

Classical civilizations (approximately 1000 BCE to 600 CE) - These civilizations were generally much larger than the earlier ones, and their political economic, cultural, and military organizations usually were more complex. All traded extensively with others, and conquered many new territories. Classical civilizations include Zhou and Han China, the Roman Empire, and the Gupta Empire in India.

THE CLASSICAL CIVILIZATIONS (1000 BCE - 600 CE)

The period after the decline of river valley civilizations (about 1000 BCE - 600 CE) is often called the classical age. During this era world history was shaped by the rise of several large civilizations that grew from areas where the earlier civilizations thrived. The classical civilizations differ from any previous ones in these ways:

1. They kept better and more recent records, so historical information about them is much more abundant. We know more about not just their wars and their leaders, but also about how ordinary people lived.
2. The classical societies provide many direct links to today's world, so that we may refer to them as root civilizations, or ones that modern societies have grown from.
3. Classical civilizations were expansionist, deliberately conquering lands around them to create large empires. As a result, they were much larger in land space and population than the river civilizations were.

Three areas where civilizations proved to be very durable were

- The Mediterranean - Two great classical civilizations grew up around this area: the Greeks and the Romans.
- China - The classical era began with the Zhou Empire and continued through the Han Dynasty.
- India - Although political unity was difficult for India, the Mauryan and Gupta Empire emerged during the classical era.

COMMON FEATURES OF CLASSICAL CIVILIZATIONS

The three areas of classical civilizations developed their own beliefs, lifestyles, political institutions, and social structures. However, there were important similarities among them:

1. Patriarchal family structures - Like the river valley civilizations that preceded them, the classical civilization valued male authority within families, as well as in most other areas of life.
2. Agricultural-based economies - Despite more sophisticated and complex job specialization, the most common occupation in all areas was farming.
3. Complex governments - Because they were so large, these three civilizations had to invent new ways to keep their lands together politically. Their governments were large and complex, although they each had unique ways of governing.
4. Expanding trade base - Their economic systems were complex. Although they generally operated independently, trade routes connected them by both land and sea.

GLOBAL TRADE AND CONTACT

During the classical era the major civilizations were not entirely isolated from one another. Migrations continued, and trade increased, diffusing technologies, ideas, and goods from civilization centers to more parts of the world. However, the process was slow. Chinese inventions such as paper had not yet reached societies outside East Asia by the end of the classical era. The Western Hemisphere was not yet in contact with the Eastern Hemisphere. Nevertheless, a great deal of cultural diffusion did take place, and larger areas of the world were in contact with one another than in previous eras.

One very important example of cultural diffusion was Hellenization, or the deliberate spread of Greek culture. The most important agent for this important change was Alexander the Great, who conquered Egypt, the Middle East, and the large empire of Persia that spread eastward all the way to the Indus River Valley. Alexander was Macedonian, but he controlled Greece and was a big fan of Greek culture. His conquests meant that Greek architecture, philosophy, science, sculpture, and values diffused to large areas of the world and greatly increased the importance of Classical Greece as a root culture.

Trade routes that linked the classical civilizations include:

- **The Silk Road** - This overland route extended from western China, across Central Asia, and finally to the Mediterranean area. Chinese silk was the most desired commodity, but the Chinese were willing to trade it for other goods, particularly for horses from Central Asia. There was no single route, but it consisted of a series of passages with common stops along the way. Major trade towns appeared along the way where goods were exchanged. No single merchant traveled the entire length of the road, but some products (particularly silk) did make it from one end to the other.
- **The Indian Ocean Trade** - This important set of water routes became even more important in later eras, but the Indian Ocean Trade was actively in place during the classical era. The trade had three legs: one connected eastern Africa and the Middle East with India; another connected India to Southeast Asia; and the final one linked Southeast Asia to the Chinese port of Canton.
- **Saharan Trade** - This route connected people that lived south of the Sahara to the Mediterranean and the Middle East. The Berbers, nomads who traversed the desert, were the most important agents of trade. They carried goods in camel caravans, with Cairo at the mouth of the Nile River as the most important destination. There they connected to other trade routes, so that Cairo became a major trade center that linked many civilizations together.
- **Sub-Saharan Trade** - This trade was probably inspired by the Bantu migration, and by the end of the classical era people south of the Sahara were connect to people in the eastern and southern parts of Africa. This trade connected to the Indian Ocean trade along the eastern coast of Africa, which in turn connected the people of sub-Saharan Africa to trade centers in Cairo and India.

TRADE DURING THE CLASSICAL ERA (1000 BCE to 600 CE)

Route	Description	What traded?	Who participated?	Cultural diffusion
Silk Road	Overland from western China to the Mediterranean Trade made possible by development of a camel hybrid capable of long dry trips	From west to east - horses, alfalfa, grapes, melons, walnuts From east to west - silk, peaches, apricots, spices, pottery, paper	Chinese, Indians, Parthians, central Asians, Romans Primary agents of trade - central Asian nomads	Chariot warfare, the stirrup, music, diversity of populations, Buddhism and Christianity, wealth and prosperity (particularly important for central Asian nomads)
Indian Ocean Trade	By water from Canton in China to Southeast Asia to India to eastern Africa and the Middle East; monsoon-controlled	Pigments, pearls, spices, bananas and other tropical fruits	Chinese, Indians, Malays, Persians, Arabs, people on Africa's east coast	Lateen sail (flattened triangular shape) permitted sailing far from coast Created a trading class with mixture of cultures, ties to homeland broken
Saharan Trade	Points in western Africa south of the Sahara to the Mediterranean; Cairo most important destination Camel caravans	Salt from Sahara to points south and west Gold from western Africa Wheat and olives from Italy Roman manufactured goods to western Africa	Western Africans, people of the Mediterranean Berbers most important agents of trade	Technology of the camel saddle - important because it allowed domestication and use of the camel for trade
Sub-Saharan Trade	Connected Africans south and east of the Sahara to one another; connected in the east to other trade routes	Agricultural products, iron weapons	Diverse peoples in sub-Saharan Africa	Bantu language, "Africanity"

THE LATE CLASSICAL ERA: THE FALL OF EMPIRES (200 TO 600 CE)

Recall that all of the river-valley civilization areas experienced significant decline and/or conquest in the time period around 1200 BCE. A similar thing happened to the classical civilizations between about 200 and 600 CE, and because the empires were larger and more connected, their fall had an even more significant impact on the course of world history. Han China was the first to fall (around 220 CE), then the Western Roman Empire (476 CE), and finally the Gupta in 550 CE.

SIMILARITIES

Several common factors caused all three empires to fall:

- Attacks from the Huns - The Huns were a nomadic people of Asia that began to migrate south and west during this time period. Their migration was probably caused by drought and lack of pasture, and the invention and use of the stirrup facilitated their attacks on all three established civilizations.
- Deterioration of political institutions - All three empires were riddled by political corruption during their latter days, and all three suffered under weak-willed rulers. Moral decay also characterized the years prior to their respective falls.
- Protection/maintenance of borders - All empires found that their borders had grown so large that their military had trouble guarding them. A primary example is the failure of the Great Wall to keep the Huns out of China. The Huns generally just went around it.
- Diseases that followed the trade routes - Plagues and epidemics may have killed off as much as half of the population of each empire.

DIFFERENCES

Even though the empires shared common reasons for their declines, some significant differences also may be seen.

- The Gupta's dependence on alliances with regional princes broke down, exhibiting the tendency toward political fragmentation on the Indian subcontinent.
- Rome's empire lasted much longer than did either of the other two. The Roman Empire also split in two, and the eastern half endured for another 1000 years after the west fell.
- The fall of empire affected the three areas in different ways. The fall of the Gupta probably had the least impact, partly because political unity wasn't the rule anyway, and partly because the traditions of Hinduism and the caste system (the glue that held the area together) continued on after the empire fell. The fall of the Han Dynasty was problematic for China because strong centralized government was in place, and social disorder resulted from the loss of authority. However, dynastic cycles that followed the dictates of the Mandate of Heaven were well defined in China, and the Confucian traditions continued to give coherence to Chinese society. The most devastating fall of all occurred in Rome. Roman civilization depended almost exclusively on the ability of the government and the military to control territory. Even though Christianity emerged as a major religion, it appeared so late in the life of the empire that it provided little to unify people as Romans after the empire fell. Instead, the areas of the empire fragmented into small parts and developed unique characteristics, and the Western Roman Empire never united again.

COMMON CONSEQUENCES

The fall of the three empires had some important consequences that represent major turning points in world history:

- Trade was disrupted but survived, keeping intact the trend toward increased long-distance contact. Trade on the Indian Ocean even increased as conflict and decline of political authority affected overland trade.
- The importance of religion increased as political authority decreased. In the west religion, particularly Christianity, was left to slowly develop authority in many areas of people's lives. Buddhism also spread quickly into China, presenting itself as competition to Confucian traditions.
- Political disunity in the Middle East forged the way for the appearance of a new religion in the 7th century.

By 600 CE Islam was in the wings waiting to make its entrance onto the world stage.

BELIEF SYSTEMS

Belief systems include both religions and philosophies that help to explain basic questions of human existence, such as "Where did we come from?" Or "What happens after death?" or "What is the nature of human relationships or interactions?" Many major beliefs systems that influence the modern world began during the Foundations Era (8000 BCE to 600 CE).

Religion was extremely important to the river-valley civilizations, and most areas of life revolved around pleasing the gods. Monotheism was first introduced about 2000 BCE by Israelites, but monotheism did not grow substantially till much later. Each of the classical civilizations had very different belief systems that partially account for the very different directions that the three areas took in succeeding eras. Rome and Greece were polytheistic, but Christianity had a firm footing by the time the western empire fell. Hinduism dominated Indian society from very early times, although Buddhism also took root in India. From China's early days, ancestors were revered, a belief reinforced by the philosophy of Confucianism. Other belief systems, such as Daoism, Legalism, and Buddhism, also flourished in China by 600 CE.

POLYTHEISM

The earliest form of religion was probably polydaemonism (the belief in many spirits), but somewhere in the Neolithic era people began to put these spirits together to form gods. In polytheism, each god typically has responsibility for one area of life, like war, the sea, or death. In early agricultural societies, quite logically most of the gods had responsibility for the raising of crops and domesticated animals. The most prominent god in many early societies was the Sun God, who took many forms and went by many names. Perceptions of the gods varied from one civilization to the next, with some seeing them as fierce and full of retribution, and others seeing them as more tolerant of human foibles.

HINDUISM

The beginnings of Hinduism are difficult to trace, but the religion originated with the polytheism that the Aryans brought as they began invading the Indian subcontinent sometime after 2000 BCE.

Hinduism assumes the eternal existence of a universal spirit that guides all life on earth. A piece of the spirit called the atman is trapped inside humans and other living creatures. The most important desire of the atman is to be reunited with the universal spirit, and every aspect of an individual's life is governed by it. When someone dies, their atman may be reunited, but most usually is reborn in a new body. A person's caste membership is a clear indication of how close he or she is to the desired reunion. Some basic tenets of Hinduism are

- Reincarnation - Atman spirits are reborn in different people after one body dies. This rebirth has no beginning and no end, and is part of the larger universal spirit that pervades all of life.
- Karma - This widely used word actually refers to the pattern of cause and effect that transcends individual human lives. Whether or not an individual fulfills his/her duties in one life determines what happens in the next.
- Dharma - Duties called dharma are attached to each caste position. For example, a warrior's dharma is to fight honorably, and a wife's duty is to serve her husband faithfully. Even the lowest caste has dharma attached to it. If one fulfills this dharma, the reward is for the atman to be reborn into a higher caste.
- Moksha - Moksha is the highest, most sought-after goal for the atman. It describes the reunion with the universal spirit.

BUDDHISM

Buddhism began in India in the Ganges River area during the 6th century BCE. Its founder was Siddhartha Guatama, who later became known as the Buddha, or the "Enlightened One." Siddhartha was the son of a wealthy Hindu prince who grew up with many advantages in life. However, as a young man he did not find answers to the meaning of life in Hinduism, so he left home to become an ascetic, or wandering holy man. His Enlightenment forms the basic tenets of Buddhism:

- **The Four Noble Truths** - 1) All of life is suffering; 2) Suffering is caused by false desires for things that do not bring satisfaction; 3) Suffering may be relieved by removing the desire; 4) Desire may be removed by following the Eightfold Path.
- **The Eightfold Path to Enlightenment** - The ultimate goal is to follow the path to nirvana, or a state of contentment that occurs when the individual's soul unites with the universal spirit. The eight steps must be achieved one by one, starting with a change in thoughts and intentions, followed by changes in life style and actions, that prelude a higher thought process through meditation. Eventually, a "breakthrough" occurs when nirvana is achieved that gives the person a whole new understanding of life.
- Note that Hinduism supported the continuation of the caste system in India, since castes were an outer reflection of inner purity. For example, placement in a lower caste happened because a person did not fulfill his/her dharma in a previous life. Buddhists believed that changes in thought processes and life styles brought enlightenment, not the powers of one's caste. Although the Buddha actively spread the new beliefs during his long lifetime, the new religion faced oppression after his death from Hindus who saw it as a threat to the basic social and religious structure that held India together. Buddhism probably survived only because the Mauryan emperor Ashoka converted to it and promoted its practice. However, in the long run, Buddhism did much better in areas where it spread through cultural diffusion, such as Southeast Asia, China, and Japan.

CONFUCIANISM

Three important belief systems (Confucianism, Daoism, and Legalism) emerged in China during the Warring States Period (403-221 BCE) between the Zhou and Han Dynasties. Although the period was politically chaotic, it hosted a cultural flowering that left a permanent mark on Chinese history.

Confucius contemplated why China had fallen into chaos, and concluded that the Mandate of Heaven had been lost because of poor behavior of not only the Chinese emperor, but all his subjects as well. His plan for reestablishing Chinese society profoundly affected the course of Chinese history and eventually spread to many other areas of Asia as well. He emphasized the importance of harmony, order, and obedience and believed that if five basic relationships were sound, all of society would be, too:

1. Emperor/subject - the emperor has the responsibility to take care of his subjects, and subjects must obey the emperor
2. Father/son - the father takes care of the son, and the son obeys the father
3. Older brother/younger brother - the older brother takes care of the younger brother, who in turn obeys him
4. Husband/wife - the husband takes care of the wife, who in turn obeys him
5. Friend/friend -The only relationship that does not assume inequality should be characterized by mutual care and obedience

Confucius also defined the "superior man" - one who exhibits ren (kindness), li (sense of propriety), and Xiao (filial piety, or loyalty to the family).

Confucianism accepted and endorsed inequality as an important part of an ordered society. It confirmed the power of the emperor, but held him responsible for his people, and it reinforced the patriarchal family structure that was already in place in China. Because Confucianism focused on social order and political organization, it is generally seen as a philosophy rather than a religion. Religions are more likely to emphasize spiritual topics, not society and politics.

DAOISM

The founder of Daoism is believed to have been Laozi, a spiritualist who probably lived in the 4th century BCE. The religion centers on the Dao (sometimes referred to as the "Way" or "Path"), the original force of the cosmos that is an eternal and unchanging principle that governs all the workings of the world. The Dao is passive - not active, good nor bad - but it just is. It cannot be changed, so humans must learn to live with it. According to Daoism, human strivings have brought the world to chaos because they resist the Dao. A chief characteristic is wuwei, or a disengagement from the affairs of the world, including government. The less government, the better. Live simply, in harmony with nature. Daoism encourages introspection, development of inner contentment, and no ambition to change the Dao.

Both Confucianism and Daoism encourage self knowledge and acceptance of the ways things are. However, Confucianism is activist and extroverted, and Daoism is reflective and introspective. The same individual may believe in the importance of both belief systems, unlike many people in western societies who think that a person may only adhere to one belief system or another.

LEGALISM

The third belief system that arose from the Warring States Period is legalism, and it stands in stark contrast to the other beliefs. It had no concern with ethics, morality, or propriety, and cared nothing about human nature, or governing principles of the world. Instead it emphasized the importance of rule of law, or the imperative for laws to govern, not men. According to legalism, laws should be administered objectively, and punishments for offenders should be harsh and swift. Legalism was the philosophy of Shi Huangdi, the first emperor, whose Qin Dynasty rescued China from chaos. However, when he died, the Han emperors that followed deserted legalism and established Confucianism as the dominant philosophy.

JUDAISM

As noted earlier, Judaism was the first clearly monotheistic religion. At the heart of the religion was a belief in a Covenant, or agreement, between God and the Jewish people, that God would provide for them as long as they obeyed him. The Ten Commandments set down rules for relationships among human beings, as well as human relationships to God. Because they were specially chosen by God, Jews came to see themselves as separate from others and did not seek to convert others to the religion. As a result, Judaism has remained a relatively small religion. However, its influence on other larger religions, including Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Islam is vast, and so it remains as a very significant "root religion."

Zoroastrianism is an early monotheistic religion that almost certainly influenced and was influenced by Judaism, and it is very difficult to know which one may have emerged first. Both religions thrived in the Middle East, and adherents of both apparently had contact with one another. Zoroastrianism was the major religion of Persia, a great land-based empire that was long at war with Ancient Greece and eventually conquered by Alexander the Great. The religion's founder was Zoroaster or Zarathushtra, who saw the world immersed in a great struggle between good and evil, a concept that certainly influenced other monotheistic religions.

CHRISTIANITY

Christianity grew directly out of Judaism, with its founder Jesus of Nazareth born and raised as a Jew in the area just east of the Mediterranean Sea. During his lifetime, the area was controlled by Rome as a province in the empire. Christianity originated partly from a long-standing Jewish belief in the coming of a Messiah, or a leader who would restore the Jewish kingdom to its former glory days. Jesus' followers saw him as the Messiah who would cleanse the Jewish religion of its rigid and haughty priests and assure life after death to all that followed Christian precepts. In this way, its appeal to ordinary people may be compared to that of Buddhism, as it struggled to emerge from the Hindu caste system. Christianity's broad appeal of the masses, as well as deliberate conversion efforts by its early apostles, meant that the religion grew steadily and eventually became the religion with the most followers in the modern world.

Jesus was a prophet and teacher whose followers came to believe that he was the son of God. He advocated a moral code based on love, charity, and humility. His disciples predicted a final judgment day when God would reward the righteous with immortality and condemn sinners to eternal hell. Jesus was arrested and executed by Roman officials because he aroused suspicions among Jewish leaders, and he was seen by many as a dangerous rebel rouser. After his death, his apostles spread the faith. Especially important was Paul, a Jew who was familiar with Greco-Roman culture. He explained Christian principles in ways that Greeks and Romans understood, and he established churches all over the eastern end of the Mediterranean, and even as far away as Rome.

Christianity grew steadily in the Roman Empire, but not without clashes with Roman authorities. Eventually in the 4th century CE, the Emperor Constantine was converted to Christianity and established a new capital in the eastern city of Byzantium, which he renamed Constantinople. As a result, the religion grew west and north from Rome, and also east from Constantinople, greatly extending its reach.

By the end of the classical era, these major belief systems had expanded to many areas of the world, and with the fall of empires in the late classical era, came to be major forces in shaping world history. One major religion - Islam - remained to be established in the 7th century as part of the next great period that extended from 600 to 1450 CE.