

What is an empire?

An empire is a unit of political organization that is characterized by one group ruling over additional groups of people. Empires generally cover vast amounts of territory and political rule extends over several different cultural groups.

Sargon, a leader in the third millennium BCE, is credited with conquering the first empire in Mesopotamia, when he extended his rule over the city-states in the region and built his capital at Agade. Sargon's descendants ruled as a part of the Akkadian dynasty for a century.

What are the characteristics of successful empires?

Whether it was the civil-service bureaucracy established by the Chinese or the imperial system of the Persians, all empires must have a strong central administration. The administration has the task of collecting taxes, overseeing coinage, ensuring that the emperor's laws are enforced and maintaining a uniformity in weights and measurements. Overall the most important duty of the administration is to collect taxes from the subjects and tribute from conquered peoples. These revenues insure that the government will have the funds to operate and maintain the imperial system.

Imperial: describes an empire (like democratic describes a democracy, imperial describes an empire)

The most efficient administrations imposed a common language in the empire, but a common language was a must for government officials. In the Incan empire local peoples were allowed to speak other languages, but the government officials all used the language of Quechua. Mandarin became the official language of China and as such the language spread to more regions.

Strong economic growth characterized the most successful empires. As imperial powers conquered more territory they could control more trade routes. Successful empires like the Persians and the Romans facilitated trade by building roads. The Maurya Indian emperor, Ashoka had rest stations built along the roads in India to give aid to the traders. In China the Silk Road was the primary conduit for trade, but the Grand Canal was built to foster trade between northern and southern regions of the growing empire.

The economic power of an empire was evident in the vast marketplaces that flourished in the capital or imperial cities. Most large empires had several cosmopolitan centers, and all had an imperial city where the administration of the empire was centered. The capital cities also served as centers where education and the arts flourished. The Byzantine capital of Constantinople was such a venue during the post-classical period. Strategically located on the Mediterranean and Black Sea, Constantinople served as the crossroads between Western Europe and Asia. Constantinople flourished as a trade and cultural center.



Most capital cities were dominated by a monumental structure or as in the case of the Romans several monumental structures. The Aztec empire located in what is central Mexico today, was built around a monumental pyramid. These monumental structures served several purposes. They were a symbol of the ruler's strength and provided proof that the ruler was capable of harnessing the labor power needed to build these large structures. They were also effective as a means to project the might of the empire to intimidate visitors or rivals as well as a way inspire awe in the subjects of the empire.

States succeed in building empires if they had an ideology that promoted the personal connection with the ruler or the state. For the Chinese the concept of the Mandate of Heaven reinforced the acceptance of the emperor's power and for the Indian empires the caste system promoted the idea that the ruler was of the highest caste. The modern Russian empire was coalesced around the communist ideology.



Above all an empire had to be a strong military power. Protection of the borders of the empire was necessary as well as to maintain control within the empire. If the subjected people did not accept the ideology of the conqueror then military dominance was used. Enormous amounts of money were spent to recruit, train and mobilize troops. Roads were used and built for troop movements as well as for trade.