Administrative Structure | Religious Policy | Major Conflict |
|---------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|
| Ottoman | Cannons, Janissaries | Central bureaucracy, devshirme | Mostly Sunni Islam | Conflict with Safavids |
| Safavid | Cavalry, muskets | Shah-centered bureaucracy | Shi’a Islam | Sunni–Shi’a rivalry |

| | | | | |
|---------------|----------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------|
| Mughal | Cannons, matchlocks | Mansabdari system | Relative tolerance (Akbar) | Internal rebellions |
| Manchu (Qing) | Gunpowder, alliances | Confucian bureaucracy | Confucian + Manchu norms | Ming loyalist resistance |

Write **6–8 sentences** comparing **any two empires**, focusing on how **THEY** expanded power.

Key Table

Factors in Land-Based Imperial Expansion (1450–1750)

| Category | Examples | Effects |
|----------------------------------|---|--|
| Military Innovation | Cannons, muskets, siege artillery | Conquest of fortified cities and large territories |
| Administrative Control | Centralized bureaucracies | Efficient tax collection and governance |
| Elite Military Groups | Janissaries, ghulams, mansabdars | Loyalty to the ruler, professional armies |
| Religion & Legitimacy | Sunni/Shi'a rivalry, divine kingship | Justified authority, caused conflict |
| Political Rivalries | Ottoman–Safavid conflict, Mughal rebellions | Regional instability and shifting borders |

CCOT / Comparison / Causation Section

Causation

- Gunpowder technologies → rapid territorial expansion
- Centralized administrative systems → stable governance
- Religious disputes → political conflict

Comparison

Similarities among Ottoman, Safavid, Mughal, Manchu:

- All used gunpowder weapons
- All centralized authority
- All faced religious or ethnic diversity

Differences:

- Ottomans: devshirme/Janissaries
- Safavids: Shi'a state identity
- Mughals: religious tolerance under Akbar
- Manchu: adopted Confucian systems

CCOT

Continuities:

- Rulers sought legitimacy
- Empires relied on military power

Changes:

- Increasing use of firearms over cavalry
- Growth of professional armies

Key Takeaways

- Land-based empires grew due to **gunpowder weapons** and **military innovation**.
- Strong **centralized bureaucracies** allowed rulers to control large, diverse territories.
- Religious and political conflicts shaped expansion and rivalry.
- The Ottoman, Safavid, Mughal, and Manchu empires became dominant forces in their regions.

Student Writing Task

Prompt:

In 8–10 sentences, explain ONE reason the Ottoman, Safavid, Mughal, or Manchu Empire was able to expand between 1450 and 1750.

Use evidence from at least **one primary source**.

Include:

- Claim
- Evidence from Kritovoulos or Babur
- Explanation of how technology or governance enabled expansion
- Clear cause-and-effect reasoning