**OTTOMANS**
 The Ottomans were a Turkish dynasty, which started out on the borders of a declining Byzantine Empire. Founder, Othman I, rose to prominence in the 14th century, as a ghazi or fighting lord. He won many victories and picked up numerous followers while repeatedly raiding what was left of the Byzantine Empire. Almost the only thing left of the Byzantine Empire was the fortified city of Constantinople itself, surrounded by huge walls. It took the Ottomans 150 years to take Constantinople, from the days when Othman first set out to capture it. The Ottomans first conquered all the Byzantine territory outside the city on both sides, and then in the 1450s moved against the city itself. Led by Mohammed II, the Ottomans knocked down Constantinople's walls with the biggest cannons ever seen. The 80th Byzantine Emperor died fighting on the walls, and the city fell. Under Mohammed and his early successors, the Ottoman Empire spread into other parts of Europe. They used the new technology of gunpowder and artillery to devastating effect. The greatest Ottoman leader, Suleiman the Magnificent, was born at peak of Ottoman power in the early 16th century. He ruled from 1520-1566. Under him, the Ottomans became a world power. They absorbed new territories in Europe, Africa and Asia, and dominated the Muslim world.
By the 1540s, Ottoman military might was unmatched by any state in the world (with the possible exception of China). Their empire extended over Egypt, Anatolia, Syria-Palestine, most of North Africa, western Arabia, Mesopotamia, Iraq, Kurdistan, Georgia, and Hungary. The state was held together by a strong hereditary sovereign, and a strong military organization. Ottoman power began to decline after the reign of Selim II. This was due to military corruption, governmental decentralization, maritime setbacks, commercial and agricultural failures, and cultural and religious stagnation. After 1683, the Ottomans were driven out of Hungary and never again posed a serious threat to Europe. By 1774, the Ottoman Empire became a weak and crumbling empire, which staggered along until its eventual fall in 1918, in the wake of W.W.I.

**SAFAVID EMPIRE**

The Safavid Empire was east of the Ottomans. The Persians, their core population, had experienced 2,000 years of rule under various empires by 1500. The area had become Muslim in the 7th century, and was in many ways the cultural heart of the Islamic world. Persia had been ruled by outsiders or politically fragmented for centuries when in 1500 the Safavids, a Persian Shi’ite group, seized power under the leadership of their 13-year-old leader Shah Ishmail I (1500-1524). The Shi’ites and Sunnis were a long-standing division in Islamic world, which would get worse under influence of these two rival empires. Shi’ite Muslims rejected the traditional Islamic leadership, which traces its succession back to the caliphs, the acknowledged successors of Mohammed. Shi’ites insisted that only someone directly related to Mohammed could be the head of the Islamic world. Such a real leader would be an imam, a spiritual leader, rather than merely a secular leader. The Shi’ites were a religious minority in the Islamic world, and had been persecuted for centuries until they gained a homeland in the Safavid Empire. The religious division drove a wedge into the heart of the Islamic world. The Safavid Empire was surrounded on all sides by Sunni Islamic powers. Shi’ite Persia was full of religious zeal, and stirred up the Shi’ite minorities of other lands. This resulted in a period comparable to the Christian wars of religion, in which both the Ottomans and the Safavids destroyed large numbers of minority religions in their areas, and the two armies fought repeatedly throughout the century. In the early days, the Ottomans generally won. They were better prepared, with better artillery. Around 1600, however, the Safavids got a capable leader. Shah Abbas I (1587-1629) was the greatest of all the Safavid leaders. He came to the throne at 17, and ruled for over 40 years, presiding over one of Persia’s golden ages. Abbas replaced the army of religious enthusiasts with an army of paid soldiers trained in the Western European manner, and got cannons from the English as well. Under his reign, the Safavids finally pushed the Ottomans out of their Western lands. Abbas streamlined the Safavid administration along Western lines, received European traders, and opened diplomatic negotiations with the West. Abbas also poured money into infrastructure — he built roads, canals, and shrines and improved pilgrimage roads to stimulate pilgrimages through his territories. During the four decades of his rule, the Safavids were prosperous and Persian culture flourished.

            Ottoman pressure eventually forced the Safavids eastward. After 1722, the empire gradually declined because of Ottoman and Afghanistan pressures, economic decline in the empire as a whole, and the increasing religious intolerance of the more conservative Shi’ites. The lasting legacies of Safavid rule were the firmly established 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.

**MUGHAL EMPIRE**

 The Mughals were Cathay Turks descended for Tamerlane, the legendary warrior. Mughal India comprised most of modern-day Pakistan, northern India, and Bangladesh. Two towering figures in Mughal India were its founder, Babur (1483-1530) and Akbar the Great (1556-1605), the empire’s true architect.
Babur was half-Turk, half-Mongol, and claimed descent from Tamerlane. At 11, he inherited an unstable central Asian kingdom. He was an exceptional leader who, with the use of new gunpowder technology, took most of North India by the end of his lifetime. The Mughals firmly established their empire in northern India during the 16th century under the direction of Akbar the Great (r. 1556-1605), Babur’s grandson. Akbar completely reorganized the central and provincial governments and rationalized the tax system. Under his leadership, the Mughal Empire became a true Indian empire. Akbar was a religiously eclectic, open-minded man, who showed tolerance to all faiths. He never learned to read himself but surrounded himself with learned scholars and books. He was a pacifier and conciliator, married Hindu women, gave Hindus equal rights in his empire, and placed them in high administrative positions. He also tried to institute other social reforms to liberate women from the harem isolation, and to stop child marriages. He provided India with its 1st strong centralized leadership since the Guptas 1,000 years before. He invited members of all religions to come and debate in his presence, and designed his own religion, which was a mixture of Muslim and Hindu. He hoped to bring the two main religions closer together to help unite India, but did not force religious beliefs on anyone, and respected both Hindu temples and Islamic mosques. His efforts were appreciated by Hindus, and viewed suspiciously by Muslims, but he converted no one to his new religious admixture.

            The 17th century was the golden age of Mughal culture, especially in architecture and painting. The Mughal Empire eventually saw a general political decline, however, due to the burdens of new building projects such as the Taj Mahal, a giant mausoleum for a ruler’s favorite empress; military campaigns, and the erosion of Akbar’s administrative and tax reforms. Religious intolerance and subsequent infighting also contributed to the decline. The dominance of the British East India Company had utterly eclipsed Mughal power by 1819, although the dynasty officially ended only in 1858.

**REASONS FOR DECLINE**

All three empires had striking periods of culture blooming, followed by sharp decline. Islamic societies were generally conservative, and did not undergo the kind of radical changes that occurred in Western world in politics and culture. Islamic societies produced a great deal of scientific work, but no scientific revolution; and commercial prosperity, but no industrial explosion. The European colonialism of 19th century went hand in hand with the relentless advance of Western industrial, commercial and military power, which began in the early modern world. The Shi’ite/Sunni division of Islamic world was also an enduring separation-which is still going on in Iran and Iraq right now