

The Fall of Rome

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Was the collapse of the Roman empire in the west a series of gradual adjustments or a catastrophic event that brought violent change?

Dark ages

In September 476 AD, the last Roman emperor of the west, Romulus Augustulus, was deposed by a Germanic prince called Odovacar, who had won control of the remnants of the Roman army of Italy. He then sent the western imperial regalia to Constantinople.

The Roman empire in western Europe - a centralised superstate which had been in existence for 500 years - had ceased to exist, its single emperor replaced by upwards of a dozen kings and princes.

The vast majority of these rulers, like Odovacar himself, were non-Roman in origin. Their power was based on the control of military forces which were the direct descendants of recent immigrants into the Roman world, whether Anglo-Saxons in Britain, Goths in southern Gaul and Spain, or Vandals in North Africa.

The end of empire was a major event in human history.

What difference did this political revolution make to real life in the former western Empire?

For many 19th and earlier 20th century commentators, the fall of Rome marked the death knell of education and literacy, sophisticated architecture, advanced economic interaction, and, not least, the rule of written law.

The 'dark ages' which followed were dark not only because written sources were few and far between, but because life became nasty, brutish and short.

Other commentators, who were more focused on the slavery and entrenched social hierarchies that were also part of the Roman world, didn't really disagree with these observations.

But they saw the 'dark ages' as a more necessary evil - Rome had to fall to destroy large-scale slavery and make possible, eventually, a world which valued all human beings more equally.

On either view, the end of empire was a major event in human history.

Massive inequality

Justinian I and his retinue, mosaic detail of the emperor, c. 547 AD

The 1960s, however, were famously a time when all established certainties were challenged, and this applied to ancient history no less than to sexuality.

The eastern half of the Roman empire not only survived the collapse of its western partner in the third quarter of the fifth century, but went on to thrive in the sixth.

Under Justinian I (527 - 565 AD), it was still constructing hugely impressive public monuments, such as the *Hagia Sophia* in Constantinople, and had reconquered Italy, North Africa, and parts of Spain.

As late as 383 AD, captive barbarians were being fed to wild animals in the Colosseum.

At the same time, there still lived in the west many individuals, who continued to describe themselves as Romans, and many of the successor states, it was correctly pointed out, were still operating using recognisably Roman institutions and justifying themselves ideologically with reference to canonical Roman values.

Consequently, by the late 1990s the word 'transformation' had come into vogue. No one denied that many things changed between 350 and 600 AD, but it became fashionable to see these changes as much more the result of long-term evolution than of a violent imperial collapse.

These revisionist arguments have some real substance. There really was little change at one deep level - the life of the peasant producers who made up perhaps 90% of the population.

I am still staggered by feats of Roman engineering, blown away by the beauty of some of the buildings Romans lived in, and delighted by the sophistication of the empire's literary and political culture.

But these cultural glories were limited to a tiny privileged elite - those who owned enough land to count as gentry landowners. They represented maybe 3% of the whole population. Its structures were probably unspeakably vile to pretty much everyone else.

As late as 383 AD, captive barbarians were being fed to wild animals in the Colosseum, and its criminal law dealt ruthlessly with anyone seeking to remedy the highly unequal distribution of property.

In 650 AD, as in 350 AD, peasants were still labouring away in the much the same way to feed themselves and to produce the surplus which funded everything else.

Fall of Rome

On every other level, however, 'transformation' understates, in my view, the nature and importance of Rome's passing.

A two-stage process occurred between the battle of Hadrianople in 378 AD, when the emperor Valens and two-thirds of his army (upwards of 10,000 men) fell in a single afternoon at the hands of an army of Gothic migrants, to the deposition of Romulus Augustulus nearly a century later.

This process created the successor kingdoms. Stage one consisted of immigration onto Roman soil, followed by a second stage of aggressive expansion of the territory under the migrants' control. All of it was carried forward at the point of the sword.

The central Roman state collapsed because the migrants forcibly stripped it of its tax base.

The central Roman state collapsed because the migrants forcibly stripped it of the tax base which it had used to fund its armies, not because of long-term 'organic' transformations.

In this violent process of collapse, some local Roman societies immediately went under. In Britain and north eastern Gaul particularly, Roman landowners lost their estates and Roman culture disappeared with them.

In southern Gaul, Spain, and Italy, Roman landowners survived by coming to terms with the migrants. But to suppose that this was a voluntary process - as some of the revisionary work done since the 1960s has supposed - is to miss the point that these landowners faced the starkest of choices.

As the central Roman state ceased to exert power in their localities, they either had to do such deals, or lose the lands that were the basis of their entire wealth. And even where Roman landowners survived, the effects of Rome's fall were nonetheless revolutionary.

Roman culture

In judging these effects, it is important to recognise two separate dimensions of 'Roman-ness' - 'Roman' in the sense of the central state, and 'Roman' in the sense of characteristic patterns of life prevailing within its borders.

At the state level, the empire was not just replaced by mini versions of itself, even where Roman landowners survived. Within two generations of 476 AD, a new and weaker type of state structure had emerged right across the former Roman west.

The old empire had employed two key levers of central power - large-scale taxation, two-thirds of which was then spent on maintaining the second lever, a large professional army.

Learning Latin was now a waste of time - advanced literacy was confined to churchmen for 500 years.

This high-tax, high-spend structure meant that the Roman state both intruded itself bureaucratically into localities to raise taxation, and was also able, if necessary, to compel obedience to its demands by employing the army, which the taxation supported.

The new states of post-Roman Europe were much weaker affairs. Even where other less important Roman institutions survived, the new kings had only much-diminished revenue rights and their armies were composed of semi-professional contingents of local landowners.

On the level of local 'Roman-ness' too, the revolution could not have been more profound. The characteristic patterns of local Roman life were in fact intimately linked to the existence of the central Roman state, and, as the nature of state structures changed in the post-Roman world, so too did local life.

The Roman city, for instance, was the basic unit of local administration through which taxation was raised. As central tax raising powers disappeared, so too did the need to keep the city, and by 700 AD it was history.

Many of the more advanced elements of the Roman economy, such as specialised production and long-distance trade, quickly disappeared too.

The Roman state had subsidised large-scale transport structures for its own purposes, but these had also been used by traders. As this command economy collapsed, so did much of the trade dependent upon it. Cultural patterns were also transformed beyond recognition. Roman elites learned to read and write classical Latin to highly-advanced levels through a lengthy and expensive private education, because it qualified them for careers in the extensive Roman bureaucracy.

The end of taxation meant that these careers disappeared in the post-Roman west, and elite parents quickly realised that spending so much money on learning Latin was now a waste of time. As a result, advanced literacy was confined to churchmen for the next 500 years.

Militarisation

Copy manuscript depicting various scenes from a psalm

Everywhere you look, the fall of the Rome let loose profound change. At the heart of it all, where change at state and local level intertwined, lay the militarisation of elite landowners.

The end of the Roman empire generated many states where previously there had been one, and another casualty of 476 AD was thus the *Pax Romana*. Warfare became endemic to the former Roman west.

In this situation, successor state kings needed military service above all, and quickly mobilised Roman landowners with contingents of their retainers to fight alongside the descendants of their migrant warbands.

Dark age Europe was born out of the violent destruction of the Roman empire

But taxation had always been justified in the Roman period by the fact that it paid for defence. When successor state kings made local Roman landowners turn out for battle, not only was it a nasty shock, but it was also the ultimate double whammy.

Having to pay taxation *and* fight was massively unpopular - witness the stringing up of the Roman grandee Parthenius, employed by the Frankish king Chilperic as his chief tax collector in 574 AD. Kings quickly realised that they could gain much popularity by canceling tax obligations.

In the short term, they could do so since they no longer needed the money for a professional army. But in the longer term, it was precisely this process which created the new Europe of powerful local landowners and relatively powerless states, which lacked both tax revenues and professional armies, and generated the cultural change, since literacy was now so marginal to secular elite life.

It also brings us back to the peasantry. One striking feature of post-Roman archaeology is the substantial decline it demonstrates in overall population. Even if peasants don't fight, they are not immune to the effects of warfare, and declining economic opportunity also hit their capacities to make a living. Though probably not really aware of it, they too had benefited from the *Pax Romana*.

Dark age Europe was born out of the violent destruction of the Roman empire, as the battlefield replaced the bureau at the heart of elite life, but its ramifications were felt at every social level.

DECLINE OF THE GUPTA EMPIRE

The last great king of the Gupta was Skanda Gupta who ascended the throne about 455 A.D. Even during the later years of Kumar Gupta's reign, the empire was attacked by a tribe called Pushyamitra but it was repulsed. And immediately after the accession of Skanda Gupta, Hunas made inroads, but they too were repelled.

However, fresh waves of Invaders arrived and shattered the fabric of the Gupta Empire. Although in the beginning the Gupta king Skanda Gupta tried effectively to stem the march of the Hunas into India, his successors proved to be weak and could not cope with the Huna invaders, who excelled in horsemanship and who possibly used stirrups made of metal. Although the Huna power was soon overthrown by Yasodharman of Malwa, the Malwa prince successfully challenged the authority of the Guptas and set up Pillars of victory commemorating his conquest (AD 532) of almost the whole of northern India. Indeed Yasodharman's rule was short lived, but he dealt a severe blow to the Gupta empire.

The Gupta empire was further undermined by the rise of the feudatories. The governors appointed by the Gupta kings in north Bengal and their feudatories in Samatata or south-east Bengal broke away from the Gupta control. The later Gupthas of Magadha established their power in Bihar. Besides, the Maukharis rose to power in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh and had their capital at Kanauj. Probably by AD 550 Bihar and Uttar Pradesh and passed out of Gupta hands. And the rulers of Valabhi established their authority in Gujarat and Western Malw

ANOTHER CAUSE:

After the reign of Skanda Gupta (467 AD) any Gupta coin or inscription has been found in western Malwa and Saurashtra. The migration of guild of Silk weavers from Gujarat to Malwa in AD 473 and their adoption of non-productive professions show that there was not much demand for cloth produced by them. The advantages from Gujarat trade gradually disappeared. After the middle of the fifth century the Gupta kings made desperate attempts to maintain their gold currency by reducing the content of pure gold in it. The loss of western India complete by the end of the fifth century, must have deprived the Guptas of the rich revenues from trade and commerce and crippled them economically, and the princes of Thaneswar established their power in Haryana and then gradually moved on to Kanauj.

ADDITIONAL NOTE :

The causes of the downfall of disappearance of the Guptas were basically not different from those that brought the end many ancient and medieval dynasties. Over and above the usual causes of administrative inefficiency, weak successors and stagnant fall of the Guptas: dynastic dissensions, foreign invasions and some internal rebellions.

DYNASTIC DISSENSIONS AND WEAK RULERS:

There is evidence to show that following the death of Kumaragupta and Skandagupta, there were civil wars and struggles for the throne. For instance, we have the successors of Buddhagupta, highlighting the rule of more than just one king. Those were Vinayagupta in Bengal and Bhanugupta in Iran.

Absence of law of primogeniture along with strong centralized authority in ancient and medieval periods led to chaos. Thus we see that the resources of the empire were frittered away in petty squabbles and wars for the throne.

Besides circumstances weakening the Gupta monarchy, the very personalities of the later Gupta Kings contributed to the ultimate fall of this dynasty. They were not only men of weak character but also some of them followed pacifics that affected other spheres of administration, particularly that of military efficiency.

FOREIGN INVASIONS:

Foreign invasions were the second major factor in the decline and disappearance of the Guptas. The invasion of barbaric tribe Pushyamitra was not the decisive. A far more important invasion was that of the White Huns, who, after settling in the Oxus valley, invaded India. First appeared during the reign of Buddhagupta. Again they reappeared under the command of Toramana who annexed a large portion of the north-western region including parts of Modern U.P. He followed by his son, Mihirakula, who became the overlord of north India. Indeed he was defeated by Yashodharman of Malwa but the repercussions of these invasions were disastrous for the Gupta Empire.

INTERNAL REBELLIONS :

As a result of the weakening of Central Authority a number of feudal chieftans, principally those of the north-western region, assumed the status of independent rulers might bear some names in this regard such as Maitrakas (of Kathiawar), Panivarajaks (of Budndhelkhand), Unchkalpas, Laxman in Allahabad. Etc.

After the reign of Buddhagupta, the status of certain governors of North Bengal and Yamuna - Narmada area around Magadh too assumed independence and became to be known as the later Guptas.

By far one of the most important rebellions was that of Yashodharman of western Malwa who became independent and established his kingdom. He defeated Mihirakula and seems to have made extensive conquests from the Himalayas to Brahmaputra. However, his empire did not last very long. Nevertheless, it set a pattern for other feudal chieftans, who in due course, broke away from Central authority.

Last but not the least, we might note that the change in the Gupta polity from one of militancy to that of pacifism greatly affected the composition of the empire. We do have instance some of the later Gupta kings who changed from Hinduism to Buddhism and this was reflected in total military inefficiency of the later Guptas.

Apart from these three major groups of causes, that led to the final disappearance of the Gupta empire, it is to be borne in mind that no empire after the Mauryas was a reality. Ver often they were total fictions.

With the disappearance of the Mauryan empire no empire in its full connotation came into existence in India since we had no tradition like that of the Greeks where it is held that the State comes into existence for the necessities of life but continues to exist for the good of life, and man, by nature, is a political animal. Somehow, after the Mauryan era the thinking of India became apolitical. The first factor that contributed for this outlook of Indians was the emergence of feudalism about which evidence is there from the days of the Satavahanas. This tendency grew in the Christian era and was firmly established by the seventh century AD.

Along with this development one more saboteur of political consciousness was the religious perception of ancient Indians. Beginning before the Christian era it came to be gradually established that the kingship has its own dharma known as rajya-dharma while the people had a handful of dharmas like varnashrama dharma and the grihadharma. All these dharmas led the individual loyalty or perception towards a non-political entity. This thinking is given religious sanction by the priestly order. This thinking is given religious sanction by the priestly order of the day. Thus the State never was the architectonic factor in the life of ancient India except during the Mauryan era. It is this perception of ancient India that made the emergence and disappearance of hundreds of States mere non-events.

A Military Coup and Invasions – fall of the Mauryan Empire

In 185 BCE, the rule of the Maurya family ended when an army commander-in-chief, Pusyamitra Sunga, murdered the last Maurya king during a parade of his troops. Pusyamitra's rise to power has been described, perhaps inaccurately, as a reaction by Brahmins to the Buddhism of the Maurya family. Nevertheless, the influence of state power on religion continued, with Pusyamitra supporting orthodox Brahminism and appointing Brahmins to state offices. And, with Pusyamitra's rule, animal sacrifices returned that had been prohibited under Ashoka and his heirs. Other matters outlawed by the Maurya also returned, including musical festivals and dances.

Then came invasions. Perhaps the collapse of the Maurya Empire had signaled to outsiders that India was now vulnerable -- much as division after Alexander's death had brought an assault by Celts. The first of the great invasions began roughly two years after Pusyamitra took power. The king of Bactria, Demetrius, followed the footsteps of Alexander through the Khyber Pass and extended his power into the northern Indus Valley, where he began what was to become a series of wars between the Greeks and Indians.

The Greeks brought with them a better coin than was being used in India, which contributed to regional and inter-regional trade. They brought with them ideas in astronomy, architecture and art that spread through India, and with the new art came new depictions of Hindu gods and a new image of the Buddha.

Between the years 155 and 130, a Greek named Menander (known to Indians as Milinda) ruled in India's northwest. He sent his army into the Ganges Valley as far as Magadha's capital, Pataliputra. But, failing to capture that city, he returned to his kingdom in the northwest. In Pataliputra the Sunga dynasty, created by Pusyamitra Sunga, continued its rule.

Like Ashoka, Menander converted to Buddhism. This conversion may have facilitated the passage of Buddhist ideas west to Bactria and from Bactria farther west. The Greeks in India helped in spreading ideas westward. The road between India and Bactria had become a bridge to and from the West. To the Indus Valley came ideas from Zoroastrianism, and in India arose the belief in a savior who at the end of time would lead the forces of light and goodness in a final victory against the forces of darkness and evil.

Scythian and Kushan Invasions

Those herdsmen whom the Chinese called Xiongnu expanded against Indo-European speaking tribes called the Yüeh Chih -- also called Kushans. The Kushans pushed against Scythians, who migrated from their homeland in Central Asia into an area southeast of the Caspian Sea, an area to become known as **Parthia**. From 141 to 128 BCE the Scythians were able to expand into a lush, agricultural area, Bactria, against the Greeks there, who were already weakened by warfare. Soon thereafter, the Kushans invaded Bactria. Then around 50 BCE, the Parthian empire -- which in Persia had replaced the power of the Seleucid dynasty -- invaded northwestern India. And also invading India were the Scythians from Bactria.

The last of the Greek kings in India, Hermaeus, tried unsuccessfully to defend his rule from these attacks. In the Indus Valley, Greeks, Scythians and Parthians fought into the first century CE, and the Scythians extended their rule into north-central India and south along India's western coast, to the Gulf of Cambay. They ended Greek rule in India but maintained the Indo-Greek culture, some of which they had acquired in Bactria. In India, the Scythians became known as *Sakas*. Like other conquerors, the Sakas kept the local royalty as their subordinates. And Saka rulers became known as *Satrap*s or *Viceroy*s.

In the middle of the first century CE, another tribe of Kushans left Bactria and moved into northwest India. After a generation or more a Kushan named Kanishka became the greatest of the Kushan kings. He expanded his rule from Bactria to the center of the Ganges valley and south along the Indus River to the Arabian Sea, and like the Saka rulers he absorbed lesser kings and made them sub-rulers.

Trade, Prosperity and Cultural Diffusions

The centuries of invasions were dark times for much of India, but not so for the southern part of the sub-continent, which was peopled by Dravidians. Unlike other Dark Ages, during the period of invasions into India much of its roads and ports were maintained. Southern India benefited from expanded economic and cultural contacts with the world outside India and an expanded trade with West Asia and the Roman Empire. The south had become the most prosperous part of India. Leaving southern ports were ivory, onyx, cotton goods, silks, pepper and other spices, and from the Roman empire the Indians imported tin, lead, antimony and wine.

Indian ships sailed south to Lanka and then east to Southeast Asian ports, where Indian merchants sold cotton cloth, ivory, brass wear, monkeys, parrots and elephants to Chinese merchants, who transported their goods by sea to China. From Southeast Asian ports Indian merchants acquired spices that they traded elsewhere. Trade between India and China passed also across Central Asia by camel caravan, across what would become known as the great northern silk route, China sending musk, raw and woven silk, tung oil and amber westward into India.

Accompanying this seagoing trade, wave after wave of Indians emigrated. These colonists reached Lanka, the coast of Burma, what is now Thailand and Cambodia, the Malay Peninsula, Java, Sumatra and Borneo, and a few reached Taiwan and the Philippines.

In India, meanwhile, the increase in India's trade led to the rise of bankers and financiers among the Indians, and these men of wealth gave support to monarchies and landlords short on cash. Families in banking and commerce extended their enterprises into as many urban centers as they could, in India and abroad. And the increase in trade brought a rise in intellectual activity among the Indians -- as it had among the Greeks. Science and the arts flourished, stimulated too by ideas that the Greeks brought from Bactria.

Kanishka's Empire and Buddhism

Like tribal people before them -- and like the Germans who would invade the Roman Empire -- Kanishka and the Kushans adopted aspects of the civilization they had conquered. Kanishka's empire prospered economically, and it is said that to his court, from all over Asia, the wealth and wisdom of Kanishka attracted merchants, artists, poets and musicians. Like other barbarian rulers, Kanishka found Buddhism more accessible than Hinduism. Kanishka became a patron of Buddhism, and Buddhists would rank him as one of their own and with Ashoka and Menander as a great king. Kanishka would remain attached to warfare for the remainder of his life, while his attachment to Buddhism remained an ideal separate from the struggle over power.

Kanishka was eclectic in religion. He appears also to have been inclined toward the Persian cult of Mithras, to Zoroastrianism, and to have also worshiped Greek and Hindu deities. Buddhism dominated in the cities of Kanishka's empire and in Kanishka's court, while through his empire Brahmin families maintained orthodox Hinduism.

Kanishka is said to have been attempting to reconcile Hinduism and Buddhism. And he convened a Buddhist council in Kashmir -- much as the emperor Constantine would call a council of Christians -- in hope of resolving conflict that had developed among Buddhists: between Mahayana Buddhism, meaning the Great Vehicle, and Hinayana Buddhism, the Little Vehicle. Hinayana Buddhism was mainly in the southern half of India.

Achaemenid Persian Empire

East of the Zagros Mountains, a high plateau stretches off towards **India**. While **Egypt** was rising up against the Hyksos, a wave of pastoral tribes from north of the Caspian Sea was drifting down into this area and across into India. By the time the **Assyrians** had built their new **empire**, a second wave had covered the whole stretch between the Zagros and the Hindu Kush. Some tribes settled, others retained their semi-nomadic lifestyle. These were the Iranian peoples.

Like all nomadic peoples lacking police and **law** courts, a code of honour was central to the Iranian tribes, and their religious beliefs differed from those of **farming** people. Whereas the farmers of Egypt and **Mesopotamia** had converted nature **gods** into **city** guardians, the Iranians had begun distilling them into a few universal principles. Zoroaster, who lived some time around 1000 BCE, drove this process. **For** him, the only god was the creator, Ahura Mazda, bringer of **asha** -- light, order, truth: the law or logic by which the world was structured. Even those who were not practising Zoroastrians grew up shaped by a culture that valued simple ethical ideas such as telling the truth.

In some areas, one tribe would manage to gather a collection of other tribes under its leadership. The Medes were one such. They built a capital at Ecbatana ('meeting place') in the eastern Zagros from where they extended their power. In 612 BCE, Cyaxares, king of the Medes, stormed **Nineveh** with the Chaldeans, after which he pushed into the north-west. In 585 BCE, the Medes were fighting the **Lydians** on the Halys river when a solar eclipse frightened both sides into making peace. Soon afterwards, Cyaxares died leaving an empire of sorts to his son Astyages (585-550 BCE).

One of the regions whose tribes paid tribute to the Medes was **Persia**, which lay south-east of Ecbatana, beyond **Elam**. There were around 10 or 15 tribes in Persia, of which one was the **Pasargadae**. The leader of the Pasargadae always came from the **Achaemenid** clan, and, in 559 BCE, a new leader was chosen: **Cyrus II** ('the Great').

We are told that **Cyrus** was the grandson of Astyages on his mother's side, but that did not stop him wanting to shake off the **Median** yoke. By 552 BCE, he had formed the Persian tribes into a federation and begun a series of uprisings. When the inevitable showdown with his grandfather came in 550 BCE, the Medes mutinied and joined Cyrus to march on Ecbatana.

Cyrus took the title 'Shah ('King') of Persia' and built a capital on the site of his victory, which he called Pasargadae, after his tribe. Winning the Medes over had landed Cyrus with a vague, sprawling empire of countless different peoples, however. He faced cultural diversity, suspicion and outright hostility. Lydia and Chaldean **Babylon** had had agreements with the Medes; neither felt comfortable about a Persian takeover.

Lydia was won because Cyrus did not play by the rules. After an indecisive battle near the Halys river one autumn, King **Croesus** (c. 560-c. 546 BCE) returned to **Sardis**, expecting to resume fighting in the spring according to custom. But Cyrus followed him home and captured Sardis itself, Lydia's capital and richest of the **Ionian cities**. A century earlier, Lydia had minted the first **coins**, making Ionia a hub of commerce. Now all this fell to Cyrus.

As for Croesus himself, it seems Cyrus may have spared his life, again against all precedent. Cyrus developed a reputation for sparing conquered rulers so he could ask their advice on how best to govern their lands. How much of this reputation was warranted is hard to know, but before Cyrus no one would have wanted it anyway; it would have been a sign of weakness.

Empire of many nations

Cyrus, by contrast, saw cooperation as a strength, particularly when it came to securing the main prize: Babylon. Rather than trying to take the world's greatest city by force, Cyrus fought a propaganda campaign to exploit the unpopularity of its king, Nabonidus. Babylon's traditions would be safer with Cyrus, was the message. The gates were opened and palm fronds were laid before him as he entered the city. Once in Babylon, Cyrus performed the religious ceremonies Nabonidus had neglected and returned confiscated icons to their **temples** around the country. These acts enabled Cyrus to claim legitimate rule in Babylon; rule sanctioned by the **Babylonian** gods. He then explained what place this would take in his empire: his would be an empire based, in effect, on a kind of contract between himself and the various peoples in his care. They would pay their tribute and he would ensure all were free to worship their own gods and live according to their customs.

The exiled **Jews** were allowed to go home and given money towards the building of a new temple in **Jerusalem**. This earned Cyrus a glowing write-up in the Old Testament as well as providing him with a useful buffer state against Egypt. Cyrus's multiculturalism made an enduring imperial peace a real possibility at last and defined the way later empires sought to achieve stable rule. It was obvious to Cyrus that this was the only way he could hope to hold on to his **conquests**, but his was a vision only someone from outside the civilizations of the river valleys, with their intense attachments to local gods, could have conceived.

King of kings

Cyrus's son and successor **Cambyses II** (529-522 BCE) added Egypt to the Persian Empire, but then a revolt broke out at home, led, it seems, by a Median priest posing as Cambyses's brother, whom Cambyses had secretly murdered. Cambyses hurried back but died on the way, leaving one of his generals, a distant relative, to step in. His name was **Darius**. **Darius I** ('the Great') killed the pretender to the throne, but uprisings were now breaking out all over and he found himself having to re-establish Cyrus's conquests. Backed by the army and the noble clans of Persia, grown rich from imperial rule, Darius regained the Empire and extended it into the **Indus Valley**, a prize worth several times more in tribute than Babylon.

Darius realized that if the Empire were to work it needed efficient organization. He divided it into 20 satrapies, or provinces, each paying a fixed rate of tribute to Persia. Each satrapy was run by a centrally appointed satrap, or governor, often related to Darius. To prevent the satrap building a power base, Darius appointed a separate military commander answerable only to him. Imperial spies known as the 'king's

ears' kept tabs on both and reported back to Darius through the postal service – the Empire was connected by a network of roads along which couriers could change horses at stations spaced a day's travel apart.

Darius took much of this structure from the Assyrians, simply applying it on a larger scale, but his use of tribute was something new. Previously, tribute had been essentially protection money paid to avoid trouble, but Darius treated it as tax. He used it to build a navy and embarked on massive public-spending programmes, pumping money into irrigation works, mineral exploration, roads and a canal between the Nile and the Red Sea.

He also established a common currency, which made working far from home much easier. Darius now brought together teams of craftsmen from all over the Empire to build, under the direction of Persian architects, an imperial capital at **Persepolis**. Here he could keep his gold and silver in a giant vault (which soon became too small) and show off the multi-ethnic scope of his empire. Persepolis became a display case for the artistic styles of just about every culture within the Empire, held in a frame of Persian design. It was a visualization of Cyrus's idea of empire.

But Darius never acknowledged Cyrus. He seems to have had a chip on his shoulder about not belonging to Cyrus's branch of the Achaemenid clan. As he outstripped Cyrus's achievements, he began to carry himself in an ever more exalted manner, dropping the title Shah for the grander Shahanshah ('King of Kings'). Like Persepolis, however, this followed directly from Cyrus's vision. Cyrus had played the part of Babylon's king when he entered the city, but his concept of empire demanded a ruler who stood above all kings linked to the interests of any one community. It required a king of kings.

Humiliation and decadence

Darius's later rule saw trouble in the **Mediterranean**. In 499 BCE there was a **Greek** revolt in Ionia. After eventually quashing it, Darius's fleet sailed to punish **Athens** for backing the rebels, only to encounter a surprise defeat. If the Persian administrative machine were not to look dangerously weak, the Greeks would have to be taught a lesson. But when Darius raised taxes to fund a rearmament drive he provoked unrest in more important areas such as Egypt.

It fell to Darius's son **Xerxes I** (486–465 BCE) to restore order in Egypt and take up the Greek question. **Xerxes** carried himself more loftily still than Darius and, with two great empire builders to follow, had even more to prove. But he lacked their cultural sensitivity. When tax increases produced riots in Babylon in 482 BCE, Xerxes sacked the city, destroyed the temple and melted down the solid gold statue of Marduk, three times the size of a man. With it went Babylon's greatness.

Marduk's gold allowed Xerxes to begin assembling his forces to crush the Greeks in 480 BCE. Forced into battle too soon, however, he suffered a worse humiliation than his father. After that, Xerxes seems largely to have withdrawn into the luxury of his court and harem. When Cyrus entered Babylon he had aped the behaviour of a Mesopotamian king for public consumption, but now the private lives of Persian rulers took Mesopotamian form. Shut up in opulent isolation, the later Achaemenids played out an increasingly gaudy pantomime of harem intrigue and palace assassination.

The empire Cyrus and Darius had built was strong enough to weather this slide into decadence for 200 years, but gradually it took its toll. Satraps carved out their own islands of power. Inflation began to bite as taxes kept rising. Even the multiculturalism of the Empire, initially its great strength, had its drawbacks: the huge army was a bewildering ragbag of troops all trained and equipped according to their own traditions, all speaking different languages.

In 401 BCE, **Cyrus the Younger**, Satrap of Lydia, **Phrygia** and Cappadocia, staged a coup against his brother Artaxerxes II (404–358 BCE) with the help of 10,000 Greek mercenaries who returned home when the coup failed. The information they brought back paved the way for the triumphant arrival of **Alexander the Great** in 334 BCE.

Persia had been the first real empire, an empire with an organizational structure developed from a realistic idea of how to govern different subject peoples. It defined the role of an **emperor** and set a template for future empires from the **Romans** to the British. When **Alexander** came to replace the dying Persian Empire with a vision of his own, he held the example of Cyrus in the front of his mind.

"The empire, long divided, must unite; long united, must divide. Thus it has ever been."

This quotation, taken from the classic literary work by Luo Guanzhong, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, best summarizes the cycle of dynastical rise and fall in China.

Although the final years of the Han Dynasty and the Three Kingdoms period that preceded it is often idealized in many Chinese dramatic and literary works, the reality of the period was much less romantic. The imperial court of Han was plagued with corruption. Much of the blame for the downfall of the dynasty in Guanzhong's *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* was placed on the influence of the eunuchs but there were more factors that came into play.

One such factor was the excessive powers held by certain families at court. Their influence was just as great as that of the eunuchs and played a strong role in diminishing the authority of the Son of Heaven—the Emperor. Also, a disgruntled peasantry suffering from natural disasters that befell the empire in 183 CE led to a large-scale uprising. Because of a weak central government, military leaders and local warlords became more powerful as a result of the rebellion. Thus, although the corruption of the eunuchs contributed to the decline of the Han Dynasty, the major reasons behind the dynasty's collapse are the overwhelming influence held by powerful clans, the natural disasters that befell a disgruntled peasantry and the disintegration of central authority within the empire.

The Han Dynasty was the longest imperial dynasty, lasting which lasted for more than four hundred years. The story of the dynasty's foundations began with a struggle between Liu Bang (刘邦) and his rival Xiang Yu (项羽) after the collapse of the Qin Dynasty. Despite being a man of military prowess and from a noble family, Xiang Yu lost the conflict to a man of lower social status—Liu Bang. After the fall of the Qin Dynasty, a divided empire was reunited in 206 BCE under the rule of the Han Dynasty.

While the Han Dynasty saw much technological and cultural advancement, it could not prevent its decay from within the court in much of the latter half of its reign. During this period, especially during the rule of Emperor Huan (桓帝) between 146 to 168 CE, there was an ongoing power struggle between the palace eunuchs and the court officials. While the court officials obtained their office by merit, the palace eunuchs gained their influence through their close relationship with the emperor. One of the most notable events in the rule of Emperor Huan was his persecution of civil and military officials while placing his trust on the palace eunuchs. This substantially weakened the central government and increased the corruption within the court. When Emperor Huan finally passed away in 168 CE and the new Emperor Ling (灵帝) ascended to the throne, the court officials hoped that they could save the Imperial court from certain catastrophe by removing the influence of the eunuchs. However, they were unsuccessful and the officials were arrested, executed or proscribed from office. Thereafter, the eunuchs became so influential that the emperor acknowledged that he looked up to them as he would parents. This contributed greatly to the events that followed.

In the final years of the Han Dynasty, those who held the highest positions in the military were not necessarily men of merit but men with the correct bloodline. During the rule of Emperor Ling, two important families held the highest military posts of General-in-Chief (大将军), General of Agile Cavalry (骠骑将军) and General of Chariots and Cavalry (车骑将军)—the Dong (董) and the He (何). These two families were related to the Imperial family by marriage and, along with the eunuchs, played a central role in the eventual downfall of the Han Dynasty through jealousy and rivalry between the clans. After the death of Emperor Ling, there was a war of succession between Empress He (何后) and the Empress-Dowager Dong (董太后). Both wanted the descendants of the two respective families to be the next rulers of the Han Dynasty. Although Empress He claimed victory for a short while by placing Emperor Shao (少帝) on the throne, later events caused him to be deposed and his half-brother, Emperor Xian (献帝) from the Dong clan, was placed on the throne.

According to the *Chronicles of the Later Han* (资治通鉴), the final years of the Han Dynasty were plagued with many natural disasters. The empire was especially beleaguered in the two years preceding a large-scale peasant uprising. For two summers in a row, drought was recorded. The autumn of 183 CE equally as difficult for the peasants as flooding of the Yellow River further added to their misery. In addition to the natural disasters, the peasantry was heavily taxed from unsuccessful ventures against foreign nomadic tribes. In 177 CE, an entire army was defeated and destroyed in a major military expedition against the Xianbi tribes of the north. With this added burden on the peasantry, the stage was set for a large-scale revolt in the volatile rural areas of China.

Although there was continual unrest and minor uprisings in the last century of the Han Dynasty, there was none as significant and as devastating as the Yellow Turban Rebellion (黄巾之乱). It began with the spiritual leader Zhang Jiao (张角) establishing a secret religious sect named "Taiping Tao" (Doctrine of Justice). He rapidly rose in popularity with the peasantry by spreading his teachings all over northern China and through his spiritual healing of the sick. He claimed that the "Blue Heaven" (the Han government) was dead and a new era for the "Yellow Heaven" had begun. He called for an uprising to overthrow the Han court and to establish a peasant regime.

Rebellion erupted in the second month of 184 CE. Yellow Turban rebels all over China rose up in revolt of the dynasty while burning government offices and looting towns and villages. Immediately, He Jin (何进), brother to the empress, was made General-in-Chief and was charged with the task of defeating the rebels. Although initial operations against the rebels resulted in setbacks and defeat, the uprising was quelled and the major leaders killed within nine months. However, the Han military and the power of the state were severely weakened. Many properties were destroyed and the loss of life on both sides was immense. Over the course of the uprising, the wealth of the eunuchs accumulated as did their power and control over the state because of the absence of government officials.

Because of the weakened Han military, the Yellow Turban Rebellion also caused the Han government to desperately recruit men to fight for their cause. However, charismatic leaders managed to form their own paramilitary groups and join the Han army to deal with the uprising. An example of this can be seen in the first chapter of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* where the emperor issues a call for volunteer fighters against the rebels. The protagonist, Liu Bei (刘备), decides to recruit his own army instead of joining up with the government forces. Another example deals with a volunteer army recruited from Southern China to deal with the rebels. According to Sun Jian's (孙坚) biography in the *Chronicles of the Three Kingdoms* (三国志), the young military officer, Sun Jian, gathered recruits from his home district and joined up with the Han army to fight against the Yellow Turban rebels (14). While the central government decayed, these paramilitary groups grew in strength.

Although the rulers Cao Cao (曹操), Sun Quan (孙权) and Liu Bei have near-legendary status in folklore and in the novel Romance of the Three Kingdom, their rise to prominence was greatly facilitated by the collapse of the central government after the Yellow Turban Rebellion. After the death of Emperor Ling in 189 CE and the ascension of Emperor Shao, General-in-Chief, He Jin, immediately took action to rid the dynasty of the eunuchs and by summoning a provincial governor, Dong Zhuo (董卓), to the capital to deal with them. Unfortunately, it was the eunuchs who struck first and assassinated He Jin before the plan could be put into motion. In retaliation, one of He Jin's subordinates and future warlord, Yuan Shao (袁紹), broke into the palace with soldiers and killing more than two thousand eunuchs. During the chaos that ensued, Dong Zhuo managed to seize power of the capital, deposing Emperor Shao in the process and setting up Emperor Xian as his puppet. This military interference was not welcomed by the rest of the empire and in the winter of 190 CE, all of the provinces east of the capital rebelled against Dong Zhuo. Leading this opposition was Yuan Shao who rallied a collective group of local officials and their provincial armies against the capital. Despite their successes against Dong Zhuo that led to his assassination, bickering among these officials took hold of the fragile alliance between them, thereby dissolving it. With little guidance, the central government soon fell into disarray while China descended into a state of anarchy.

A contributing factor that led to this state of anarchy was the weakening of the capital and the growing power possessed by the provincial armies. After the Yellow Turbans Rebellion, a reform swept across the provinces whereby provincial "inspectors" were replaced by "governors". Prior to the revolt, the role of inspectors was only to supervise those who ran the province and to raise armies in times of crisis. However, after the reform, governors were granted executive authority over the province. Therefore, the governors not only had power over the civil decisions of the province, but they also became the military leaders. The initial intention was to quickly raise armies and local militia in the provinces in case of further uprisings. However this had an adverse effect on the weakened central government for power had now been decentralized. As the incidents of 190 CE show, a collective group of governors were able to launch an uprising against the central government, then led by Dong Zhuo. It was this same group of governors that decided to use their military power against each other, thus beginning an age of warlords in the last decades of the Han Dynasty.

Three warlord states emerged victorious from this age of anarchy, establishing their boundaries from their conquered lands. The wise Cao Cao, a government official under He Jin, rose to prominence during the warlord period. He defeated his rivals one after the other including Yuan Shao, despite being heavily outnumbered and outsupplied. Eventually, he was the only remaining ruler of the vast and populous northern and central plains. Liu Bei, a distant relative to the Imperial House of Han, vowed to uphold the Han Dynasty. He sought to establish a base to restore the dying empire and after many setbacks, he eventually occupied the mountainous and resourceful regions of Ba Shu (巴蜀, modern Szechuan province). Lastly, the descendants of Sun Jian—sons Sun Ce (孙策) and Sun Quan—spent much of the warlord period battling local warlords and the southern barbarian tribes. They managed to unite the territories south of the Yangtze River, thus becoming the third contending warring state).

Following Cao Cao's death, his son Cao Pi (曹丕) would usurp the throne from Emperor Xian in 220 CE and establish the Wei Dynasty (魏). Liu Bei, a loyalist to Han, followed by proclaiming himself Emperor of the Shu-Han Dynasty (蜀汉). While Sun Quan was the last to declare himself Emperor of the Wu Dynasty (吴), China would experience a period called the Three Kingdoms. For several decades to come, regardless of the many battles between them, the borders of these kingdoms would remain relatively static. Each of the kingdoms established their own customs and government systems. They became three autonomous dynasties that succeeded the four centuries of dominance by the Han Dynasty.

Despite its previous glory, the Han Dynasty was plagued by corruption, resulting in its deterioration. Although the internal struggle between the eunuchs and the government officials played a large role in the fall of the empire, there were other crucial factors at work as well—powerful family clans, natural disaster and decentralization. The increasingly weakening government eventually plunged the empire into a state of anarchy that led to the period of the Three Kingdoms. However, this era too will end with the reunification of the empire under the Jin Dynasty. Thus, the cycle continues—the empire, long united is divided but long divided, must unite.