

## The Safavid Empire (1501-1722)

### Introduction



The Safavid Empire was based in what is today Iran ©

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This Islamic Empire was strong enough to challenge the **Ottomans** in the west and the **Mughals** in the east.

### Summary

- The Safavid Empire lasted from 1501-1722
- It covered all of Iran, and parts of Turkey and Georgia
- The Safavid Empire was a theocracy
- The state religion was **Shi'a** Islam
- All other religions, and forms of Islam were suppressed
- The Empire's economic strength came from its location on the trade routes
- The Empire made Iran a centre of **art, architecture**, poetry and philosophy
- The capital, Isfahan, is one of the most beautiful cities in the world
- The key figures in the Empire were:
  - Isma'il I
  - Abbas I
- The Empire declined when it became complacent and corrupt

### Origins

The Empire was founded by the Safavids, a **Sufi** order that goes back to Safi al-Din (1252-1334). Safi al-Din converted to **Shi'ism** and was a Persian nationalist. The Safavid brotherhood was originally a religious group.

Over the following centuries the brotherhood became stronger, by attracting local warlords and by political marriages. It became a military group as well as a religious one in the 15th century.

Many were attracted by the brotherhood's allegiance to Ali, and to the 'hidden Imam'.

In the 15th century the brotherhood became more militarily aggressive, and waged a **jihād** (Islamic holy war) against parts of what are now modern Turkey and Georgia.

The Safavid Empire dates from the rule of Shah Ismail (ruled 1501-1524).

In 1501, the Safavid Shahs declared independence when the Ottomans outlawed Shi'a Islam in their territory. The Safavid Empire was strengthened by important Shi'a soldiers from the Ottoman army who had fled from persecution.

When the Safavids came to power, Shah Ismail was proclaimed ruler at the age of 14 or 15, and by 1510 Ismail had conquered the whole of Iran.

**Top**

## **Religion**

### **Religion in the Safavid Empire - the negatives**

One of Shah Ismail's most important decisions was to declare that the state religion would be the form of Islam called **Shi'ism**, that at the time was completely foreign to Iranian culture.

The Safavids launched a vigorous campaign to convert what was then a predominantly Sunni population by persuasion and by force. The Sunni *ulama* (a religious council of wise men) either left or were killed.

To promote Shi'ism the Safavids brought in scholars from Shi'ite countries to form a new religious elite. They appointed an official (the *Sadr*) to co-ordinate this elite - and ensure that it did what the Shah wanted. The religious leaders effectively became a tool of the government.

The Safavids also spent money to promote religion, making grants to shrines and religious schools. And most craftily of all, they used grants of land and money to create a new class of wealthy religious aristocrats who owed everything to the state.

In specifically religious terms the Safavids not only persecuted Sunni Muslims, but Shi'ites with different views, and all other religions. Alien shrines were vandalised, and **Sufi** mystic groups forbidden.

This was surprising, since the Safavids owed their origins to a Sufi order and to a form of Shi'ism that they now banned. They also reduced the importance of the **Hajj** (pilgrimage to Mecca), replacing it with pilgrimage to Shi'ite shrines.

### **Religion in the Safavid Empire - the positives**

The early Safavid empire was effectively a theocracy. Religious and political power were completely intertwined, and encapsulated in the person of the Shah.

The people of the Empire soon embraced the new faith with enthusiasm, celebrating Shi'ite festivals with great piety. The most significant of these was **Ashura**, when Shia Muslims mark the death of Husayn. Ali was also venerated.

Because Shi'ism was now a state religion, with major educational establishments devoted to it, its philosophy and theology developed greatly during the Safavid Empire.

**Top**

### **Strengths**

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The Safavid Empire, although driven and inspired by strong religious faith, rapidly built the foundations of strong central **secular** government and administration.

The Safavids benefited from their geographical position at the centre of the trade routes of the ancient world. They became rich on the growing trade between Europe and the Islamic civilisations of central Asia and India.

#### **Art and culture**

Under Safavid rule eastern Persia became a great cultural centre.

During this period, painting, metalwork, textiles and carpets reached new heights of perfection. For art to succeed at this scale, patronage had to come from the top.

This was not entirely for love of beauty. Much of the early art was devoted to celebrating the glories of the earlier Iranian kingdom, and thus, by implication, making legitimate the Safavids as that kingdom's current heirs.

The Safavids were often artists themselves. Shah Ismail was a poet and Shah Tahmasp a painter. Their patronage, which included opening royal workshops for artists, created a favourable climate for the development of art.

### **Isfahan**



Mosque in Isfahan, Iran ©

The artistic achievements and the prosperity of the Safavid period are best represented by Isfahan, the capital of Shah Abbas.

Isfahan had parks, libraries and mosques that amazed Europeans, who had not seen anything like this at home. The Persians called it *Nisf-e-Jahan*, 'half the world', meaning that to see it was to see half the world.

Isfahan became one of the world's most elegant cities. In its heyday it was also one of the largest with a population of one million; 163 mosques, 48 religious schools, 1801 shops and 263 public baths.

**Top**

### **Decline**

#### **Decline**

The Safavid Empire was held together in the early years by conquering new territory, and then by the need to defend it from the neighbouring Ottoman Empire. But in the seventeenth century the Ottoman threat to the Safavids declined. The first result of this was that the military forces became less effective.

With their major enemy keeping quiet, the Safavid Shahs became complacent, and then corrupt and decadent. Power passed to the Shi'a ulama (a religious council of wise men) which eventually deposed the Shahs and proclaimed the world's first Islamic Republic in the eighteenth century. The ulama developed a theory that only a Mujtahid - one deeply learned in the **Sharia** (**Qur'anic** law) and one who has had a blameless life, could rule.

In 1726 an Afghan group destroyed the ruling dynasty. After the conquest a division of powers was agreed between the new Afghan Shahs and the Shi'a ulama. The Afghan Shahs controlled the state and foreign policy, and could levy taxes and make secular laws. The ulama retained control of religious practice; and enforced the Sharia (Qur'anic Law) in personal and family matters.

The problems of this division of spiritual and political authority is something that Iran is still working out today.

### **Iran after the Safavid Empire**

However by this period the Empire was disintegrating, and for the next two centuries it lay in decay. Bandit chiefs and feudal lords plundered it at will, further weakening the Empire, and people yearned for strong central rule and stability.

The rise of the Pahlavis (1925 -79) saw the reaffirmation of a strong central authority in Iran and the re-emergence of the dynastic principle. The discovery of oil early in the twentieth century and the interest of it to the British and then the Americans determined

the style and role of the second Pahlavi Shah. The wealth from oil enabled him to head an opulent and corrupt court.

The ulama continued to tolerate the non-religious Shahs right up until the 1970s but they finally overthrew the monarchy in 1979. This led to power being exercised through the highest officials of the ulama, the Ayatollahs. Ayatollah Khomeini's challenge to the Shah's Royal authority confirmed a deep religious tradition in Iranian society and history.

BBC- Religion Safavid Empire (1501-1722). (n.d.). *BBC News*. Retrieved February 17, 2014, from [http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/history/safavidempire\\_1.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/history/safavidempire_1.shtml)

## Mughal Empire (1500s, 1600s)

*Last updated 2009-09-07*

Learn about the Mughal Empire that ruled most of India and Pakistan in the 16th and 17th centuries.

### The Mughal Empire



The Taj Mahal houses the jewelled tomb of Mumtaz Mahal, much loved wife of emperor Shah Jehan ©

The Mughal (or Mogul) Empire ruled most of India and Pakistan in the 16th and 17th centuries.

It consolidated Islam in South Asia, and spread Muslim (and particularly Persian) arts and culture as well as the faith.

The Mughals were Muslims who ruled a country with a large **Hindu** majority. However for much of their empire they allowed Hindus to reach senior government or military positions.

The Mughals brought many changes to India:

- Centralised government that brought together many smaller kingdoms
- Delegated government with respect for human rights
- Persian art and culture
- Persian language mixed with Arabic and Hindi to create Urdu
- Periods of great religious tolerance
- A style of architecture (e.g. the Taj Mahal)
- A system of education that took account of pupils' needs and culture

### Muslims in India

There had been Muslims in India long before the Mughals. The first Muslims arrived in the 8th century.



Ahmedabad's Jama Masjid (Grand Mosque) was built in the 15th century in Gujarat ©

The Mughal Empire grew out of descendants of the Mongol Empire who were living in Turkestan in the 15th century. They had become Muslims and assimilated the culture of the Middle East, while keeping elements of their Far Eastern roots.

They also retained the great military skill and cunning of their Mongol ancestors, and were among the first Western military leaders to use guns.

**Top**

**Babur**

**Babur**



Jewelled archway in Humayun's tumb in Delhi ©

Babur the first Mughal Emperor, was a descendent of Genghis Khan and Tamerlaine.

Babur moved into Afghanistan in 1504, and then moved on to India, apparently at the invitation of some Indian princes who wanted to dispose of their ruler. Babur disposed of the ruler, and decided to take over himself.

The Empire he founded was a sophisticated civilization based on religious toleration. It was a mixture of Persian, Mongol and Indian culture.

Under Babur Hinduism was tolerated and new Hindu temples were built with his permission.

Trade with the rest of the Islamic world, especially Persia and through Persia to Europe, was encouraged.

The importance of **slavery** in the Empire diminished and peace was made with the Hindu kingdoms of Southern India.

Babur brought a broad-minded, confident Islam from central Asia. His first act after conquering Delhi was to forbid the killing of cows because that was offensive to Hindus.

Babur may have been descended from brutal conquerors, but he was not a barbarian bent on loot and plunder. Instead he had great ideas about civilisation, architecture and administration.

Babur was followed by his son Humayun who was a bad emperor, a better poet, and a drug addict. He rapidly lost the empire. He did eventually recover the throne but died soon afterwards after breaking his neck falling downstairs.

### **Abu Akbar**

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Itimad-ud-Daulah's tomb in Agra is considered a landmark in Mughal architecture ©

The third Emperor, Abu Akbar, is regarded as one of the great rulers of all time, regardless of country.

Akbar succeeded to the throne at 13, and started to recapture the remaining territory lost from Babur's empire. By the time of his death in 1605 he ruled over most of north, central, and western India.

Akbar worked hard to win over the hearts and minds of the Hindu leaders. While this may well have been for political reasons - he married a Hindu princess (and is said to have married several thousand wives for political and diplomatic purposes) - it was also a part of his philosophy.

Akbar believed that all religions should be tolerated, and that a ruler's duty was to treat all believers equally, whatever their belief.

He established a form of delegated government in which the provincial governors were personally responsible to him for the quality of government in their territory.

Akbar's government machine included many Hindus in positions of responsibility - the governed were allowed to take a major part in the governing.



## **Jahangir and Jahan**

### **Jahangir**

Akbar's son, Emperor Jahangir, readopted Islam as the state religion and continued the policy of religious toleration. His court included large numbers of Indian Hindus, Persian **Shi'a** and **Sufis** and members of local heterodox Islamic sects.

Jahangir also began building the magnificent monuments and gardens by which the Mughals are chiefly remembered today, importing hundreds of Persian architects to build palaces and create magnificent gardens.

### **Jahan**

The architectural achievements of the Mughals peaked between 1592 and 1666, during the reign of Jahangir's successor Jahan.



The Taj Mahal, commissioned by Emperor Jahan, marks the apex of the Mughal Empire ©

Jahan commissioned the Taj Mahal. The Taj Mahal marks the apex of the Mughal Empire; it symbolises stability, power and confidence.

The building is a mausoleum built by Jahan for his wife Mumtaz and it has come to symbolise the love between two people.

**Top**

### **Aurangzeb**

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Jahan's son Aurangzeb was the last great Mughal Emperor.



Itimad-ud-Daulah's tomb in Agra is considered a landmark in Mughal architecture ©

History's verdict on Aurangzeb largely depends on who's writing it; Muslim or Hindu.

Aurangzeb ruled for nearly 50 years. He came to the throne after imprisoning his father and having his older brother killed.

He was a strong leader, whose conquests expanded the Mughal Empire to its greatest size.

Aurangzeb was a very observant and religious Muslim who ended the policy of religious tolerance followed by earlier emperors.

He no longer allowed the Hindu community to live under their own laws and customs, but imposed **Sharia** law (Islamic law) over the whole empire.

Thousands of Hindu temples and shrines were torn down and a punitive tax on Hindu subjects was re-imposed.

In the last decades of the seventeenth century Aurangzeb invaded the Hindu kingdoms in central and southern India, conquering much territory and taking many slaves.

Under Aurangzeb, the Mughal empire reached the peak of its military power, but the rule was unstable. This was partly because of the hostility that Aurangzeb's intolerance and taxation inspired in the population, but also because the empire had simply become too big to be successfully governed.

The Muslim Governor of Hyderabad in southern India rebelled and established a separate Shi'a state; he also reintroduced religious toleration.

The Hindu kingdoms also fought back, often supported by the French and the British, who used them to tighten their grip on the sub-continent.

Aurangzeb's extremism caused Mughal territory and creativity to dry up and the Empire went into decline. The Mughal Emperors that followed Aurangzeb effectively became British or French puppets. The last Mughal Emperor was deposed by the British in 1858.