

CHAPTER 5

The Classical Period: Directions, Diversities, and Declines by 500 C.E.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

The basic themes of the three great classical civilizations of China, India, and the Mediterranean involved expansion and integration. Throughout the classical world, these themes faltered between 200 and 500 C.E., signaling the end of that era. The response of major religions to political decline formed a leading direction in the next phase of world history. Meanwhile, developments outside the classical orbit gained new prominence.

Expansion and Integration. Common themes for the classical civilizations include territorial expansion and efforts to integrate the peoples of the new territories. Responses to expansion included philosophers who commented on the policy, like Confucius, Buddha, and Socrates. Integration involved two basic issues: first, how to govern the new territories, and second, how to create social cohesion throughout the empire. In retrospect, it appears the Chinese and Indians were more successful at establishing social cohesion than the Mediterraneans were.

Beyond the Classical Civilizations. Outside the classical civilizations, important developments occurred in other parts of the world. Significant civilizations operated in the Americas and in Africa. Agriculture spread to northern Europe and northern Asia. In central Asia especially, nomadic societies linked and sometimes disrupted classical civilizations. In Africa, the kingdom of Kush was flourishing by 1000 B.C.E. It was in turn defeated by its rival, Axum, which was later conquered by Ethiopia. The latter two civilizations had contacts with the eastern Mediterranean world until after Rome's fall. The first great state in western Africa was Ghana. In Japan, political organization on a national scale arose around 400 C.E. and was the basis for imperial rule. By 600 C.E., Japan was ready for elaborate contacts with China. In northern Europe, political structures were loosely organized as regional kingdoms. Agriculture was still rather primitive, but by 600 the Scandinavians began trading with and pillaging Europeans near them. Until about 1000 C.E., northern Europe was one of the most "backward" areas of the world. Another area of the world developing by 600 C.E. was in Central America. The Olmecs displayed many impressive achievements, including building pyramids and defining an accurate calendar. They influenced their successors, including the Teotihuacan and the Maya. A similar civilization rose in the Andes region, which led to the Inca Empire. These two centers of early civilization in the Americas developed in isolation from those in Afro-Eurasia and lacked the wheel and iron technology. Yet another case of isolated development was the Polynesians, who reached Fiji and Samoa by 1000 B.C.E. By 400 C.E., they spread their civilization to Hawaii by traveling in large outrigger canoes. The herding peoples of central Asia also contributed to world history, particularly toward the end of the classical period. Some made contact with established civilizations, like China. Among other services, they transported goods along the Silk Road and created technologies like the stirrup. Through their invasions of established civilizations, they contributed to the end of the classical era.

In Depth: Nomads and Cross-Civilization Contacts and Exchanges. Nomadic peoples were often agents of contact between civilizations and between farming peoples and town dwellers. Both Chinese and Roman armies battled hostile nomads who threatened to disrupt trade. Religions, art, agriculture, technology, and, most infamously, disease spread along trade routes

established by nomads. Sedentary civilizations adopted military tactics and materiel from nomadic peoples and developed their own to deter them, like the Great Wall and gunpowder, in China.

Decline in China and India. A combination of external weakness and invasion led to the decline of classical civilizations in China and then India. From 200 to 600 C.E., all three classical civilizations collapsed entirely or in part, and all three were invaded by outside groups from central Asia. The central Asian nomadic Huns attacked all three classical civilizations. About 100 C.E., the Han dynasty began serious decline. Weakened central government, social unrest led by overtaxed peasants, and epidemics were the most prominent sources of decline. These combined to make the government unable to stop invading nomads. However, by 600, China revived, first with the brief Sui dynasty and later (and more gloriously) with the Tang. Confucianism and bureaucracy revived. Unlike those in Rome, the cultural and political structures in China were too strong to be fully and permanently overturned. The decline in India was not as drastic as in China. By 600, Huns destroyed the Gupta Empire. For several centuries, no native Indian led a large state there. Hinduism gained ground as Buddhism, unappealing to the warrior caste, declined in its native land. After 600, Islam entered India and Arab traders took control of Indian Ocean trade routes. What survived was Hinduism (Islam never gained adherence from a majority of the population) and the caste system.

Decline and Fall in Rome. Decline in Rome was multifactorial. Population declined, leadership faltered, the economy flagged, tax collection became more difficult, and, as a result and perhaps most significantly, despondency pervaded much of the citizenry. The decline in Rome was more disruptive than in China or India and was more pronounced in the western portion of the empire than in the eastern. In Italy, Spain, and points north, the fall of Rome shattered unities and reduced the level of civilization itself. Emperors Diocletian and Constantine slowed the spiral of decay but only temporarily; the latter moved the capital to Constantinople and allowed Christianity. When Germanic tribes invaded in the 400s, there was little power or will to resist. In the eastern half, a remnant of the empire survived as the Byzantine Empire. In earlier days of the Roman Empire, two Middle Eastern civilizations, the Parthian and then the Sassanid, attempted to revive the Persian Empire. Each served as a bridge between the Mediterranean and the East. The Sassanids were in turn overthrown by Islamic Arab conquerors.

The New Religious Map. As the classical civilizations declined, what developed into the world's major religions—Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam—flourished and shaped the global map of faith into the one we recognize today. People sought solace in the spiritual world as they saw their temporal world collapsing. Christianity, once persecuted in the West, became widespread. Similarly, Buddhism grew in China and the East. Islam surfaced and became a dynamic force in the areas in between. With Hinduism, Islam shared some commonalities: intense devotion, piety, and a hope for a better life after this one. Each also responded to political instability and to poverty. Each often took on features of local cultures, in a process called “syncretism.”

Hinduism, Buddhism, and Daoism. Over time Hinduism changed little in its major tenets and generally stayed within the India subcontinent. On the other hand, Buddhism altered as it traveled beyond India, and Buddha himself became more of a savior figure than a teacher of a way. Women in China were especially drawn to this faith in that many felt it led to a more meaningful life. Ultimately, with the revival of dynasties in China, Buddhism was persecuted, but it remained a minority current. It had a greater influence in Japan, Korea, and Vietnam.

Daoism reacted to Buddhism by organizing its beliefs and developing a clear hold on the peasant population of east Asia.

Christianity and Islam. Christianity played a major part in the formation of postclassical civilizations in eastern and western Europe. It emphasized missionary activity even more than Buddhism did. Its beginnings were in the early days of the Roman Empire, near the eastern shores of the Mediterranean. Jesus preached compassion with great conviction and charisma, but in his lifetime he had relatively few followers. Over time, his message of the spiritual equality of all people and an afterlife of heavenly communion with God replaced the comparatively unsatisfying traditional polytheistic religion of the Romans. Later Christians, Paul most notably, saw themselves not as part of a reform movement within Judaism but rather as a new religion. The writings of Paul and other Christians became known as the New Testament in the Christian Bible. By the time Rome collapsed, Christianity had demonstrated immense spiritual power and solid organization. For example, Benedict formed a monastery in Italy that became the template for other groups of monks and nuns. Christianity had particular appeal to women, who were offered leadership opportunities in convents and who were encouraged to worship together with men, which was unlike the practices in many faiths of the time. Islam will be featured in greater detail in upcoming chapters. With Buddhism and Christianity, the Islamic faith completes the roster of world religions, with most of the Earth's population following one of these three belief systems today. Polytheistic faiths continued to exist, especially in Hinduism and Daoism.

The Spread of Major Religions. The spread of major religions—Hinduism in India, Buddhism in east and southeast Asia, a more popular Daoism in China, Christianity in Europe and parts of the Mediterranean world, and Islam in the Middle East—was the result of the changes in classical civilizations brought on by attack and decline. This new religious surge reduced the hold of literal animism in much of Asia and Europe.

The World Around 500 C.E. Developments in many parts of the world by 500 C.E. produced three major themes in world history. First, there were responses to the collapse of the classical empires. Societies reworked their key institutions and values after internal decline and external invasion. Second, there were the creation of and reaction to the new religions that developed. Third, increased skill in agriculture and the development of early civilizations or new contacts prepared parts of Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Americas for future changes.

Global Connections: The Late Classical Period and the World. Each of the classical civilizations radiated trade and other influences to areas larger than their own boundaries. For example, China had contact with Korea and Vietnam, and central Asian nomads linked East and West through the Silk Road and other means. Decline of classical authority meant overland routes became more precarious; thus, increasingly, sea lanes were used, especially in the Indian Ocean. At the same time, missionaries and nomadic raiders took advantage of more porous borders. These changes set new bases for connections within Afro-Eurasia.

KEY TERMS

Kush: An independent kingdom flourishing along the upper Nile around 1000 B.C.E. It represents an example of an established civilization, like classical Egypt, influencing a nearby region.

Axum and Ethiopia: Axum defeated Kush around 300 B.C.E. Ethiopia in turn defeated Axum. Both these African kingdoms had active contacts with the eastern Mediterranean world until after Rome's fall.

Shintoism: Japanese religion that provided for worship of political rulers and spirits of nature. This was the basis for the worship of the Japanese emperor as a religious figure.

Olmec: Central America's first civilization (c. 800-400 B.C.E.), which developed agriculture and produced accurate calendars. It powerfully influenced later civilizations in the Americas.

Teotihuacan: Followed the Olmec. Built the first great city in the Americas and developed the first alphabet (c. 400 B.C.E.-400 C.E.).

Inca: American culture centered in the Andes mountains. Domesticated the llama.

Polynesian peoples: Island civilizations that reached Fiji and Samoa by 1000 B.C.E. and Hawaii by 400 C.E. They adapted local plants, introduced new animals, and imported a caste system led by a local king.

Yellow Turbans: During the decline of classical China, the Yellow Turbans were a Daoist group that promised a golden age that was to be brought about by divine magic.

Sui and Tang: Chinese dynasties that followed the fall of the Han. Under Tang leadership especially, China enjoyed one of the most glorious eras in its history. Confucianism and the bureaucracy were revived.

Rajput: Regional Indian princes who ruled after the fall of the Guptas.

Devi: The mother goddess of Hinduism. The worship of this deity encouraged new emotionalism in the religion.

Islam: World religion that developed in the Middle East after 622 C.E. Initially surpassed Christianity in numbers of adherents and became its most tenacious rival.

Allah: Sole deity in the Islamic faith.

Constantinople: Center of the Roman Empire after 312 C.E., established by the last strong emperor, Constantine.

Byzantine Empire: Successor to the Roman Empire in the eastern Mediterranean. It was artistically creative and active in trade. Its emperors, especially Justinian, tried to revive the heritage of Rome throughout its previous territory but failed. Many centuries of fighting Muslims led to its demise in 1453.

Augustine: One of the greatest Christian theologians. Bishop of Alexandria, Egypt.

Coptic Christianity: Largest branch of African Christianity, centered in Egypt.

Syncretism: The blending of cultures. In this chapter, syncretism connects most strongly with religions; for example, Christianity’s adaptation of some of the features of the Roman religion.

Bodhisattvas: Buddhist doctrine that held that some people could gain nirvana through meditation. This shows that Buddhism shifted from a system of ethics into a more emotional belief.

Mahayana: Or the “Greater Vehicle.” East Asian form of Buddhism that emphasized its founder as a divine savior.

Jesus of Nazareth: Jewish teacher who preached reforms in Judaism. His followers believed him to be the Messiah, the savior sent by God to redeem humanity. Over time, his disciples spread Jesus’ message of compassion and piety throughout the Roman Empire.

Paul: Early Christian leader who saw the faith in a different light. Instead of a reform of Judaism, Paul helped turn the faith into a new religion that welcomed non-Jews.

Benedict: Founder of monasticism in what had been the western half of the Roman Empire; established Benedictine Rule in the 6th century; paralleled development of Basil’s rules in Byzantine Empire.

Sahara: Vast desert region of north Africa which extends from Atlantic Ocean to the Nile River.

Maya: (300 – 900 C.E.) Classic culture emerging in southern Mexico and Central America contemporary with Teotihuacan; extended over broad region; featured monumental architecture, written language, calendrical and mathematical systems, and highly developed religion.

Buddhism: The Indian prince Gautama became the Buddha, or “enlightened one,” when he questioned the poverty and misery he saw. Generally seen as a reform movement out of Hinduism. Buddhism had its greatest effect outside of India, especially in southeast Asia.

Pope: Meaning papa or father; bishop of Rome and head of Roman Catholic church.

Islam: Monotheistic religion in which the supreme being is Allah and the chief prophet and founder is Mohammad; developed in the Arabian peninsula in the 7th century C.E.

Animism: a belief in the existence of many spirits and demons which are found in the natural world.

LESSON SUGGESTIONS

Leader Analysis	Constantine
Conflict Analysis	Nomadic peoples vs. classical empires
Change Analysis	Syncretism in Hinduism and Christianity
Societal Comparison	Postclassical Europe and China