Chapter 10

The End of the Classical Era: World History in Transition, 200-700 C.E.

OUTLINE

I. Introduction

Between 200 C.E. and 600 C.E., the major civilizations suffered serious reverses. After 600 C.E., the classical stage of civilization came to an end to be replaced by the postclassical world. The decline of the classical civilizations of Asia, Africa, and Europe unleashed expansive forces that would carry civilization to new regions of the world. All of the core civilizations of the Old World suffered from external invasions. Attila the Hun created a loose kingdom of central Asian nomads running from Germany to China, and his invasion of Rome helped accelerate its collapse. The Huns’ power came largely from their strength as horsemen.

II. Upheavals in Eastern and Southern Asia

A. Introduction

The decline of the Han and Gupta empires under pressure from nomadic invaders marked the end of the classical period in Asia.

B. Decline and Fall in Han China

After a period of recovery, the quality of Han emperors began to decline around 88 C.E. At the same time, conditions for the peasantry deteriorated, as large landowners began to monopolize control over the agricultural system and impose serfdom. Peasant unrest transformed into a Daoist revolutionary movement by the Yellow Turbans in 184 C.E. Although Han generals suppressed the rebellion, they set themselves up as regional rulers. Southern China and northern China diverged, with southern China remaining the most expansive. For more than three centuries, no Chinese dynasties ruled. Nomads from the Asiatic steppes invaded China and established their own regional kingdoms. In this period of political disintegration, Buddhism spread into China. By the fifth century C.E., Buddhist monasteries appeared throughout China. In response to the Buddhist doctrine of personal salvation, Daoism was forced to become more formalized in order to retain its popular appeal. Confucianism lost ground during the period of political fragmentation. Chinese political unity was restored partly under the Sui dynasty toward the end of the sixth century C.E. Under the weight of foreign expansion and public works expenses, the Sui dynasty collapsed and was replaced by the T’ang in 618 C.E. Even during the worst period of political fragmentation, some aspects of traditional Chinese culture survived.

C. The End of the Guptas: Decline in India

The decline of the Guptas inaugurated a period in which political fragmentation was the rule.
Beginning around 440 C.E., the Huns initiated a series of invasions and gained control over northwestern India. Unable to restore control over even its tributary princes, the Gupta dynasty collapsed entirely around 550 C.E. Harsha reconstructed a weak empire across northern India between 616 C.E. and 657 C.E. The short-lived empire disintegrated after his death. From this period, regional dynasties, the Rajput, controlled much of northern India. In the aftermath of the Gupta decline, Buddhism continued to wane as a religious influence in India. Hinduism, in contrast, grew in popularity and even spread among the Huns. Along with Hinduism, the caste system continued to spread throughout the subcontinent. Commercially, India continued to spread its contacts throughout southern India and Southeast Asia. Islamic armies reached India for the first time during the seventh century C.E., although early conversions were limited to northwestern India.

III. The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire

A. Introduction

The fall of the Roman Empire was more disruptive than those that occurred in Asia.

B. The Causation of Roman Decline

The population of the later Roman Empire declined, diminishing the recruitment base for the armies. The economy was less able to support taxation. Politically, the quality of emperors also worsened. The onset of decline coincided with the end of imperial expansion around 180 C.E. With the end of imperial conquest came the end of the ready supply of slaves on which the empire depended. Because the empire never established a principle of succession, there were constant civil wars over who should be emperor. At the same time, a series of plagues that devastated the economy struck the empire. Rome’s upper classes became less dedicated to the principles of public service. Even cultural life decayed. Rome’s fall was thus based on large, impersonal forces beyond the government’s control.

C. The Process of Roman Decline

As the empire faltered, small farmers began to surrender their lands to great landowners in return for protection. The formation of great estates decentralized government and economic authority. Some later emperors attempted to reform the system and revitalize the empire. Diocletian (284 C.E. to 305 C.E.) strengthened administrative structure and revised taxes. He attempted to restore the cult of the divine emperors. Constantine (312 C.E. to 337 C.E.) established a second capital at Constantinople and publicly accepted Christianity. Constantine’s efforts allowed the eastern half of the Roman Empire to recover. Christianity rapidly spread to become a major world religion. Division of the empire, however, fatally weakened its western half. When the Germanic migrations began in the fifth century C.E., the western half was able to offer almost no resistance. Germanic kingdoms were set up in the regions formerly controlled from Rome. Internal weakness, rather than the martial skills of the invaders, brought down the Roman Empire.

D. Results of the Fall of Rome

Rome’s fall split the unity of Mediterranean civilization. In the place of the empire emerged three new civilizations. In the northeastern part of the old Roman Empire, emperors continued to rule and continuity with classical civilization was greater. The Byzantine Empire, as the eastern half of the Roman Empire became known, combined Hellenistic and Roman elements. In northern Africa and the southeastern portions of the Mediterranean, small kingdoms temporarily
replaced the Roman Empire. Religious dispute disrupted attempts at unity here. The entire region was eventually swallowed up by Islam. In western Europe, Rome’s fall completely destroyed the classical political foundations. Germanic kingdoms grew throughout the region, but cultural dynamism was supplied by the spread of Christianity. The level of culture, as a whole, deteriorated.

IV. The Development and Spread of World Religions

A. Introduction

The fall of the classical empires allowed Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam to spread beyond boundaries of a single region. Even religions that were more localized gained new adherents.

B. Christianity and Buddhism Compared

Buddhism and Christianity both began to move outward from the locations of their initial foundation when their host civilizations entered periods of prolonged decline. There were strong similarities between the two religions. Christianity, like Buddhism, stressed otherworldliness and produced an important monastic movement. The Chinese version of Buddhism (Mahayana) placed emphasis on Buddha as a savior. Buddhist holy men (bodhisattvas) built up spiritual merits during their lives that could be tapped by less devout men in the search for salvation. Christianity also emphasized salvation and ritual, and also recognized the position of special holy men and women who accumulated a treasury of merit. These special holy persons were called saints. Christianity also differed from Buddhism in that it placed greater emphasis on the political organization of the Church and stressed a single orthodoxy.

C. Early Christianity

Christianity began as a reform movement within Judaism. After Jesus’s death, when it became clear that the world would not come to an immediate end, disciples began to spread the message of salvation to non-Judaic populations. The early Christian message stressed Christ’s sacrifice as a means of making salvation available to all those who believed. It asked followers to worship a single God, concentrate on spiritual concerns, and live a life of simplicity. Early ritual stressed baptism and the reenactment of Christ’s Last Supper. The Christian message found willing adherents. When the Roman Empire began to deteriorate, Christianity became even more widespread. Under the leadership of the apostle Paul, Christians began to conceive of their faith as a new religion, rather than as an extension of Judaism. A political structure in which a bishop emerged as the principle governor in each Christian community evolved. Christian political structure paralleled that of the Roman Empire. Christian doctrine became increasingly organized in the first editions of the New Testament.

D. Christianity Gains Ground

By the time of Constantine’s conversion in the fourth century C.E., Christianity had enticed as much as 10 percent of the empire’s population to convert. With the backing of the state, the religion spread even more rapidly. As the empire declined, the government of the Church under bishops became prominent. A central organization with the bishop of Rome at its head began to emerge. Doctrinal debate resulted in the formulation of early Christian orthodoxy. Against the challenge of Arianism, the Church council at Nicaea dictated that there were three persons of the Godhead, all equally divine. The early Church also developed an evolving speculative theology. Such writers as Augustine bound together the ancient thought of Hellenistic Greece with early
Christianity and created a place for rational thought in Western religion. Thus Christianity appealed to the men and women of the late classical world on a number of levels. Some had simple faith in an all-powerful deity. Others were drawn to the Church as the repository of the ancient intellectual world. Under Benedict of Nursia, Western Christianity developed a formal monasticism in the sixth century C.E. Monasticism was also typical of eastern Christianity. The popular message of Christianity appealed to all social levels and provided some unity across class divisions. Christianity also accepted the potential of salvation for women. Christianity fostered the development of a new culture different from that of the ancient Mediterranean. The new religion accepted the role of the state but did not make it paramount. The Church worked for the removal of slavery and recognized the value of fundamental labor. At the same time, Christianity accepted Roman architecture and certain aspects of ancient philosophy. Latin remained the basic language of the Church.

E. The New Religious Map

Like other world religions that cut across cultural barriers, Christianity spread among Germanic peoples of northwestern Europe and among Slavic peoples of eastern Europe. In 610 C.E., a third major religion was founded; Islam was the last of the major world religions. Within a century, most people of the world were converted to some form of the new religions of Buddhism, Christianity, or Islam or to one of the older faiths - Hinduism and Daoism. The existence of a world framework of trade helps to explain the dissemination of religions.

V. In the Wake of Decline and Fall

By 600 C.E., the world was affected both by the decline of classical civilizations and the spread of world religions. China, more than other areas, was able to retain the foundations of political unification. Both China and India maintained substantial cultural cohesion based on classical norms. The Mediterranean civilizations were split irrevocably. Geographical focus for classical civilization was lost, although certain cultural attributes were retained in attenuated forms. The results of classical decline went beyond the striking shifts in religious allegiance. Some areas changed far more than others. China was unique in its ability to recapture so many classical ingredients. The heritage of classical Mediterranean civilization was used selectively by successor civilizations.

VI. Global Connections: The Late Classical Period and the World

In the classical period, key developments focused within civilizations, but each culture also influenced other areas. Decline accelerated contacts, and the end of the classical era brought important exchanges, but it also brought more obstacles to exchange. Borders became more porous, especially for nomadic invaders, but travel became more dangerous.
TIMELINE

Insert the following events into the timeline. This should help you to compare important historical events chronologically.

- beginning of Sui dynasty in China
- last Roman emperor of West deposed
- Council of Nicaea meets
- beginning of reign of Harsha in India
- beginning of Islam
- beginning of reign of Diocletian, division of Rome

TERMS, PEOPLE, EVENTS

The following terms, people, and events are important to your understanding of the chapter. Define each one.

- Yellow Turbans
- Harsha
- Diocletian
- Justinian
- bodhisattvas
- Trinity
- Benedict of Nursia
- Sui
- Rajput
- Constantine
- Saint Basil
- saints
- Council of Nicaea
- T'ang
- Devi
- Byzantine Empire
- Mahayana
- Pope
- Arianism
MAKING CONNECTIONS

The following questions are intended to emphasize important ideas within the chapter.

1. Compare the factors that led to the decline of classical civilization in China, the Mediterranean, and India.

2. How did political instability affect China? India?

3. What are the causes for the fall of the Roman Empire? Were internal or external causes more important?

4. What were the results of the fall of the Roman Empire?

5. Compare and contrast Buddhism and Christianity.

6. How did the map of civilization alter as a result of cultural diffusion after the disruption of the classical empires?

PUTTING LARGER CONCEPTS TOGETHER

The following questions test your ability to summarize the major conclusions of the chapter.

1. How did the classical civilizations (China, India, and the Mediterranean) of Eurasia differ in the aftermath of disruption between 200 C.E. and 700 C.E.?

2. What was the function of the great religions in creating a new cultural map of the world? How is the diffusion of religion tied to the decline of the ancient civilizations?
SELF-TEST OF FACTUAL INFORMATION

1. Which of the following was a common problem for all three of the Eurasian classical empires?
   
   a. the total loss of all elements of civilization
   b. outside invasions by nomadic peoples
   c. the failure of agricultural systems
   d. the internal rebellions of peasants

2. In which of the civilizations did the growing power of the great landholders to tax lead to rebellion against the ruling dynasty?

   a. Gupta India
   b. the Roman Empire
   c. Han China
   d. Maurya India

3. Which of the following developments did NOT occur following the fall of the Han dynasty?

   a. China was ruled for several centuries by the landowning class who operated private armies.
   b. Southern and northern China pulled apart with greater prosperity in southern China.
   c. A Hsiung-nu dynasty was established in northern China.
   d. Buddhism entered China.

4. Daoists reacted to the appearance of Buddhism in China by

   a. becoming a sect within Buddhism.
   b. withdrawing to Korea.
   c. formalizing Daoist doctrine to reach the common people.
   d. engaging in an underground war against Buddhist monasteries.

5. The Rajput were

   a. the dynasty that succeeded the Gupta in India.
   b. Hun invaders of northwestern India.
   c. Buddhist missionaries from India to China.
   d. regional princes who governed India after the imperial period.

6. What was the status of Buddhism in India following the fall of the Gupta Empire?

   a. It continued to decline in the face of the Gupta preference for Hinduism and the dislike of the succeeding military rulers for Buddhist principles.
   b. Buddhism declined but retained a presence in India as it was adopted by the Huns.
   c. Buddhism was resurrected as a major religion in India because it was adopted by many of the regional princes.
   d. Buddhism replaced Hinduism as the primary religion of the Indian population.
7. Put the decline of the following empires in correct chronological order.
   a. Roman, Han, Gupta
   b. Han, Gupta, Roman
   c. Han, Roman, Gupta
   d. Gupta, Roman, Han

8. What impact did the end of Roman expansion have on the economy of the empire?
   a. It permitted the empire to focus its resources over a smaller territory and reduced the strain on the imperial economy.
   b. The primary result was the restriction of Roman commerce to trade with sub-Saharan Africa.
   c. The economy suffered as the Romans lost control over trade within the Indian Ocean.
   d. The end of expansion led to a labor shortage because the Roman economy depended on a steady supply of slave labor.

9. The emperor Diocletian
   a. was the last Roman emperor in the western half of the empire.
   b. accepted Christianity as an official state religion.
   c. built the eastern capital of Constantinople.
   d. accomplished administrative reform and improved the Roman tax system.

10. What was the primary result of the fall of the Roman Empire?
    a. Despite the collapse of the Mediterranean civilization, the cultural unity of the region was retained.
    b. The collapse led to cultural regression throughout the region of Mediterranean civilization.
    c. Rome’s fall split the unity of the Mediterranean lands.
    d. Rome’s fall was devastating in its eastern half, but the culture of the western region was fundamentally unaffected.