

# Voicing the Veiled: The Sovereignty and Influence of Mughal Matriarchs

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## Abstract

A recurring question while discussing Islamic political states is the role of women within it. Accomplishments of male members have been documented preferentially disregarding those by the women. This project shall bring attention to the largely overlooked presence of the women in political and administrative chambers of one of the world's largest Islamic monarchies - the Mughal Empire. Outstanding and influential women who complimented their male counterparts in running the Empire. A modern theme in feminist literature is reclaiming voices of the women. Similarly, multiple women scholars have aimed to document the Mughal women's contribution in the dynasty's copacetic running. With threads of women's contribution intertwined in the Mughal courts political fabric, giving voice to her story, and allowing the discounted matriarchs a stage to highlight themselves is important. This project intends to analyse several important women who played significant roles in running the Mughal Empire by participating actively in the political affairs, through multiple authentic sources and illuminate their influence in the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

**Keywords:** Mughals, Matriarchs, Herstory

## 1. Introduction

The phrase “Mughal Empire” is synonymous with thoroughly explored portion of the opulent empire, its men, their grand administration, and impressive political advancements. Scholars and emperors worldwide commend the empire for not only their extensive wars, but also capturing, expanding, and holding onto a large chunk of the Indian sub-continent. They established systems like Mansabdari, the Navratnas, and efficient revenue systems like ‘Zabt’, and built beautiful monuments like the Taj Mahal, Jama Masjid, and the Red Fort. None can deny their contribution in expanding and enhancing India in the field of economy, intellectuality, and grandeur. Progressive diplomatic advancement made by them included the tolerance of different faiths within the community – today's secular India is an extension of the same tolerance. Therefore, political contributions of Mughal Empire, credited to its men, is a widely discussed and researched topic.

However, glaring patriarchy within the empire overlooked and denied the accolades deserved for significant contributions made by the equally strong-minded, determined, and intellectual other-half of the empire – the women. Women of the emperors have held very important positions in the court and have taken crucial decisions in functioning of the empire. Therefore, study of the Mughal Empire is incomplete without acknowledging contributions made by its women.

- Gulbadan Begum, sister of Humayun, compiled and recorded the Humayun-Nama.

- Empress Nur Jahan's political intellect and diplomacy protected the Empire in absence of Emperor Jehangir.
- Princess Zeb-un-nisa, the daughter of Aurangzeb was a frequent member of his parliament. He asked for, listened to, and was influenced by Zeb-un-nisa's opinions.

These women therefore are necessary to be discovered, researched, acknowledged, and written about extensively for a holistic overview of the Empire. Western scholars proliferated a notion that women in eastern societies were largely suppressed and ostracized from politics. One can challenge such notions by studying political agency of these and other women. It is paramount to correct the stereotypes surrounding the value of women that plagued the Mughal Empire. To prove how interconnected the assumed binaries of the private and public spheres of the Empire were, studying the role of women beyond their domestic duties and harem activities is pertinent. This project will help create a record of the political presence of women in the Empire, and consequently an all-encompassing documentation of it.

In "Feminist Themes in Indu Sundaresan's 'The Twentieth Wife'," the author N. Subhadra Chari describes the way in which the author, through feminist perspective, displays the corridors of power and patriarchal structures that dominated the Empire in the 17th century. It explores Mehrunnisa, or Nur Jahan, who defied societal norms and became the influential Empress of the Empire. Mehrunnisa challenges the traditional role assigned to women, demonstrating intelligence, political acumen, and an unyielding spirit. Her character defies limitations imposed by the society, illustrating the potential to break free from prescribed roles.

Ira Mukhoty, in her compelling work "Daughters of the Sun: Empresses, Queens and Begums of the Mughal Empire," gives voice to the often overlooked and underestimated women of the Mughal era, unveiling a rich tapestry of their lives and societal positions. Mukhoty's narrative illuminates the multifaceted roles that Mughal women played, challenging preconceived notions.

Sharmita Ray, in 'The Multifaceted Women of the Mughal Harem: A Historiographical Essay', explores Mughal women in a vivid picture of empresses, queens, and begums actively shaping the political, cultural, and social landscapes of the Empire. Often overshadowed by their male counterparts in historical accounts, these women emerge as key contributors and influencers.

In "How Gulbadan Remembered: The Book of Humāyūn as an Act of Representation", Rebecca Gould talks about Gulbadan's 'Humayun-Nama' and the role of female domesticity undergoing unique transformation, emerging as a focal point of political sovereignty. This shift is facilitated by Gulbadan's fusion of memory and history. "The Book of Humāyūn" does more than replicating the empirical conditions of Mughal's early modernity. Engaging with prevailing concepts of female and male subjectivity, it reinterprets the empirical foundations of Mughal sovereignty. It introduces novel, woman-centric modes of thought and existence, contributing to the shaping of future memories and the political frameworks.

## **2. Inspecting the Political Dynamic of the Mughal Women vis-à-vis the Harem**

In addition to its larger-than-life kings, Mughal era was also characterised by the influence its women held within the court. Power dynamics of women were multifaceted, influenced by a blend of customs, kinship ties, and personal charm. There was a struggle for command amongst the princesses and queens for support of the emperors to secure a formidable position and secure the benefits. As the harem gained prominence, it functioned as a realm where women asserted their agency and exert influence. 'Padshah Begum' or the empress, held extensive power and influence by heading the harem and overseeing the everyday activities

of the other members of the harem. The Empresses had a say in the court politics – providing critical information from harem, advising upon subjects of the empire, and conferring in diplomatic relations. The harem consisted of the emperor's other wives, concubines, mothers, sisters, and daughters. The wives and concubines were customarily regarded for their social standing, intelligence, and attractiveness.

Women of the harem were highly educated and wielded tremendous influence as they represented the emperor in various capacities. They received guidance in music, dance, poetry, and admission to educational institutions. They participated in philanthropic work providing funds and support for the construction of mosques, markets, and other social arenas. The harem thus became a complex of massively powerful women residing under one roof, having a huge impact on shaping the direction of the empire and leaving their mark on history.

#### **Aisan Daulat Begum** (died 1505)

Babur's grandmother, Aisan Daulat Begum, had an invaluable influence on him. Babur absorbed from her cultural and political lessons, shaping his leadership style, and contributing to the establishment of courtly traditions within the emerging Empire. Aisan Daulat Begum's legacy extended beyond familial ties, leaving a mark on the foundations of governance and cultural refinement of the Mughal court. Her understanding of courtly norms encompassed social, cultural and political dynamics within the courts of Central Asia. Belonging to a Timurid background, she had great knowledge on the courtly etiquettes that formed a complex tapestry dictating proper conduct, diplomatic finesse, and cultural refinement.

Her exposure involved navigating the intricacies of court protocol, understanding of interpersonal relationships, and mastering the art of maintaining delicate alliances. Timurid courts were hubs of cultural patronage and intellectual exchange, Aisan Daulat Begum would have been familiar with the expectations and rituals inherent in courtly life.

#### **Khanzada Begum** (1478 – 1545 A.D.)

Babur's elder sister, Khanzada begum, played a significant part in Mughal history. She contributed in sustaining Babur's and Humayun's reigns by playing crucial roles, and she was made the Padshah Begum after Babur died. On account of her marriage to Shaybani Khan, the Uzbek ruler, she represented her brother in the Uzbek court, a brave move by a woman at that time. This daring woman supported her brother in front of his enemies, proudly and incessantly. Consequently, Shaybani Khan divorced her, and to further disrespect her, he gave her to a lowly follower. The Safavid ruler, Shah Ismail, defeated the Uzbeks and returned her to Babur, gaining his favours.

Her only son with Shaybani died young. She adopted Sultanam Begum, two-year-old sister of her third husband and later arranged her marriage to Prince Hindal, Babur's son. She threw an elaborately magnificent party, the 'Mystic Feast', having delicious food, beautiful decorations, amusing entertainment, and a huge guest list which occupies multiple pages in Humayun-nama (Mukhoty, 30).

Her position in the eyes of Babur and her wisdom made her a magnificent adviser. Well regarded by the harem, she was sought for internal issues and struggles. Her most significant contribution was convincing Humayun's brothers to accept him as ruler. Bloody power struggles among the siblings created a dilemma for the future of the empire, none of the ladies would accept Humayun's brothers as their emperor, disapproving such behaviour. Humayun entrusted the heavy burden of urging Hindal and Kamran to support him to Khanzada begum. Travelling at the age of sixty-four on horseback through rough terrains, Khanzada carried out her duty to help her nephew and Emperor. By asserting Babur's nomination of Humayun as the one deserving the throne, she advised Kamran to stay loyal to the emperor (Mukhoty, 47).

**Gulbadan Begum (1523 – 1603 A.D.)**

The harem had overtime become a lattice of rivalries, unlikely alliances, and intrigue. Gulbadan Begum, one of the Empire's first thoroughly educated woman, is credited with writing a very important record of the empire. In '*Ahwal Humayun Padshah Jamah Kardom Gulbadan Begum bint Babur Padshah amma Akbar Padshah*' later renamed as '*Humayun-nama*', Gulbadan refrained from embellished jargon and focussed on asserting the reign of her father, brother, and nephew accurately. This shows the position women held in the eyes of Akbar who tasked her with the responsibility of recording history of the empire. She influenced Mughal history by chronicling narratives from the everyday life of the Mughal court. Gulbadan's biggest achievement was providing a perspective to the Mughals that was to date obscured: the female lens. Power struggles, politics within the harem and obstacles encountered by the rulers, this was an undivulged view exploring the entirety of the Mughal era.

**Mehr-un-Nissa or Nur Jahan (1577 – 1645 A.D.)**

There were also women who actively participated in and led the political matters of the courts. Empress Nur Jahan was often in charge during absences of Jahangir. She issued imperial orders, formed policies, took corresponding decisions and was responsible for multiple state affairs. Her remarkable political triumph was the peace treaty with Maharana Amar Singh. This diplomatic success stabilized northwestern frontier of the Empire. She boosted trade and commerce, playing a huge role in the economic prosperity of Jahangir's rule. Her influence in the economy extended in the form of coinage, establishing a distinctive position in the history where queens did not appear on coins.

Women contributed heavily to the field of arts and architecture. Nur Jahan was a patron of the same. She authorized and saw through construction of Itimad-ud-Daulah's Tomb, a precursor to the Taj Mahal. She promulgated the culture of miniature paintings and supervised works that exhibited scenes of the courts, the day-to-day lives of the royals and extravagant expeditions.

**Bibi Mubarika (died 1531)**

Babur's fifth wife, Bibi Mubarika, was daughter of Yusufzai Pakhtun tribe's chieftain. She enlightened Babur about Pakhtun traditions and customs, which helped him in forging successful and loyal relationships. Although she bore Babur no child, but Babur still respected her, proving that providing a child, or an heir, was not the only function that could earn respect and proper care from the emperor.

Upon his death in 1530 A.D. Babur was buried temporarily in Agra, which was under the reign of Sher Shah Suri, and thus threatened the safety of his grave. Bibi Mubarika fiercely defended his grave, and in her respect, Sher Shah left it intact. Sher Shah also sent an escort with her for the journey with Babur's remains to Kabul where he was buried in Bagh-e-Wafa as per his last wishes (Mukhoty, 40). This validates the claim that women were strong and responsible to be tasked with critical duties. Carrying remains of a husband-emperor is an intensely emotional and physically taxing duty which Bibi Mubarika assumed perfectly.

**Bega Begum (1511 – 1582 A.D.)**

Bega Begum, Humayun's first wife, lived through the suffering during efforts of re-establishing the kingdom. She was highly respected by the harem and both the emperors she lived under. A Persian woman of great stature and confidence, she frequently advised Emperor Humayun, as recorded by Ira Mukhoty. She lived in Delhi alone in 1569 in a small house supervising the construction of Humayun's mausoleum, and looked after maintenance of some 500 builders, ensuring no compromise with the grandeur. She died there in 1582 and stayed beside her husband even in death (Mukhoty, 65).

**Hamida Banu Begum (1527 – 1604 A.D.)**

Many Mughal mothers had significant role in running of the empire. Empress Hamida Banu Begum, Akbar's mother, supported the young Akbar after the death of her husband. Her intelligence and political awareness helped stabilize the tumultuous empire after Humayun's death.

**Maham Anga (died 1562 A.D.)**

Emperor Akbar's foster mother, Maham Anga, played a crucial role in his education and mentorship shaping his political and administrative outlook and had a profound influence on political affairs. She served as political advisor to Akbar, highlighting her experience and wisdom, and the respect she commanded. The instability caused by the murder of Humayun's lieutenant caused Akbar to shift his family from Kabul to Hindustan and he sent Maham to receive them. Arranging Akbar's marriage to Jodha Bai (Mariam-uz-Zamani) was her major accomplishment, who later forged important political alliances and policies. Her influence in the political sphere in early days of the empire encouraged next generation women to pursue influential positions in the court.

She got her son, Adham Khan, appointed as army's supreme commander. Her closeness to Akbar had been scrutinized by biographers of the time, and soon her influence began to weaken. In 1561, Akbar assigned Atka Khan as prime minister, angering her as she believed herself to be the Prime Minister with her repeated shows of excellent service, wisdom, and devotion to the emperor. Her eventual downfall triggered in 1562 when Akbar reappointed Muhammad Khan Shirwani as governor of Malwa, removing Adham Khan. Blinded by anger, Adham Khan resolved to kill and went to the emperor's fort, with weapons drawn. Murdering those in his way, Adham killed Atqa Khan, eliminating any chance of reconciliation. He made his way to Akbar but was captured and subsequently, Akbar had Adham thrown repeatedly from the terrace to experience a painful death. Akbar informed Maham himself, which led to the end of her control on the emperor and the empire. Maham died after mere 40 days, taking with her the legacy of a woman drunk in power and restrained by motherly love, who couldn't save her son.

**Jahanara Begum (1613 - 1681 A.D.)**

Jahanara Begum, daughter of Emperor Shah Jahan, is another important woman of the Mughal era. Her immense political acumen, piety, and intelligence made her trusted advisor and confidante to her father. Her well-informed opinions weighed heavily on matters of state, diplomacy and governance allowing her to maintain a close relationship with her father and influence key decisions and policies. Jahanara Begum had a palace for her own private use, a privilege awarded mostly to the wives of Shah Jahan (Mukhoty, 169). This apartment was decorated by painters and architects hired by Jahanara, and she spent a hefty sum of seven lakh rupees on the beautification.

Her diplomatic skills and comprehension of the politics at play during Shah Jahan's illness granted her wisdom and power to take active role in state affairs and negotiations with other empires on his behalf. Her understanding of the society and its functioning helped her in fulfilling her social responsibilities by constructing a grand market in Delhi, the famous Chandni Chowk and also building a hospice. She constructed "double-storied caravanserai", second only to Jama Masjid in magnificence, and other structures driven by her ambition to embed her name in history (Mukhoty, xxiii).

This reveals qualities of a successful ruler, understanding needs of their subjects, taking correct decisions and sustaining relationships with neighbouring kingdoms, while leaving a mark on history through elegant physical structures.

**Roshanara Begum (1617 – 1671 A.D.)**

Aurangzeb's sister, Roshanara Begum, is another significant name in Mughal dynasty. Her well-founded

decisions determined the direction the empire's administration would take. She developed into a brilliant strategist and diplomat forging alliances with many imperial factions.

### **Salima Sultana Begum (1539 – 1613 A.D.)**

Salima Sultana was wedded to Bairam Khan before she married Akbar. She was the daughter of Mirza Noor-ud-din-Muhammad, granddaughter of Babur and niece of Humayun. She was very influential in state politics and Akbar often took advice from her on many political affairs. Even in the case of Prince Salim's revolt, she was influential in Akbar's decisions regarding Salim's punishment. Ummah of the court advised Akbar to harshly castigate the prince while Salima forbade Akbar from doing this as it would not be in favour of the country. She assured Akbar that she will convince Salim to come to him and accept his faults. Akbar requested Salima to inform the prince of his pardon. She went to Salim with an elephant named Fath Lashkar, a special horse, and a robe of honour and thus through her efforts the prince was finally pardoned in 1603 A.D. Along with other begums of the harem, Salima Sultana was very active in the court politics at the beginning of Jahangir's reign as Emperor.

### **Sahibji**

A woman not part of the Mughal family, but still irrefutable in the making of her story is Sahibji, the wife of nobleman Amir Khan and co-governor of Kabul. Her title shows her crossing the demarcation of gender and enjoying the respect reserved for men. Her characterization in texts is verbatim 'lionlike' and not lioness-like, thereby projecting the lion's robust courage onto the noblewoman. During times of a politically unstable Kabul, Sahibji demonstrated exemplary leadership and guardianship and guaranteed security of the official camp's retreat from the hostile territory. She devised a calculated strategy to outsmart or at the very least prevent any potential Afghan heads from advancing upon the commanderless province by disguising details of her husband's demise.

She set up a doppelganger of Amir Khan and force him to pretend to be the governor seated inside the glass-windowed palanquin, where soldiers would regularly greet him. Sahibji carried out mourning rituals only after the convoy arrived at a protected location. She did not let her guard down; in fact, the administration kept the Afghan tribal chiefs close to her as a sign when they arrived for the traditional ceremony of honouring the deceased. Subsequently, she sent out a warning, cautioning them against robbing people and wreaking havoc in Kabul. "Otherwise, the ball and the field [will] be ready. If I win, my name will remain till the judgment day," (Jamil, web). In consequence, the Afghan tribal heads submitted their loyalty to Sahibji.

### **3. The Political Footprint of Mughal Women – or Lack Thereof**

Feminist political philosophy is a field of study that examines the ways in which political systems, structures, and ideologies impact women and gender equality. It seeks to understand and critique the ways in which women are marginalized, oppressed, and excluded from full participation in political and social life, and to envision and advocate for a more just and equitable society.

Hilde Lindemann, a philosopher and researcher of female bioethics, suggested that individuals often feel need to relate tales to create a sense of themselves. Especially women writers express their lifetime stories creating an avenue to shape their own histories. They authenticate their own narratives, knit their own history uncontaminated by a biased outsider's observation or a man's ignorant perception. They gain the freedom to reinterpret events they experienced, as opposed to the established traditional point of view. Marginalized women prioritise different topics and viewpoints in framing of a scene, which opens up untraversed tapestry of female gaze. In Gulbadan's Humayun-nama, Mughal women were already shaping

their own history. Some members of the zenana commissioned enormous monuments and gardens shaping not only Mughal history but Hindustan itself. They left behind legacy marking their presence in the fabric of Indian history, enlightening women of the power they possessed and the heights they reached.

Mughal women's roles were largely defined by their relationships to men as wives, mothers, or daughters, mainly confined to bearing children and maintaining household. Women were expected to be obedient and submissive to male authority with restricted freedom and autonomy. Despite these constraints, some women in the Mughal Empire wielded significant political power and influence. Examples like Nur Jahan or Mumtaz Mahal challenge the notion that women in pre-modern societies were passive and powerless. It highlights the complexities of Mughal women's experiences in the way they could navigate and challenge patriarchal norms to assert agency and influence. Their examples demonstrate that Mughal women could administer laws and supervise the empire, often from behind the scenes and in ways that remained unrecognized or less recorded by historians.

Urdubegis, derived from the Persian words “Urdu”, meaning camp and “Begis” meaning lady, were women employed to protect and guard Emperor and his zenana. These women were bought as slave girls for the purpose of creating a women-led guard inside the harem from early days of Mughal Empire. To prevent their corruption, an ensemble from diverse backgrounds of Habshi, Tartar, Turkish, and Kashmiri were recruited. They thoroughly trained in combat and warfare such as archery, swordsmanship and horse riding to valiantly protect the emperor and his zenana. Urdubegis were a formidable protector that ensured security of the Mughal household. Urdubegis enriched the cultural milieu of Mughal court adding their native culture while participating in social activities.

Palanquins of Mughal women were carried by Urdubegis for short distances, while men carried the palanquins for longer journeys with Urdubegis surrounding the harem for protection (Godden, 126). Documented as “masculine”, “strong”, “militarily disciplined”, and “unveiled”, these women had created a class of their own. By not using a veil these women were better suited to defend themselves and therefore wore mostly in male or altered womanly outfits. This act of the Emperors’ to practice their progressive policies by employing women in positions of security helped create a safe and harmonious environment within the Mughal court, while also displaying their respect for women and their capabilities.

History of the Mughal Empire, unfortunately, ignored this aspect.

European writers, who visited India, narrated a fantastical and lustful documentation of the zenana. This denied Mughal women, and other ladies involved in the administration of the empire, an accurate representation in history. Inquisitive readers hardly had interest in corporate-style working of Urdubegis or other women employees like the Mahaldars, the Tehwildars, or the Musrifs who overlooked slaves employed in doing daily chores attending to each Mughal lady, or the female counterparts to each male administrative staff in the harem were hence scarcely written about.

Interestingly, Bibi Fatima, milk mother to Emperor Humayun and the chief and only Urdubegi finding some mention in literature, is documented in Humayun-Nama by Gulbadan Begum. She also served under Emperor Akbar, chronicled as ‘Sultan’ by Gulbadan, emphasising her honorific position extent of her contribution in the harem as an administrator. Her noteworthy actions included high level vigilance during time of the exile for Humayun’s security and alerting fellow men during diplomatic mission to Badakshan of their malevolent intents before men could learn of it. Akbar respected her greatly. Once he volunteered to warn her son-in-law, Akbar’s own uncle, who used to abuse her daughter. Later, Akbar personally visited Bibi Fatima breaking news of her son-in-law’s arrest for stabbing her daughter in panic.

Chroniclers didn't find it important to document roles, responsibilities, and presence of women in the courts. We learned about this one woman thanks to another female chronicler of the time, while similar stories of other women got permanently forgotten.

#### 4. Conclusion

Gulbadan Begum describes the Empire intimately with love and affection. Contrastingly, Abu'l-Fazl, Akbar's biographer in Akbarnama, establishes an ornamented empire, embroidered by achievements of the army, beauty of the monuments and harmony of the communities.

Ornamental titles shrouded and obscured contributions and success stories of women, although significantly involved in every facet of the Empire.

- 'Maryam-uz-Zamani' or 'Mary of the World' given to Harka Bai, mother of Emperor Jahangir limited her identity to being 'the chaste woman', despite being mother of his child.
- 'Maryam-Makhani' or 'veil of chastity' or 'pillar of purity' for Hamida Banu Begum, mother of Emperor Akbar.
- 'Cupola of chastity' for both Maham Anga and Haji Begum

Akbar and Abu'l Faiz preferred exaggerating purity and chastity of these women, over appreciating and acknowledging their administrative roles. Idea that women's chastity equals 'family honour' creates a disproportionate burden on women, ridding them of their chance at being a human amongst humans. These titles enforce connection of these women with the Emperor and highlight his importance in the lives of his subjects and his family. Personal histories and experiences of these women were subsumed under their roles as wives, mothers, sisters, or daughters of the emperor, which in turn begets the idea of only men being in control of an Empire and being responsible for it. Achievements of these women get masked which reinforces patriarchal norms of women's existence in history primarily in relation to male authority figures – creating one-dimensional view of these women in narratives.

Furthermore, politics of naming play sinister roles, including shadowing their efforts and conquests. Akbar's foster mother, Maham Anga, stood behind and taught him responsibilities of a kingdom when he was young. The term "Petticoat government" was used for her endeavours to describe and ridicule the idea of a women leading a man's empire and belittling Maham Anga's wisdom.

Ultimately, the personalities and contributions of women were finally acknowledged and brought to fore by fellow women writers. An empire's glory is examined not through the majesty of its King, or legacies they leave behind, but the condition of its subjects, citizens, or family of the King. It is a shame such remarkable women get obscured from the naked view of future generations.

It is important that these women are researched and studied, to understand how they lived and prevailed in eras bygone. Women like Queen Nur Jahan, a great political stand-in when the emperor was incapable of taking audience. Or Jahanara Begum, the visionary who constructed the Jama Mosque in Agra, attached to a madrasa to promote education. Or ambitious mothers like Hamida Begum, Maham Anga, Aisan Daulat Begum and Khanzada Begum who all played significant roles in establishing Mughals Empire.

Women of Mughal Empire are honoured today as more information is unearthed from buried documents. Day by day, books and articles are published about the noteworthy achievements made by these women, finally bringing them under the limelight they deserve. They are being freed from the enforced anonymity that not only the biographers of the Mughal era bestowed upon them, but even many contemporary documenters treat them with. And through the sources referenced in this project, the existence of these veiled voices are being heard, acknowledged, and celebrated. Scholars like Ruby Lal, Sharmita Ray,



Shadab Bano, Angbin Yasmin, and many others have ensured that these significant personages are remembered in the future, for their valuable contributions to one of world's greatest dynasties – The Mughal Empire.

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