

Safavids and Mughals  
AP World History  
Kienast

Iranian History Overview

Iran (Persia) has a complex history. Originally Iran was part of a storied empire called the Persian or Achaemenid Empire which lasted from 550 BCE-330 BCE. In 330 the empire was conquered by Alexander the Great. When Alexander died in 312 he left the Persian portion of his empire to one of his trusted generals, Seleucus. The descendants of Seleucus ruled Iran as a Greco-Persian state until a rebellion by native Iranians allowed the establishment of the Parthian Empire in 247 BCE.

The Parthians, around the time of the Roman and Han Empires, became wealthy by controlling trade along the Silk Roads. By 224 CE the Parthian Empire had weakened, in part due to the decline of trade along the Silk Roads. In that year, a new group of leaders, the Sassanids, took over Iran. The Sassanids called their new country “Eran,” which was later used as the name of the country. Islam took over the entirety of the Middle East in the 600’s, including Iran. The Umayyads ruled Iran as an Islamic state, then the Abbassids.

The Mongols took over control of Iran in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century and ruled until the late 14<sup>th</sup> century. Tamerlane (or Timur the Lame), a Mongol born in central Asia, took over control of Iran in the 14<sup>th</sup> century in an attempt to resurrect the old Mongol Empire. He and his descendants ruled Iran until the 16<sup>th</sup> century as the Timurids.

In the early 16<sup>th</sup> century an Iranian named Shah Ismail (1487-1524) established the first dynasty of the Safavids. The dynasty was named for one of his ancestors, Sheikh Safi al-Din. The Safavids were Shiites who wanted to recreate a modern Persian Empire. The Safavids promoted rebellion in the less-radical Islamic populations of the Ottoman Empire. This constant war with Ottomans led to eventual defeat in 1580’s. The Safavids are famous for using Shiism to consolidate power in Iran.

While the Safavids failed to unify their people into a new Persian empire, they did have some cultural impacts upon the region. The Shia faith persisted in Iran, despite the lack of political stability in the region. Most Iranians are now Shia. The rise of the Shia faith in Iran did have some unintended consequences. Most Ottomans were not happy with the rise of the Shia faith in Iran since they were Sunni, and the tension simply increased rivalries between the two religious sects over the next few centuries. The tension between Shia and Sunni faiths also led to increased popularity for the Sufi Islamic faith. Sufis believe in a much less rigid, much more individualistic and tolerant interpretation of Islam as a rejection of the rigidity and intolerance demonstrated in the rivalry between Sunnis and Shia.

Indian History Overview

India’s first great empire was the Mauryan Empire of 322-185 BCE. The Gupta Empire lasted from 320 CE-600 CE. In the 600’s CE, India was plunged into chaos and disorder. Eventually Muslims came to dominate India, ruling from 1206-1526 as the Delhi Sultanate. The Mughal Dynasty followed, lasting from 1526-1857.

Babur (1483-1450) founded the Mughal Dynasty after capturing New Delhi, 1526. Another leader, Akbar the Great (1556-1605), brought Mughal control to most of India. He is known for using heavy artillery and siege warfare to unite the empire together. Akbar's empire is known as one of the "gunpowder empires" as a result. The Ottoman Empire and Safavid Empire are the two other empires known as "gunpowder empires." Akbar is also known for using absolute rule, much like the Safavids and Ottomans.

The Mughal Empire should have been easy to control because, unlike their European contemporaries, they controlled an empire over a contiguous landmass, while the Europeans controlled empires scattered over several continents. The difficulty, however, was that India was a completely diverse empire due to thousands of years of interactive trade. Due to the diversity of their populations, the Mughals were well-known for their tolerance of other religions. While Islam and Hinduism were the most common religions, several Mughal leaders tried to synthesize the two into one unifying religion. One famous attempt was by Akbar the Great who tried to create a "divine religion" that combined Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, and Christianity (among other smaller faiths) into a syncretic faith. While his attempt did not succeed, a holdover from this attempt is the religion of the Sikhs. Sikhism is a unique blend of Hindu and Islamic beliefs that could only find success in a region that tolerated religious differences. Sikhism is not the dominant religion of modern India, its 25 million adherents greatly outnumbered by Hindus and Muslims in South Asia, but it did grow into a much larger religion than most syncretic faiths.

The Mughals are famous for government innovations such as the use of *zamindars*. They were local administrators who owned and controlled local land and collected taxes, much like the gentry class in Europe. The *zamindars* were made into economically elite class by the Mughals.