

**Empires in the "Middle East" Before Muhammad**

(Remember that the term "Middle East" is not precise even today. For pre-Islamic times the term is really misleading. What I mean here is something like "empires in the lands that became the Middle East in our conception or somehow influenced the history of said lands"...well, you know what I mean! Also, most dates here are necessarily rough estimates.)

**Egyptian Dynasties**

Some time around 3000 BC, Upper and Lower Egypt united.

Classical Egyptian Civilization really began with the first of three "kingdoms," (Old [2615-2175 BC], Middle [1991-1785 BC], and New [1570-332 BC]). The spaces in between the unified kingdoms are called "intermediate periods." A kingdom represents the rule of series of dynasties (royal families). In a sense, all three kingdoms were "empires" in that one king dominated several local areas, but historically, we refer only to the Middle Kingdom as the Egyptian Empire, since during this period Egypt conquered much territory in Palestine, etc.

**Mesopotamian Empires**

Civilization (meaning roughly cities and writing) emerged in Mesopotamia in the period after about 3200 BC (more or less when it did in Egypt). Since one of the principle cities that arose on the Tigris and Euphrates was called Sumer, we call this early (non-empire) period, Sumerian Civilization.

2360-2180 BC—A dynasty from the river city of **Akkad** (first conqueror, Sargon) created an empire by taking over other cities and imposing some degree of "unity" over several other city-states (**hence the word "empire," which means a collection of more than one political entity**).

A number of lesser "empires" existed from time to time during the period 2180-1830, but the "bigger is better" series of major empires began with the rise of the...

**Old Babylonian Empire**, 1830-1532 BC. This was the kingdom of Hammurabi, who had a famous law code written down around 1700 BC.

Again, lesser dynasties and invaders ruled for a while, and then...

**The Assyrian Empire**, based in northern Mesopotamia, arose, and came to dominate the entire Fertile Crescent—from the 1300s to about about 609 BC.

These territories were reorganized under the short-lived but brilliant **New Babylonian Empire**, which was founded essentially on the fall of Assyria, hence, by the late 600s BC. (The Nebuchadrezzar of the Old Testament was the most notable emperor.)

**Bigger is Better**

In 539, Indo-Aryan peoples called Persians and Medes, under the leadership of Kyrosh (Cyrus) the Great, conquered Babylonia and added what is now Iran and territories east to the Fertile

Crescent and Anatolia, to make the largest empire of all those mentioned so far. We call this the first phase of the **Persian Empire** (the **Achaemenid Dynasty** phase), and it lasted, we know pretty accurately, from 539 to 330 BC.

In 330, the old Persian Empire collapsed in the face of conquest by the Greek/Macedonian army of Alexander the Great, who "Grecianized," or "Hellenized" a huge area more in a cultural sense than a political sense. Alexander's empire hardly outlived him, and broke into several pieces, most of which were absorbed or taken into the...

**Roman Empire** during the period 200 BC to about 70 AD. The Roman Empire which emerged really consisted of the western part, based on Italy and including much of what we call Western and Central Europe, and the Eastern part, essentially the Hellenized lands which Alexander had united briefly. After a disastrous series of wars, plague, and civil war on the 200s AD, the Roman Empire emerged as weak and depopulated in the West but still strong in the east. Henceforth, the old city of Byzantium (modern day Istanbul) became an increasingly important center of gravity for the Empire and eventually a rival capital to Rome. In fact, though the traditional end of the "Roman Empire" is 476 AD, for a good fifty years, Rome had exercised only slight influence on its lands. Byzantium, on the other hand, continued to be in a economically and politically strong position. Hence, the Roman Empire didn't "fall" in the East, but continued. And the Emperors whose seat was now Byzantium (named changed to Constantinople) called themselves Roman Emperors. In general, we keep things clear now by calling this post-476 Roman Empire...

**the Byzantine Empire.** This Byzantine Empire was strong and vibrant for a very long time, and though we will study its shrinkage, the Empire existed in fact (though in the end only in the city of Byzantium/Constantinople) until the **1453 AD**.