The Decline and Fall of Empires

By: Upshur, Jiu-Hwa et al. *World History*. 2002

The following are some of the general reasons for the decline and fall of empires:

Dynastic succession

No major empire had clear rules about the acquiring, holding, transferring and relinquishing of power. Dynasties run the risk of no heir, an unresponsive heir, an incompetent heir, a child heir or a woman heir. All of these have the potential to cause crisis.

Bureaucratic corruption

In time bureaucracies succumbed to corruption and corrupt governments provoke rebellion.

Inequitable economic burdens

Governments rely on revenue to support the military and bureaucracy. The revenue is dependant on a prosperous population engaged in agriculture, trade and industry. If the burden to produce revenue falls heavily on one segment of society the government can not function.

Regional, racial and ethnic tension

Groups that resist integration get restless.

Decline of martial spirit

When the spirit to fight and make other sacrifices for the state declines the state can not defend itself.

Moral decline

An increase in self-indulgence and hedonism can lead to apathy for the state.

Escapist or other-worldly religion

Religions that stress heavenly rewards over earthy ones are a factor in declining civic spirit and other ills of empires.

External enemies

Empires inspire envy from their less affluent neighbors.

Costly technology

Successful empires create engineering wonders that help to sustain them like roads, harbors, irrigation systems, walls, etc. They are expensive to initiate and maintain. They often impoverished the governments.

**Decline in China and India**

Steams, Peter, Michael Adas, Stuart B. Schwartz, and Marc Jason Gilbert. World Civilizations. 4th ed. New York: Pearson Longman, 2005.

A combination of internal weakness and inva­sion led to important changes, first in China, then in India.

Between 200 and 600 C.E., all three classical civi­lizations collapsed entirely or in part. During this four ­century span, all suffered from outside invasions, the result of growing incursions by groups from central Asia. This renewed wave of nomadic expansion was not as sweeping as the earlier Indo-European growth, which had spread over India and much of the Mediter­ranean region many centuries before, but it severely tested the civilized regimes. Rome, of course, fell directly to Germanic invaders, who fought on partly because they were, in turn, harassed by the fierce Asi­atic Huns. The Huns themselves swept once across Italy, invading the city of Rome amid great destruc­tion. Another Hun group from central Asia overthrew the Guptas in India, and similar nomadic tribes had earlier toppled the Chinese Han dynasty. The central Asian nomads were certainly encouraged by a growing realization of the weakness of the classical regimes. For Han China as well as the later Roman Empire suffered from serious internal problems long before the invaders dealt the final blows. And the Guptas in India had not permanently resolved that area's tendency to dissolve into political fragmentation.

By about 100 C.E., 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. The free peasants, long heavily taxed, were burdened with new taxes and demands of service by these same landlords. Many lost their farms and became day laborers on the large estates. Some had to sell their children into ser­vice. Social unrest increased, producing a great revo­lutionary effort led by Daoists in 184 C.E. Daoism now gained new appeal, shifting toward a popular religion and adding healing practices and magic to earlier philosophical beliefs. The Daoist leaders, called the Yellow Turbans, promised a golden age that was to be brought about by divine magic. The Yellow Turbans attacked the weakness of the emperor but also the self-indulgence of the current bureaucracy. *As* many as 30,000 students demonstrated against the decline of government morality. However, their protests failed, and Chinese population growth and prosperity both spiraled further downward. The imperial court was mired in intrigue and civil war.

This dramatic decline paralleled the slightly later collapse of Rome, as we shall see. It obviously explained China's inability to push back invasions from border­land nomads, who finally overthrew the Han dynasty outright. Asin Rome, growing political ineffectiveness formed part of the decline. Another important factor was the spread of devastating new epidemics, which may have killed up to half of the population. These combined blows not only toppled the Han, but led to almost three centuries of chaos, an unusually long span of unrest in Chinese history. Regional rulers and weak dynasties rose and fell during this period. Even China's cultural unity was threatened as the wave of

Buddhism spread, one of the only cases in which China imported a major idea from outside its borders until the 20th century. Northern China, particularly, seemed near collapse.

Nonetheless, China did revive itself near the end of the 6th century. Strong native rulers in the north drove out the nomadic invaders. The Sui dynasty briefly ruled, and then in 618 C.E. it was followed by the Tang, who sponsored one of the most glorious periods in Chinese history. Confucianism and the bureaucratic system were revived, and indeed the bureaucratic tradition became more elaborate. The period of chaos left its mark somewhat in the contin­ued presence of a Buddhist minority and new styles in art and literature. But, unlike the case of Rome, there was no permanent disruption.

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. Confucian values and styles of life remained current among the upper class. Many of the nomadic invaders, seeing that they had nothing better to offer by way of government or culture, sim­ply tried to assimilate the Chinese traditions. China thus had to recover from a serious setback, but it did not have to reinvent its civilization.

The decline of classical civilization in India was less drastic than the collapse of Han China. The ability of the Gupta emperors to control local princes was declining by the 5th century. Invasions by nomadic peoples, probably Hun tribes similar to those who were pressing into Europe, affected some northern portions of India as early as 500 C.E. During the next century, the invaders penetrated much deeper, destroy­ing the Gupta Empire in central India. 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. Few political events of more than local significance occurred.

Within this framework, Indian culture continued to evolve. Buddhism declined further in India proper. Hindu beliefs gained ground, among other things converting the Hun princes, who had originally wor­shipped gods of battle and had no sympathy for the Buddhist principles of calm and contemplation. Within Hinduism, the worship of a mother goddess, Devi, spread widely, encouraging a new popular emotionalism in religious ritual. Indian economic prosperity also continued at high levels.

Hinduism also underwent further popularization; Hindu texts were written in vernacular languages such as Hindi, and use of the old classical language, Sanskrit, declined. These reactions were largely successful in preventing more than a minority of Indians from abandoning Hinduism, but they distracted from fur­ther achievements in science and mathematics. Clearly, by 500 C.E., the glory days of the Guptas were long past, although classical traditions survived particularly in Hinduism and the caste system.

Decline and Fall of the Gupta

Smitha, Frank. "The Gupta Empire and Hinduism, 320 to 500 CE." MacroHistorv. 01 Aug 2006. MacroHistory. 11 Aug 2006 <http://www.fsmitha.com/h1/ch28gup.htm>.

Chandra Gupta II died in 415 and was succeeded by his son, Kumara Gupta, who maintained India's peace and prosperity. During his forty-year reign the Gupta Empire remained undiminished. Then - as was the Roman Empire around this time - India suffered more invasions. Kumara Gupta's son, the crown prince, Skanda Gupta, was able to drive the invaders, the Hephthalites, (White Huns) back, into the Sassanian Empire, where they were to defeat the Sassanid army and kill the Sassanid king, Firuz.

In India, women and children sang praises to Skanda Gupta. Skanda Gupta succeeded his father in 455. Then the Hephthalites retuned, and he spent much of his reign of twenty-five years combating them, which drained his treasury and weakened his empire. Skanda Gupta died in 467, and after a century and a half the cycle of rise and disintegration of empire tuned again to disintegration. Contributing to this was dissention within the royal family. Benefiting from this dissention, governors of provinces and feudal chieftains revolted against Gupta rule. For awhile the Gupta Empire had two centers: at Valabhi on the western coast and at Pataliputra toward the east. Seeing weakness, the Hephthalites invaded India again - in greater number. Just before the year 500, the Hephthalites took control of the Punjab. After 515, they absorbed the Kashmir, and they advanced into the Ganges Valley, the heart of India, raping, burning, massacring, blotting out entire cities and reducing fine buildings to rubble. Provinces and feudal territories declared their independence, and the whole of north India became divided among numerous independent kingdoms. And with this fragmentation India was again torn by numerous small wars between local rulers.

**Decline and Fall in Rome**

Decline in Rome was particularly complex. Its causes have been much debated. Developments varied between the eastern and western portions of the empire as the Mediterranean region pulled apart.

The Roman Empire exhibited a great many symp­toms of decay after about 180 C.E. There was statisti­cal evidence in the declining population in addition to growing difficulties in recruiting effective armies. There were also political manifestations in the greater brutality and arbitrariness of many Roman emperors­, victims, according to one commentator at the time, of "lustful and cruel habits." Tax collection became increasingly difficult, as residents of the empire fell on hard times. The governor of Egypt complained that "the once numerous inhabitants of the aforesaid vil­lages have now been reduced to a few, because some have fled in poverty and others have died... and for this reason we are in danger owing to impoverishment of having to abandon the tax-collectorship."

Above all, there were human symptoms. Inscrip­tions on Roman tombstones increasingly ended with the slogan, "I was not, I was, I am not, I have no more desires," suggesting a pervasive despondency over the futility of this life and despair at the absence of an afterlife.

The decline of Rome was more disruptive than the collapse of the classical dynasties in Asia. For this reason, and because memories of the collapse of this great empire became part of the Western tradition, the process of deterioration deserves particular atten­tion. Every so often, Americans or western Europeans concerned about changes in their own society won­der if there might be lessons in Rome's fall that apply to the uncertain future of Western civilization today.

We have seen that the quality of political and eco­nomic life in the Roman Empire began to shift after about 180 C.E. political confusion produced a series of weak emperors and many disputes over 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. More important in initiating the process of decline was a series of plagues that swept over the empire. As in China, the plagues' source was growing interna­tional trade, which brought diseases endemic in southern Asia to new areas like the Mediterranean, where no resistance had been established even to con­tagions such as the measles. The resulting diseases decimated the population. The population of Rome decreased from a million people to 250,000. Eco­nomic life worsened in consequence. Recruitment of troops became more difficult, so the empire was increasingly reduced to hiring Germanic soldiers to guard its frontiers. The need to pay troops added to the demands on the state's budget, just as declining production 'cut into tax revenues.

Here, perhaps, is the key to the process of decline: a set of general problems, triggered by a cycle of plagues that could not be prevented, resulting in a rather mechanistic spiral that steadily worsened. How­ever, there is another side to Rome's downfall, although whether as a cause or result of the initial dif­ficulties is hard to say. Rome's upper classes became steadily more pleasure-seeking, turning away from the political devotion and economic vigor that had char­acterized the republic and early empire. Cultural life decayed. Aside from some truly creative Christian writ­ers, the fathers of Western theology, there was very little sparkle to the art or literature of the later empire. Many Roman scholars contented themselves with writ­ing textbooks that rather mechanically summarized earlier achievements in science, mathematics, and lit­erary style. Writing textbooks is not, of course, proof of absolute intellectual incompetence-at least, not in all cases-but the point was that new knowledge or artistic styles were not being generated, and even the levels of previous accomplishment began to slip. The later Romans wrote textbooks about rhetoric instead of displaying rhetorical talent in actual political life; they wrote simple compendiums, for example, about animals or geometry, that barely captured the essen­tials of what earlier intellectuals had known, and often added superstitious beliefs that previous generations would have scorned.

This cultural decline, finally, was not clearly due to disease or economic collapse, for it began in some ways before these larger problems surfaced. Some­thing was happening to the Roman elite, perhaps because of the deadening effect of authoritarian polit­ical rule, perhaps because of a new interest in luxuries and sensual indulgence. Revealingly, the upper classes no longer produced many offspring, for bearing and raising children seemed incompatible with a life of pleasure-seeking.

Rome's fall, in other words, can be blamed on large, forces that would have been hard for any society to control or a moral and political decay that reflected growing corruption among society's leaders. Probably elements of both were involved. Thus, the plagues would have weakened even a vigor­ous society, but they would not necessarily have pro­duced an irreversible downward spiral had not the morale of the ruling classes already been sapped by an unproductive lifestyle and superficial values.

Regardless of precise causes, the course of Roman decay is quite clear. As the quality of imper­ial rule declined, as life became more dangerous and economic survival more precarious, many farmers clustered around the protection of large landlords, surrendering full control over their plots of land in the hope of military and judicial protection. The decentralization of political and economic authority, which was greatest in the western, or European, por­tions of the empire, foreshadowed the manorial sys­tem of Europe in the Middle Ages. The system of estates gave great political power to landlords and did provide some local stability. But, in the long run, it weakened the power of the emperor and also tended to move the economy away from the elaborate and successful trade patterns of Mediterranean civilization in its heyday. Many estates tried to be self-sufficient. Trade and production declined further as a result, and cities shrank in size. The empire was locked in a vicious circle, in which responses to the initial deteri­oration merely lessened the chances of recovery.

Some later emperors tried vigorously to reverse the tide. Diocletian, who ruled from 284 to 305 C.E., tightened up the administration of the empire and tried to improve tax collection. Regulation of the dwindling economy increased. Diocletian also attempted to direct political loyalties to his own per­son, exerting pressure to worship the emperor as god. This was what prompted him to persecute Christians with particular viciousness, for they would not give Caesar preference over their God. The emperor Constantine, who ruled from 312 to 337 C.E., experimented with other methods of control. He set up a second capital city, Constantinople, to regulate the eastern half of the empire more effi­ciently. He tried to use the religious force of Chris­tianity to unify the empire spiritually, extending its toleration and adopting it as his own faith. These measures were not without result. The eastern empire, ruled from Constantinople (now the Turkish city of Istanbul), remained an effective political and economic unit. Christianity spread under his official sponsorship, although there were some new prob­lems linked to its success.

None of these measures, however, revived the empire as a whole. Division merely made the weakness of the western half worse. Attempts to regulate the economy reduced economic initiative and lowered production; ultimately tax revenues declined once again. The army deteriorated further. And, when the Germanic invasions began in earnest in the 400s, there was scant basis to resist. Many peasants, burdened by the social and economic pressures of the decaying empire, actually welcomed the barbarians. A priest noted that "in all districts taken over by the Germans, there is one desire among all the Romans, that they should never again find it necessary to pass under Roman jurisdiction." German kingdoms were estab­lished in many parts of the empire by 425 C.E., and the last Roman emperor in the west was displaced in 476 C.E. The Germanic invaders numbered at most 5 per­cent of the population of the empire, but so great was the earlier Roman decline that this small, poorly orga­nized force was able to put an end to one of the world's great political structures

The collapse of Rome echoed mightily through the later history of Europe and the Middle East. Rome's fall split the unity of the Mediterranean lands that had been so arduously won through Hellenistic culture and then by the Roman Empire itself. This was one sign that the end of the Roman Empire was a more serious affair than the displacement of the last classical dynasties in India and China. For Greece and Rome had not produced the shared political culture and bureaucratic traditions of China that could allow revival after a period of chaos. Nor had Mediter­ranean civilization, for all its vitality, generated a com­mon religion that appealed deeply enough, or satisfied enough needs, to maintain unity amid polit­ical fragmentation, as in India. Such religions would reach the Mediterranean world as Rome fell, but they came too late to save the empire and produced a deep rift in this world, between Christian and Muslim, ­that has not been healed to this day.

However, Rome's collapse, although profound, was uneven. Ineffect, the fall of Rome divided the Mediterranean world into three zones, which formed the starting points of three distinct civilizations that would develop in later centuries.

Inthe eastern part of the empire, centered now on Constantinople, the empire in a sense did not fall. Civilization was more deeply entrenched here than in some of the western European portions of the empire, and there were fewer pressures from invaders. Emperors continued to rule Greece and other parts of southeast Europe, plus the northern Middle East. This eastern empire, later to be known as the Byzantine Empire, was a product of late imperial Rome, rather than a balanced result of the entire span of classical Mediterranean civilization. Thus, although its language was Greek, it maintained the authoritar­ian tone of the late Roman rulers. But the eastern empire was vibrant, artistically creative, and active in trade. Briefly, especially under the emperor **Justinian** (who ruled from 527 to 565 C.E.), the eastern emper­ors tried to recapture the whole heritage of Rome. However, Justinian was unable to maintain a hold in Italy and even lost the provinces of North Africa. He did issue one of the most famous compilations of Roman law, in the code that bore his name. But his was the last effort to restore Mediterranean unity.

The Byzantine Empire did not control the whole of the northern Middle East, even in its greatest days. During the late Hellenistic periods and into the early centuries of the Roman Empire, a Parthian empire had flourished, centered in the Tigris-Euphrates region but spreading into northwestern India and to the borders of Rome's holdings along the Mediter­ranean. Parthian conquerors had taken over this por­tion of Alexander the Great's empire. They produced little culture of their own, being content to rely on Persian styles, but they long maintained an effective military and bureaucratic apparatus. Then, around 227 C.E., a Persian rebellion displaced the Parthians and created a new Sassanid empire that more directly revived the glories of the earlier Persian Empire. Per­sian religious ideas, including the religion of Zoroas­trianism, revived, although there were some conversions to Christianity as well. Persian styles in art and manufacturing experienced a brilliant resurgence.

Both the Parthian and the Sassanid empires served as bridges between the Mediterranean and the East, transmitting goods and some artistic and liter­ary styles between the Greek-speaking world and India and China. As the Roman Empire weakened, the Sassanids joined the attack, at times pushing into parts of southeastern Europe. Ultimately, however, the Byzantine Empire managed to create a stable frontier. The Sassanid Empire preserved the impor­tant strain of Persian culture in the eastern part of the Middle East, and this continued to influence this region as well as India.

Rome's fall, then, did not disrupt the northern Middle East-the original cradle of civilization-as much as might have been expected. Persian rule sim­ply continued in one part of the region, until the Arab onslaught, which itself did not destroy Persian culture. Byzantium maintained many of the traditions of the later Roman Empire, plus Christianity, in the western part of the Middle East and in Greece and other parts of southeastern Europe.

The second zone that devolved from Rome's fall consisted of North Africa and the southeastern shores of the Mediterranean. Here, a number of regional kingdoms briefly succeeded the empire. While Chris­tianity spread into the area-indeed, one of the great­est Christian theologians, Augustine, was a bishop in north Africa-its appearance was not so uniformly tri­umphant as in the Byzantine Empire or western Europe. Furthermore, separate beliefs and doctrines soon split north African Christianity from the larger branches, producing most notably the Coptic church in Egypt, which still survives as a Christian minority in that country.

Finally, there was the western part of the empire: Italy, Spain, and points north. Here is where Rome's fall not only shattered unities but also reduced the level of civilization itself. Crude, regional Germanic kingdoms developed in parts of Italy, France, and elsewhere. Cities shrank still further, and, especially outside Italy, trade almost disappeared. The only clearly vital forces in this region emanated not from Roman traditions but from the spread of Christian­ity. Even Christianity could not sustain a sophisticated culture of literature or art, however. In the mire of Rome's collapse, this part of the world forgot for sev­eral centuries what it had previously known.

In this western domain, what we call the fall of Rome was scarcely noted at the time, for decay had been progressing for so many decades that the failure to name a new emperor meant little. There was some comprehension of loss, some realization that the pre­sent could not rival the past. Thus, Christian scholars were soon apologizing for their inability to write well or to understand some of the doctrines of the earlier theologians like Augustine. This sense of inferiority to classical achievements would long mark the culture of this western zone, even as times improved.

Why Don’t Empires Last?

Johnson and Johnson. The Human Drama World History: From the Beginning to 500 C.E.

Many factors contributed to the strength and endurance of both the Roman and Han empires. But after several centuries of glory, both began a period of decline and political decentralization. Why did these great empires disintegrate? What caused the central governments to lose control, trade to diminish, and creativity in the arts and literature to fade! Historians often write about the fall of Rome. Starting in the Third century, authority and legitimacy of the Roman government began to weaken, and it could no longer control the provinces. By that time the Han Empire had lost much or its hold over its territory as well.

We can only speculate to what extent people living through these periods of decline realized what was happening. Most subjects within an empire, we have noted, are unaware of what is going on in the cap­ital. Local bureaucrats demand taxes and corvee and carry out the will of the central government as best as they can. Although the cen­tral government's vast network of control and communication is impressive, the daily lives of most people, especially those in distant provinces, are hardly affected. However, when people no longer feel secure and are not "left in peace” they begin to care a great deal about "who rules the land."

Why Did the Roman and Han Empires Disintegrate?

Chinese historians constructed the concept of a dynastic cycle to explain why the Shang, Zhou and Qin dynasties - as well as the Han - had lost the Mandate. They focused on the quality of leader­ship and suggested that T'ian (Heaven) blesses a moral leader and gives him and his family the Mandate to rule. The people follow his example, obey the rules, and share their labor and produce with the central authorities. But when the emperor does not set a good exam­ple, officials become corrupt and try to get rich rather than serve the people. Corrupt officials award bureaucrats who have not passed the examinations honestly positions in the government. These officials, no longer carefully schooled in the Confucian classics, care little about decorum and moral example and use their positions to build their own power base.

Although Chinese historians stressed the personal and moral aspects of the dynastic cycle, more recent world historians tend to emphasize economic and political reasons for the collapse of the Han and later dynasties. These historians cite peasant uprisings: and the idea that troops were used to put down these internal threats instead of defending the country. To pay the army, the government levied increased taxes, which led to more unrest and revolts. Additional sol­diers were needed, so the government forced poor farmers and others to fight, or hired nomads as soldiers, further angering the people and creating reluctant warriors. Using more soldiers again the people left the borders unguarded, inviting nomad invasions. Sometimes a series of natural disasters, such as floods, earthquakes, and droughts also helped bring down a dynasty. ­

Studies of the disintegration of the Roman Empire do not empha­size moral leadership or countrywide examinations, but many of the other reasons for the fragmentation of the Han are similar to reasons for the breakup of the Western Roman Empire. With increasing expenses and a shrinking tax base, both governments had to choose between raising taxes and reducing their armed forces social services. Population declines added to the growing fiscal crisis. Because of social unrest, trade was decreasing, lowering profits. Both governments experienced a major breakdown in their efficient administrative systems and tried to control corrupt officials and court intrigues. Finally, both faced threats from nomadic groups on their borders.

*Taxes*

The financial base in both empires eroded as peasants had difficulty paying taxes. Rates were high in part because many large estates in both areas were no longer taxed. Rich Roman land owners resisted paying taxes to a government that was no longer providing services, and often a landlords armed guards drove tax collectors away. In addition, much church land was not taxed. In China many of the large estates owned by scholar officials were tax free. When local official in both areas tried to force peasants to pay their taxes, some fled to local landlords for protection from tax collectors and marauding bandits, asking to live on their estates in exchange for working the land. Land owners welcomed these additional laborers, who worked for almost nothing. In Rome large estates attracted craftsmen who were having trouble finding markets for their goods. These artisans made tools and other implements, and the estates became increasingly self-sufficient.

Population

Changes in population added to the problem of collecting enough revenue. Beginning in 165 C.E., a series of plagues killed hundreds of thousands of people in the Roman Empire, drastically reduced the farming population. The lands often lay fallow, producing no taxes. In China population increases led to smaller family plots. Some peasants who were unable to pay the tax fled south to the Yangzi Valley.

*Trade*

Decline in trade was more of a problem in Rome than in Han China. Many Chinese communities were self-sufficient and most trade was carried out as part of the tributary system. Many within Roman territories, on the other hand, relied on trade, so when the legions spent less time repairing roads and bridges and guarding travelers, bandits and pirates attacked travelers and ship, leading to a sharp decline in trade. Less trade meant fewer taxes. In addition, the Roman government minted money not backed by silver, causing inflation.

The Bureaucracy

Administrative problems plagued both empires. The Roman government had trouble recruiting bureaucrats who could enforce laws and collect taxes. The later Han was unable to check the power of the large private estate owners. Many were able to bypass the exam system by buying position in the bureaucracy, which elevated their status.

*Succession*

Establishing an orderly system for selecting the new ruler had always been problematic for Roman citizens who wanted to hold on to the fiction that the Senate chose the new emperor. In reality would-be rulers usually fought for the throne, and soldiers, hoping for shared rewards, supported their generals. Once in power, the new emperor concentrated on winning the loyalty and protection of the Praetorian Guards and then the entire army. Even with this loyalty, however, being emperor became a dangerous job – between 235 and 284 C.E. 25 out of 26 emperors died violent deaths.

Emperor Diocletian, who ruled as an absolute monarch, tried to stem the political and economic decline by introducing reforms that improved tax collection, froze prices, and required sons to perform the same jobs as their fathers. To govern more effectively, he divided the empire in half, making two separate administrative units. He ruled the western half from Rome and a trusted colleague ruled the eastern half. After Constantinople became the capital of the eastern half of the empire, the stronger emperors ruled from that city, and trade, manufacturing, and cultural creativity were concentrated in the east, further weakening the western half.

*Court Intrigues*

Unlike Rome, in Han China the constant intrigues of corrupt officials, especially those close to the emperor created instability. Battles over succession took place in halls and bedrooms inside the palace not on streets or battle fields. Isolated from the outside world, the ruler relied on competing court officials to find out what was going on. He also had to balance the desires of his consorts, who often sought power for their own sons and families. In additions eunuchs who guarded the women’s quarters, were often involved in palace intrigues.

Emperor Han Huandi increased the power of the court eunuchs, even allowing them to kill members of his consort’s families. Soon the eunuchs were telling the emperor whom to reward with titles or honors, whom to be sent to torture or be killed and who should become scholar officials. They made sure that their relatives and friends got positions of power. Others had to bribe the eunuchs. To counter the eunuchs’’ power, the scholars formed their own association. Unfortunately, the next emperor did not trust the scholars and ordered them executed.

In the countryside, feeling desperate, many people rallied around a leader of a Taoist sect who seemed to have magical powers. In 184 C.E. his group and another secret society rebelled against the Han. The emperor was killed, the palace was destroyed, and chaos followed as nomads sacked the city. By 220 the Han had lost the Mandate.

What Role did Christianity and Buddhism Play?

In The declining years of the empires, an increasing number of people sought solace. Some, thinking it was useless to look for answers, simply tried to enjoy the physical pleasure of life. Many others began to investigate new sources of meanings for their insecure lives. Many Romans concentrated on enjoying luxury goods, dressing well, and showing off their wealth at lavish parties. Many women had fewer children, and parents spent less time teaching them the values of citizenship and public service. Roman religion was increasingly unable to satisfy the yearning for meaning. During the insecurity of the later Roman Empire, many turned to Christianity.

It is not clear how much the spread of Christianity contributed to the breakup off the Western Roman Empire. As Christianity spread, Roman rulers tried unsuccessfully to eliminate it. Emperor Diocletian declared himself the supreme god, but his major campaign to wipe out Christianity, despite many deaths and cruel punishments, failed.

After Diocletian, Constantine, a convert to Christianity believed that God had helped him win power. In 313 Constantine issued the Edict of Milan, which made Christianity legal throughout the empire. During his reign Constantine made Sunday a holiday, gave tax free land to Christians on which they began to build churches, and exempted the clergy and many Christians from paying taxes. By the time Constantine died, Christianity not only had become the major religious faith of Rome, but was spreading far beyond the Roman borders to Nubia, India and Northwest Eurasia.

In 380 Emperor Theodosius made Christianity the official religion of the Empire. He ordered the statues of other gods destroys and made it an act of treason to practice any other religion. Many, including Jews, were persecuted. More and more people became Christians and many began to put their faith in the “city of God,” not in Rome.

By contrast Buddhism was not a factor in the decline of the Han. Initially the religion was confined mainly to traders and other outsiders. Because Taoism offered a degree of mysticism, and Confucianism, which had become the official ideology of China, provided the foundation for both private and public life, other philosophies had little appeal. Buddhism was far more popular among the nomadic groups who invaded and came to control some of the territory formally under Han control, and many Chinese turned to Buddhism to answer the insecurities of life following the disintegration of the Han.

The Second Great Movement of Nomadic Groups

About 2000 years after the first significant migration of Indo-European and Semitic nomads in 1700 B.C.E., nomadic groups from the Asian steppes launched a second wave of migration. These invasions threatened the vary survival of the empires and effected all of Eurasia.

The stirrup played an important role in this influx of nomadic invasion and helped bring about the end of the Western Roman Empire. This important new technology allowed the rider to stand in the saddle and made the cavalry devastatingly effective. It may have first developed in the steppes or in India. By 300 C.E. the Chinese were casting iron stirrups. By connecting various defensive walls and building additional signal towers, the Qin had discouraged nomads from trying to invade China. When the Han Empire was strong, it could use its tribute arrangement to keep the Xiongnu and other nomadic groups from invading. When the later Han could no longer maintain the system, the Xiongnu had to find other ways to get the goods they needed. They increased their raids inside the walls and also moved farther west in large numbers.

As the Xiongnu went west they put pressure on other pastoral groups, causing some, including the Kushans, to move into northern India. These domino-like pressures also helped trigger the movement of nomadic and semi-nomadic German peoples into territories under Roman Hegemony.

Sometime before the start of the first millennium B.C.E. Germanic grouped began to move out of the steppes of central Asia and into the sparsely settled lands of the west. The “Germani,” as the Romans called these nomadic bands, split into two major bands: the Teutons and the Goths.

Although these groups were not skilled farmers, they had superior military technology and an impressive fighting spirit; by the second century B.C.E. they were threatening Roman forces. During Julius Caesar’s rule some tried to conquer eastern Gaul, but Roman legions stopped them. Many settled down along the Rhine and Danube Rivers. For decades there were many relatively peaceful interchanges with the Romans. Some even joined the legions, and many who were captured in battle worked as slaves in the Empire.

What About the Huns?

But the Xiongnu helped upset this balance. As increasing numbers moved further west in the 4th century C.E., both Germanic groups and Romans tried to stop the advance of these people they call the Huns. Both considered the Huns violent savage men who covered vast distances with amazing speed, riding on their ponies.

With stirrups Hun warriors could stand erect astride their galloping horses, making it possible to shoot arrows with deadly accuracy. Hun attacks made Germanic groups step up their pressure along the border of the Roman Empire. When the Huns crossed the Volga River in 372, the Ostrogoths begged permission from Rome to cross into its territory for protection. Rome allowed them to cross the Danube, but when the Ostrogoths did not get the land and food they believed the Romans had promised, they began to pillage. In 378 the Ostrogoths defeated several Roman legions. Some Roman peasants welcomed the Germanic peoples as deliverers from Roman taxation and oppression, and a buffer against the Huns.

By the 5th century the center of the Hun confederacy was in present-day Hungary. Under its leader, Attila, they made repeated assaults against Roman territory, even attacking Gaul. After Attila’s death, the Huns continued their aggression, but by the 6th century they disappear from historical record.

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In 410 a Visigoth general sacked Rome, and Roman officials bought peace by granting him control of southern Gaul and Spain. By 425 German chieftains had set up many small kingdoms within the territory that had been part of the Empire. In 476 Odoacer, a German chief, captured Roma and made himself king of Italy, the date many historians use as the official end of the Western Roman Empire.

Legacies in Roman and Han Territories

The decline of the Han and Roman Empires resulted in different legacies. One of the most striking differences resulted from the contrasting attitudes toward centralized authority and the legitimacy of the leader. Given the central role of the Chinese family and the importance of the concept of Emperorship, later Chinese leaders would be able to draw upon a strong tradition of centralized control as they sought to build a new dynastic order. However, in the aftermath of Rome, whose subjects looked to law and citizenship more than to family, and where the ruler’s legitimacy had often been tenuous, political leaders would have to struggle to establish any kind of lasting centralized control.

The breakup of these empires also had a profound effect on cross-cultural contacts. The vibrant trade across the hemisphere significantly declined, generally lowering the standard of living, and many of the large cities that had bee the centers of culture, artistic creation, and commerce faded. In part because of its reliance on trade, major citied in the declining Roman Empire fared far worse than those in areas that had been under the Han.

While the Eastern Roman Empire continued to flourish, large, relatively self-sufficient landed estates sprang up not only on the Italian peninsula but also in areas where Germanic groups settles. It would be a long time before these areas were able to develop the complex urban civilization and new forms of political legitimacy. In China, on the other hand, although the central government collapsed and nomads captured and destroy the Han capital Loyang, many people, including those who fled south, were able to retain their cultural traditions. They were able to keep alive the rich scientific, philosophic, technological, and literary traditions of the civilization.