Decline and Fall of Classical Empires

Text by Mr. Millhouse – Hebron HS
Correlates to Stearns Chapter 5
Decline and Fall of Empires

• Nine major factors led to the decline of the classical empires
  – Dynastic Succession
  – Bureaucratic Corruption
  – Inequitable Economic Burdens
  – Regional, Racial, or Ethnic Tension
  – Decline of Martial Spirit
  – Moral Decline
  – Escapist or Otherworldly Religions
  – Costly Technology
  – External Enemies
Dynastic Succession

• Rome did not have a clear line of succession
  – Murders and disputes over succession undermined the credibility of the empire
  – From 235-284 CE twenty-six emperors claimed the imperial throne
    • Finally stabilized by Diocletian and Constantine
Dynastic Succession

- Dynastic empires experienced a decline in quality of rulers as time went on
  - Decline of the quality of rulers led to uprisings, usurpations, and civil wars
  - Factions emerged amongst elites in Han China
Bureaucratic Corruption

• Yellow Turban rebellion
  – Peasant rebellion caused by corrupt government practices
  – Fueled by decline of population due to plague epidemics

• Military took control of Han government duties by 190 CE
Inequitable Economic Burdens

• Increasing tax burden fell to the poor as rich evade taxes
• Growth of large plantations and the decline in free farming contributed to fall of Rome and Han China
  – Wang Mang (9-23 CE) attempts land reforms
• Gupta government was unable to collect its tax revenue
Regional, Racial, or Ethnic Tensions

- Alexander the Great was unable to unify Greek, Egyptians, Persians, and others
- India reverted back to regional states based on language and ethnicity after fall of Mauryan Empire
- Diocletian divides Roman empire into four separate administrations each with its own capital
Decline of Martial Spirit

- Roman army depended upon citizens’ pride in military service
  - Decline in pride forced Romans to use mercenaries which drained the treasury
- Ashoka’s emphasis on pacifism as a state policy sapped the spirit of Indians
Moral Decline

- Roman emperors became increasingly self-indulgent and hedonistic
  - Nero, Caligula, et al.
- Hedonism and extravagance of the upper class blamed for the decline of the Han dynasty
Escapist or Otherworldly Religions

• Christianity stressed heavenly rather than earthly rewards
  – Religious strife also contributed to chaos in Rome

• Many Chinese began to follow Buddhism or escapists Daoists

• Ashoka’s emphasis on pacifist Buddhism alienated many Hindus
The Spread of Christianity. Christian churches appeared first in the major cities of the Empire and spread only gradually into the countryside, in part due to the establishment of monasteries.
Costly Technology

- Cost of maintaining engineering wonders put a strain on already impoverished economies
  - Roman aqueducts, roads, arenas, etc.
External Enemies

• Han dynasty experienced repeated invasions by the Xiongnu (Huns)
• Germanic tribes lived on northern plains of Europe for centuries
  – Visigoths settled, developed agriculture, and served in the Roman military
External Invasions

• In the 4th century, Huns migrated from their homelands in central Asia
  – Led by Attila the Hun, the Huns attacked the Romans and the Germanic homelands

• Germans sought refuge in the Roman empire
  – Established permanent settlements in Roman territories
  – Visigoths sack rome in 410 CE
  – Overthrow last Roman emperor in 476 CE
This map shows the breakdown of the Roman frontier in the late fourth and early fifth centuries CE. Great cities including Augusta Treverorum (modern Trier) and Rome itself were sacked by invading barbarian forces. Historians debate the reasons for what happened, but one of them was the rise of the Huns in Central Asia. As they moved westwards, they pushed against the various Germanic and Gothic tribes. These, in turn, looked for refuge and plunder inside the Roman Empire.
Effects of Collapse

• Han dynasty divided into three rival kingdoms in 220 CE
  – Three kingdoms would fight for control of China for centuries
• Christianity was most prominent survivor of Roman collapse
  – Rise of the church as an institution
• Most Roman institutions disappeared as Germans were unwilling or incapable of continuing them
Picture Credits

- http://go.hrw.com/venus_images/0304MC05.gif
- http://www.beloit.edu/~classics/main/courses/history222/nero/Nero(55-9)Medium.jpg
- http://wps.ablongman.com/wps/media/objects/262/268312/art/figures/KISH_06_134.gif
- http://www.theodora.com/wfb/photos/china/great_wall_china_photo_gov_2.jpg
- http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~klio/maps/re/EmpireMap5.jpg