

Decline in China and 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. As in 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.

Why Don't Empires Last?

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 destroyed 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.

What caused the Fall of the Roman Empire?

Document A: Textbook

The basic trouble was the very few inhabitants of the empire believed that the old civilization was worth saving... the overwhelming majority of the population had been systematically excluded from political responsibilities. They could not organize to protect themselves; they could not serve in the army... Their economic plight was hopeless. Most of them were serfs bound to the soil, and the small urban groups saw their cities slipping into uninterrupted decline.

Source: The Course of Civilization by Strayer, Gatzke & Harbison (1961)

Document B: Excerpt Gibbon

The decline of Rome was the natural and inevitable effect of immoderate greatness (large size) ... the introduction of Christianity, had some influence on the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. The clergy successfully preached the doctrine of patience; the active virtues of society were discouraged; and the last remains of military spirit were buried in the cloister; a large portion of public & private wealth was consecrated to the...demands of charity and devotion...

Source: The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire by Edward Gibbon.

Document C: Excerpt Muller

First the economic factor ... While the empire was expanding, its prosperity was fed by plundered wealth and by new markets in the semi-barbaric provinces. When the empire ceased to expand, however, however, economic progress soon ceased... The abundance of slaves led to growth of the *latifundia*, the great estates... came to dominate agriculture and ruin the free *coloni* (farmers) who drifted to the cities, to add to the unemployment there. The abundance of slaved kept wages low.

Source: Uses of the Past by Herbert J. Muller

Document D: Montanelli

Rome, like all great empires, was not overthrown by external enemies but undermined by internal decay... The military crisis was the result of... shortage of children. (Consequently) foreigners poured into the...Roman army [was] composed entirely of Germans

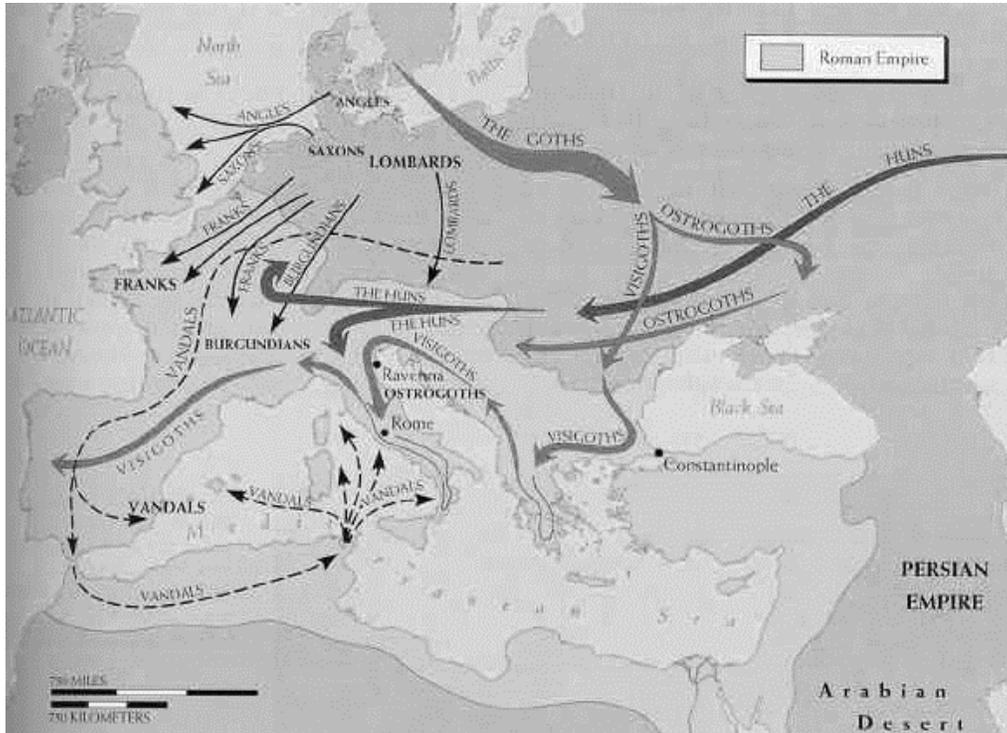
Source: Romans without Laurels by Indro Montanelli

Document E: Haskell

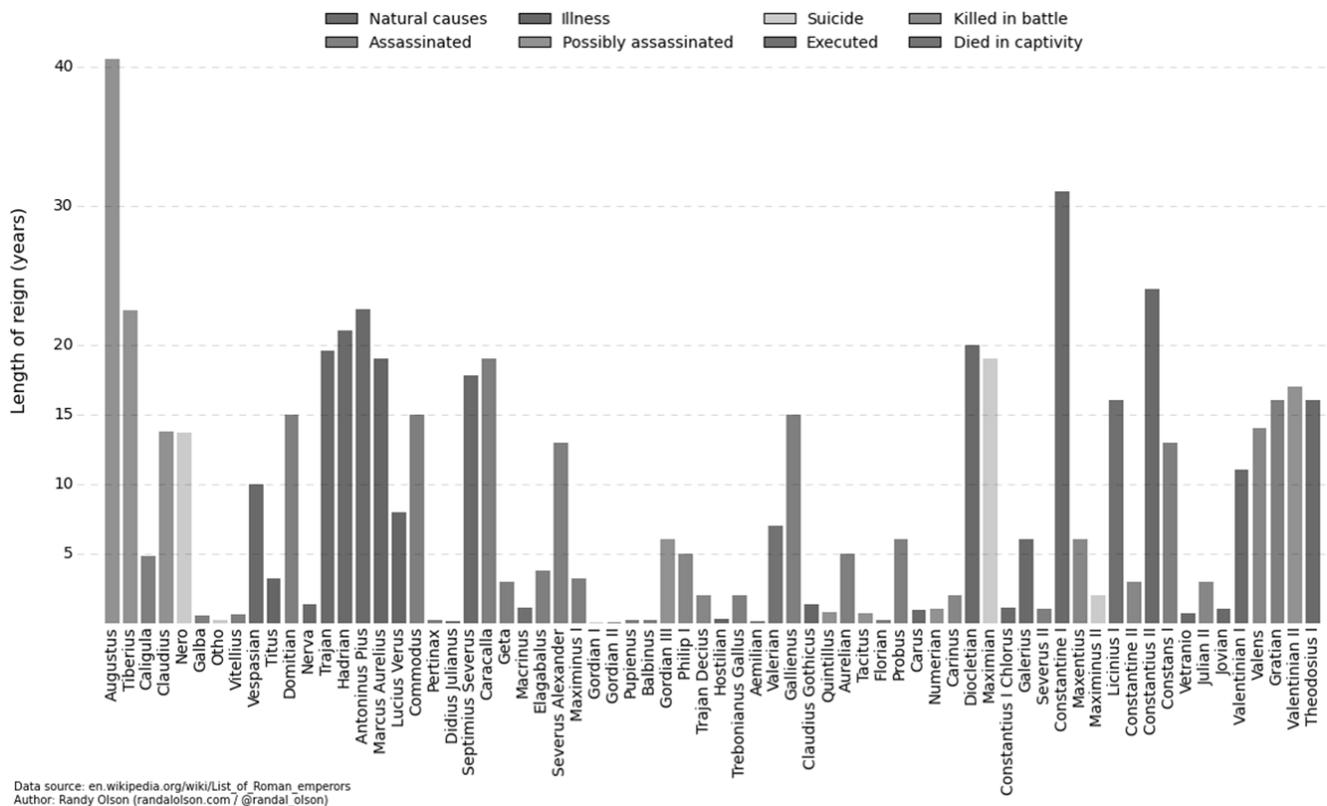
... Part of the money went into ... the maintenance of the army and of the vast bureaucracy required by a centralized government...the expense led to strangling taxation... the Heart was taken out of enterprising men... tenants fled from their farms and businessmen and workmen from their occupations. Private enterprise was crushed & the state was forced to take over many kinds of businesses to keep the machine running. People learned to expect something for nothing. The old Roman virtues of self-reliance & initiative were lost in that part of the population on welfare... The central government undertook such far-reaching responsibility in affairs that the fiber of the citizens weakened.

Source: The New deal in Old Rome by Henry Haskell

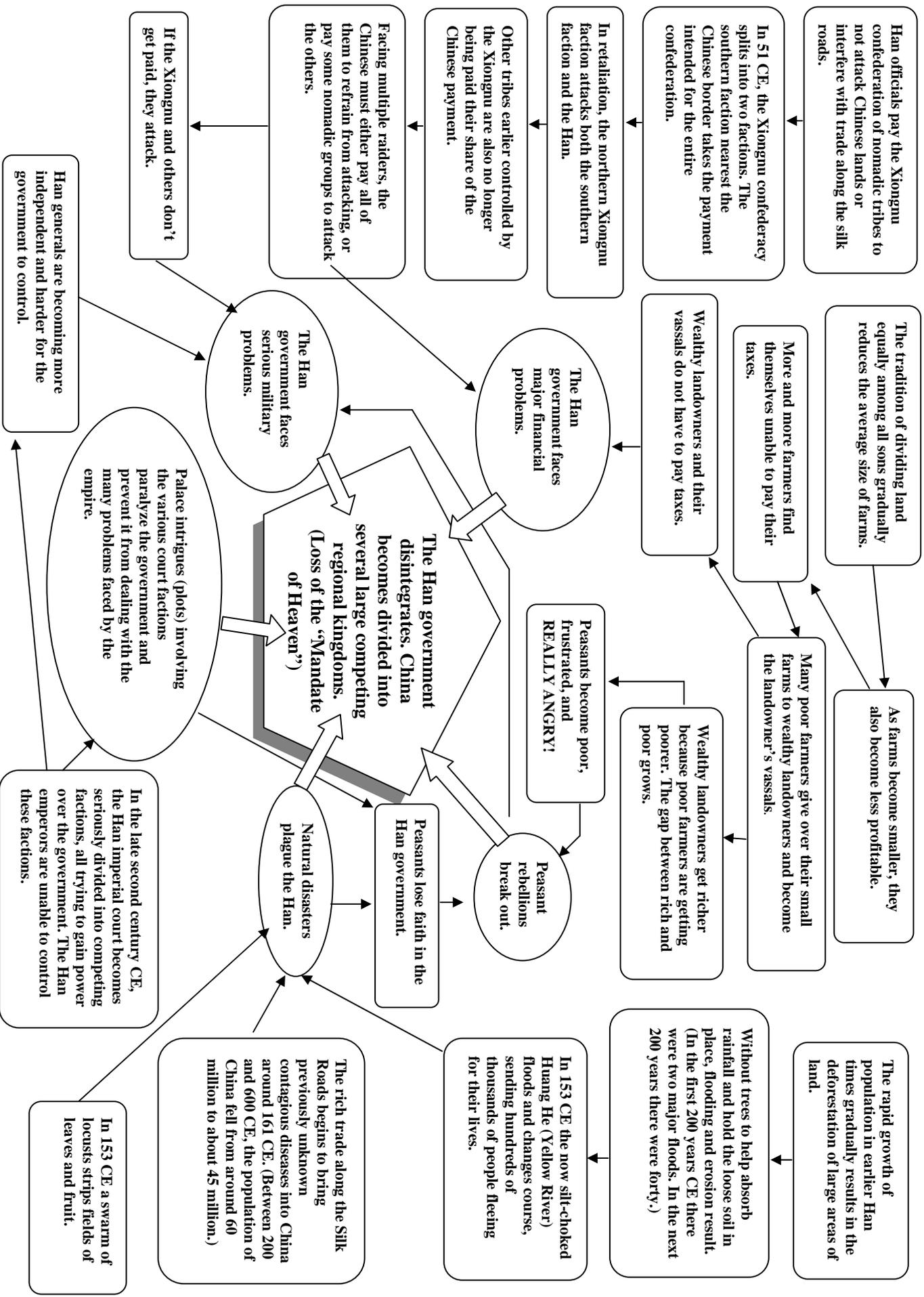
Document F: Map of “Barbarian” Invasions of Rome before 500



Document G: The Reigns and Deaths of the Emperors 27 BC – 395 BCE



Data source: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Roman_emperors
 Author: Randy Olson (randalolson.com / @randal_olson)



Lesson 4

Student Handout 4.2—The Hephthalites (The Who?)

Beyond the settled civilizations of Eurasia lived the little-known pastoral nomads of the Central Asian steppes. A great migration southward of one of these groups, known variously as the Hephthalites, Hunas, or White Huns, had a devastating effect on India. Beginning in the fifth century CE, wave after wave of these invaders terrorized settled peoples in lands ranging from the Tigris and Euphrates to the Ganges river valleys.

The origin of the Hephthalites is something of a mystery. The earliest information about them comes from Chinese chronicles. These accounts claim that the Hephthalites were originally a tribe of the great Yue-Chi, who lived north of the Great Wall. In the sixth century, the Roman historian Procopius wrote that the Hephthalites were "of the stock of the Huns in fact as well as in name; however they do not mingle with any of the Huns known to us. . . . They are the only ones among the Huns who have white bodies and countenances which are not ugly." Because Procopius described them as having Caucasian features, some historians believe that the Hephthalites may have been related to the Persians. Others think that they may have been distantly related to the Xiongnu, a pastoral people who lived in Mongolia and regularly harassed the Chinese.

Like other pastoral nomads of the Central Asian steppes, the Hephthalites had a markedly different way of life from that of the settled peoples with whom they came in contact. Moving frequently in search of game, water, and fresh grazing land for their animals, they practically lived on horseback. Portable round tents called yurts were their homes. Their clothing was made of felt or animal skins and included leather boots and fur caps. Hephthalite men were distinguished by their shaved heads, except for two braided pigtailed behind their ears and a patch of hair on top. Many men also wore long wooden earrings.

According to two Chinese pilgrims, Sung Yun and Hui Sheng, who visited them in 520 CE: "The Hephthalites have no cities, but roam freely and live in tents. They do not live in towns; their seat of government is a moving camp. They move in search of water and pasture, journeying in summer to cool places and in winter to warmer ones. . . . They have no belief in the Buddhist law and they serve a great number of divinities." In the mid-fifth century, the Hephthalites expanded westward, probably because another nomadic group was pressing them from the east. As early as 440, their armies took Samarkand and Bactria (today Uzbekistan).

After the death of the Gupta ruler Skandagupta in 470, the Hephthalites entered India destroying towns and villages along the Ganges River. Pataliputra, The Gupta capital, was reduced in population to the size of a village. They persecuted Buddhists and burned their monasteries. Their conquest was accomplished with such brutality that the Gupta dynasty was completely extinguished. The Guptas were not the only Hephthalite victims. In 484, the Hephthalites struck westward into Persia, invading the Sassanian empire. They destroyed agricultural lands and killed the Sassanid king before withdrawing to the east once more.

Toramana and Mihirakula, the most famous of the Hephthalite kings, ruled India in the first half of the 6th century. Toromana led the successful invasion of India. His son, Mihirakula, succeeded him in about 515. In 520, the Chinese ambassador Song-yun described this king as cruel, vindictive, and barbarous, not believing in the law of Buddha, having 700 war-elephants, and living with his troops on the frontier. About ten years later the Greek Cosmas of Alexandria described Mihirakula as a ruler who exacted an oppressive tribute from subject peoples with the help of a large army of cavalry and war elephants. Mihirakula's reputation was so fierce that even today, oral accounts in India still include stories of him amusing himself by rolling elephants down a precipice and watching their agonies.

The cruelty of Mihirakula's rule caused a number of Indian princes to form a confederation and revolt against him about 528. He was not killed in this rebellion, however, but fled to Kashmir, where a few years later he seized the throne and then started attacking neighboring kingdoms. He died in about 540.

Between 557 and 561, the Sassanid king opened contacts with a Turkic nomadic group who had appeared from Inner Eurasia. Seeking revenge for the Hephthalite murder of his grandfather, who had been king before him, he formed an alliance with the Turkic leader. This chief had the largest and most powerful army in the region; it was he who finally conquered the Hephthalites and killed their king. By 565, only a small number of Hephthalites remained in India. Their decline marked a turning point in the story of Inner Eurasia. For the allies of the Persian king were Turks, a new power that would dominate the steppes for next few centuries.