

Unit 11

Early Empires

Section 1

Unit Materials

Questions To Consider

Question 1.

What historical and environmental conditions enabled the creation of centralized empires?

Question 2.

How were early empires administered and maintained — politically, economically, and ideologically?

Question 3.

How did early empires connect the peoples of Eurasia, South America, and West Africa in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries?

Question 4.

What was the legacy of early empires in Eurasia, Africa, and the Americas?

The Big Picture

How is this topic related to Increasing Integration?

Early empires were able to integrate peoples of different religions and cultures under a common political system. They also provided stability and protection for trading enterprises across vast territories, and thus helped facilitate connections between distant peoples.

How related to Proliferating Difference?

Early empires also helped create differences between peoples by establishing political, social, and ethnic hierarchies within their realms.

Unit Purpose

- Empires are large-scale political structures that appear in many different times and places.
- Although empires take many different forms, they all concentrate power in a central location, and maintain economic relationships — usually through tax or tribute — with outlying areas.

- One critical factor in the rise and maintenance of most empires is the possession of superior military strength, tactics, or technologies.
- Empires are often born as a result of the efforts of individual charismatic leaders.

Unit Content Overview

The word “empire” evokes visions of grandeur and glory, conquest and slavery. Indeed, empires live in memory long after they have faded from power. We are probably most likely to think of empire in connection with Rome; the term, in fact, comes from the Latin *imperium*, with its root meaning of order and command. Tacitus, the Roman historian, also used it to refer to the immense size and diversity of the Roman world. But many different empires beyond that of Rome — Mesopotamian, Chinese, Aztec, and Mughal, for example — have appeared throughout history and around the world. By exploring the diverse historical, cultural, and geographical settings of empires, historians aim to understand how and why empires emerged when and where they did, how they were maintained, and how and why they came to an end. Like all history, the answers to these questions depend on the kinds of sources we have and on the ways historians use them to provide multiple perspectives on the past.

This unit seeks to understand the rise, maintenance, and fall of empires by comparing the empire experience in different parts of the world. We can identify both similarities and differences among the processes that led to the rise and fall of empires in diverse historical, cultural, and geographical settings. In most cases, physical environment, charismatic leaders, and a large and strong military were critical to empire building. While empires generally introduced new political and administrative institutions, they also frequently adapted to existing institutions and local elites. Finally, most empires spent much energy and resources in order to control production and trade within their realms. Ultimately, however, what is most interesting and important about the comparative study of empires is that peoples widely separated by time and place independently created common forms of political and social organization.

Unit References

Anthony Pagden, *Peoples and Empires: A Short History of European Migration, Exploration, and Conquest, from Greece to the Present* (New York: Modern Library, 2001).

Carla Sinopoli, “The Archaeology of Empires,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 23 (1994): 159–80.

Susan E. Alcock, ed., *Empires: Perspectives From Archaeology and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

Terence D’Altroy, *The Incas* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002).

Ross Dunn, *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta: A Muslim Traveler of the 14th Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

Global Historical Context

- Time Period: 1200–1500 CE
- The period between 1200 and 1500 CE was an era of empire-building in Eurasia, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Americas. In addition to the case studies explored in this unit, empires and other centralized states developed in east and south Asia (the Ming in China and the Mughals in India), as well as in Central and North America (the Mayans and Mississippians, respectively). Increased trade often went hand-in-hand with the development of empires and other powerful, centralized states. In the Indian Ocean region, for example, maritime trade benefited from the political stability and economic

expansion provided by centralized states; in sub-Saharan Africa and Western Europe, economic expansion helped encourage political change towards centralized structures. Also as a result of increased trade across imperial frontiers in this period, religious ideas and traditions continued to spread across the world.

AP Themes

- Examines interactions in economies and politics by focusing on the relationship between the trade networks and the creation of empires.
- Explores systems of social structure by comparing contemporary but geographically distant empire systems with one another.
- Discusses changing functions of states by comparatively exploring the nature of the shift to imperial structures in a variety of regions around the world.

Related Units

- Unit 6. Order and Early Societies: How do diverse political structures and relationships distribute power and material resources? Through the rise of the Chinese Empire, Mayan regional kingdoms, and the complex society of Igbo-Ukwu, this unit considers the origins of centralized states and alternative political and social orders. It is related to Unit 11 because it considers an empire as one system by which early societies ordered themselves.
- Unit 8. Early Economies: How do societies assign value to land, labor, and material goods? A comparison of manorial economies in Japan and medieval Europe is contrasted with the tribute economy of the Inka, and the experience of dramatic economic change is illustrated by the commercial revolution in China. This unit is related to Unit 11 because it details the way in which one empire — the Inka — constructed complex economic systems to maintain power.
- Unit 20. Imperial Designs: What lasting impacts did modern imperialism have on the world? The profound consequences of imperialism are examined in the South African frontier and Brazil, where politics, culture, industrial capitalism, and the environment were shaped and re-shaped. This unit is related to Unit 11 because it explores a later form of imperialism, and can serve as a useful contrast with the earlier period.
- Unit 23. People Shape the World: What is the impact of the individual in world history? This unit examines the role of individual and collective action in shaping the world through the lives of such diverse figures as the Ayatollah Khomeini, Mao Zedong, and Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo. It is related to Unit 11 because charismatic individuals were frequently critical in establishing early empires.

Section 2

Video-Related Materials

Video Segment One: The Mongol Empire

This segment examines the rise of the Mongols — a people who came to rule a vast empire spanning much of Eurasia in the thirteenth century. In 1206, Mongol clan leaders who had banded together elected a man named Temujin, or Chinggis Khan, to be their universal ruler. Chinggis (or Genghis) Khan claimed a divine right to conquer the world — a claim he combined with his charismatic leadership to win the allegiance of tribal leaders. The key to Mongol expansion was a highly effective military, which depended on skilled horsemanship and the use of long-range, recursive bows that could be fired in quick succession. These skills allowed the Mongols to easily conquer sedentary, agricultural societies, and to defeat armies many times their size. In fact, by his death in 1227, Chinggis Khan had not only conquered Beijing (in 1215) but most of Central Asia as well. Chinggis Khan's sons and grandsons continued this expansionary project, and by 1250 had succeeded in conquering most of Eurasia. Perhaps ironically, although the Mongol conquests resulted in the deaths of many hundreds of thousands of people, they also brought a level of peace and security to the vast trade routes of the Eurasian interior. Indeed, even though the Mongol Empire collapsed in the fourteenth century, it encouraged vigorous trade and contacts between distant peoples for a century, and served as the anchor for a Eurasian world system.

Video Segment Two: The Mali Empire

This segment explores the Mali Empire of West Africa, which arose between 1200 and 1400 in the kingdom of Ghana. Oral tradition records that a powerful leader, named Sunjata, unified the Mali Empire, and that the empire grew rich and powerful from trade conducted across the vast expanse of the Sahara desert. Indeed, merchants traveled long distances to trade iron products, salt, and gold in Mali's markets. The empire itself grew increasingly cosmopolitan, as it became host to a wide variety of traders, slaves, and travelers who frequented Mali's urban centers at Timbuktu, Gao, and Jenne-Jao. Like the Mongol Empire, the key to Mali's success was its effective military force — paid for with wealth gained by the trans-Saharan trade and with tribute won from neighboring conquered states. In return for tribute, Mali's military offered protection from thievery and banditry — which further encouraged trade to flourish in the region. In addition, while the Mali central administration established its own rule of law over conquered territories, it allowed regional cultures to remain under the control of existing clans and elites. Although the Mali Empire collapsed in the mid-fifteenth century, during its existence it provided a conduit for the exchange of ideas, religions, and commodities, and connected people across the vast inland ocean of the Sahara.

Video Segment Three: The Inka Empire

This segment focuses on the Inka Empire of South America, which rose to power under the leadership of prince Pachacuti in the fifteenth century. Unlike empires in Eurasia, the Inka Empire did not have the benefit of the horse, wheeled vehicles, metal tools, writing, or even superior military technologies. Instead, the Inka overpowered their adversaries through superior logistics and by fielding very large armies. Once the Inka conquered a territory, they ensured its effective incorporation by bringing the sons of conquered elites to be educated at Cuzco, the Inka capital. This strategy socialized such children to accept Inka ways, and ensured they would serve the Inka Empire once they were returned to their homes. Inkan rulers legitimized their rule with religion, and insisted that conquered areas adopt the Inkan creator god and recognize the Inka ruler as god's representative on Earth. The state ensured economic solvency by redistributing conquered land and resources, and by demanding labor — or *mit'a* — through military service or commodity production. At its height, the Inkan Empire stretched from modern Chile to Ecuador and supported a network of roads nearly 30,000 kilometers long. Although the Inkan Empire collapsed completely in 1532, during its existence it created a unique and powerful system that connected peoples from a diverse array of ecological niches along the west coast of South America.

Perspectives on the Past: Empire Legacies

What are the complex and sometimes contradictory legacies of early empires? While some conquered peoples rebelled against the Inkan Empire when it was in power, years of Spanish rule led them to yearn for a restoration of the Inka and to rebel in the name of the destroyed Inkan Empire. Even now, images of the Inka continue to persist in Peruvian culture. The legacies of the Mongol Empire were contradictory, because the empire served as a conduit for disease as well as new ideas. Today, the memory of the Mongol Empire lives on in Mongolia, where Chinggis Khan has become a symbol of national identity. In West Africa, the legacies of empire live on in the names of modern African states such as Ghana and Mali. In each case, the idea of empire lives on as a powerful force in the twenty-first century.

Video Details

Who Is Interviewed

- Linda Walton
- Candice Goucher
- Peter Winn

Primary Source Materials Featured in the Video

- *Secret History of the Mongols*
- Mali Griot
- Pedro de Cieza de Leon, Spanish soldier

Program Contents

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17:01	24:45	Video Segment 3. <i>The Inka Empire</i>
24:46	26:16	Perspectives on the Past: <i>Empire Legacies</i>
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