

The Classical Period, 1000 B.C.E.–500 C.E.

CHAPTERS

Classical Civilization: China
Classical Civilization: India
Classical Civilization in the Mediterranean:
Greece and Rome
The Classical Period: Directions, Diversities,
and Declines by 500 C.E.

Introduction

Having quickly reviewed the hundreds of thousands of years of human prehistory and the 3000 years of developments in the river valley civilizations, we now slow down our discussion considerably. In the remainder of this book, we deal with the most recent 3000 years of human experience, from roughly 1000 years before the common era (B.C.E.) until the present. There are several reasons for this radical change of pace. Available knowledge is one. Civilizations over the past 3000 years have produced far more records than their predecessors. We not only know more about events such as wars and rebellions, but we also have a fuller sense of how ordinary people in these societies thought about daily issues such as health and family. More important is the fact that civilizations created after 1000 B.C.E. have direct links to civilizations that exist today. Chinese civilization, indeed, flows quite coherently from the middle of the Zhou dynasty (500 B.C.E.) to the present, with surges and declines and significant changes but with equally important connections to preceding events. Even in Western society, where there have been far more shattering disruptions than in China, we can look back to Greek and Roman civilizations and find philosophies and political institutions directly related to contemporary ideas and forms.

The period in the history of civilization after the decline of the river valley cultures is known as *classical*; it runs from about 1000 B.C.E. until the 5th century C.E. In three parts of the world—China, India, and the Mediterranean area (which extends from the Middle East to southern Europe and north Africa)—new or renewed civilizations arose that proved very durable. These civilizations did not touch all the world's peoples, although they spread well beyond the boundaries of the river valleys. It is important to remember that the history of clas-

sical civilization does not reflect the whole of world history during this period, because it does not include northern Europeans, central Asians, most Africans below the Sahara, and of course all American Indians. Historical developments in these regions beyond the classical civilizations were significant, but they followed patterns different from those in the classical world.

Also during the classical period, new empires arose around the Tigris-Euphrates valley, resuming the developments of those started by the Sumerians and Babylonians. First the Assyrians and then the Persians established large empires that at times extended throughout the Middle East and even into Europe and India. These empires boasted not only great power but also important new religious ideas and artistic styles that influenced both Greek and Indian cultures later on.

The three classical civilizations of China, India, and the Mediterranean left the most substantial legacies, however, and they also included the largest population concentrations in the world at that time. Moreover, all three classical civilizations set in motion institutions and values that would continue to shape these key parts of the world long after the classical period was over. Some of the continuing diversity of our world is the result of distinctions created during the classical period. Examples include the intense political centralization of the Chinese in contrast to the greater regionalism of Indian political life, or the emotional restraint the Chinese and Japanese were taught to exhibit compared with the greater display of feeling allowed many Mediterranean peoples.

All three classical civilizations built on the achievements of the river valley societies. In the Mediterranean, Greeks benefited from the influence of the earlier Minoan civilization, which had been centered on the Greek islands and partially derived from the greater Egyptian culture. Here, and still more obviously in India and China, classical peoples relied on the technologies developed in the river valley societies; they also utilized earlier artistic styles and possibly some more abstract ideas. And, of course, they adapted earlier writing systems and mathematical concepts.

However, the classical civilizations were not, in the final analysis, simple continuations of the earlier societies from which they derived. Use of iron weapons, first by invading peoples, gave governments a new military edge. Classical civilizations also created larger political structures, capable of controlling more territory. They shifted their geographical base: The center of Indian

development moved from the Indus to the Ganges River; China expanded to include the rice-growing Yangtze River (Chiang Jiang) as well as the Huanghê, or Yellow River. All the classical civilizations improved on earlier technologies for agriculture, manufacturing, and urban life. They established more elaborate philosophical and religious systems and expanded scientific and mathematical knowledge. The sophistication of these achievements helps account for the enduring influence of classical civilizations today, not only in the regions where they flourished but also in other areas of the world to which their heritage ultimately spread.

Expansion and integration dominated the outcomes of classical civilizations, even though each created a distinctive, specific culture. Each classical civilization spread beyond a regional center to embrace a growing diversity of people and a growing amount of territory. This, in turn, created the challenge of building institutions and beliefs that could integrate these peoples, without necessarily homogenizing them. Integration included politics, so it was no accident that massive empires grew, at least toward the end of the classical era, around each center. Integration also included growing internal trade as well as cultural systems deliberately designed to draw people together in common beliefs. The problem of integrating new territories, and the processes that resulted, led to the fundamental characteristics of the classical period.

Expansion resulted from massive population growth and encouraged the further development of the classical civilizations. In the final centuries before the common era, China's population tripled, to 60 million. At 14 B.C.E., the Roman Empire had a population of about 54 million people and India about 50 million. Expansion included the migration of farming popula-

tions from the regional center to escape crowding, and deliberate commercial efforts to seek new sources of food supply—the factor behind Greek colonies scattered around the Mediterranean. It also included explicit military expansion, particularly by the great empires of China, India, Greece, and Rome, which often resulted in significant resettlement efforts. Military conquest by these three civilizations was backed by well-organized political units and often the advantage in weaponry that iron-based technology provided.

In the Mediterranean, expansion was actually aided by the various diseases settlers brought to the new lands: It reduced local populations and hence the pressure or need to deal with local diversities. Expansion in China and India meant embracing large local populations, already resistant to the contagions of agricultural society. This resulted in greater attention to social, cultural, and political institutions. Both China and India, though in very different ways, worked harder on the process of integration than Greece and Rome. Everywhere, however, the need to innovate in response to expansion, to draw peoples and territories into manageable interaction, determined many of the key characteristics of this period of world history.

Each classical civilization operated separately for the most part. Trade brought silk from China to the Middle East and the Roman Empire, but while such luxuries were welcomed, no economy was deeply affected by international commerce. There was important cultural exchange between Greece and India, but India's adaptation of Greek artistic style and the Mediterranean's adoption of Indian religious concepts were unusual occurrences. For the most part, developments within each expanding civilization, more than contacts between them, marked this phase of world history.

2000 B.C.E.	1000 B.C.E.	500 B.C.E.	250 B.C.E.	1 C.E.	250 C.E.	500 C.E.
1700 Indo-European invasions in Mediterranean	c. 1000 Polynesians reach Fiji, Samoa	c. 500 Laozi and Daoism	221–202 Qin dynasty; Great Wall	23–220 Later Han dynasty; invention of paper, compass	312–337 Constantine; division of Roman Empire administration; toleration of Christianity	527–565 Justinian, Eastern emperor
1500–1000 Vedic Age in India, formative period	1000–600 Epic Age in India, beginnings of early Hinduism	500–449 Greek defeat of Persia; spread of Athenian Empire	202 B.C.E.–220 C.E. Han dynasty	30 Crucifixion of Jesus	319–540 Gupta Empire	589–618 Sui dynasty in China
1400 Kingdom of Mycenae	800 Rise of Greek city-states; Homeric epics, beginnings of Rome	470–430 Athens at height: Pericles, Phidias, Sophocles, Socrates	140–87 Rule of Wu Ti	c. 100 Root crops introduced to southern Africa through trade	450 Beginning of Hun invasions in India	600 Harsha's Empire
1029–258 Zhou dynasty	800–400 Spread of Olmec civilization: cultivation of maize (corn), potatoes, domestication of turkeys, dogs	431–404 Peloponnesian Wars	133 Decline of Roman republic	180 Death of Marcus Aurelius; beginning of decline of Roman Empire	476 Last Roman emperor deposed, fall of Rome	618 Tang dynasty
	700 Zhou decline	402–201 Warring States period in China	30 B.C.E.–220 C.E. Kushan rule in India, Hindu beliefs develop	2nd century Development of porcelain in China		
	563–483 Gautama Buddha	338–323 Macedonian Empire, Alexander the Great	27 Augustus Caesar, rise of Roman Empire	220–589 Nomadic invasions, disorder, considerable spread of Buddhism in China		
	551–478 Confucius	330–100 Hellenistic period		231 Initial Germanic invasion effort		
	509–450 Beginnings of Roman republic; Twelve Tables of Law	264–146 Rome's Punic Wars				
		322–184 Mauryan dynasty in India				