

Chapter 4

22

Rise of Classical Civilizations

Key Terms

Alexander the Great
aristocracy*
Aristotle
artistic*
democracy*
dynasty*
geocentric theory*
Hellenistic Age*
Indo-Europeans*
*jati**
mystery religion*

*Pax Romana**
*polis**
*sati**
Silk Roads*
Stoicism*
Twelve Tables*
Untouchables*
varna*
*Vedas**
Zoroastrianism*

CLASSICAL CHINA

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Classical civilizations, defined as those that had enduring influence over vast numbers of people, emerged in China, India, and the Mediterranean region. The first of the classical civilizations began in China. Three Chinese dynasties made their mark on the values of traditional Chinese civilization: the Zhou, the Qin, and the Han.

The Zhou

Claiming that they possessed the mandate of heaven, or the approval of the gods, the Zhou began to dominate China after the fall of the Shang dynasty. The mandate of heaven would be claimed by future Chinese

dynasties as a rationalization for their authority to rule. In power from 1029 to 258 B.C.E., the Zhou:

- Took steps to further centralize the Chinese government.
- Expanded Chinese territory to include the Yangtze River valley. This southern river valley added a fertile rice-growing area to the already rich wheat-producing regions of northern China.
- Produced emperors, calling themselves “Sons of Heaven,” who lived lives of luxury.
- Standardized the spoken language.

The Qin

After a period of civil disorder known as the Era of the Warring States, the Zhou were replaced by the Qin dynasty. Under the Qin (221–202 B.C.E.):

- The name of the dynasty, Qin, was applied to the country of China.
- Chinese territory expanded southward as far as northern Vietnam.
- A defensive wall that became the nucleus of the Great Wall was constructed.
- Weights, measures, and coinage were standardized.
- A common written language was standardized.
- The manufacture of silk cloth was encouraged.
- New roads were constructed.

The Han

In 200 B.C.E., the Qin were replaced by the Han, who ruled until 220 B.C.E. During the rule of the Han dynasty:

- The governmental bureaucracy (ranks of employees) grew stronger.
- Chinese territory expanded into Central Asia, Korea, and Indochina.
- The Chinese civil service exam began.
- Trade along the Silk Roads increased.
- A time of peace settled across China.
- Chinese traditions were reinforced through the strengthening of patriarchal society in which the father and other male members of the family were in positions of authority.
- The government oversaw iron production.
- The government sponsored and maintained canals and irrigation systems.
- Society was further stratified, consisting of an elite class (including the educated governmental bureaucracy), peasants and artisans, and unskilled laborers (including a small number of slaves).
- Agriculture was improved by the invention of ox-drawn plows and a collar that prevented choking in draft animals.
- Paper was manufactured for the first time.
- Water-powered mills were invented.

Under the Han, the people of China enjoyed a level of culture significantly more advanced than that of other civilizations and societies at that time, a distinction it would maintain until the fifteenth century. So vital were the accomplishments of the Han to Chinese culture that even today the Chinese call themselves the “People of Han.”

BACKGROUNDS OF CLASSICAL INDIA

The roots of classical India began during the invasions of the Aryans about 1500 B.C.E. From their original home in Central Asia, the Aryans brought a tradition of hunting and cattle-herding; after their arrival in South Asia, however, they adapted the agricultural methods of native peoples. Aryan iron tools facilitated their success in agriculture.

Although the people of the Harappan civilization of the Indus valley possessed a written language, the Aryans did not. Much of our knowledge of the Aryans comes from their oral epics, called the *Vedas*. The *Vedas* were later written down in the Sanskrit language, which remains a prominent language in India today. The influence of the *Vedas* is evident in the term applied to the early classical period of Indian culture, the Vedic Age (1500–1000 B.C.E.). The first Aryan epic, the *Rig-Veda*, is a collection of hymns in honor of the Aryan gods. Other epic literature which shaped Indian culture during the Epic Age (1000–600 B.C.E.) includes the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* (considered the greatest epic poem of India), and the *Upanishads*, a collection of religious epic poems.

Aryan Society

Aryan society was based on a village organization composed of families with patriarchal control. The Aryans, who were fair-complexioned compared to the native people they conquered, perceived the people of the Indus valley as inferior. Therefore, they modified the class system with which they were already familiar in their society to define the new relationship between conqueror and conquered. Society was divided into four distinct classes, or *varna*, based on skin color:

- *Kshatriyas*, or warriors and rulers
- *Brahmins*, or priests
- *Vaisyas*, or merchants and farmers
- *Sudras*, or common workers

The first three classes were composed of Aryans, the fourth of the Dravidians, or the native people of India whom the Aryans encountered at the time of their invasion. During the Epic Age, the first two classes reversed in order of importance. At the very bottom of the social structure was a classless group of Untouchables. Members of this group were involved in occupations perceived as distasteful, such as handling waste products, carrying out the dead, or butchering animals. As the classes

became hereditary they became castes, or rigid social classes that seldom permitted social mobility. Within each caste were numerous subcastes, or *jati*, that further defined Indian society.

The Aryans also introduced to Indian culture their own array of gods and goddesses. Part of their belief system was the veneration of some animals, particularly cattle.

CLASSICAL INDIA

The cultural and social structures of the Vedic and Epic Ages formed the basis of the classical civilization of India. About 600 B.C.E. northern India was divided into sixteen states; one state, Magadha, became prominent. In 327 B.C.E., Alexander the Great of Macedonia reached into the Indian subcontinent as far as the Indus River, where he set up a border state, which he called Bactria. Five years later the Mauryan dynasty was founded by a soldier named Chandragupta, an autocratic ruler who developed a large bureaucracy and a large army in addition to promoting trade and communication. Mauryan rulers were the first to unify most of the Indian subcontinent.

The most prominent of the Mauryan rulers was Ashoka (269–232 B.C.E.), the grandson of Chandragupta. Under Ashoka, all of the Indian subcontinent except for the southern tip came under Mauryan control. Known by the brutality of his conquests, Ashoka later moderated his behavior and values, embracing the tolerance and nonviolence of Buddhism while also respecting the values of Hinduism. Like his grandfather Chandragupta, Ashoka encouraged trade and constructed an extensive system of roads complete with rest areas for travelers. Along these roads, which connected with the Silk Roads, Ashoka spread the ideas of Buddhism.

Ashoka's influence was insufficient to prevent India from dividing into a number of states once again after his death. Invaders from the northwest, the Kushans, ruled India until 220 C.E. Their rule was followed in 320 C.E. by the Guptas, who ushered in the golden age of Indian history.

Gupta India

In contrast to the Mauryans, the Gupta rulers were Hindus. As a result, during Gupta rule, the caste system and the influence of the Brahmins were reinforced. Because of the strict divisions of the caste system, slavery was not widespread. Although Hinduism was the religion of the ruling dynasty, Buddhism was tolerated and Buddhist monks and nuns spread their influence through urban monasteries. The Gupta style of rule was not as centralized as that of the Mauryan empire, and local rulers were permitted to maintain authority in their respective territories if they submitted to the ultimate rule of the Guptas. Other accomplishments and features of the Gupta dynasty included:

- High-towered temples in honor of the Hindu gods.
- Lavish wall paintings in caves dedicated to the gods. A key example was the Caves of Ajanta in central India.
- The growth of Sanskrit as the language of the educated.
- The discovery of zero as a place holder and the development of “Arabic” numerals, the number system used throughout most of the world today. An innovation of Gupta India, Arabic numerals were so called by the Western world because they were carried from India to the West by means of Arabic caravans.
- The development of the decimal system.
- The strengthening of trade, especially between East and Southeast Asia.
- The deterioration in the status of women; society became increasingly patriarchal. Women gradually lost their right to inherit or own property and were married at a younger age. The custom of *sati* was practiced in some parts of India. *Sati* involved the practice of a widow throwing herself on her husband’s funeral pyre. The custom was alleged to bestow honor and purity upon the widow.
- Inoculation against smallpox and sterilization during surgery and in the treatment of wounds.
- Knowledge of plastic surgery and the setting of bones.
- Advances in astronomy such as the prediction of eclipses and the identification of planets.
- The classic Hindu temple complete with courtyards, paintings, and sculptures appeared.

The achievements and knowledge of the Gupta remained part of Indian culture long after the decline of their dynasty.

PERSIA AND THE CLASSICAL WORLD

Before turning to a discussion of classical Mediterranean civilization, it is necessary to discuss one of the cultures that would significantly influence Mediterranean societies: that of the Persians. The Persians (inhabiting a territory approximate to present-day Iran) counted among the heirs of ancient Mesopotamian civilization. In 550 B.C.E. the Persian conqueror Cyrus the Great had established an empire that encompassed the northern part of Southwest Asia and a portion of northwestern India. The Persian empire was noted for its tolerance toward the customs of conquered peoples. The Persians introduced a new religion called Zoroastrianism that held to a belief in a system of rewards and punishments in the afterlife. They spread the knowledge of iron metallurgy throughout their empire and engaged in an active long-distance trade that linked India, Southwest Asia, and Egypt. The Persian Royal Road, complete with relay stations, was a 1,600-mile highway linking remote portions of the empire. Persian trade contacts with Greece encouraged artistic and philosophical exchange as well.

CLASSICAL CIVILIZATION IN THE MEDITERRANEAN: GREECE

In addition to the role played by the Persians, the culture of a number of societies in the Mediterranean blended to bring about the civilization of Greece. The island of Crete southeast of the Greek mainland was in contact with the Egyptian civilization by the year 2000 B.C.E. The early Greek civilization, known as Mycenaea, was influenced by that of Crete through contacts with traders in the region. The Greeks were an Indo-European people who migrated to the southern portion of the Greek peninsula about 1700 B.C.E. A second wave of Indo-Europeans called the Dorians invaded about 1100 B.C.E., destroying the Mycenaean civilization.

About 800 B.C.E., Phoenician mariners sailed into the Aegean Sea to the east of the Greek mainland. The Phoenicians were largely a seafaring people whose need for accurate recordkeeping in their commercial transactions led them to develop an alphabet of 22 letters representing consonants. The Greeks adapted the Phoenician alphabet, adding symbols for vowel sounds to give the people of the Greek peninsula a common language.

The Importance of Geography

Geography strongly determined the course of Greek history. Separated by mountains and hills, the Greek peninsula was left with little available farmland. At the same time, the peninsula's irregular coastline provided relatively easy access to the sea for Greek settlements. Fishing and trading in the waters of the Aegean became another source to increase the supply of food and other products the Greeks could not provide themselves.

The City-State

The rugged terrain also prevented the easy centralization of communities or government. Greek political organization was based on the city-state, or *polis*, consisting of a city and the surrounding countryside, both under the influence of one government. The two most prominent city-states were Sparta and Athens. Sparta's aristocratic government focused on creating a strong military state, which depended upon the labor of slaves. Athens, by contrast, was initially an aristocracy, but gradually allowed its inhabitants self-rule. The height of Athenian democracy occurred during the rule of the aristocrat Pericles (443–429 B.C.E.), also considered the golden age of Athens for its achievements in science, philosophy, and the arts. Whereas Sparta's economic life relied on agriculture, the Athenians relied on the sea for their livelihood and engaged in an active trade across the Aegean. The people of Athens, to whom education and artistic expression were important, also depended heav-

ily on slaves. From 500 to 449 B.C.E., Athens and Sparta joined forces to defeat a series of Persian invasions.

After the Persian Wars, Athens grew from a *polis* to an empire. Its dominant status aroused distrust among other *poleis*, including Sparta. From 431 to 404 B.C.E., Athens and Sparta and their allies fought each other for dominance in the Peloponnesian Wars. When Athens suffered a devastating plague during the course of the war, the once proud and flourishing *polis* questioned why its gods had allowed such a great tragedy. The weakened Athens saw defeat at the hands of Sparta.

During the eighth century B.C.E., the population of the Greek city-states increased tremendously, leading the Greeks to seek additional territory. As a result, the Greeks established a number of colonies in Sicily, southern Italy, the eastern Mediterranean, and the Black Sea. These new settlements allowed the Greeks the opportunity to trade grapes and olive oil for products that their rugged terrain could not produce in sufficient quantities, including fish, grain, and honey. Colonies not only served as outlets for population; they also transmitted Greek culture throughout the Mediterranean world.

The Culture of Classical Greece

Throughout the classical period the various Greek city-states, although often rivals, at the same time shared a common culture. Numerous gods and goddesses who often displayed human characteristics formed the basis of Greek religion. The Olympic games, first held in 776 B.C.E., brought together athletes from across the Greek peninsula to honor their gods. Drama was an integral feature of Greek culture; tragedies explored the relationship between the limitations of humans and the expectations of the gods, whereas comedies often satirized public officials.

Greek philosophy emphasized the power of human reason. The philosopher Aristotle became a model of Greek thought by constructing arguments through the use of logic and wrote on a variety of subjects in politics, arts, and the sciences.

Alexander the Great and the Hellenistic Age

When the Greek city-states, or *poleis*, weakened because of their internal conflict in the Peloponnesian War, they captured the attention of Philip, the ruler of the kingdom of Macedon to the north of Greece. When Philip's plans to conquer the Greek *poleis* were cut short by his death, however, his son Alexander stepped in to carry out his father's ambitions. By the time of his death in 323 B.C.E. at the age of 33, Alexander (known as "The Great") had conquered not only the Greek *poleis* but also Egypt, Syria, and Palestine as well as Persia. In South Asia, Alexander proceeded as far as the Punjab across the Indus River when his troops refused to proceed any farther.

Throughout the territories he controlled, Alexander established cities, many named Alexandria in his honor. In order to blend the cultures of Persia and Greece, he married a Persian woman and encouraged his officers to do the same. On his death, however, Alexander's empire was divided among his generals. In spite of these divisions, a relative balance of power was maintained among the remnants of Alexander's former empire as the Greek culture served as its unifying force.

The period of Alexander's rule and that of his generals has been termed the Hellenistic Age, named after the influence of the Hellenes, as the Greeks called themselves. The Hellenistic Age was characterized by a blend of the cultures of Greece and the Middle East, particularly Persia. Long-distance trade flourished, establishing communications from the Greek homeland to parts of South Asia and North Africa. Hellenistic philosophy sought personal satisfaction and tranquility. The most popular school of Hellenistic philosophy was Stoicism. Stoicism taught that men and women should use their powers of reason to lead virtuous lives and to assist others. Mystery religions taught that believers who followed their practices would be rewarded with a blissful life in the afterworld. The culture of the Hellenistic world would be adopted by another classical Mediterranean culture, that of the Romans. Among the achievements of the Hellenistic world were:

- Euclidean geometry.
- The Pythagorean Theorem.
- Studies of human anatomy and physiology by Galen.
- The calculation of the circumference of the earth by Eratosthenes.

In spite of the significant achievements of scientists and mathematicians of the Hellenistic world, one significant error was promoted during the same era. Contrary to the traditions of Southwest Asia, the Hellenistic astronomer Ptolemy expounded a theory of the nature of the universe which placed the earth at its center. His **geocentric theory**, although incorrect, was widely accepted as truth by the West until the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century.

CLASSICAL CIVILIZATION IN THE MEDITERRANEAN: ROME

The Hellenistic period ended in 146 B.C.E. with the conquest of the Greek peninsula by Rome. Rome began as a kingdom in central Italy about 800 B.C.E. In 509 B.C.E. the Roman monarch was deposed by the aristocracy. The resulting Roman republic began a period of expansion in the Mediterranean world. The defeat of the Phoenician city of Carthage in North Africa during the Punic Wars (264–246 B.C.E.) made Rome master of the Mediterranean Sea. The strong military tradition of the Romans led to power struggles among generals. When one of them, Julius Caesar came to power in 45 B.C.E., the structures of the Roman republic began to dissolve.

Rome Becomes an Empire

When a conspiracy assassinated Julius Caesar in 44 B.C.E., a period of civil disorder culminated in 27 B.C.E. with the rule of Octavian, or Augustus Caesar, the grandnephew of Julius Caesar. The period from 27 B.C.E. to 180 C.E. was known as the *Pax Romana*, or Roman Peace. During this more than 200-year period of peace and prosperity:

- A system of public works, including bridges, aqueducts, and roads, served all parts of the empire. Roman roads and sea lanes connected the Roman empire with the Silk Roads of Central Asia.
- Highway banditry decreased.
- A common language, Latin, promoted unity within the empire.
- A common coinage facilitated trade.
- Stadiums were constructed to provide entertainment, such as gladiator contests, for Roman citizens.
- Jesus was born in the Roman province of Judea. The new religion of Christianity spread easily across the Roman roads.

Roman Government

During the days of the Roman republic, government was centered around the Senate, which was composed primarily of members of the aristocracy. The executive resided in two consuls. When crises occurred, the Senate could appoint a dictator who could hold emergency powers for a period up to 6 months. During the republic, laws were codified, or written down, in the Twelve Tables.

Under the Roman Empire, conquered peoples in various parts of the empire were generally allowed a considerable measure of self-rule unless they rebelled against the authority of the emperor. Many inhabitants in conquered provinces, especially those geographically close to Rome, were granted citizenship.

Roman Law

The most lasting contribution of Rome was its system of laws. From the tradition of the Twelve Tables came a desire to extend Roman standards of justice throughout the empire. Among the legal principles established by the Romans were:

- The concept that a defendant is innocent unless proven guilty by a court of law.
- The right of defendants to confront their accusers in a court of law.
- The right of judges to set aside laws that were unjust.

Roman law served to unite not only the peoples of their vast empire but also left a lasting impact on Western legal tradition.

Roman Culture

Much of the culture of the Romans was adopted from that of the Greeks. The Greek alphabet, a gift of the Phoenicians, was passed on to the Romans who modified the letters and transmitted the alphabet throughout the various parts of their empire. Many aspects of Greek rational thought, including the works of Aristotle and the philosophical school of Stoicism, became part of Roman life. Greek gods and goddesses, renamed by the Romans, found their way into Roman religious beliefs. Although the Romans were credited with the development of massive arches designed to handle the weight of heavy structures, the architecture of Rome was more a case of cultural diffusion from the Greeks than one of independent invention.

Everyday Life in Greece and Rome

In both classical Mediterranean societies, families were patriarchal, although women in the elite classes of Rome often wielded considerable influence within the family itself. In both Greece and Rome, women sometimes owned property and small businesses. In matters of law, however, women had fewer rights than men. Even Aristotle felt that women should be kept in a subordinate role.

Slavery was commonplace in both Greece and Rome. Aristotle attempted to justify slavery, believing that it was necessary to a thriving society. In some Greek *poleis*, such as Sparta, slaves performed agricultural tasks. In Athens, slaves labored in the silver mines and as household servants. Roman slaves made up as much as one third of the population. In fact, among the reasons for Roman expansion was the acquisition of slaves from among conquered peoples. Some Roman slaves were used to mine iron and precious metals. Other slaves carried out household duties. Especially prized were educated Greek slaves, who became tutors for the children of Rome's elite class. Slave labor was so widely used by both Greeks and Romans that neither culture found much need for technological advances as labor-saving devices. As a result, the Mediterranean world fell behind the technological level of China and India in the areas of agriculture and manufacturing.

Rapid Review



Classical civilizations in China, India, and the Mediterranean forged lasting institutions in their respective regions. China created a complex bureaucracy based on the traditions of family and education. In India, cultural diversity prevailed while a caste system gradually evolved to rigidly organize this diversity. In the Mediterranean, rational thought and the rule of law prevailed during the dominance of the Greeks followed by the Romans.

✓ Chapter Review Questions

1. All of the following Chinese traditions and achievements began under the Han dynasty EXCEPT
 - A. expansion into Central Asia.
 - B. paper manufacture.
 - C. the civil service exam.
 - D. Confucian philosophy.
 - E. bureaucratic government.

2. The roots of classical India included
 - A. the Aryan written language, or Sanskrit.
 - B. the egalitarian Aryan society.
 - C. Aryan agricultural knowledge.
 - D. a society united by *jati*.
 - E. Vedic traditional literature.

3. From the time of the Roman republic to the Pax Romana
 - A. Rome became increasingly democratic.
 - B. the Roman civilization became increasingly weaker.
 - C. the territory of Rome continued to expand.
 - D. Roman citizenship became increasingly rare.
 - E. Greek influence upon Rome became less pronounced.

4. Under both the Han and Roman empires
 - A. Imperial roads were connected to the Silk Roads.
 - B. new territories were added to the empires.
 - C. a time of peace settled over both empires.
 - D. enduring cultural traditions were established.
 - E. all of the above.

5. The Hellenistic empire of Alexander
 - A. continued the competition with Persia begun under the Greek *poleis*.
 - B. was successful in curbing foreign influence upon Greece.
 - C. produced theories that accurately explained the nature of the universe.
 - D. blended Mediterranean and Middle Eastern cultures.
 - E. strengthened its hold upon the Mediterranean world after Alexander's death.

6. Under Gupta India
 - A. Arabic numerals originated in India.
 - B. slavery increased.
 - C. Hinduism and Buddhism became the official religions of India.
 - D. the government of India became more centralized.
 - E. the status of women improved.

7. The Persians
 - A. were noted for their harsh treatment toward conquered peoples.
 - B. continued the traditions of ancient Mesopotamia.
 - C. introduced a new religion similar to the structure of Hinduism.
 - D. failed to establish a unified empire.
 - E. focused their commercial activity on trade with China.

8. Greek society
 - A. was unified by the geography of the Greek peninsula.
 - B. was disrupted by the conquest of Alexander.
 - C. was extended through overseas colonization.
 - D. extended the democratic ideal by relying on free labor alone.
 - E. organized its faith around a monotheistic religion.

2 Answers and Explanations

1. D. Confucian philosophy was introduced after the fall of the Zhou dynasty. The Han dynasty expanded Chinese territory, including adding territory from Central Asia (A). Paper manufacture was developed (B) and the civil service exam was (C) introduced under the Han. Chinese government under the Han depended on the use of administrators to assist in governing its vast empire (E).
2. E. The traditions of the *Vedas* became an integral part of Indian society. Sanskrit, the language of the Aryans, was originally an oral language only (A). Aryan society consisted of a number of classes based on skin color, which would become the foundation of the Hindu caste system (B). Aryans were nomadic peoples who learned of agriculture from the Dravidian people of India (C). The society of classical India was divided by the *jati*, or subcastes of the Hindu caste system (D).
3. C. The territory of the Roman Empire expanded greatly during this time period. Rome became less democratic as the empire evolved (A). The Pax Romana marked the height of Roman civilization; decline began after this period (B). During this period, inhabitants of nearby Roman provinces were offered citizenship (D). Roman culture continued to preserve the Hellenistic traditions on which it was built (E).
4. E. All of the above. Roman roads connected to the Silk Roads, allowing trade between the Roman Empire and Han China (A). Both empires expanded significantly during their duration (B). Both experienced a time of relative peace when their respective cultures flourished (C), allowing the establishment of enduring traditions in philosophy, language, and government (D).
5. D. Alexander united the cultures of both Greece and the Middle East, particularly Persia, in his empire. Competition between Greece and Persia, therefore, was not a characteristic of his empire (A). The nature of Alexander's empire was to blend foreign cultures with that of the Greeks (B). Ptolemy embraced the geocentric view (C). Alexander's empire was divided by his generals and did not continue after his death (E).
6. A. Arabic numerals originated in Gupta India but were given their name because they were carried to the Western world by Arab caravans. The Hindu caste system lessened the need for slavery (B). Although the Gupta tolerated Buddhism, they embraced Hinduism as their own religion and promoted its acceptance (C). The Indian government was less centralized under the Gupta than it had been under Mauryan rulers (D). Women had a more inferior status, exemplified by the practice of *sati* (E).
7. B. The Persian conquest of Mesopotamia continued the transmission of Mesopotamian culture. They were noted for tolerance toward conquered peoples who did not rebel against Persian rule (A). In contrast to Hinduism, the new religion of Zoroastrianism was a religion of rewards and punishments in the afterlife (C). The Persians unified their empire through the Royal Road (D), which focused on trade with neighboring peoples in India, Southwest Asia, and Egypt (E).
8. C. Colonization spread the knowledge of Greek culture throughout the Mediterranean world. The mountains of the Greek peninsula prevented Greeks from uniting (A). Alexander continued the traditions of Greece (B). Greek society relied heavily on slave labor (D). Its religion was polytheistic, with gods and goddesses who displayed human characteristics (E).