

Unit 3: Land-Based Empires, c. 1450–1750

Unit 3 covers how gunpowder empires expanded across Afro-Eurasia, how they administered and legitimized their rule, and how belief systems changed during 1450 to 1750. CED topics 3.1 through 3.3.

AP World History

Land-Based Empires

About 12 minutes to read

How to use this guide

Read it in order the first time because the three topics form a sequence. First the empires grow, using gunpowder weapons to conquer rivals. Then they have to govern what they conquered, so they build administrations and find ways to legitimize their rule. Meanwhile the belief systems of the period shift, sometimes because rulers use them and sometimes in ways rulers cannot control. Exam questions usually ask you to compare how two empires handled the same problem, so keep the comparison table on page 2 open in your mind as you read.

After the first read, use the trap boxes and the tables to review the distinctions that exam questions test most often. Finish with the practice questions, then complete the recall check on the last page out loud and note any items you cannot explain yet.

What this unit is worth. Unit 3 carries 12 to 15 percent of the multiple-choice section, which makes it one of the heavier units on the exam. The comparison skill matters here more than in most units. The College Board expects you to explain similarities and differences in how the land-based empires expanded, administered, and legitimized their power, not just to list facts about each one.

3.1 Empires Expand

Between 1450 and 1750, several large empires grew by conquering land neighbors. The CED points to three tools behind this expansion. **Gunpowder** is the explosive compound used in firearms and artillery. **Cannons** are the large gunpowder artillery pieces that let armies break rival fortifications. **Armed trade** is commerce carried out with military backing, so trade routes doubled as instruments of control. Together these let land-based empires conquer rivals and build large states.

Four empires anchor this topic. The **Ottoman Empire** held Southern Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa and expanded using gunpowder weapons. The **Safavid Empire** ruled Persia in the Middle East, and its political and religious disputes with the Ottomans and Mughals fueled **state rivalries**, which are conflicts between states driven by political and religious disputes. The **Mughal Empire** covered South and Central Asia and used gunpowder weapons such as cannons to defeat rival states. The **Manchu** were the people who ruled Central and East Asia as one of the great land-based empires of the period and established the Qing dynasty.

EMPIRE	WHERE	WHAT TO ATTACH TO IT
Ottoman	Southern Europe, Middle East, North Africa	Gunpowder expansion; the devshirme system; Sunni side of the Ottoman-Safavid rivalry
Safavid	Persia (Middle East)	Shi'a side of the Ottoman-Safavid rivalry; religious disputes with Ottomans and Mughals
Mughal	South and Central Asia	Cannons against rival states; the zamindar tax system
Manchu (Qing)	Central and East Asia	Established the Qing dynasty; the fourth great land-based empire of the period
Songhai	West Africa, 15th and 16th centuries	Conflict with Morocco as an example of state rivalries; promotion of Islam as religious legitimation

The **Songhai Empire** is the CED's West African example. It was a major empire of the 15th and 16th centuries. Its conflict with Morocco illustrates state rivalries, and its promotion of Islam illustrates how rulers used religious ideas to legitimize their rule, which connects it to topic 3.2 as well.

Trap. These are *land-based* empires. When a question asks about the Ottomans, Safavids, Mughals, or Manchu, the answer will involve armies, artillery, and overland conquest. Do not reach for naval or maritime explanations. Sea-based expansion belongs to the transoceanic networks of Unit 4.

3.2 Empires: Administration

Conquering territory is only the first problem. Rulers then had to hold it, and the CED describes two groups they increasingly built up for that purpose. **Bureaucratic elites** are trained administrators recruited to run the government. **Military professionals** are trained career soldiers and officers. Rulers developed both to maintain centralized control over their populations and resources. When a question asks how an empire kept power after expanding, these two groups are usually the answer.

Rulers also needed money, and the CED names three revenue methods. **Tribute collection** means requiring conquered or subordinate peoples to send goods or payments to the imperial center. **Tax farming** is the system in which the state sold the right to collect taxes to private agents. **Tax-collection systems** more broadly are new or reformed methods of gathering revenue, such as collecting taxes in hard currency. All three existed to generate revenue for state power and expansion.

Trap. Tax farming and tribute collection both raise money, but they work differently. In tax farming the state sells the *right to collect* to private agents. In tribute collection the subordinate peoples send payments *directly* to the center. If the scenario mentions private agents buying collection rights, it is tax farming.

Two examples make the abstract methods concrete. The **devshirme** was the Ottoman practice of recruiting young Christian boys from conquered territories to serve as elite soldiers, the Janissaries, and as administrators. The CED cites it as an example of the bureaucratic elites and military professionals rulers used to centralize control. **Zamindar tax collection** was Mughal India's system in which local landholders called zamindars collected taxes from peasants for the imperial government. The CED cites it as an example of an innovative tax-collection system.

Trap. Keep the examples with their empires. Devshirme is Ottoman. Zamindar tax collection is Mughal. Questions that swap them are testing whether you memorized the pairing or just the vocabulary word.

Legitimizing rule

Beyond administrators, soldiers, and revenue, rulers needed people to accept their authority. The CED names three continuing methods. **Religious ideas** are beliefs rulers used to legitimize their rule. **Art and monumental architecture** are grand artistic and building projects used to display imperial power. Rulers continued to use faith, art, and monumental building to justify their authority from 1450 to 1750. None of this was new, which is the point. The methods continued because they worked.

Divine right is the European idea that a monarch's authority comes directly from God. The CED cites it as an example of the religious ideas rulers used to legitimize their rule. Note the geography. Divine right is the European example. The Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal rulers had their own religious claims, but the term divine right belongs to Europe.

METHOD	WHAT IT IS	CED EXAMPLE
Bureaucratic elites	Trained administrators running the government	Devshirme (Ottoman)
Military professionals	Career soldiers and officers	Janissaries raised through the devshirme
Religious ideas	Beliefs used to justify authority	Divine right (Europe); Songhai promotion of Islam
Art and monumental architecture	Grand projects displaying imperial power	Continued by rulers across the period
Tribute collection	Subordinate peoples send goods or payments to the center	Used to fund state power and expansion
Tax farming	State sells tax-collection rights to private agents	Used to fund state power and expansion
Tax-collection systems	New or reformed revenue methods	Zamindar tax collection (Mughal India)

3.3 Empires: Belief Systems

Religion changed during 1450 to 1750 in ways no ruler fully controlled. **Christianity**, the religion centered on Jesus Christ, saw its reach expand in this period. The engine was a rupture inside the faith itself. The **Protestant Reformation** was the 16th-century break with existing Christian traditions, and the CED marks it as a major rupture within Christianity. The **Catholic Reformation** was the Roman Church's internal reform movement in response to Protestantism. The CED's key claim is that *both* reformations contributed to the growth of Christianity. Both reformations added converts and new institutions, so Christianity grew larger after the split than before it.

Trap. The Catholic Reformation was the Roman Church reforming *itself*, not a second group breaking away. If a question describes an internal reform movement that stayed inside the Roman Church, that is the Catholic Reformation. The breakaway is the Protestant one.

Islam changed through politics as much as theology. The **Sunni-Shi'a split** is the division within Islam between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims. The **Ottoman-Safavid rivalry** was the political and religious competition between the two empires, and the CED states that this rivalry *intensified* the split. The Ottomans were Sunni and the Safavids were Shi'a, so their imperial competition mapped onto the religious division and deepened it. Note the verb. The rivalry intensified an existing split. It did not create it.

Trap. Keep the pairing straight. Ottoman goes with Sunni, Safavid goes with Shi'a. Questions that flip the pairing are testing exactly this, and the flip is the most common wrong answer on this topic.

New religions could also form where faiths met. **Sikhism** is a religion that developed in South Asia during 1450 to 1750, and it arose in a context of interactions between **Hinduism** and **Islam**. Hinduism is the South Asian religion whose interaction with Islam formed that context, and Islam is the Muslim religion whose interaction with Hinduism did the same. The CED presents Sikhism as a product of contact between two established traditions, not as a top-down project of any empire.

Confusions That Cost Points

PAIR	HOW TO KEEP THEM APART
Land-based vs sea-based empires	Unit 3 empires expanded overland with gunpowder and cannons. Maritime expansion with ships and naval power belongs to Unit 4.
Devshirme vs zamindar	Devshirme recruited Ottoman soldiers and administrators. Zamindar tax collection was Mughal India's landholder tax system. Different empires, different jobs.
Tax farming vs tribute collection	Tax farming sells collection rights to private agents. Tribute is paid directly by subordinate peoples to the center.
Protestant vs Catholic Reformation	Protestant was the 16th-century break from existing traditions. Catholic was the Roman Church's internal reform in response. Both grew Christianity.
Ottoman/Sunni vs Safavid/Shi'a	The pairing never flips. Their rivalry intensified the split; it did not invent it.
State rivalries vs armed trade	State rivalries are conflicts between states over political and religious disputes. Armed trade is commerce conducted with military backing.
Bureaucratic elites vs military professionals	Elites administer. Professionals fight. Rulers needed both to centralize control.

Practice Questions

Original questions written for this guide in the style of the AP exam. Answers and explanations are on the next page, so complete the questions before checking them.

1. Between 1450 and 1750 the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal empires conquered large land territories and defeated rival states. Which development best explains their ability to do so?

- A. Their construction of powerful ocean-going navies
- B. Their increased use of gunpowder weapons such as cannons
- C. Their adoption of European systems of divine right
- D. Their decision to abandon taxation of conquered peoples

2. In the 15th and 16th centuries, the Songhai Empire came into conflict with Morocco and promoted Islam within its territories. These two facts best illustrate which pair of concepts from this unit?

- A. Armed trade and tax farming
- B. State rivalries and religious ideas used to legitimize rule
- C. Bureaucratic elites and military professionals
- D. The Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Reformation

3. The Ottoman devshirme recruited young Christian boys from conquered territories to serve as Janissary soldiers and imperial administrators. This practice is best understood as an example of which imperial strategy?

- A. Generating revenue through tribute collection
- B. Recruiting bureaucratic elites and military professionals to centralize control
- C. Using monumental architecture to display imperial power
- D. Conducting commerce with military backing

4. A Mughal official grants local landholders the responsibility of collecting taxes from peasants on behalf of the imperial government. This arrangement is an example of

- A. tax farming
- B. tribute collection
- C. the zamindar tax-collection system
- D. armed trade

- 5.** Which of the following best describes how rulers maintained centralized control over their populations and resources from 1450 to 1750?
- A. They increasingly recruited bureaucratic elites and developed military professionals
 - B. They abolished standing armies and relied on tribute alone
 - C. They sold all tax-collection rights and dismissed their administrators
 - D. They depended entirely on religious leaders to govern
- 6.** A 17th-century European monarch claims that his authority to rule comes directly from God and cannot be challenged by his subjects. This claim is an example of
- A. devshirme
 - B. tax farming
 - C. divine right
 - D. the Sunni-Shi'a split
- 7.** During 1450 to 1750, political and religious competition between the Ottoman and Safavid empires deepened the division between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims. Which statement about this development is most accurate?
- A. The rivalry created the Sunni-Shi'a split for the first time
 - B. The Safavid Empire was Sunni and the Ottoman Empire was Shi'a
 - C. The rivalry intensified an existing split, with the Ottomans Sunni and the Safavids Shi'a
 - D. The rivalry ended when both empires adopted Sikhism
- 8.** Sikhism developed in South Asia during 1450 to 1750. Which context best explains its development?
- A. Interaction between Hinduism and Islam
 - B. The Ottoman-Safavid rivalry over trade routes
 - C. The Protestant break with Roman Catholic traditions
 - D. The Manchu establishment of the Qing dynasty

Answer Key

- 1. B.** The CED identifies the increased use of gunpowder, cannons, and armed trade as the basis of imperial expansion from 1450 to 1750. A is the Unit 4 trap. These were land-based empires, not naval powers. C confuses a European legitimization idea with the military basis of conquest. D reverses the unit's revenue logic. Rulers expanded taxation, they did not abandon it.
- 2. B.** The CED cites the Songhai-Morocco conflict as an example of state rivalries and Songhai's promotion of Islam as an example of religious ideas used to legitimize rule. A names two revenue and trade tools that have nothing to do with either fact. C names the personnel of centralization, not conflict or legitimization. D places a European religious rupture in West Africa, which is the wrong region entirely.
- 3. B.** The CED cites the devshirme as an example of the bureaucratic elites and military professionals rulers used to centralize control. The boys became Janissary soldiers and administrators, which is exactly the two groups named. A is wrong because no revenue changes hands here. C is a different legitimization method. D describes armed trade, which is commerce, not recruitment.
- 4. C.** Local landholders collecting taxes from peasants for the Mughal government is the zamindar system by definition. A is the trap. Tax farming sells collection rights to *private agents*, while zamindars were landholders operating inside the Mughal system. B involves subordinate peoples sending payments to the center, not landholders collecting from peasants. D is commerce with military backing, which has nothing to do with tax collection.
- 5. A.** This is the CED's central claim about administration. Rulers increasingly recruited bureaucratic elites and developed military professionals to maintain centralized control. B, C, and D each describe rulers giving up one of the very tools the unit says they built up. If an option has a ruler abandoning administrators, armies, or revenue, it contradicts the topic.
- 6. C.** Authority coming directly from God is the definition of divine right, and the CED cites it as the European example of religious legitimization. A is Ottoman personnel recruitment. B is a revenue method. D is the Islamic division intensified by the Ottoman-Safavid rivalry. None of them is a European theory of monarchy.
- 7. C.** The CED states that the Ottoman-Safavid rivalry intensified the Sunni-Shi'a split, with the Ottomans on the Sunni side and the Safavids on the Shi'a side. A is the trap. The split already existed. The rivalry deepened it. B flips the pairing, which is the most common wrong answer on this topic. D invents an ending that never happened. Sikhism developed in South Asia, not in the Ottoman or Safavid courts.
- 8. A.** The CED presents Sikhism as developing in South Asia in the context of interactions between Hinduism and Islam. B names the rivalry that intensified the Sunni-Shi'a split, which is a different development in a different region. C is the European rupture inside Christianity. D is the Manchu conquest of China. Only A matches the South Asian interfaith context.

When you check your answers, note which distinction each miss came from. Make a flashcard for that distinction and drill it spaced out over the next few days instead of rereading the whole section. If you missed one of these questions, the same distinction is worth practicing again in Rycal, where the Land-Based Empires deck has flashcards for it and more practice questions use the same kinds of traps.

One-Page Recall Check

Say each answer out loud before you look back, and mark the ones you cannot finish. Anything you cannot say out loud yet belongs in your flashcard deck. In Rycal, add those items to the Land-Based Empires deck and let spaced review bring them back over the next few days.

- Name the four great land-based empires of 1450 to 1750 and give the region of each.
- Explain how gunpowder, cannons, and armed trade each contributed to imperial expansion.
- Describe the Songhai-Morocco conflict and say which concept it illustrates.
- Explain how Songhai's promotion of Islam illustrates religious legitimization.
- Define bureaucratic elites and military professionals, and explain what centralized control meant for rulers.
- Explain the devshirme: who was recruited, from where, and for which two jobs.
- Distinguish tax farming, tribute collection, and the zamindar system in one sentence each.
- Define divine right and say which region the CED attaches it to.
- Name three ways rulers legitimized their rule that continued across the whole period.
- Explain why both the Protestant and Catholic reformations contributed to the growth of Christianity.
- Distinguish the Protestant Reformation from the Catholic Reformation.
- Explain how the Ottoman-Safavid rivalry intensified the Sunni-Shi'a split, and keep the Sunni/Shi'a pairing straight.
- Explain the context in which Sikhism developed.
- Say which empire goes with the devshirme and which goes with the zamindar system, without hesitating.

Where to go next. Turn every missed item above into flashcards and drill them spaced out over several days rather than in one sitting. In Rycal, open the Land-Based Empires deck under AP World History. The deck covers the terms in this guide, and its practice questions target the same traps named here. If you have a test date, add it in the Test Planner. You can also start your next review with a Brain Dump, then check what you missed against this guide.

Key terms for this unit

Gunpowder, cannons, armed trade, Manchu, Mughal Empire, Ottoman Empire, Safavid Empire, state rivalries, Songhai Empire, bureaucratic elites, military professionals, religious ideas, art and monumental architecture, tribute collection, tax farming, tax-collection systems, devshirme, divine right, zamindar tax collection, Protestant Reformation, Catholic Reformation, Christianity, Sunni-Shi'a split, Ottoman-Safavid rivalry, Sikhism, Islam.

About this guide. Written for Rycal and aligned to the College Board AP World History course framework, Unit 3, topics 3.1-3.3. All questions and explanations are original Rycal writing. Rycal is independent and is not affiliated with or endorsed by the College Board.