



1000 B.C.E.      500 B.C.E.      0      500 C.E.      1000 C.E.

Alexander's empire, ca. 336-323 B.C.E.

Achaemenid empire  
558-330 B.C.E.

Parthian empire,  
247 B.C.E.-224 C.E.

Sasanid empire, 224-651 C.E.

Seleucid empire, 323-83 B.C.E.

**SOUTHWEST ASIA**

Classical Greece, 800-350 B.C.E.

Roman republic, 509 B.C.E.-1st century C.E.

Roman empire, 1st century-476 C.E.

**MEDITERRANEAN**

Mauryan empire, India,  
321-185 B.C.E.

Kushan empire in northern  
India, 1-300 C.E.

Bactrian rule in northern India,  
182 B.C.E.-1 C.E.

Gupta empire, India, 320-550 C.E.

**ASIA**

Qin dynasty, China, 221-207 B.C.E.

Han dynasty, China,  
206 B.C.E.-9 C.E.; 25-220 C.E.

Following the adoption of agriculture, the early complex societies demonstrated the remarkable potential of the human species. Building on foundations laid by the early complex societies, the classical societies scaled the size of human communities and the range of human influence up to dimensions that their ancestors could hardly have imagined. They inherited forms of social organization and techniques of statecraft from the early complex societies, but they made adjustments that enabled them to extend their reach far beyond individual regions to distant lands and peoples. The Achaemenid, Han, and Roman empires, for example, all borrowed forms of social organization from their predecessors, but all of them also dwarfed their forerunners and built impressive capital cities from which they supervised sprawling empires and held enormous territories together for centuries at a time.

The classical societies grew to such large geographic proportions that they all found it necessary to devote resources to the construction of roads and the discovery of reliable routes over the neighboring seas. Although expensive to build and maintain, transportation and communications networks served the rulers of classical societies as links between their capitals and the distant reaches of their empires. Roads and sea lanes functioned as the nerves of the classical societies.

Transportation and communications networks were not captives of individual societies. They eventually pointed beyond the boundaries of individual societies and offered access to a larger world. Rulers originally built roads to facilitate communications between their capitals and their provinces—and, if necessary, to send their armed forces to put down rebellions or ensure implementation of their policies. It is possible, however, that merchants made better use of the magnificent road systems of classical societies than did the rulers themselves. Merchants tied regions of the classical societies together by linking producers and consumers. Moreover, they put the classical societies in communication with one another by jumping their frontiers and creating trading relationships across much of the eastern hemisphere.

Merchants and their trade goods shared the roads and the sea lanes with other travelers, including agricultural crops, domesticated animals, and disease pathogens. Some of their more prominent traveling companions, though, were missionaries spreading the word about their beliefs. Building on traditions of writing and reflection inherited from their forerunners, the classical societies all generated cultural and religious traditions whose influences resonate more than two thousand years later. Confucianism, Buddhism, Greek science, rational philosophy, and Christianity have all changed dramatically since the time of their founders, none of whom would recognize their modern-day descendants. Nevertheless, their cultural and religious traditions have profoundly shaped the course of world history.

Rulers of the classical empires built the roads and sponsored exploration of the sea lanes, but merchants and missionaries were equal partners in the construction of the classical era of world history.