

Greatest Empires of All Time

1. PERSIAN [IRAN] (539 B.C.-641 A.D.)

Imperial Designate: shah

Emperors of Note: Cyrus the Great, Darius the Great, Khosru

State Religions: Zoroastrianism

Technological Accomplishment: The Royal Road, the first international highway, stretching from Iran to Turkey.

The first great multicultural nation, the Persian Empire ranks ahead of Rome as the greatest empire of all time for one reason – morality. The Persians were an exceptionally genteel people, obsessed with cleanliness and hygiene. They in fact had a “code of cleanliness,” which discouraged, among other things eating anything in the street, spitting, or blowing your nose in public. The Persians were also known as avid truth-tellers, Persian kings often turning their nose up at allies who broke treaties. Persia was notoriously tolerant of other religions – when they conquered the Babylonian Empire, the Jews saw it as a liberation from God. The era of Cyrus and Darius was known as the “Era of Great Kings,” and both men were renown for their outstanding characters. In 331 B.C., Alexander of Macedon concluded his destiny by sacking the Persian capital of Susa. Though many historians use this for the end of the Persian Empire, they are discounting the powerful Sassanid Empire (224 - 641 A.D.) which reconquered Iran after the Greeks and Parthians – a 550-year interval. They were later squashed by the Muslims a century later. But still the Persian Empire did not die. The second dynasty of the Muslim Empire, the Abbasid Dynasty, was essentially a revival of the old Persian guard. The Persians, old hat at running empires and benefitting from an infinitely more rich and storied background than the nomadic Arabs, reasserted authority amongst the caliphs and the capital was moved from Damascus to Baghdad. From that point on, the old Persian administrative infrastructure was used throughout most of Islam as the new religion became a conduit for the further spread of Persian culture and art.

2. ROMAN [ITALY] (264 B.C.-565 A.D.)

Imperial Designate: caesar

Emperors of Note: Julius Caesar; Augustus Caesar; Marcus Aurelius

State Religions: nature-based/Christianity

Technological Accomplishment: European road system; aqueducts

No empire in history can quite compare with the impact of the Romans. Julius Caesar and his proteges conquered all lands surrounding the Mediterranean Sea and most of Western Europe, bringing together the most disparate group of people ever assembled under one nation. The influence the Roman empire has had on the world culturally is manifest. Western culture takes from them our calendar, our system of government, our sporting events, the legacy of Christianity – almost everything that comprises the West is Roman. Unfortunately, Rome started out as a totalitarian state. In the rush to protect its border, Rome overtook cultures in a dictatorial way that draws comparisons to the vision of world dominance held by the Nazis. Still, for many years people believed that Rome was “the civilized world,” and its end would mean armageddon. Generations grew up hearing about caesars who conquered hundreds of years ago. When Ovid was exiled from Rome, he likened life in the outer provinces to being “cast in a wilderness of ignorance.”

3. MUSLIM [SAUDI ARABIA, SYRIA, IRAQ] (634 B.C.-1258 A.D.)

Imperial Designate: caliph

Emperors of Note: Muhammad; Ali; Harun the Upright

State Religions: Islam

Technological Accomplishment: pharmacology; algebra

The Muslim empire swept across the Gobi Desert like a holy storm. Spurned by the Jews’ and Christians’ rejection of him as a legitimate prophet, Muhammad mobilized the nomadic people of the desert in a theological campaign that would make use of the Arabs’ superior riding and fighting skills. Islam was a radical ideological movement

that affected each culture it came into contact with in different ways. In many ways identical to the Catholic church and its dominance of Western Europe, Islam set itself apart because of sterner moral code and a perpetual readiness for holy warfare. While Europe was struggling through the Dark Ages, Muslim scholars were furthering the research of the ancient Greeks in such areas as mathematics, astrology, medicine, and philosophy. Unfortunately, as with most things, the empire fragmented into several dynasties after Baghdad's Abbasid ruling family was supplanted by their Turkish eunuchs, the Seljuks. From that point on, Islam was an empire in name only, and the caliph only a figurehead. But by that time its double-time march across the Near East had erected a social infrastructure that stands to this day.

4. EGYPTIAN (3500 – 525 B.C.)

Imperial Designate: pharaoh

Emperors of Note: Cheops, Ahkennaten, Hathesphut, Thutmose III, Ramses the Great, Cleopatra

State Religions: nature-based

Technological Accomplishment: pyramids

The first great empire, it lasted longer than any other since. Their most memorable monument, Cheops' Great Pyramid at Giza, was, as historian Will Durant put it, "more ancient to [the Romans] than the Greeks are to us." The Egyptians were the first model to man that a mass civilization can work on a grand scale, and must have in its run fully told every story of man that would be repeated millions of time after. Their kings were equated as gods, so that civic duty was also religious duty. Indeed, a pharaoh's closest competitor was the chief priest – as each city patronized a particular god, the priests of the most affluent cities held the most power. This was evidenced when Ahkenaton's attempts to sway Egypt towards monotheism resulted in his rule being stricken from official records by spiteful priests after his death. The Egyptians were master builders, and divined new concepts in architecture and astronomy. Their invention of papyrus revolutionized how writing, the hot new medium of information,

was stored. Upon their conquest by the Persians, Egyptian royal traditions were maintained up until the Muslim conquest in 625 A.D.

5. INCA [PERU] (1438 – 1533 A.D.)

Imperial Designate: inca

Emperors of Note: Pachacuti, Topa Inca Yupanqui

State Religions: nature-based

Technological Accomplishment: hillside terracing; suspension bridge

The Inca emerged at the end of a dark age in Andean civilization. There had been densely populated kingdoms in the Andes Mountains for at least 8000 years before them, but around the 15th century Peru consisted mostly of warring states, each based on the type of agriculture most suited to their climate. A polity inhabiting the southeastern Peru, the Inca tribe began a systematic sweep over the entire Andean footlands once a neighboring kingdom tried to conquer them. The Inca became the Borg of the New World, absorbing, adapting, and utilizing the innovations and systems of the people they'd conquered. After four generations of conquest, the Inca controlled a rich empire of disparate regional cultures that stretched 200 miles wide by 2,500 miles long and was held together by a complex system of highways and post stations. But conquerors know only nominal loyalty, as many of the warlords the Inca conquered later helped the Spaniards sweep over the area with even greater efficiency.

6. MACEDONIAN [GREECE] (338 – 190 B.C.)

Imperial Designate: king

Emperors of Note: Philip II; Alexander the Great

State Religions: nature-based

Technological Accomplishment: military phalanx

Philip unified Greece; Alexander conquered Persia. That is the long and short of Macedonia's greatness, a backwater burg of barbarians

and tribal hicks whose living habits were used as fodder for Grecian talk-show monologues. But it was the prince of these poor white trash of Greece that went on to prove the greatest Hellenistic commander in chief of his time and to father the savior of the world. Philip claimed descent from proper Greek cities deep in Peloponnesia – but in short he was just a badass gangbanger that was rougher than his opponents and had the foresight to get Aristotle to tutor his son Alexander. The boy used the Philosopher’s counsel to good measure – he was soon hailed as divinity for liberating formerly Greek colonies from their Persian overlords. Alexander’s intention was to be the epitome of the philosopher-king, and his greatness was his multiculturalism – he followed Egyptian tradition by letting them crown him as the son of god, he married an Afghan princess to pacify tribal chieftains, and even adopted Persian ceremony into his military discipline. He also encouraged intermarriage among his officers, and ensured the spread of Greek values throughout the region by giving their offspring a Greek education and giving the fathers sole custody upon reaching adulthood. Alexander’s conquest established the Hellenistic Age, which stamped Greek culture on the Near East all the way up to the Muslim conquest.

7. OTTOMAN [TURKEY] (1300 – 1922 A.D.)

Imperial Designate: sultan

Emperors of Note: Murad I; Mehmed the Conqueror; Selim I; Suleiman the Magnificent

State Religions: Islam

The Ottomans started out as a warrior caste that was committed to recapturing the essence of Islam through qualities like bravery, celibacy, camaraderie, and asceticism. Heavily influenced by the growing Sufi movement in Islam, Ottoman janissaries were the spiritual brothers of another military fraternity that was changing life in Asia at the time – the Japanese samurai. When Murad I began invading Christian orthodox towns in the Balkans, many Christian leaders welcomed the Ottomans rather than Catholic crusaders because of the Muslims’ reported religious freedom, communism,

and tendency to free peasants from the debt they owed to feudal landlords. It was Murad and his great grandson Murad II that made Rome feel the need to launch the first two crusades, and Mehmed was the one that brought down the Byzantine Empire once and for all (hence the title “the Conqueror”). The Ottomans declined because, in an arrogance customary of Islamic dynasties, they believed that Allah would not permit their empire to be threatened – therefore, corruption, political lethargy, and technological stagnancy were manifest. When the Industrial Revolution swept up the rest of the world, the Ottomans were left standing with their scimitars drooping. WWI knocked them off the world map.

8. BRITISH (1066 A.D.- pres.)

Imperial Designate: king/queen

Emperors of Note: Henry VIII, Elizabeth I, Oliver Cromwell, William & Mary, Sir Robert Peel, Lord Palmerston, Benjamin Disraeli, William Gladstone, Winston Churchill

State Religions: Christianity

Technological Legacy: transnational corporation

Call Britain the Other Empire Built by Napoleon. It was only through war with the French emperor that Britain was able to produce and sell the arms, rations, vital equipment, and clothes that are conflict’s natural by-product and thereby kickstart the Industrial Revolution of the 1800s. The first British surge towards empire began with the end of the War of the Roses in 1066, which established the Tudor Dynasty and gave England such great rulers as Henry VIII and Elizabeth I. Britain followed Spain and Portugal around the world in the 15th century in search of plunder, land, natural resources, and souls for Jesus. With its defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 Britain gained supremacy of the Seven Seas, and in 1600 Elizabeth founded the British East India Company, the world’s first multinational corporation, which would be the keystone to a worldwide trading empire. The predominating factor for Britain’s expansionism, however, was fear of being surpassed by the other European powers of the time, especially longtime kissing cousin France. Colonies in

Africa, Asia, Australia, and America, eventually sparked the phrase “the sun never sets on the British Empire.”

9. MALI (1240–1500 A.D.)

Imperial Designate: mansa

Emperors of Note: Sundiata Keita, Kankan Musa, Suleiman Musa

State Religions: Islam

Mali was created when an upstart tribal chieftain tried to take over the empire of Ancient Ghana; he ended up creating a contra-rebel movement that overcame his tribe and went on to create the largest empire Africa had ever known. At its height, the state of Mali reached from Africa’s northwestern coast across to west Niger and from the northern part of present-day Mali down to Guinea – roughly the combined size of Spain and Portugal. The kingdom was built on the salt-for-gold trade conducted amongst the Saharan Berbers to the north and indigenous tribes inhabiting gold fields to the south. First Ghana, and then Mali became the middle men in this vertical trade. By the time Mali was rising, Muhammad’s Muslim army had made their way well into West Africa. Mali’s upper class was almost entirely Muslim, with the lower class for the most part sticking to traditional nature-based gods. The crown jewel of the empire was Timbuktu, a sprawling port city of learning and culture – some of the greatest minds in the Islamic Empire were known to have visited and studied in Timbuktu.

10. RUSSIAN (1547 A.D.–pres.)

Imperial Designate: czar/premier

Emperors of Note: Ivan the Terrible; Peter the Great; Catherine the Great; Vladmir Lenin; Joseph Stalin; Nikita Khrushchev; Mikhail Gorbachev

State Religion: nature-based/Christianity/none

Technological Accomplishment: first man-made satellite

Here's the short story in case you're ever held hostage by renegade Slavic historians – Ivan the Terrible built Russia, Peter the Great modernized it, and Catherine the Great enlightened it. The rest of Russia's history is swept up in frantic scrambles to catch up to the West and regrets for having ever bothered. Russia was forged by invading Vikings who set up the country's first centralized government. Its heritage has been most influenced by Germany, Poland, Sweden, and the Ottomans. The fading Byzantine Empire breathed its last gasps of Eastern Orthodox Christianity into the chest of Mother Russia, all the significant clergy moving there after the Muslims sacked Constantinople. Moscow was thenceforth known as "the third Rome." (Note the similarity between the words "czar" and "caesar"). Russia answers the question: What if a modern Western nation had Mongolian rule as part of its cultural legacy? The Mongols slowed Russia's half-West heart from marching along with the European Renaissance until Catherine tugged it into the light. When it became the lynchpin of the U.S.S.R., the new Russian republic went about greedily lapping up Eastern European satellites like the last pig to the trough. Fortunately, the spirit of revolution (call it maybe "devolution") entered the Kremlin again during the reign of Mikhail Gorbachev in the 1990s. A mighty oak and co-superpower now, the former Mongol serf had the power to obliterate the planet in a political chess match with America. Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin disbanded the U.S.S.R. before the Cold War ended this chapter of humanity permanently.

11. ASSYRIAN [IRAQ] (858-612 B.C.)

Imperial Designate: king

State Religion: nature-based

Emperors of Note: Tiglath-Pilaser III, Sargon II

Technological Accomplishment: Siege engines (for breaking down city walls)

The Assyrians had the reputation for being the most warlike and feared of all ancient peoples. Semites who had settled the upper Tigris in Mesopotamia, the Assyrians shook off the reign of

Hammurabi's Old Babylonian Empire to lay siege to the Near East. The Assyrians were conquered by Sargon the Great in the 2000s, the first great emperor ancient times, and so adopted cruel tactics of war in order to terrorize people into thinking twice before crossing Assyria. One emperor blinded 14,000 enemy prisoners before sending them off to live in another land – he only partially blinded every hundredth man so they could serve as guides. Another, Cambyses the Nuts [my title, not his], desecrated the ancient temples of Egypt, throwing around sacred idols and mocking Apis, the bull god. He was later murdered by a relative. Tiglath Pilaser adopted a tradition of distributing entire populations of cities he'd conquered to different Assyrian towns so as to put an end to their consciousness as a unified people. This was the fate that befell Israel in 721, giving rise to the myth of the Ten Lost Tribes. The Assyrians were seen as such bloodthirsty scourges that when the capital was conquered by Nebuchanezzar's Second Babylonian Dynasty, the city was laid to waste rather than put under new government, as was the custom. The destruction was so comprehensive that the seat of this once-mighty empire was still sparsely populated 200 years later.

12. MONGOLIAN (1206–1696 A.D.)

Imperial Designate: khan

Emperors of Note: Genghis Khan, Kublai Khan, Tamerlane the Great

Technological Accomplishment: state-sponsored terrorism

The Mongolians came thundering off the central Asian steppes like a Golden Horde – which in fact, became their *nom de guerre*. Their conquests continued a tradition going back to ancient times of desert nomads preying upon “the civilized world” – Mongolia's most famous cousin was Attila the Hun. Indeed most of the people the Mongol's conquered were citizen descendants of earlier conquerors. This time they were unified by a fierce warrior named Temujin, later to be given the title “genghis khan” (“universal ruler”). The Mongols lived by the code of the steppes – the only way to assure peace was through fear. As such, they would periodically destroy a rebellious city and kill all the inhabitants as warnings to other cities. Despite his

reputation as an insane conqueror, Genghis Khan was quite the able administrator, introducing record-keeping, a judicial system, and a dependable pony express to his formerly disjointed peoples. He also encouraged freedom of religion – Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam flourished in the Mongolian Empire, and some Christian states even appealed to the Mongols for help to fight the infidel Muslims. The Mongolians weren't interested in colonization, and instead tended to conquer, pull back to their homeland, and let governors tax people silly – as such, they didn't spread much culture throughout Eurasia. But their impact can't be denied – geographically, the khans ruled the largest empire of all time, from Western Russia to Korea. With Kublai Khan's ascent, the Mongol Empire fractured because of leadership disputes, but his Yuan Dynasty in China was to last nearly a hundred years.

13. CHINESE (221 B.C.-pres.)

Imperial Designate: emperor

Emperors of Note: Shi Huangdei; Hong Wu; Mao Tse-Tung

State Religions: Buddhism

Technological Accomplishment: The Great Wall of China; paper; gunpowder; compass; fireworks (yippee!)

The easiest way to dig Chinese history is to relate it to its dynasties: The Shang, China's first, got the ball rolling; the Zhou was the wellspring of most of China's great philosophies, including Confucianism, Taoism, and legalism; the Q'in, the first age of empire, was crafted through Huangdei's mix of legalistic and Confucian social policies; the Han was China's political Golden Age; the Sui, its inevitable backlash; the Tang, a Han Renaissance; the Song, developers of China's first cosmopolitan cities and the first appearance of Neo-Confucianism; the Yuan, Kublai Khan's foreign empire; the Ming, China's restorers to native rule; the Qing, the rule of Manchurian invaders; the birth of the republic; and the birth of the People's Republic. Though the world's most populous country, China has never tended towards a policy of expansion, hence its relatively low placement on this list. Typically, most rulers in China

were overthrown by neighboring clans – witness the construction of the Great Wall during the brief Qin period (221–206 B.C.). China’s fortunes changed when Ming emperors underestimated European powers out of a xenophobia spawned by their former overlords, the Mongolian barbarians. They shifted again when Tse-Tung cemented Communist social policies in the hearts and minds of its populace. China’s impact on the world through trade has been undeniable, spawning many of the innovations that have shaped history.

14. OLMEC [MEXICO]

Imperial Designate: king

Emperors of Note: Quetzalcoatl

State Religion: nature-based

Technological Accomplishment: math; calendars

The Olmec were the “mother culture” of all subsequent Mexican cultures. Her writing, mathematics, agriculture, religion, and social organization spread up and down Mesoamerica and influenced every tribe from there on, including the Maya, Aztec, and Teotihuacan cultures. The Olmecs broke up their kingdom into three administrative centers for different trades: a coastal city, a floodplain city, and a mountain city. They constructed huge stone temples, from which they performed human sacrifice. The Olmecs had a lot in common with ancient African tribal cultures, actually. Along with the penchant for sacrifice, they both practiced pyramid building; they both worshipped snake gods; the Olmecs spoke a variation of an ancient Mali dialect; and ancient Olmec artifacts, colossal stone busts of former kings, portray distinctly African features. Theories of continental drift and ancient boat-making capability have given rise to the possibility of prehistoric contact between the two continents.

15. BYZANTINE [TURKEY] (330–1453 A.D.)

Imperial Designate: emperor

Emperors of Note: Constantine the Great; Justinian

State Religion: Orthodox Christianity

Byzantium's an interesting story. As the Roman Empire conquered the East, it became apparent that most of the gold, gems, and valuable artifacts were out there, in the riches of the former Persian Empire, since Hellenized and consolidated by Alexander. As German tribes formed kingdoms, they used the skills and organization they'd learned in the Roman army (Romans had long since stopped giving over their prime youth for the military) to actually become a threat to the Empire. In 330 A.D. Constantine moved the capital of the empire from Rome to Byzantium to entrench it in the rich culture of the East and away from barbarian hordes. Indeed, the hordes eventually sacked Rome, but her top administrators, scholars, and politicians had long since moved east. The language eventually lapsed into Greek and the dress became more Oriental, but this was still Caesar's old empire – with one glaring exception. With Constantine making Christianity the official language, this was the first empire dedicated to enlarging Christ's kingdom on earth. The effects of that endeavor still ripple today.

16. AMERICAN (1776 A.D.-pres.)

Imperial Designate: president

Emperors of Note: Thomas Jefferson; Abraham Lincoln; Franklin D. Roosevelt

State Religions: none (Christian)

Technological Accomplishments: nuclear bomb; Internet; capitalism

America started out as the Great Experiment, and it has had great failures and success in that endeavor. It blossomed as a colony of England and was designed to take advantage of the uberrich resources of the New World, mostly to fuel England's status amongst European trading nations and fund wars (mostly against the French). Incredibly brave men, most notably Jefferson, engineered a split with their homeland and embarked upon a nation-building effort that has since seen no equal. In 250 years it has grown to become the richest country in the world, with an economy twice as big as the Russian Federation, the economy in second place. Like most modern

republics, America's quest for empire doesn't take place on the battlefield, but in the business sector, and its economic system has proven to be one of the most successful in history. Though seen as the progenitor of Western values, America is just a figurehead, with a novel system of representative and rotating government. How long this Empire of Capitalism lasts compared to the others on this list is the most pressing question of the day.

17. BABYLONIAN [IRAQ] (1792-539 B.C.)

Imperial Designate: king

Emperors of Note: Hammurabi; Nebuchanezzar

State Religion: nature-based

Technological Accomplishment: Hammurabi's code of law; ziggurat

Babylon had two great epochs: Hammurabi's Old Babylonian Dynasty (1792-1750) and Nebuchanezzar's new one (626-539). Though Babylon was a Semitic city, it was not a Jewish one, as evidenced by Nebuchanezzar's sacking of Judah. The Semites were a nomadic desert people who moved into Babylon and eventually usurped it. Babylon, like most cities in ancient Mesopotamia, was founded by the Sumerians, the folks who gave the Semites their writing, culture, system of government, and the narratives behind much of Semitic religion. Hammurabi had a storied reign, establishing a system of justice and industry that spread farther than any other one had to that point. Nebuchanezzar's was known as Babylon's Golden Age, as the city reached its economical and cultural nadir. The Vegas of its day, this desert city became known as the most decadent oasis in the known world, its moral laxity and progressive mores drawing drooling businessmen from all over the Near East. Babylon was eventually conquered by the Persians and then Alexander – who died there as a result of the city's still formidable excesses.

18. FRENCH

Imperial Designate: king

Emperors of Note: Clovis; Charlemagne; Pepin the Short; Philip II; Louis XIV; Napoleon; Charles de Gaulle

State Religion: Catholicism

Technological Accomplishment: Napoleonic Code

The first French emperor was Clovis, a Frankish (a German tribe) chieftain who conquered the Gallic governor of the crumbling Roman Empire in 486 A.D. Any question about Clovis' place in French posterity is evident in the long line of French kings named Louis ("Louis" is the Latinized version of "Clovis"). He soon adopted Christianity, and the nation soon embraced feudalism. Charlemagne rose to kick much Hun butt in the 8th century, but the empire dwindled in the hands of his progeny. It wasn't until Hugh Capet was crowned in 987 that France began its entrée into real live nation statehood. Things came to a head in 1789, when Louis XVI pissed off both nobles and commoners with outrageous taxes and lost his crown—and also the head held therein. Napoleon's subsequent continental wars were a direct result of this--as the incestuous brood of European monarchs didn't cotton to having no republic sprout up in their most powerful territory. Napoleon didn't care, he conquered most of them and then ran his country better than most of them. This was the beginning of France's evolution through five republics, forever trying to get their national sensibility *just right*. While all this was going on, the French managed to forge a vast empire in West Africa, South-East Asia, and America. When the revolutionary spirit hit the French dominion, Charles DeGaulle was called in to save the day. He did that, and became a French icon. Deftly manipulating the European Community and the French people, he reigned as emperor-in-all-but-name for 11 years. With Francois Mitterand and their Great Shift Left in 1981, France became the European model for socialist capitalism.

20. THE MIGHTY IROQUOIS CONFEDERACY [UNITED STATES]

Imperial Designate: chief

Emperors of Note: Hiawatha

State Religion: nature-based

Technological Accomplishment: model for American statehood

The Iroquois confederacy was the sacred league that was going to bring back autonomous rule to the native inhabitants of America. Consisting of the Mohawks, Cayuga, Seneca, Onondagas, and Oneidas, the league was started by an itinerant preacher named Deganawidah and a young warrior chief named Hiawatha. Deganawidah's concept, called the Great Peace, was to unite first the upstate New York tribes and then all human beings into a coalition that would eliminate the need for war among mankind. The trouble began when neighboring tribes would be allowed no say in the political or social structure of the confederacy--you can have a coalition for peace, but if it's not equanimous, someone's always gonna have a problem with it. No one could come to a consensus on which European tribe to support: the upstart French or the insolent British. The most feared tribe of the confederacy were the Mohawks, but this military coalition was based on a longtime warrior tradition amongst all the Iroquois. Masters of stealth and ambush, the Iroquois arsenal was further strengthened by the steady infiltration of European firearms through trade, making them an even more fearsome fighting force. In the mid-1600s, the Iroquois began a campaign of expansion that eliminated trading rivals in Canada and Pennsylvania, leading to their largest territorial dominion, an empire comprising most of New York state and southern Ontario.

21. NUBIAN [SUDAN] (1785 B.C.-400 A.D.)

Imperial Designate: pharaoh/candake

Emperors of Note: Piankhi; Taharqha; Amanirenas

State Religion: nature-based/Christian

The Nubians were farmers and hunters that lived on the southern reaches of the Nile as Egypt was rising. They were thrifty and industrious, and Egypt promptly took them over and subjected them because they were literally sitting on a gold mine. Part of the same river culture for thousands of years, the Nubians and Egyptians

exchanged icons up and down the Nile to the extent that by the time their empire began to rise, the Nubians shared language, dress, government, art iconography, and religion with the north. They even built pyramids. When Egypt waned, Nubia waxed, periodically asserting control over their own gold fields and trading with Arabia and India. Things came to a head in 730 BC when a strengthened Nubian empire invaded and conquered Egypt, beginning that civilization's 25th Dynasty and igniting a renaissance in old-school artistry among the populace. Black kings ruled Egypt for 70 years before being driven out by the Assyrians in the mid-6th Century BC. Nubians again burned their faces on the world map when Amanirenas, a member of their distinct tradition of warrior queens, defeated Julius Caesar at her front door, burying a bust of his head in a Nubian temple. What made Nubia great was its resiliency, continually moving their capital southwards from Kerma to Napata to Meroe to evade Egyptian and Assyrian lusts. They were invaded and overrun by the Egyptians three times, and sprang back into a full-fledged trading power each time. After losing trading commercial significance to the rise of Axum in the 4th century A.D., the princes in the capital retained their titles and burial ceremonies for years after.

22. ISRAEL (1029–928 B.C.)

Imperial Designate: king

Emperors of Note: David; Solomon

State Religion: Judaism

The first legendary battle between the Hebrews and the Philistines — the previous occupiers of Palestine, the kingdom soon to be called Israel — was Samson vs. Delilah. Samson was a Hebrew, Delilah a Philistine, and the Jews lost out on that one, although Samson took out a whole slew of them (allegedly) with mighty column-toppling power. The second legendary match-up between the desert nomads and the Greek-descended aristocrats was between David and Goliath, the conqueror in this match-up going on to found the Jewish state and going down in history as Judaism's mightiest warrior-king.

Though Israel became a formidable power while reigning Middle East powers Assyria and Egypt were being besieged by inner turmoil, Israel's Golden Age was short but brief, culminating in its schism into the kingdoms of Israel and Judah upon the death of Solomon. Each were in turn blasted by the Assyrians and then the Babylonians, but the religious legacy its people carried on resonates globally to this day.

23. MAURYAN [INDIA] (324 – 185 B.C.)

Imperial Designate: raja

Emperors of Note: Chandragupta I; Asoka

Technological Legacy: building of 80,000 Buddhist temples, greatly accounting for the spread of the religion over the Far East

State Religion: Hinduism/Jainism/Buddhism

The Mauryans rose in the wake of Alexander's retreat from the Indus Valley – in fact, apocryphal tales tell of how the nation's founder, Chandragupta, met Alexander but was dismissed as a minor prince. Chandragupta subsequently went on a rampage of conquest, swallowing up Indian kingdoms disrupted by the Macedonians and snuffing out the few garrisons Alexander left behind. The Mauryan Empire was therefore founded on conquest, and remained a military state until its end. Loaded for bear with spies, the Mauryans were probably the most bureaucratic state India would ever know, replete with government offices for prostitution, navigation, drugs, mines, and public games. Chandragupta eventually renounced all warfare and starved himself to death in a Jainist temple. India's most famous monarch, the Buddhist philosopher-king Asoka, was the last of the Mauryans. After gaining a rep as the most bloodthirsty conqueror of his day, he converted to Buddhism, proclaimed his a peace-loving nation, and launched a propaganda campaign of pacifist and vegetarian values throughout his kingdom on rock pillars and in municipal codes.

24. PORTUGUESE

Imperial Designate: king

Emperors of Note: Alfonso Henriques; John II

State Religion: Catholicism

The Portugese were mostly farmers and sailors who got going on a good thing because of their ambition and fortitude. Portugese was a sort of backwater in a proud corner of the former Roman Empire with rich access to the Atlantic – a heady prospect once they nailed down transoceanic seafaring. Alfonso rallied his people enough to beat Muslims and Spanish and then solicited the pope’s confirmation before anyone else could threaten his sovereignty. The Portugese were the first to find a viable way around the Muslim Empire to the coveted goods of the East – spices, silks, and gold. All the “good” Western European countries were trying, so the Portugese figured they could burn a map on the world with a trip around Africa – they did that, lashing the Arabs out of Indian Sea trading dominance. Portugal set up colonies on three continents – not bad for a country that barely covers 35,000 square miles. The political structure fit the typical medieval vein, with family dynasties being usurped by upstart court advisors. Henry the Navigator was the son of John I, who made a name for himself by outwitting Spain’s forces and forever securing the independence of Portugal by signing a pact with Britain that stands to this day. After the wave of national independence that swept the world in the 19th century – liberating North and South America, Africa, and much of Asia – Portugal’s fortunes dwindled, but their legacy thrives all over the world.

25. AZTEC [MEXICO]

Imperial Designate: king

Emperors of Note: Montezuma

State Religion: nature-based

The Aztecs were the ultimate can-do kids, building one of the largest empires in the Americas on unwanted swampland donated to them by snobby landlords. The Aztecs made the most of the swamp, and engineered an agricultural system that soon had their population

thriving and their power mounting. They later joined an alliance with a neighboring city-state, and overthrew their former landlords. The focus of Aztec culture was on the pleasing of their gods through human sacrifice, so they waged war frequently in order to gain lambs for the slaughter. It usually went down like this: they'd go to a neighboring hamlet and recommend their king give the Aztecs tribute. If the king refused, the rout was on, and the Aztecs were skilled and ruthless warriors. At its peak, the Aztec capital city was home to over 200,000 people – more than any European city at that time.

26. SPAIN

Imperial Designate: king

Emperors of Note: Ferdinand and Isabella; Charles I; Francisco Franco

State Religion: Catholicism

Spain is cool because it's the only place that got the benefit from the Golden Ages of both Rome and Islam. Remember, since the Muslims were experiencing a Golden Age at the same time Europeans were experiencing the Dark Ages, the 300 years Spain spent under Muslim control were filled with great Muslim minds like Maimonides, Averroes, and Abulcasis. Nor did every Spanish resent Muslim control – their lax taxes were a godsend to most peasants. Once Ferdinand and Isabella combined their kingdoms of Aragon and Castile, respectfully, Spain was at last a unified empire, and almost immediately went about expanding. They were the first to give Columbus leave to conquer, Christianity had few champions like the pious Isabella, mother of the Inquisitions.

27. SONGHAY [MALI]

Imperial Designate: musa

Emperors of Note: Sunni Ali the Great, Askia Muhammad Toure

State Religion: Islam

The mighty Soninke spent many years as a powerful state paying tribute to Mali before Sunni Ali finally overthrew a corrupt Malian king. An unabashed Muslim empire, Songhay men were known as efficient administrators and soldiers. At their apex under Muhammad Toure, Songhay spread over more area than any other West African empire ever had, taking all of Mali's land and then some. Toure attempted to incorporate Muslim law into his administration, but met resistance by the rural classes, who fiercely held on to traditional nature-based religions. Their fiercest competitors were the nomadic Tuareg Berbers from the Sahara and your occasional Muslim fringe movement. It was one of these purist movements--the Almoravids, who went on to conquer North Africa and much of Spain--that eventually did spell the end of the Songhay empire only 100 years after its Golden Age.

28. GUPTA [INDIA]

Imperial Designate: raja

Emperors of Note: Chandra Gupta (no relation)

State Religion: Hinduism

While Rome was being sacked by Goths, Franks, and Vandals, India was experiencing her Golden Age under the Gupta family, also from Maghada, home of the Mauryans. In contrast to the Mauryans' strict controls over their subjects' commerce and social life, the Guptas were free-range capitalists, generally tolerant of any practice that turned a profit. During the Gupta heyday, hospitals operated free of charge, rest houses abounded along the nation's highways, and the general welfare afforded the abolition of capital punishment. Gupta India was marked by the cool temperament of its citizenry. Heavily influenced by Buddhism and Jainism, most citizens were vegetarians, and criminal offenses like murder were extremely rare. In this type of environment, a flowering of the arts and learning is never far behind, as some of India's greatest poets and dramatists lived during this time. In 515, the White Huns took advantage of a power struggle in the Indian royal family. Acting without reserve or remorse, they

pillaged and looted the capital, again sending India into a spiral of contentious warlords and petty kingdoms.

29. PARTHIAN [IRAN] (247 B.C. – 224 A.D.)

Imperial Designate: arsacid

Emperors of Note: Arsace; Mithradates

Technological Accomplishment: mounted-archer warfare

State Religion: Zoroastrianism

Though the Germans get more pub (mostly because they assimilated with and eventually conquered the Romans), the Parthians proved to be Rome's most formidable eastern foe. Born from steppeland-nomad stock, the Parthians swept out of central Asia to take over the old Persian Empire from Alexander's generals. The Parthians were the first government to consolidate and administer the Great Silk Road, a route between East and West that had long been the prime conduit for cultural and commercial exchange across the Eurasian continent. Parthia served as the route's police, and collected a tidy little tax on all goods passing through. History has ignored Parthia for the most part, possibly because of their insularity – they had no interest in fomenting the Greek culture they inherited and never saw Rome as a paragon of civilization like other “barbarian” nations. The Parthians were also known as fierce mounted archers. They invented a technique of attacking an enemy on horseback and then lobbing arrows behind them as they retreated – the Parthian Shot, later to be corrupted into “parting shot.”

30. KHMER [CAMBODIA]

Imperial Designate:

Emperors of Note: Suryavarman II; Jayavarman VII

Technological Accomplishment: the resplendent Hindu temple of Angkor Wat

State Religion: Hinduism

The Khmer people originally came into the Mekong Basin of central Vietnam in prehistoric times, but it wasn't till the 9th Century AD that they coalesced into any kind of unified state, soon to be called Kambujadesa, from whence the present-day nation of Cambodia gets its name. Soon, the Khmer became the most powerful state in Southeast Asia, based on a tight military tradition and a policy of expansionism – a policy that was to spell their downfall when lack of funds spent in costly invasions kept them from defending their empire against foreign invaders. The Khmer based their social structure on a divine hierarchy similar to the Inca – the king was God's representative on earth, and the best way to show devotion and ensure bountiful harvests was to build temples. If the parallels to Egypt's Old Kingdom pyramids seem eerie, note also that Kambujadesa likewise suffered a depression as a result of the economic toll exacted by the grandeur of its temple-building projects. But what temples they were. Angkor Wat, the nation's most famous legacy from that time, is an architectural marvel. The largest sacred structure in the world, the temple covers more than 300 acres, every single inch of which is festooned with bas relief sculptures depicting Hindu legends and Khmer military victories. The capital city itself was no less impressive, covering 135 square miles that were only accessible by a long causeway bordered by sculptures of rearing hydras.

Top Ten Rockinest Muslim Dynasties and where their capitals were:

1. Abbasids (Baghdad, Iraq)
2. Ottomans (Istanbul, Turkey)
3. Umayyads (Damascus, Syria)
4. Mamelukes (Cairo, Egypt)
5. Fatimids (Cairo, Egypt)
6. Seljuks (Konya, Turkey)
7. Almoravids (Cordoba, Spain)
8. Umayyads (Cordoba, Spain)
9. Ghaznavids (Ghazni, Pakistan)
10. Mughals (Delhi, India)

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