

## CHAPTER5

### *The Classical Period: Directions, Diversities, and Declines by 500 CE.*

#### CHAPTER SUMMARY

**Beyond The Classical Civilizations.** While the development of the three great civilization centers form the central thread in world history during the classical period, significant changes also occurred in other parts of the world. On the borders of the major civilizations, as in northeastern Africa, Japan, and northern Europe, these changes had some relationship to the classical world, though they were partly autonomous. Elsewhere, most notably in the Americas, new cultures pushed forward entirely independently. In all cases, changes during the classical set the stage for more important links in world history.

**Kush: The Expansion of Egyptian Classical Civilization.** The expansion from an established civilization affected parts of sub-Saharan Africa; in this case the interaction had begun well before the rise of Greece and Rome. By the year 1000 B.C.E., the independent kingdom of Kush was flourishing along the Upper Nile. It possessed a form of writing derived from Egyptian hieroglyphics and mastered the use of iron.

**Japan: The Development of a North Asian Civilization.** People migrated to Japan from the Korean peninsula over a 200,000 year period which ended by 200 C.E. . Japanese civilization was organized into tribes with their own chiefs and god. They were skilled with agriculture, fishing, and ironwork.

**Northern Europe: The Less Developed Civilization.** Much of Northern Europe was loosely organized into regional kingdoms. There was no written language, except in the few areas exposed to Latin. Agriculture was primitive and combined with hunting. Scandinavians developed their sailing skills, which they later used for trading and pillaging.

**The Americas: The Emergence of Autonomous Civilizations.** In Central America an Indian group called the Olmecs developed and spread an early civilization from about 800 B.C.E. until about 400 B.C.E. The first American civilization was based on many centuries of advancing agriculture, expanding the early cultivation of corn. This center of early civilization in the Americas developed in total isolation from developments elsewhere in the world.

**Decline of the Classical Civilizations.** Between 200 and 600 C.E., all three classical civilizations collapsed entirely or in part. During the four-century span, all suffered from the outside invasions, the result of growing incursions by groups from central Asia. This renewed wave or nomadic expansion was not as sweeping as the earlier Indo-European outpouring, but it severely tested the civilized regimes. However, internal factors also played a major role in the decline of the classical civilizations. For Han China as well as the later Roman Empire suffered from serious internal problems long before the invaders applied the final blows. And the Guptas in India had not permanently resolved the area's tendency toward political fragmentation.

**Decline of Classical China.** By about 100 C.B., the Han dynasty in China began to enter a serious decline. Confucian intellectual activity gradually became less creative. Politically, the central government's control diminished, bureaucrats became more corrupt, and local landlords took up much of the slack, ruling their neighborhoods according to their own wishes. Ultimately the imperial court became mired in intrigue and civil war. This social unrest had much to do with China's inability to push back invasions from borderland nomads, who finally overthrew the Han dynasty outright. There were other factors that also contributed to the decline of classical Chinese civilization. The spread of devastating new epidemics killed up to half the population, which contributed to not only toppling the Han, but led to almost three centuries of chaos--an unusually long span in Chinese history. But China revived near the end of the sixth century, for the structures of classical China were simply too strong to be overturned. The bureaucracy declined in scope and quality, but it did not disappear during the troubled centuries. China thus had to recover from a serious setback, but it did not have to reinvent its civilization.

**The Yellow Turbans.** As social unrest continued in classical China, a revolutionary effort led by the Daoist Yellow Turbans took place in 184 C.E. The Yellow Turbans attacked the weaknesses of the emperor, but also the self-indulgence of the current bureaucracy. The Yellow Turbans gained popular support, but their protest movement eventually failed.

**Classical India.** The decline of classical civilization in India was less drastic than the collapse of Han China, but in some ways it left larger traces in later Indian history. By the sixth century the Gupta empire in central India was destroyed by Hun invasions. Many of the invaders were integrated into the warrior caste of India, forming a new ruling group of regional princes. For several centuries no native ruler attempted to build a large Indian state. The regional princes, collectively called "Rajput," controlled the small states and emphasized military prowess. During the seventh century Arab incursions again threatened Indian political stability. To none of these challenges did India mount a challenge. Regionalism continued to prevail, leaving the subcontinent open, just a few centuries later, to partial conquest by Muslim rulers from the outside. India's culture, however, did withstand attack, and along with the pervasive caste system, preserved Indian identity during the invasions and even when the subcontinent fell under foreign rule.

**Decline and Fall in Rome.** The decline and fall of the Roman Empire was a prolonged and complex process. There were a number of internal and external factors that contributed to the decline. After about 180 C.B. political confusion produced a series of weak emperors and many disputes over the succession to the throne. Intervention by the army in the selection of emperors complicated political life and contributed to the deterioration of rule from the top. Even more important in setting off the process of decline was a series of plagues that swept over the empire. The population of Rome fell from one million people to 250,000, and subsequently economic life worsened. This also created an obstacle to recruiting soldiers to defend the empire. Furthermore, the decadence and arrogance of the Roman elite was also a factor in the erosion of Roman political power. Rome's fall, in other words, can be blamed on large, impersonal forces that would have been hard for any society to control or a moral and political decay that reflected growing corruption among the society's leaders.

**Emperor Constantine.** The emperor Constantine ruled the declining Roman Empire from 312 to 337 C.E. He experimented with new methods of control. He set up a second capital city, Constantinople, to regulate the eastern half of the empire more efficiently. He also tried to use the religious force of Christianity to unify the empire spiritually, extending its toleration and adopting it as his own faith. While some of these measures had success, none was able to revive the empire as whole.

**Byzantine Empire.** The eastern part of the Roman Empire, in a sense, did not fall. Civilization was more deeply entrenched there than in some of the Western European portions of the empire, and there were fewer pressures from invaders. The eastern empire came to be known as the Byzantine Empire. It was a product of late imperial Rome, rather than a balanced result of the whole span of classical Mediterranean civilization. Though its language was Greek, it maintained the authoritarian tone of the late Roman rulers. The empire itself was vibrant, artistically creative, and active in trade. Under the emperor Justinian, the Byzantine Empire made attempts to regain the whole heritage of Rome, but it fell short of this ambition.

**The New Religious Map.** The end of the classical period is not simply the story of decay and collapse. This same period, from 200 to 600 C.E., saw the effective rise of many of the world's major religions. The newly expanding religions all shared some general features. Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism all emphasized intense devotion and piety, stressing the importance of spiritual concerns beyond the daily cares of earthly life. All three offered the hope of a better existence after this life had ended, and each one responded to new political instability and to growing poverty of people in various parts of the civilized world. Yet, despite these common features, the major religions were themselves quite different.

**Buddhism.** Buddhism was altered more substantially as it traveled mainly beyond India's borders, becoming only a small minority faith in India itself. The chief agents of Buddhist expansion and leadership were monks, for Buddhism tended to divide the faithful among a minority who abandoned earthly life in favor of spiritual dedication and the larger number who worked in the world while doing the best they could to meet their spiritual obligations. Buddhism evolved further as it spread to China after the fall of the Han dynasty. The religion also developed strong roots in other parts of East Asia directly, spreading through China and from there to Korea and Japan. It also became a popular belief system in many areas of Southeast Asia.

**Doctrine of Bodhisattvas.** This doctrine held that some people could gain nirvana by their own meditation while choosing to remain in the world as saints and to aid others by prayer and example. This code also signified the shift in Buddhism's original emphasis on ethics to a more emotional cult, stressing the possibility of popular salvation.

**Christianity.** At the end of the classical era, Christianity played a direct role in the formation of two postclassical civilizations, those of Eastern and Western Europe. Christianity was characterized by its emphasis on church organization and structure, copying from the example of the Roman Empire itself. It put a premium on missionary activity and widespread conversions. Christianity also stressed its possession of exclusive truth and its intolerance of competing beliefs.

**Jesus.** Jesus of Nazareth, believed by Christians to be the son of God sent to earth to redeem human sin, crystallized the radical reform movement that was early Christianity. Combining extraordinary gentleness of spirits and great charisma, Jesus preached widely in Israel and gathered a group of loyal disciples around him. Eventually, his disciples fanned out and promoted the teachings of Jesus as new expressions of faith.

**Islam.** Islam was launched in the early seventh century and would rival Christianity as a world faith. The spread of major religions was a vital result of the changes in classical civilizations brought on by attack and decay. This new religious surge reduced the hold of animism in Asia and Europe.

## KEYTERMS

**Kush:** Kush was an independent kingdom flourishing along the Upper Nile around the year 1000 B.C.E. It possessed a form of writing derived from Egyptian hieroglyphics and mastered the use of iron. This is an example of established civilization, like classical Egypt, affecting parts of another region.

**Shintoism:** This Japanese religion provided for worship of the political rulers and spirits of nature, including the all-important god of rice. Many of the local shrines and rituals revolved around Shinto beliefs, which became unified into a single national religion by 700 C.E.

**The Olmecs:** In Central America, an Indian group called the Olmecs developed and spread an early form of civilization from about 800 until about 400 B.C.E. This center of early civilization in the Americas developed in total isolation from developments elsewhere in the world.

**The Asiatic Huns:** Between 200 and 600 C.E. the Asiatic Huns conducted attacks that led to the decline of all three classical civilizations. The Huns swept across Italy and invaded the city of Rome. It was another Hun group from central Asia that overthrew the Guptas in India, and similar nomadic tribes had earlier toppled the Chinese dynasty.

**The Yellow Turbans:** During the decline of classical Chinese civilization, the Yellow Turbans emerged as a Daoist group that promised a golden age that was to be brought about by divine magic.

**Constantinople:** Constantinople was set up by emperor Constantine who ruled from 312 to 337 C.E. Constantine set up this capital city to regulate the eastern half of the Roman empire.

**The Byzantine Empire:** The eastern part of the Roman empire became the Byzantine Empire. It was a product of late imperial Rome, rather than a balanced result of the whole span of classical Mediterranean civilization. The empire was vibrant, artistically creative, and active in trade. Briefly, especially under the emperor Justinian, the eastern emperors tried to regain the whole heritage of Rome, but failed in this attempt.

**The Sassanid Empire:** The Sassanid empire served as a bridge between the Mediterranean and the East, transmitting goods and some artistic and literary styles between Greek-speaking people and India and China.

**Bodhisattvas:** Some centuries after Buddha's death, a doctrine of bodhisattvas developed, which held that some people could gain nirvana by their own meditation while choosing to remain in the world as saints and to aid others by prayer and example. The role of the bodhisattvas was critical in the transformation of Buddhism's original emphasis on ethics to a more emotional cult, stressing the possibility of popular salvation.

**Syncretism:** The blending of cultures.

**Christianity:** At the end of the classical era, Christianity played a direct role in the formation of two postclassical civilizations, those of Eastern and Western Europe. Christianity was characterized by its emphasis on church organization and structure, copying from the example of the Roman empire itself. It put a premium on missionary activity and widespread conversions. Christianity also stressed its possession of exclusive truth and its intolerance of competing beliefs.

**Jesus:** Jesus of Nazareth, believed by Christians to be the son of God sent to earth to redeem human sin, crystallized the radical reform movement that was early Christianity. Combining extraordinary gentleness of spirits and great charisma, Jesus preached widely in Israel and gathered a group of loyal disciples around him. Eventually, his disciples fanned out and promoted the teachings of Jesus as new expression of faith.