

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

## Expansion and Integration

- Common themes for the classical civilization involve **territorial expansion** and related **efforts to integrate the new territories**.
- China united through **centralization**, India united through **religious values**, and the Mediterranean world united through **cultural achievements**.
- Integration required **territorial and social cohesion**. Each civilization valued social distinctions.

## Beyond the Classical Civilizations

- Outside the centers of civilization important developments occurred. Significant civilizations operated in **the Americas** (the Olmecs, Maya, and Incas) and also in **Africa** (Kush, Axum, and Ethiopia).
- Agriculture and other developments spread across **northern Europe** and **northern Asia**, where semi-civilized peoples developed extensive contacts with older civilizations.
- **Nomadic societies** played a vital role, particularly in central Asia, in linking and occasionally disrupting classical civilizations. Important popular migrations across Eurasia led to the rise of new cultures.

## Decline in China and India

- A combination of **internal weakness** and **nomadic invasions** led to important changes, first in China, and then in India.
- The central Asian nomadic **Huns** attacked all three classical civilizations.
- About 100 C.E., the Han dynasty began a serious decline. Weakened central government, social unrest led by overtaxed peasants, and epidemics were the most prominent sources of decline, combining 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**.
- 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.

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- 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 particularly complex.** Although its causes have been much debated, certain issues may have contributed: population declined, leadership faltered, the economy flagged, tax collection became more difficult, a series of plagues swept the empire, and a sense of despondency pervaded much of the citizenry.
- When **Germanic tribes** invaded in the 400s, there was little power or will to resist.
- Developments also varied between the eastern and western portions of the Empire, as the Mediterranean world fell apart. The eastern, or **Byzantine Empire**, continued for another 1,000 years after the western empire collapsed.

### The New Religious Map

- The period of classical decline saw the **rapid expansion** of Buddhism and Christianity. This religious change had wider cultural, social, and political implications.
- Later, Islam **appeared, and spread**, following the previous spread of Hinduism across south and southeast Asia.

### The World Around 500 C.E.

- Developments around 500 C.E. produced **three major themes** for world history in subsequent periods.
- First, there was a **collapse** of classical civilizations. Societies across Eurasia faced the task of reviving or reworking their key institutions and values after decline and invasion.
- Second, **new religions arose and older ones spread.** These would form the basis of future civilizations.
- Finally, new developments across the globe, whether through indigenous developments or contacts with older centers led to **the rise of new civilizations.**

### Multiple-Choice Questions

1. The two American centers of civilization included central Mexico and the  
(A) Mississippi area.  
(B) Yucatan peninsula.  
(C) American southwest (Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah).  
(D) Andean river valleys and plateaus of Ecuador and Peru.  
(E) Rio Plata and Parana river systems of Argentina.
2. The core or mother civilization for other civilizations in Mesoamerica was the  
(A) Olmecs.  
(B) Toltecs.  
(C) Aztecs.  
(D) Mayas.  
(E) Chavin peoples.
3. In Ethiopia, trade and contacts  
(A) insulated the culture from African influences.

- (B) led to the kingdom's conversion to Christianity.
- (C) brought the state in contact with Bantu peoples.
- (D) led to its conquest by Arabs.
- (E) introduced Buddhism and Hinduism from India.
4. Shinto
- (A) is an extremely developed form of animistic nature worship.
- (B) arrived in Japan with the first official embassy from China.
- (C) is a branch of Buddhism.
- (D) is a warrior's religion and glorifies the military way of life.
- (E) was pivotal in the transmission of Chinese culture to Japan.
5. At the end of the Classical Age
- (A) belief systems failed to survive the collapse of classical civilizations.
- (B) only the Mediterranean Greco-Roman civilization experienced upheavals.
- (C) the Huns (Hsiung-Nu) destroyed all great Eurasian classical civilizations.
- (D) there was a religious upsurge as a result of social and economic problems.
- (E) trade ceased to be important.
6. As the Han Empire collapsed
- (A) Daoists established political control of the various Chinese states.
- (B) nomads swept into China replacing the Han with a "barbarian" dynasty.
- (C) landowners and warlords dominated the successor governments.
- (D) Christianity was introduced to China and began to spread.
- (E) internal warfare subsided.
7. In India during the period after the Guptan collapse,
- (A) Buddhism reasserted its influence, replacing Hinduism.
- (B) the caste system lost its influence.
- (C) Hinduism maintained cultural cohesion when the central state collapsed.
- (D) invaders rarely assimilated into Hindu culture.
- (E) trade and commercial activities collapsed.
8. Christianity differed from classic Mediterranean culture in all of these ways EXCEPT:
- (A) it offered salvation to the poor and slaves.
- (B) it adapted classical Roman governmental institutions to organize the church.
- (C) it emphasized eternal salvation instead of the pursuits of the secular world.
- (D) it granted equal importance to the souls of men and women.
- (E) it provided a common culture to unify all classes.
9. All of these contributed to the decline and fall of Rome EXCEPT:
- (A) the spread of Christianity.
- (B) nomadic invasions.
- (C) the collapse of effective government.
- (D) plagues which decimated populations.
- (E) economic disruptions.
10. The fall of the Roman Empire
- (A) left behind a common culture unifying the Mediterranean basin.
- (B) left the Persian Empire in control of the eastern Mediterranean.
- (C) divided Christianity into Catholic and Orthodox (Greek) sects.
- (D) had little effect on artistic and cultural traditions.
- (E) divided the Mediterranean into three different cultural zones.

### ***Free-Response Question***

*Compare and contrast the collapses of the Roman Empire and Han China.*

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## ANSWERS AND EXPLANATIONS

### *Multiple-Choice Questions*

- **1. (D) is correct.** The Andes region of Ecuador and Peru formed the cradle of Inca civilization.
- **2. (A) is correct.** Historians believe that the Olmecs influenced later cultures in Central America, such as the Maya.
- **3. (B) is correct.** Greek-speaking merchants brought Christianity to Ethiopia by the 4th century C.E.
- **4. (A) is correct.** Shintoism is a relatively simple ancient Japanese religion focused on worship of political leaders and the spirits of nature, including the all-important god of rice.
- **5. (D) is correct.** Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity (and later Islam) increased their influence considerably during the turmoil at the end of the classical age.
- **6. (C) is correct.** As the central government's control diminished, local landlords ruled as they pleased; later, these regional leaders vied for power in the vacuum the Han left behind.
- **7. (C) is correct.** Hinduism continued to serve as a cohesive force despite the decline of the Guptas. In particular, many Indians began to worship Devi, a mother goddess.
- **8. (B) is correct.** Christianity DID borrow from Roman models to organize itself.
- **9. (A) is correct.** The Roman Empire was in decline long before Christianity became an officially sanctioned religion.
- **10. (E) is correct.** The three zones were the Eastern, or Byzantine zone; north Africa and the southeastern Mediterranean; and western Europe.

### *Free-Response Essay Sample Response*

*Compare and contrast the collapses of the Roman Empire and Han China.*

Though several similarities exist, the collapse of Rome was far more severe and complex than the fall of Han China. Both Rome and the Han fell after a period of decline in which the central government was less and less able to control corrupt bureaucrats and local leaders, and to protect against outside invaders and disease. However, China revived itself while Rome disappeared forever. The loss of morale among Roman elites and the overall decline of culture foreshadowed this total collapse. Unlike the Han Dynasty, when Rome fell, it divided its former empire into three distinct realms, each of which would form a separate civilization.