

WHY DON'T EMPIRES LAST?

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Many factors contributed to the strength and endurance of both the Roman and Han empires. But after several centuries of glory, both began a period of decline and political decentralization. Why did these great empires disintegrate? What caused the central governments to lose control, trade to diminish, and creativity in the arts and literature to fade! Historians often write about the fall of Rome. Starting in the Third century, authority and legitimacy of the Roman government began to weaken, and it could no longer control the provinces. By that time the Han Empire had lost much of its hold over its territory as well.

We can only speculate to what extent people living through these periods of decline realized what was happening. Most subjects within an empire, we have noted, are unaware of what is going on in the capital. Local bureaucrats demand taxes and corvee and carry out the will of the central government as best as they can. Although the central government's vast network of control and communication is impressive, the daily lives of most people, especially those in distant provinces, are hardly affected. However, when people no longer feel secure and are not "left in peace" they begin to care a great deal about "who rules the land."

Why Did the Roman and Han Empires Disintegrate?

Chinese historians constructed the concept of a dynastic cycle to explain why the Shang, Zhou and Qin dynasties - as well as the Han - had lost the Mandate. They focused on the quality of leadership and suggested that T'ian (Heaven) blesses a moral leader and gives him and his family the Mandate to rule. The people follow his example, obey the rules, and share their labor and produce with the central authorities. But when the emperor does not set a good example, officials become corrupt and try to get rich rather than serve the people. Corrupt officials award bureaucrats who have not passed the examinations honest positions in the government. These officials, no longer carefully schooled in the Confucian classics, care little about decorum and moral example and use their positions to build their own power base.

Although Chinese historians stressed the personal and moral aspects of the dynastic cycle, more recent world historians tend to emphasize economic and political reasons for the collapse of the Han and later dynasties. These historians cite peasant uprisings: and the idea that troops were used to put down these internal threats instead of defending the country. To pay the army, the government levied increased taxes, which led to more unrest and revolts. Additional soldiers were needed, so the government forced poor farmers and others to fight, or hired nomads as soldiers, further angering the people and creating reluctant warriors. Using more soldiers against the people left the borders unguarded, inviting nomad invasions. Sometimes a series of natural disasters, such as floods, earthquakes, and droughts also helped bring down a dynasty.

Studies of the disintegration of the Roman Empire do not emphasize moral leadership or countrywide examinations, but many of the other reasons for the fragmentation of the Han are similar to reasons for the breakup of the Western Roman Empire. With increasing expenses and a shrinking tax base, both governments had to choose between raising taxes and reducing their armed forces social services. Population declines added to the growing fiscal crisis. Because of social unrest, trade was decreasing, lowering profits. Both governments experienced a major breakdown in their efficient administrative systems and tried to control corrupt officials and court intrigues. Finally, both faced threats from nomadic groups on their borders.

Taxes

The financial base in both empires eroded as peasants had difficulty paying taxes. Rates were high in part because many large estates in both areas were no longer taxed. Rich Roman land owners resisted paying taxes to a government that was no longer providing services, and often a landlords armed guards drove tax collectors away. In addition, much church land was not taxed. In China many of the large estates owned by scholar officials were tax free. When local official in both areas tried to force peasants to pay their taxes, some fled to local landlords for protection from tax collectors and marauding bandits, asking to live on their estates in exchange for working the land. Landowners welcomed these additional laborers, who worked for almost

nothing. In Rome large estates attracted craftsmen who were having trouble finding markets for their goods. These artisans made tools and other implements, and the estates became increasingly self-sufficient.

Population

Changes in population added to the problem of collecting enough revenue. Beginning in 165 C.E., a series of plagues killed hundreds of thousands of people in the Roman Empire, drastically reduced the farming population. The lands often lay fallow, producing no taxes. In China population increases led to smaller family plots. Some peasants who were unable to pay the tax fled south to the Yangzi Valley.

Trade

Decline in trade was more of a problem in Rome than in Han China. Many Chinese communities were self-sufficient and most trade was carried out as part of the tributary system. Many within Roman territories, on the other hand, relied on trade, so when the legions spent less time repairing roads and bridges and guarding travelers, bandits and pirates attacked travelers and ship, leading to a sharp decline in trade. Less trade meant fewer taxes. In addition, the Roman government minted money not backed by silver, causing inflation.

The Bureaucracy

Administrative problems plagued both empires. The Roman government had trouble recruiting bureaucrats who could enforce laws and collect taxes. The later Han was unable to check the power of the large private estate owners. Many were able to bypass the exam system by buying position in the bureaucracy, which elevated their status.

Succession

Establishing an orderly system for selecting the new ruler had always been problematic for Roman citizens who wanted to hold on to the fiction that the Senate chose the new emperor. In reality would-be rulers usually fought for the throne, and soldiers, hoping for shared rewards, supported their generals. Once in power, the new emperor concentrated on winning the loyalty and protection of the Praetorian Guards and then the entire army. Even with this loyalty, however, being emperor became a dangerous job – between 235 and 284 C.E. 25 out of 26 emperors died violent deaths.

Emperor Diocletian, who ruled as an absolute monarch, tried to stem the political and economic decline by introducing reforms that improved tax collection, froze prices, and required sons to perform the same jobs as their fathers. To govern more effectively, he divided the empire in half, making two separate administrative units. He ruled the western half from Rome and a trusted colleague ruled the eastern half. After Constantinople became the capital of the eastern half of the empire, the stronger emperors ruled from that city, and trade, manufacturing, and cultural creativity were concentrated in the east, further weakening the western half.

Court Intrigues

Unlike Rome, in Han China the constant intrigues of corrupt officials, especially those close to the emperor created instability. Battles over succession took place in halls and bedrooms inside the palace not on streets or battle fields. Isolated from the outside world, the ruler relied on competing court officials to find out what was going on. He also had to balance the desires of his consorts, who often sought power for their own sons and families. In addition eunuchs who guarded the women's quarters, were often involved in palace intrigues.

Emperor Han Huandi increased the power of the court eunuchs, even allowing them to kill members of his consort's families. Soon the eunuchs were telling the emperor whom to reward with titles or honors, whom to be sent to torture or be killed and who should become scholar officials. They made sure that their relatives and friends got positions of power. Others had to bribe the eunuchs. To counter the eunuchs' power, the scholars formed their own association. Unfortunately, the next emperor did not trust the scholars and ordered them executed.

In the countryside, feeling desperate, many people rallied around a leader of a Taoist sect who seemed to have magical powers. In 184 C.E. his group and another secret society rebelled against the Han. The emperor was

killed, the palace was destroyed, and chaos followed as nomads sacked the city. By 220 the Han had lost the Mandate.

What Role did Christianity and Buddhism Play?

In the declining years of the empires, an increasing number of people sought solace. Some, thinking it was useless to look for answers, simply tried to enjoy the physical pleasure of life. Many others began to investigate new sources of meanings for their insecure lives. Many Romans concentrated on enjoying luxury goods, dressing well, and showing off their wealth at lavish parties. Many women had fewer children, and parents spent less time teaching them the values of citizenship and public service. Roman religion was increasingly unable to satisfy the yearning for meaning. During the insecurity of the later Roman Empire, many turned to Christianity.

It is not clear how much the spread of Christianity contributed to the breakup of the Western Roman Empire. As Christianity spread, Roman rulers tried unsuccessfully to eliminate it. Emperor Diocletian declared himself the supreme god, but his major campaign to wipe out Christianity, despite many deaths and cruel punishments, failed.

After Diocletian, Constantine, a convert to Christianity believed that God had helped him win power. In 313 Constantine issued the Edict of Milan, which made Christianity legal throughout the empire. During his reign Constantine made Sunday a holiday, gave tax free land to Christians on which they began to build churches, and exempted the clergy and many Christians from paying taxes. By the time Constantine died, Christianity not only had become the major religious faith of Rome, but was spreading far beyond the Roman borders to Nubia, India and Northwest Eurasia.

In 380 Emperor Theodosius made Christianity the official religion of the Empire. He ordered the statues of other gods destroyed and made it an act of treason to practice any other religion. Many, including Jews, were persecuted. More and more people became Christians and many began to put their faith in the "city of God," not in Rome.

By contrast Buddhism was not a factor in the decline of the Han. Initially the religion was confined mainly to traders and other outsiders. Because Taoism offered a degree of mysticism, and Confucianism, which had become the official ideology of China, provided the foundation for both private and public life, other philosophies had little appeal. Buddhism was far more popular among the nomadic groups who invaded and came to control some of the territory formally under Han control, and many Chinese turned to Buddhism to answer the insecurities of life following the disintegration of the Han.

The Second Great Movement of Nomadic Groups

About 2000 years after the first significant migration of Indo-European and Semitic nomads in 1700 B.C.E., nomadic groups from the Asian steppes launched a second wave of migration. These invasions threatened the very survival of the empires and effected all of Eurasia.

The stirrup played an important role in this influx of nomadic invasion and helped bring about the end of the Western Roman Empire. This important new technology allowed the rider to stand in the saddle and made the cavalry devastatingly effective. It may have first developed in the steppes or in India. By 300 C.E. the Chinese were casting iron stirrups. By connecting various defensive walls and building additional signal towers, the Qin had discouraged nomads from trying to invade China. When the Han Empire was strong, it could use its tribute arrangement to keep the Xiongnu and other nomadic groups from invading. When the later Han could no longer maintain the system, the Xiongnu had to find other ways to get the goods they needed. They increased their raids inside the walls and also moved farther west in large numbers.

As the Xiongnu went west they put pressure on other pastoral groups, causing some, including the Kushans, to move into northern India. These domino-like pressures also helped trigger the movement of nomadic and semi-nomadic Germanic peoples into territories under Roman Hegemony.

Sometime before the start of the first millennium B.C.E. Germanic groups began to move out of the steppes of central Asia and into the sparsely settled lands of the west. The “Germani,” as the Romans called these nomadic bands, split into two major bands: the Teutons and the Goths.

Although these groups were not skilled farmers, they had superior military technology and an impressive fighting spirit; by the second century B.C.E. they were threatening Roman forces. During Julius Caesar’s rule some tried to conquer eastern Gaul, but Roman legions stopped them. Many settled down along the Rhine and Danube Rivers. For decades there were many relatively peaceful interchanges with the Romans. Some even joined the legions, and many who were captured in battle worked as slaves in the Empire.

What About the Huns?

But the Xiongnu helped upset this balance. As increasing numbers moved further west in the 4th century C.E., both Germanic groups and Romans tried to stop the advance of these people they call the Huns. Both considered the Huns violent savage men who covered vast distances with amazing speed, riding on their ponies.

With stirrups Hun warriors could stand erect astride their galloping horses, making it possible to shoot arrows with deadly accuracy. Hun attacks made Germanic groups step up their pressure along the border of the Roman Empire. When the Huns crossed the Volga River in 372, the Ostrogoths begged permission from Rome to cross into its territory for protection. Rome allowed them to cross the Danube, but when the Ostrogoths did not get the land and food they believed the Romans had promised, they began to pillage. In 378 the Ostrogoths defeated several Roman legions. Some Roman peasants welcomed the Germanic peoples as deliverers from Roman taxation and oppression, and a buffer against the Huns.

By the 5th century the center of the Hun confederacy was in present-day Hungary. Under its leader, Attila, they made repeated assaults against Roman territory, even attacking Gaul. After Attila’s death, the Huns continued their aggression, but by the 6th century they disappear from historical record.

In 410 a Visigoth general sacked Rome, and Roman officials bought peace by granting him control of southern Gaul and Spain. By 425 German chieftains had set up many small kingdoms within the territory that had been part of the Empire. In 476 Odoacer, a German chief, captured Roma and made himself king of Italy, the date many historians use as the official end of the Western Roman Empire.

Legacies in Roman and Han Territories

The decline of the Han and Roman Empires resulted in different legacies. One of the most striking differences resulted from the contrasting attitudes toward centralized authority and the legitimacy of the leader. Given the central role of the Chinese family and the importance of the concept of Emperorship, later Chinese leaders would be able to draw upon a strong tradition of centralized control as they sought to build a new dynastic order. However, in the aftermath of Rome, whose subjects looked to law and citizenship more than to family, and where the ruler’s legitimacy had often been tenuous, political leaders would have to struggle to establish any kind of lasting centralized control.

The breakup of these empires also had a profound effect on cross-cultural contacts. The vibrant trade across the hemisphere significantly declined, generally lowering the standard of living, and many of the large cities that had been the centers of culture, artistic creation, and commerce faded. In part because of its reliance on trade, major cities in the declining Roman Empire fared far worse than those in areas that had been under the Han.

While the Eastern Roman Empire continued to flourish, large, relatively self-sufficient landed estates sprang up not only on the Italian peninsula but also in areas where Germanic groups settled. It would be a long time before these areas were able to develop the complex urban civilization and new forms of political legitimacy. In China, on the other hand, although the central government collapsed and nomads captured and destroyed the Han capital Loyang, many people, including those who fled south, were able to retain their cultural traditions. They were able to keep alive the rich scientific, philosophic, technological, and literary traditions of the civilization.