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Introduction

For more than five millennia the population of Afroeurasia grew steadily, forming larger and more complex political units, such as the Han Chinese, Persian Achaemenid, and Roman empires. Around 300 to 400 CE, this cycle of empire building came nearly to a halt, and for a time even reversed itself. The time of the ancient world came to a close, and over the 1,200 years of Big Era Five, many elements of the modern world first came into view. In this introduction, we examine some of the dynamics at work and explore their significance.

One distinguishing feature of this era was its unusual demographic (population) history. Overall there were fluctuations with a long-term upward trend, culminating in a significant rise at the end of the period to reach 400 million people globally. This number broke the ceiling on growth that had limited the population advances of earlier agrarian societies. The population surge of Big Era Five was linked to the spread of innovations in agriculture, especially numerous small changes that improved irrigation, domestic animal breeds, and enrichment of the soil. These advances, which took place from Europe and West Africa to China and Japan, increased the number of people able to derive sustenance from a given acre of land. Long distance trade also supplied people with a more varied diet and numerous products that improved the quality of life.

Politically, Big Era Five was marked by the founding of a kaleidoscope of city-states, kingdoms, and empires. For the first time, large empires appeared in West Africa, Mesoamerica, and South America. States and their corresponding economic systems became more complex. A few empires emerged that were even bigger than the Han and Roman states of earlier times. The largest of these were the Arab Muslim Empire of the eighth century and the Mongol Empire of the thirteenth century.

Long distance commerce grew and cities multiplied across Afroeurasia, especially between 1000 and 1500 CE. Big Era Five saw the emergence of the Indian Ocean basin as a new focus of busy economic interchange. Notably, during the era of the Mongol Empire and the several big Mongol states that followed it, the silk roads across Afroeurasia bustled with caravan trade

in silks, cottons, spices, tea, horses, ceramic wares, and numerous other products. Caravans and ships also carried ideas. During this era a great deal of scientific and technological cross-fertilization took place, especially in Afroeurasia, but also in the Americas. In the Americas, artistic and architectural techniques and styles spread from the Olmec city-states of the second and first millennium BCE far and wide across Mesoamerica and to Native American peoples farther north.

Culturally, Big Era Five featured the consolidation of several belief systems and the continuing retreat of the purely local religions of farmers, foragers, and **pastoral nomads**. The number of distinct religious traditions in the world almost certainly declined significantly, even as universalist religions—those that appealed to people across boundaries of language and local culture—grew by leaps and bounds. Islam, the youngest of the major world belief systems, emerged in the seventh century CE. Islam, together with Christianity and Buddhism, offered a universal message of comfort, moral living, and salvation that resulted in widespread appeal. Not all individuals and societies benefited equally—or benefited at all—from these trends in political, economic, and cultural growth. Millions fell victim to conquests, millions more paid heavy taxes to authoritarian rulers, and slavery continued to thrive. Nevertheless, an array of ingenious technological advances allowed humankind to feed, clothe, and shelter itself even as the global population grew faster than in any earlier era.

Centuries of Upheaval in Afroeurasia



WHY STUDY UPHEAVAL IN AFROEURASIA?

Many of the major long-lived empires that dominated Afroeurasia between 1200 BCE and 500 CE suffered collapse between 200 and 600 CE. This chapter is an investigation of the reasons behind this disintegration, using the Han, Roman, and Gupta empires as models. Students naturally look for, and will readily latch onto, simple monocausal explanations for such events. It is therefore important for students to learn that major events in history often have highly complex interrelated causes and that they must learn to probe beyond simplistic answers to really understand what happened and why. The chapter begins with a look at the definition of empire and the ingredients that make an empire successful. Students are then asked to speculate about what might go wrong that could bring down such an empire. The rest of the chapter seeks to answer this question. In the second and third lessons, students investigate the demise of the Han and Roman empires. In both cases, students use a variety of materials including graphic organizers to discover the enormous number of interrelated factors that contributed to the downfall of both empires. The attempts made to reestablish unity are also studied, contrasting the successful unification of China under the Sui emperor Wen with Emperor Justinian’s failed attempt to reunite Rome. The Gupta Empire is examined in the fourth lesson, which begins with a study of the empire’s rise and the “golden age” in India that resulted. Students are then introduced to the Hephthalites, the

pastoral nomads from Central Asia who, in a swift and brutal campaign, annihilated the Gupta. The Gupta model demonstrates to students that, although enduring empires often collapsed for complex reasons, occasionally an overwhelming force armed with superior military technology and tactics obliterated an otherwise strong and well-organized empire. Sometimes the answer is simple after all. Students must consider all of the models in the final lesson, which consists of a writing assessment answering the question, “Why do empires fall?”

OBJECTIVES

Upon completing this chapter, students will be able to:

1. Identify characteristics of empire.
2. Explain multiple causes for the fall of the Han Empire.
3. Research and evaluate the multiple causes for the fall of Rome.
4. Describe Justinian’s attempt to re-create the Roman Empire and why it failed.
5. Describe the rise of the Gupta Empire and its golden age.
6. Give reasons for the success of pastoral nomads in Inner Eurasia.
7. Explain the role of pastoral nomads in the collapse of the Gupta Empire.
8. Use evidence from the Han, Roman, and Gupta empires to identify reasons for the demise of long-enduring empires.

TIME AND MATERIALS

This chapter should take 5 to 8 class periods, depending on the length of the class, the abilities of students, and whether teachers choose to teach all parts of each lesson. Materials required:

- Variety of texts or access to the Internet to conduct research on China’s emperor Wen and the Sui Dynasty and research on the fall of the Roman Empire.
- A rhyming dictionary.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The era from 200 to 600 CE was a time of dramatic change across much of Afroeurasia. Successful, long-enduring empires that had risen and flourished during the preceding centuries began to flounder. One by one, nearly all were extinguished by the end of the sixth century. Why and how this happened in such a limited span of time is the subject of this chapter.

The Han Empire in China

The first to fall was the Han Dynasty in China. The Han demise was a complicated affair. Not surprisingly, a large part of the story involved pressure from pastoral nomads who lived

LESSON 1

Empire

Preparation

1. Duplicate Student Handout 1.1.1 for High School students or 1.1.2 for Middle School students.
2. Review the fact that, for several centuries, a number of complex and enduring empires had dominated large parts of Afroeurasia. Among these were the Han Empire in China and the Roman Empire in the Mediterranean Basin. In spite of their vast size, wealth, and power, all of these large empires suffered catastrophic collapse between 200 and 600 CE. The central question that concerns us in this chapter is why this near-simultaneous series of disintegrations took place.

Activities

In order to understand why empires fall, it is first necessary to have a clear idea of what an empire is and what it takes for an empire to survive and thrive.

1. Ask students, “What is an empire? How is an empire different from a kingdom?” As part of the discussion, have students name examples of empires they have heard of. Have students also list the names of states they know that were not called empires. Build a working definition of empire by discussing the differences between the listed examples.
2. Have students read Student Handout 1.1.1/1.1.2. Have them compare their definitions to the explanation given in the reading.
3. Would you rather rule a kingdom or an empire? Explain your thinking.
4. Although some large empires survived for a very long time, even the strongest and most organized among them disintegrated in the early centuries CE. What do you think may have caused their collapse? Note: Explain to students that in subsequent lessons, their predictions will be tested as they examine the fall of the Han, Roman, and Gupta empires.
5. Have students refer to Student Handout 1.1.1/1.1.2. to make a list of things that seem necessary for an empire to survive and be successful. Rank your completed list according to importance. Place a 1 next to the most important item, a 2 next to the second most important, and so on.

What Is an Empire? High School Version

An empire is the political rule of one group of people over other people who may have differing languages and customs. In contrast, a kingdom is a smaller political state composed of people who often share a common set of cultural characteristics. If a kingdom is well organized and powerful enough to rule over other lands, it can become an empire. Throughout history, empires were often built through conquest, and conquered peoples were forced to become subjects of the empire. But occasionally, people in neighboring territories saw benefits to being part of a larger, more complex political and economic organization. So they joined an empire willingly. Either way, empires were made up of kingdoms, at least in part, in much the same way that modern countries are made up of states or provinces.

Empires were much more difficult than kingdoms to organize and sustain. A massive bureaucracy was needed to govern diverse peoples under a single administration. Language and cultural barriers had to be overcome. (The language of the ruling power often became the official language used for government and trade throughout the empire.) Extensive transportation and communication networks had to be built, maintained, and protected, so that the natural riches of the empire's far-flung provinces could be brought to the ruling center. Long distance trade, the economic lifeblood of an empire, had to be regulated and a common currency established. Taxes needed to be collected and legal systems established. Much effort and money had to be devoted to maintaining the military so that it could protect trade, enforce laws, and defend the empire from its enemies, both external and internal.

All this had to be accomplished in a balanced fashion. For example, enough tax money had to be collected to pay for the roads, armies, and bureaucracies needed to run the empire. But if the tax rate was too high, it could impoverish people, ruin commerce, and actually reduce the amount of money flowing into the treasury. This type of economic blunder could lead to rebellion. Similarly, government officials needed authority to do their jobs effectively, but they had to be closely monitored to ensure that they did not abuse their positions of power and enrich themselves at the expense of the empire and its people. Widespread corruption could also anger an empire's subjects and incite them to rebellion. Imperial powers tried to win the loyalty of their subjects by granting privileges such as citizenship and local autonomy and by sharing knowledge and technology. At the same time, they had to be careful that subject peoples did not gain so much power and knowledge that they could break away from or overthrow the government. Such equilibrium was difficult to maintain. Empires had to be flexible enough to adapt to changing circumstances and challenges, while keeping everything in balance. Several large empires in Afroeurasia maintained this balance for long periods of time. But from the third to seventh centuries, three of the most powerful and enduring empires began to weaken and disintegrate.

Source: Howard Spodek, *The World's History*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2000).

What Is an Empire? Middle School Version

An empire is the rule of one group of people over other groups who have different languages and customs. An emperor rules an empire.

A kingdom is a smaller state made up of people who share the same culture. If a kingdom is strong enough to rule over other lands, it can become an empire. Throughout history, empires were built through wars. Conquered lands were forced to become part of the empire.

Empires were more difficult to rule than kingdoms. A well-organized government was needed to keep the many different lands and people united under the emperor's rule. Transportation networks had to be built and protected so that products from the empire's far corners could be brought to the capital. Long distance trade had to be established and taxes collected. Money was needed to build an army that would protect trade and defend the empire.

Enough tax money had to be collected to pay for the roads, armies, and officials needed to run the empire. But if taxes were too high, people couldn't pay them. Trade suffered, and the amount of money flowing into the treasury decreased. This type of economic mistake could cause people to rebel.

Emperors tried to win people's loyalty by making people citizens and by sharing knowledge and technology. But emperors had to be careful that people did not gain so much power that they could break away from or overthrow the government. Some empires throughout Afroeurasia maintained this balance for long periods of time. But from the 3rd to 7th centuries, three of the most powerful empires began to weaken and collapse.

Source: Adapted from Howard Spodek, *The World's History*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2000).