

WHAT CAUSES CIVILIZATIONS TO LOSE VIGOR AND DECLINE?

Toward the end of the Classical Era in World History (500 AD) three classical empires collapsed. What were the reasons for these collapses and what were the consequences?

Han Empire (fell 220 AD)

Signs of Decline

Imperial overreach- couldn't control all lands conquered

Corruption and power struggles at court – eunuchs, emperors' wives and concubines, and scholar aristocrats vied for power

Large landlords and local warriors gained power as dynasty lost power

Peasants oppressed by higher land rents and more taxes

Consequences of Decline

Secret societies (Yellow Turbans- Taoists) revolted

Regional lords and military commanders fought for power as dynasty declined

Invasions by foreigners

China fragmented and was ruled by local landlords for 350 years

Disarray, chaos, and uncertainty caused people to seek solace in Buddhism

Gupta Empire (fell 540 AD)

Signs of Decline

Weak central control of empire as local rajas revolted and fought among themselves

Hun invasion and inability to defend themselves

Huns, strong and vigorous people, established kingdoms

Consequences of Decline

Hun invasions led to more invasions by Muslims in 700's AD.

Muslim traders took control of Indian Ocean trade and reduced India's commercial strength

Revival of Hinduism with new gods and goddesses, rituals, and emphasis on caste. People sought comfort in renewing spiritual traditions

Roman Empire (476AD)

Signs of Decline

Imperial overreach. Legions overextended
Rulers morally corrupt, self-indulgent, not interested in common good
Cultural life decayed
Lower classes unemployed. Lived off bread and circuses, no stake in system

Foreign trade imbalance. Lack of economic productivity

Consequences

Foreign invasions by vigorous people who took over completely

Turmoil and disarray caused people to seek solace in Christianity and Islam

We can learn from the fall of these empires by asking questions:

1. How great a role did moral decline play in the collapse of these classical empires?
2. Is it inevitable that empires and dynasties will eventually fall just as living beings have a life span and eventually decay and die? At the civilization level this means government officials focus on protecting their positions rather than seeking new ways of doing things; that upper classes become soft and selfish; and that territories expand farther than a society can control, leaving supply routes and defenses overextended and vulnerable to attack. Overextension also reduces internal economic vitality through sheer costliness.
3. What can we learn from the interplay between forces of decline and weakness and forces of vigor and strength in history?
4. Rather than say that these empires died, should we say they declined, but regrouped with new combinations of tradition and innovation?
5. How can you explain peoples' tendency to regroup by turning to spirituality?
6. What role does human agency play in the decline of empires and dynasties?