

“What Is the Greatest Empire in History?”

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MACUNGIE, Pa.—It was a fun exercise in history that I chose to pursue in the hope of creating a conversation on this topic. With that being said, the framework of this article is as follows: Criteria, Honorable Mentions, Great Empires Just Outside the Top 5, and Top 5.

Criteria

For my list of criteria (in no particular order), I have chosen the following.

- Longevity—a combination of being a powerful state and the existence of civilization.
- Size—how large the empire was and how relevant were its core centers on a global scale.
- Influence—the lasting impact of the empire, during and after its reign.
- Uniqueness—does the empire stand alone in the test of time.
- Power—the economic and military strength of the empire.

Why were these criteria chosen?

If two empires were, hypothetically, the same in every manner except one empire existed twice as long as the other, would we not say the empire that existed longer was greater?

Furthermore, there are plenty of empires that came into existence due to a “great man.” After the great man died, their empires died as well. It is hard to say the empire was great when it was built on one man. Longevity can measure, indirectly, the stability of an empire and how well the state functioned. If the state did not govern well, the empire would not last long.

Size is generally self-explanatory. The larger the empire generally means the empire is more impressive. I did include “core centers” as well. Having a large empire where there are competing interests is more impressive than having an empire where there is less competition.

Is it more impressive to rule an empire where the capital is in Persia, China, India, Europe or the Siberian Tundra? One of these geographies is less impressive than the others.

When the empire is gone, do the scribes lament about the “good old days”?

Do the institutions, culture, traditions and glory live generations after the empire ceases to exist?

While similar to longevity, there are two major differences.

- An empire can last a short time but have a large impact, especially if it re-orders the political landscape.
- On the other hand, an empire can last a long time and have a relatively small impact on the world as a whole.

Uniqueness, I imagine, could be the most controversial criterion, if not explained properly. There are two elements of uniqueness. Were you able to construct an empire that remains unrivaled before and after it existed?

If a theoretical empire is created from the remnants of a collapsing empire and its own remnants are used to create a new empire, then are any of these empires really that great?

While the civilization and peoples that live in this geographic area may be great, is hard to gauge an empire based on its own metrics if the predecessor and successor empires are just as good.

Another criterion of uniqueness is how the empire compares to its rivals. If there are six competing global empires from a similar geographic region, while each empire may be large, it does not mean all six are in fact great empires. In fact, we would suspect the lesser of these empires are not great, especially when compared to history.

Is the empire strong? There are weak empires that have had a large land area. There are empires that were unable to survive meeting other empires. For an empire to be great, it needs to project outward to the world with the ability to back it up.

While all empires fall, at the zenith of power, was the empire unrivaled or, at a minimum, a superpower? If it was not, then it is hardly a great empire. If it was, it is welcomed in the echelon of history.

Honorable mention

I will be naming over 25 empires over these next three sections – 21 will be mentioned briefly here. It does not mean that every empire listed here is in the top 25.

In fact, I will mention a couple of empires that I would not place near the greatest empires of all time. But, in this section, I wanted to include the reasons why I excluded some empires, to have empires mentioned that were geographically diverse, and why some empires did not make the cut. The order of the countries mentioned is also irrelevant.

In my list of empires, I did not include empires that either are still in their zenith or those that existed during or before the Bronze Age.

- So, regardless if we consider the United States of America an empire or not, it is not included.

■ Also, the Egyptian empire, at its zenith, and the Hittite empires were also excluded. Due to a lack of literature and overall size differences compared to later empires, these older empires, while impressive, were not included.

There were empires that, while important for history or their region, failed to compare to other great empires. These empires generally were isolated and were conquered immediately when met with another great empire.

■ While the Aztecs were an impressive empire for pre-Columbian North America, this empire was not large, did not have longevity and was conquered easily by the Spanish.

■ The Incas, while it had greater longevity and land area that is comparable to other great powers, it too was not powerful enough to make the list. While its empire is impressive in many ways and was the greatest empire in Latin America before Columbus set foot in the Caribbean, its lack of ability to survive external powers also meant it did not make the cut.

Other empires, while strong, suffered from geography. Most sub-Saharan empires fell short compared to other empires because their influence was confined to their region.

■ This does not mean there were no great empires, but, outside of the Mali Empire, none exerted their influence on the rest of the world. But, even in the case of the Mali Empire, its influence was short and fleeting. As such, none of these empires make the cut for Greatest Empires.

■ Indian empires also struggled with geography as well. While there were impressive empires, not only did they stay within India, but most of these empires were unable to conquer the subcontinent itself.

■ While the Mughal Empire was close, its demise at the hands of the British would dampen its prospects in its ranking. Due to the complication of conquering India itself, we were tempted to put the empire that largely united the subcontinent within the list of the Great Empires. While such a feat in itself was impressive, the Maurya Empire collapsed within a short time; therefore, it did not make the list.

■ Lastly, the Chinese dynasties also failed to make our list. While the Han Dynasty deserves to be mentioned since it was the golden age for China, due to the cyclical pattern of dynasties, it is generally hard to put any one dynasty in the category of Greatest Empires. While the Chinese civilization would certainly be on the list of great civilizations, this seems to hurt each Chinese dynasty from standing out from one another.

■ When looking at the largest empires in history, there are a number that come from the Steppe. Unfortunately for our list, if your empire did not extend into other geographic regions, you were excluded from the Greatest Empires.

■ While the Xiongnu Empire and the First Turkic Khaganate, were impressive in size, their inability to rule peoples outside the Steppe also hurt them.

■ The Russian Empire, and its successor the Soviet Union, would seem to fit this category, but it was able to exert its influence in Europe and was once one of the remaining global superpowers post-World War II. To exclude them from the Greatest Empires based on this criterion alone would be unfair. But, for most of its history, it was a strong state but not the strongest. Compared to the other European powers, it falls short. When it eventually did eclipse the rest of the European powers, it was rivaled by America. Perhaps if this rivalry lasted longer, it would have made the list. But, with its collapse and lack of longevity, it just missed the list of greatest empires. This is if we agree that the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire should be linked together in the first place. If we disagree with this, these empires would fall down the rankings. This is not the only European country when compared to its contemporaries, that missed out on the list.

■ The Portuguese had a large empire but was never the greatest power or empire in its neighborhood.

■ The Spanish were both stronger and had a larger empire.

■ The French and British also had more impressive empires and were generally stronger as well.

■ Comparing against contemporaries was also a problem when looking at the Muslim and Persian worlds. The Seljuk Empire, Ayyubid Dynasty and Fatimid Caliphate were powerful and influential empires that deserve our respect. The Sasanians and Parthians created impressive Persian empires that rivaled Rome.

However, there are other empires from similar geographic and cultural positions that were generally more impressive. Due to this, none of these empires made our cut. The same could be said of the European empires, such as the Huns and the Holy Roman Empire.

In a strange twist, these empires were excluded for the exact opposite reasons from each other. While the Holy Roman Empire was an influential empire that lasted nearly a millennium, it was not nearly as large as the other Empires on this list. While the Hunnic Empire sprawled across an impressive land area and made an impact, it did not exist long enough to be considered. Outside of Hungary, its influence was also limited.

Greatest Empires—Top 10

In this category, we will name empires that should be considered as the Greatest Empires. If these empires were to make the top five on any list, this would make sense. However, each of these empires has a weakness that prevented me from putting them within the top five.

■ French Empire

The French Empire lasted centuries and was one of the largest empires at its time and in the history of the world. Its language was once the lingua franca of the world, and its colonies spanned around the globe.

However, the biggest issue of putting the French in the top five is that, it can be argued, it was never the strongest power when its empire was at its zenith. One could make the argument the Spanish were stronger than the French and then the British were stronger than the French. How can the French be considered the greatest empire if it never was the strongest power?

Such an argument, if made, would be unfair to the French. Yes, the Spanish were the strongest power at its zenith, but the French were its rival and near equal. Yes, the British were the strongest power at its zenith, but the French were its rival and near equal.

This of course assumes that the French were not the strongest power in Europe under King Louis XIV and/or Napoleon Bonaparte. While the years under Napoleon I were short and the sunset on the Sun-King's empire, its longevity and ability to rival the other strongest empires lend credence that it should be considered. Perhaps if Napoleon was victorious, history may have been written where the French would have made it to the top five.

■ Macedonian Empire

Alexander the Great may be one of the most important figures in world history and may be one of its greatest military minds. He built upon his father's empire that united the Greeks and united an empire that spanned from Egypt to India.

Both Macedonia and Alexander the Great would serve as an influence and aspiration for the Romans. At its zenith, there was no empire that could compete against it.

Unfortunately, the greatest argument against putting Macedonia in the top five is lack of longevity. Perhaps there is no empire that suffered from the lack of longevity than the Macedonians. After Alexander the Great died, his empire died as well. It fractured into four major empires that constantly fought each other until they themselves collapsed.

Despite its short nature, the impact of the Macedonian Empire cannot be overstated. Before Macedon, the Hellenistic Kingdoms, if we were to exclude colonies, were either in Greece or on the Aegean Sea. After the Macedonians, the Hellenistic Empires, such as the Seleucids and the Ptolemaic Kingdom, spanned all across Europe, Asia and Egypt.

While the empire itself did not last long, its influence did. Until the Romans, and lesser extent Parthians, conquered these kingdoms, the political system was defined by the successor states of the Macedonian empire. Even after these kingdoms and empires fell, Rome took inspiration from the Macedonian Empire.

If the Macedonian Empire were able to outlive Alexander the Great for centuries, it would be a top-five empire in history. It could even have been the greatest.

■ Umayyad and Abbasid Empires

It may be unfair to group empires together except their histories, cultures and lands are intertwined. The Umayyad Empire was the second Caliphate and the largest.

Its land stretched from the Atlantic Ocean to India and from Spain to the Arabian Peninsula. Despite its success, it was overthrown by the Abbasid Empire. The third Caliphate was not as large as its predecessor, but it was the strongest power during the Islamic Golden Age. So, if we were to argue which empire was better, we would have to decide if we preferred the intellectual achievements of the Abbasid or the map of the Umayyads.

In either case, both empires fall short of the top five.

The Umayyad Empire lasted just a century before being overthrown. While its remnant survived in Spain, its influence in the world was greatly reduced. Others would call the empire in Spain more of a successor state than the continuation of the original empire.

The Abbasid Empire was in its zenith of power for only a century. While it survived longer than the Umayyad Empire, its empire became divided and its power dwindled. Due to longevity, it is hard to put either empire in the top five. But, in a twist of irony, if these empires were a singular entity and their histories combined, they would be within the top five.

■ The Spanish Empire

The first great post-Columbus empire; its influence on the world can still be seen and felt, especially in its former colonies. By conquering the Aztecs and Incas and everything in between, the Spanish created a transatlantic, trans-continental empire that was the fifth greatest in land size.

Their discovery of the Americas started an age of exploration and led to technological advancements within Europe. For about three centuries, Spain loomed large on the world stage.

But it misses out on the top five because the Spanish Empire at its zenith was never an unquestioned power. Despite a head start in the Americas, it was unable to translate it into a European empire, despite attempts.

While it would be fair to call the Spanish the strongest empire at one time, the French were always at its level. This of course was before the Spanish Armada was defeated by the British and the weather.

After this, Spain was not the superpower but one of the leading powers. While it would be unfair to say the French Empire eclipsed the Spanish, it would certainly be fair to say the British were successful in this regard.

If the Spanish were able to harness their resources wherein they could dominate Europe or were able to beat the English with their Armada, the Spanish would not have only been undisputed masters of the Old Continent, but they would have competed within the top five.

Top 5

All of these empires can be considered the greatest. However, in any ranking, we must select what goes where.

Out of the five contenders, we have the Achaemenid Empire, the British Empire, the Mongolian Empire, the Ottoman Empire and the Roman Empire (alphabetically listed).

I also compared and contrasted the empires against each other in order to give a better explanation of how I ranked the empires.

5—Achaemenid Empire

Our first entry on this list is perhaps the first great empire in the history of man. If not the first, at least the first to exist after the Bronze Age collapse. Except for its direct predecessors, the Median Empire, no other empire before it had more than a million square miles of land.

While the Median Empire just broke this threshold, the Achaemenid Empire doubled the size of the Median Empire. In fact, if we were to exclude the empires on the Steppe, it was the largest empire until the Caliphates, a millennia later.

However, there are a couple of reasons why we need to nitpick and keep the Achaemenids at five. Despite being successful, there were a number of reasons why we ranked the other empires higher. When it comes to longevity, other empires either lasted longer or around the same length of time.

When it comes to size, other empires were either much larger or around the same size. When it came to influence, the Achaemenid Empire was clearly influential, but not as much as the other empires. The Achaemenid Empire was the perfect standard empire to compare the rest. If that empire was greater, it should be in the top five; if not, it should miss out.

4—The Ottoman Empire

Before I made my list, I debated whether to break up my rankings pre-1453/1492 and post-1453/1492. In my judgment, it could have been comparing apples to oranges when comparing empires that were created before the existence of transatlantic empires and after these empires emerged.

I decided against it because of the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman Empire may be the only empire that thrived before and after Columbus stepped foot in the Caribbean. In fact, Columbus may not have stepped foot in the Caribbean if the Ottoman Empire had not conquered Constantinople in 1453, ending the Byzantine Empire.

In fact, out of the empires that rank within the top five, it had the second-best longevity. Five centuries of relevance, over half that time the strongest power in the Middle East and Eastern Europe.

Outside of Rome, this cannot be beat. Despite this, this in itself is not enough to rank it higher on our list. While it did last significantly longer than the Achaemenids or Mongolians, it was comparable to the British. But compared to the British and Mongolians, their empire was not nearly as large.

This could be forgiven if the Ottoman Empire was more influential than the other empires remaining, but it was not. Due to this, we were forced to rank the Ottoman Empire here.

3—The British Empire

On one hand, ranking the largest empire of all time that encompassed a quarter of the globe third may seem odd. But in trying to separate out the British, Mongolian and Roman empires, we have to set our priorities.

If it is influence and power, these three empires are at the same level. Rome created the foundation of the Western World. The Mongols' impact across Russia, China and the Middle East transformed these societies.

The British set the foundation for the modern world. All three were the most dominant powers at their zenith. If it comes to longevity, Rome wins. If it comes to size, Rome loses.

In either category, the British may have a slight edge over the Mongols. Which leaves uniqueness. While each is unique in its own way, one is less unique than the others.

The British Empire was one of many European empires that stretched across the globe. While it was the most successful, the pattern of Europeans having large transcontinental empires does make such an endeavor less unique.

This is not to say the British Empire was not unique, it was. After all, it may be one of only a few empires that actually occupied the full extent of India.

But, when comparing the uniqueness of each empire, we must decide if a transcontinental empire made by ships, technology and commerce was more nearly unique than an empire made from horses or an empire that almost outlasted time. In the opinion of this author, the British come in an honorable third.

2—Mongol Empire

The question between the Mongol and British Empires is what was more impressive, how the Mongolians conquered nearly a fifth of the land area from the Mongolian steppe or the British conquered a quarter of the globe from their island?

Between the Mongolians and the Romans, the question is what is more impressive, the Mongolians able to conquer so much from the Steppe or the Romans being the largest power in the West for a millennium and having a civilization that spanned for two?

While the Mongols did not have the technological advantages that the British and other Europeans, did during their conquest, this is one primary reason the Mongolians rank above the British; the question about the Mongolia and Romans is asking who would win: the unstoppable force or immovable object?

While there have been other empires on the Steppe, none have been quite

as impressive as the Mongolians. None of these other empires were able to conquer the Chinese, Persians and Russians. The biggest issue is that the Mongolian Empire lasted about a century before it was divided amongst itself.

In an additional two centuries, those successor empires were soon gone as well. While this time was comparable to the British in their height of power, it did not match up well against the Romans. If the Mongolian Empire lasted longer, it would be the greatest empire.

1—The Roman Empire

There is perhaps no empire that is as revered as the Romans. Since the collapse of the Romans, a number of empires claimed to be its successor state. The Holy Roman Empire claimed to be its successor despite the eastern half of the empire still continuing a proud legacy. Both the Russian and Ottoman Empires claimed to be successor states of Constantinople.

While others may separate the Byzantine Empire from the Roman Empire, Constantinople was created by Romans for Romans with Roman institutions and culture. To think Constantinople as anything else except Roman would be unfair to all citizens of Rome.

Even empires that did not claim direct successorship of Rome were heavily inspired by it. Napoleon's coronation was heavily inspired by Rome; this leaves out the fact that Napoleon was a consul of France, a position borrowed by Rome. Similar links in position can be seen in the German Empire, Kaiser, and the Russian Empire, Czar.

The Pax Britannica was inspired by the Pax Romana. The founding fathers of the United States looked to the eternal city for inspiration in order to set up its own republic. This does not include the number of other countries directly or indirectly impacted by Rome or those whom Rome inspired.

This also leaves out the impact the Romans had in creating the biggest churches within Christianity whose institutions are still around today. While both the British and Mongolians had influence, the longevity of Rome separated it from everyone else.

From 753 B.C. to 1453 A.D., Rome existed in one form or another. While being a civilization for two millennia would be impressive for anyone, what is more impressive is how long they were able to remain a powerful entity.

Before the Punic Wars, 264 B.C., Rome was a major power in the Mediterranean; after the end of the second Punic War in 201 B.C., Rome became the undisputed power in the western Mediterranean and the strongest empire in the Mediterranean. Soon, Carthage, the Gallic Tribes, Greek city-states, and the Hellenistic empires would soon fall to Rome.

Despite dividing and uniting itself time and time again, Rome remained unquestioned power in the Mediterranean and Europe until 395 A.D.; when it divided itself into two empires. In the 5th century, when the Western Roman Empire collapsed, the Eastern Roman Empire or Byzantine Empire would con-

tinue being the most powerful force on the Mediterranean. In fact, Justinian the Great expanded the Eastern Roman Empire wherein the empire again included Rome and the Italian peninsula.

After this, it remained a major, and at times the strongest, power in the Mediterranean until the 13th century. Its the two last centuries, it was reduced to a regional power. For nearly 1,500 years, Rome was a major power in Europe, the Middle East and the Mediterranean. For a third of that time, it was the strongest power in its theatres; for another third, it was the only relevant power in its theatres.

In fact, no other European power was able to hold so much of their continent under one power for so long. While some empires conquered much of Europe and then lost their territories within the same generation, only Rome was able to keep and maintain its European empire for a mind-boggling amount of time. Between the longevity and ability to keep and maintain its European possessions, Rome was truly unique.

While the Romans, Mongolians and British were all influential, there was no empire that lasted for so long and maintained its relevance as the Romans. Usually, empires struggle lasting a fifth of the time the Romans existed. Due to this, we rank the Romans as the Greatest Empire in the History of the World.