

Important World Empires

The Roman Empire (27 BCE to 1453)

This is a no-brainer, as absolutely no Empire is as well-known and has been as thoroughly studied as is the one that owned the Mediterranean and much of Europe for almost 1,500 years. Founded in 27 BCE, when the Roman senate granted Octavian the title of Augustus—thereby ending the old Roman Republic (which itself had already stood a good 500 years)—it ended nearly 1500 years later when the Ottoman Turks, under Mehmed II, sacked the last vestiges of the old Empire's capitol, Constantinople, in 1453. Of course, by that time it was a mere shadow of its former glory (and was no longer even ruled from Rome) but, at its zenith in 117 CE, it was the most powerful nation on the planet, bar none. While it wasn't the largest, or even the longest-lasting Empire in history, its influence on western culture—especially in regards to architecture, language, literature, art, and science—cannot be underestimated. In fact, it's difficult to imagine how the world would look today if there hadn't been a Roman Empire those many centuries ago.

Others empires worthy of note: The Assyrian Empire (mentioned prominently in the Bible), the Byzantine Empire (the long-lived successor to the Roman Empire), The Holy Roman Empire (which owned Europe for nearly 900 years), the Egyptian Empire (regional but nearly as famous as the Roman Empire), and the Greek—or, more precisely—the Macedonian Empire (one of the shortest-lived but most powerful empires in the world, under Alexander the Great).

The British Empire (1603 to 1997)

Though it lasted a mere 400 years, no empire was larger than the one the comparatively-small island nation of Great Britain was able to maintain until fairly recently. How big was it? At its zenith in 1922, the British Empire held sway over nearly half a billion people (a fifth of the world's population at the time) and covered more than 13 million square miles (almost a quarter of the Earth's total land area)! Not bad for a country slightly smaller than the state of Oregon. In fact, at one point the sun never set on the British Empire, not because God couldn't trust an Englishman in the dark, but because of its global reach (with colonies and possessions on every continent—including, believe it or not, Antarctica).

Alas, all good things must come to an end, and that end came in the twentieth century, when two World Wars drained England financially, making it cheaper to dissolve her empire than keep it. Of course, once they lost India in 1947 it was all over; except for a couple of small possessions (the aforementioned Falkland Islands and a few islands scattered around the globe), the sun really has set on the British Empire. Its most important possession remains Gibraltar, the gateway to the Mediterranean, and one that is supposed to remain in British hands as long as its population of Barbary Macaques—a type of obnoxious monkey—remains on the peninsula.

The Mongol Empire (1206-1368)

Though short-lived as Empires go—it lasted a mere 162 years—while it was around, few were as frightening, or grew as quickly, as this one. Under the leadership of Ghengis Khan (1163-1227), it started small—basically just present-day Mongolia—but within seventy years it had grown into the largest contiguous land Empire in human history, eventually stretching from Eastern Europe to the Sea of Japan. At its height, it covered an area of 9 million square miles, and held sway over a population of 100 million.

It would probably have been even larger—and possibly have lasted longer—had it managed to invade Japan, but its fleet lost bouts with first-class tsunamis in 1274 and 1281, ending Kublai Khan's plans to expand eastward. By the middle of fourteenth century, the empire began slowly falling apart through infighting and political instability until it finally folded, with its far-flung territories breaking away or being absorbed by other emerging powers. While it existed, however, few Empires had as big an impact on trade, religion, and culture in Asia as did the Mongols.

The Ottoman Empire (1299-1922)

The Ottoman Empire was one of the largest and longest lasting empires in history. During its height (under Suleiman the Magnificent) in the 16th century, it stretched from the southern borders of the Holy Roman Empire to the Persian Gulf, and from the Caspian Sea to modern day Algeria, giving it de facto control of much of southeast Europe, Western Asia and North Africa. At the beginning of the 17th century the empire contained no fewer than 32 provinces, along with numerous vassal states, making it one of the truly great empires whose influence continues to be felt to this day.

As is the case with most large empires, however, ethnic and religious tensions, and increasing competition from other emerging powers, whittled away at the Ottoman's power until it finally began dissolving in the 19th century. In many ways, the circumstances surrounding the Ottoman Empire's fall closely paralleled those surrounding the decline of the Roman Empire, particularly in regards to the ongoing tensions between the Empire's different ethnic groups, and the various governments' inability to deal with these tensions. Attempts to improve cultural rights and civil liberties came too late to reverse its demise, though it did lay the foundation for secularist governments in the Muslim world, as exemplified by modern-day Turkey.

The Achaemenid Empire (ca. 550-330 BCE)

More commonly referred to as the Medo-Persian Empire, this Asian Empire was the largest one in ancient history which, at its height, extended from the Indus valley of modern day Pakistan to Libya, and into the Balkans. Forged by Cyrus the Great, it is best remembered as the chief foe of the Greek city states during the Greco-Persian Wars, for emancipating its slaves and releasing the Jews from their Babylonian captivity,

and for instituting the usage of official languages throughout its territories. It wasn't very long, however, before it fell victim to Alexander the Great in the 4th century BCE, and was quickly defeated and absorbed into Alexander's own vast, but short-lived, Empire.

Upon his death, it splintered into two smaller Empires, the Ptolemaic Kingdom and Seleucid Empire, as well as into other minor territories, many of which gained independence after its collapse. Perhaps its greatest contribution was in its creation of a centralized administration that kept it running efficiently and profitably for centuries, and served as a model for future and modern governments. So these are the folks that invented bureaucracy, is it?

The Umayyad Caliphate (661-750)

I bet you've never heard of this one, but it proved to be one of the fastest growing—though shortest-lived—Empires in history. Organized in the aftermath of the death of the venerated prophet Muhammad, it was the mechanism by which Islam was spread across the Middle East and into North Africa, sweeping aside everything in its path. Actually, the Umayyad Caliphate was the second of the four Islamic caliphates established after the death of Muhammad but, at its height, it would cover more than five million square miles, making it the largest empire the world had yet seen (modern Arab nationalism regards the period of the Umayyads as part of the Arab Golden Age of Islam). Though it was eventually superseded by various other caliphates and empires (including the Ottoman Empire), it laid the foundation for what was to be a nearly unbroken string of Muslim control in the region, that continues to this day.

The Qing Dynasty (1644-1912)

This was the last ruling dynasty of China before the country became a Republic, bringing an end to many hundreds of years of imperial rule. Preceded by the better-known Ming Dynasty, the Qing dynasty was founded by the Manchu clan Aisin Gioro in what is today Manchuria in 1644. It grew quickly until, by the 18th century, it covered all of what is today's modern China, Mongolia, and even parts of Siberia—an area of over 5.7 million square miles (and making it the 5th largest empire in history, according to land mass.) The Qing Dynasty was finally overthrown following the Xinhai Revolution, however, when the Empress Dowager Longyu abdicated on behalf of the last emperor, Puyi, in February of 1912, bringing an end to a long line of Emperors stretching back over 1500 years. Not a bad run by any standards!

The Spanish Empire (1492-1976)

One of the first global empires, at its height it possessed territories and colonies in Europe, the Americas, Africa, Asia and Oceania, making it one of the most important political and economic powers in the world for several hundred years. Its establishment in the 15th century also ushered in the modern global era, and five centuries of European dominance of global affairs before competition from other European powers—particularly the French and British—weakened Spain

to the point that, by the end of the 19th century, it was but a shadow of its former greatness. The end didn't finally come until the 1970s, however, when it granted its last colonies in Africa and South America their independence, spelling finitoe to 600 years of Spanish colonialism. Its chief contribution came in its discovery of the New World in 1492 and the spread of Christianity to the western world, both of which was to dramatically change the geo-political dynamics of the planet and lay the foundation for the modern western world.

The French Empire (1534-1962)

Eventually becoming the second-largest empire in history (second only to the British Empire), at its zenith the French Colonial Empire extended over 4.9 million square miles, and covered almost 1/10 of the Earth's total land area. Its influence made French one of the most widely-spoken languages in the world for a time, and brought French architecture, culture, and cuisine to the four corners of the globe. Alas, like all the great European empires, its collapse came about incrementally over a long period of time, as it lost territories to other emerging nations—especially to the British—and it suffered through two World Wars, which drained it financially. Though it continued to hold onto to some of its territories well into the 20th century (and still does to this day), by 1962, with the granting of independence to rebellious Algeria, the French Empire was basically no more, bringing a close to a long and cultured era in human history.

The Mayan Empire (ca. 2000 BCE-1540 CE)

How does the Mayan Empire make it onto the list alongside such well-known empires like the Roman, British, and Mongol Empires? Easy. It holds the record for the longest running empire—almost 3500 years! That's more than twice as long as the Roman Empire, and 1500 years longer than the various Chinese dynasties combined! While very little is known about its first 3,000 years, its demise and brief interaction with the Spanish in the 16th century is the stuff of legends (see the Mel Gibson-directed film *Apocalypto* to get a good idea of what the Mayan Empire looked like at its height). Today, all we have left of the Mayans is their impressive pyramid-like structures scattered across the Yucatan peninsula, and a doomsday calendar that seems to have everybody up in arms nowadays.