An empire is the political rule of one group of people over other people who may have differing languages and customs. In contrast, a kingdom is a smaller political state composed of people who often share a common set of cultural characteristics. If a kingdom is well organized and powerful enough to rule over other lands, it can become an empire. Throughout history, empires were often built through conquest, and conquered peoples were forced to become subjects of the empire. But occasionally, people in neighboring territories saw benefits to being part of a larger, more complex political and economic organization. So they joined an empire willingly. Either way, empires were made up of kingdoms, at least in part, in much the same way that modern countries are made up of states or provinces.

Empires were much more difficult than kingdoms to organize and sustain. A massive bureaucracy was needed to govern diverse peoples under a single administration. Language and cultural barriers had to be overcome. (The language of the ruling power often became the official language used for government and trade throughout the empire.) Extensive transportation and communication networks had to be built, maintained, and protected, so that the natural riches of the empire’s far-flung provinces could be brought to the ruling center. Long distance trade, the economic life-blood of an empire, had to be regulated and a common currency established. Taxes needed to be collected and legal systems established. Much effort and money had to be devoted to maintaining the military so that it could protect trade, enforce laws, and defend the empire from its enemies, both external and internal.

All this had to be accomplished in a balanced fashion. For example, enough tax money had to be collected to pay for the roads, armies, and bureaucracies needed to run the empire. But if the tax rate was too high, it could impoverish people, ruin commerce, and actually reduce the amount of money flowing into the treasury. This type of economic blunder could lead to rebellion. Similarly, government officials needed authority to do their jobs effectively, but they had to be closely monitored to ensure that they did not abuse their positions of power and enrich themselves at the expense of the empire and its people. Widespread corruption could also anger an empire’s subjects and incite them to rebellion. Imperial powers tried to win the loyalty of their subjects by granting privileges such as citizenship and local autonomy and by sharing knowledge and technology. At the same time, they had to be careful that subject peoples did not gain so much power and knowledge that they could break away from or overthrow the government. Such equilibrium was difficult to maintain. Empires had to be flexible enough to adapt to changing circumstances and challenges, while keeping everything in balance. Several large empires in Afroeurasia maintained this balance for long periods of time. But from the third to seventh centuries, three of the most powerful and enduring empires began to weaken and disintegrate.