# 12

# Cross-Cultural Exchanges on the Silk Roads

**In the year 139 B.C.E., the Chinese emperor Han Wudi** sent an envoy named Zhang Qian on a mission to lands west of China. The emperor's purpose was to find allies who could help combat the nomadic Xiongnu, who menaced the northern and western borders of the Han empire. From captives he had learned that other nomadic peoples in far western lands bore grudges against the Xiongnu, and he reasoned that they might ally with Han forces to pressure their common enemy.

The problem for Zhang Qian was that to communicate with potential allies against the Xiongnu, he had to pass directly through lands they controlled. Soon after Zhang Qian left Han territory, Xiongnu forces captured him. For ten years the Xiongnu held him in comfortable captivity: they allowed him to keep his personal servant, and they provided him with a Xiongnu wife, with whom he had a son. When suspicions about him subsided, however, Zhang Qian escaped with his family and servant. He even had the presence of mind to keep with him the yak tail that Han Wudi had given him as a sign of his ambassadorial status. He fled to the west and traveled as far as Bactria, but he did not succeed in lining up allies against the Xiongnu. While returning to China, Zhang Qian again fell into Xiongnu hands but managed to escape after one year's detention when the death of the Xiongnu leader led to a period of turmoil. In 126 B.C.E. Zhang Qian and his party returned to China and a warm welcome from Han Wudi.

Although his diplomatic efforts did not succeed, Zhang Qian's mission had far-reaching consequences. Apart from political and military intelligence about western lands and their peoples, Zhang Qian also brought back information of immense commercial value. While in Bactria about 128 B.C.E., he noticed Chinese goods—textiles and bamboo articles—offered for sale in local markets. Upon inquiry he learned that they had come from southwest China by way of Bengal. From that information he deduced the possibility of establishing trade relations between China and Bactria through India.

Han Wudi responded enthusiastically to that idea and dreamed of trading with peoples inhabiting lands west of China. From 102 to 98 B.C.E., he mounted an ambitious campaign that broke the power of the Xiongnu and pacified central Asia. His conquests simplified trade relations, since it became unnecessary to route commerce through India. The intelligence that Zhang Qian gathered during his travels thus contributed to the opening of the silk roads—the network of trade routes that linked lands as distant as China and the Roman empire—and more generally to the establishment of relations between China and lands to the west.

China and other classical societies imposed political and military control over vast territories. They promoted trade and communication within their own empires, bringing regions that had previously been self-sufficient into a larger economy and society. They also fostered the

**OPPOSITE: Ruins of the ancient city of Khocho (Gaochang), near Turpan
on the northern silk road.**

spread of cultural and religious traditions to distant regions, and they encouraged the construction of institutional frameworks that promoted the long-term survival of those traditions.

The influence of the classical societies did not stop at the imperial boundaries. Nearby peoples regarded their powerful neighbors with a mixture of envy and suspicion, and they sought to share the wealth that those neighbors generated. They pursued that goal by various means, both peaceful and violent, and relations with neighboring peoples, particularly nomadic peoples, became a major preoccupation of all the classical societies.

Beyond their relations with neighboring peoples, the classical societies established a broad zone of communication and exchange throughout much of the earth's eastern hemisphere. Trade networks crossed the deserts of central Asia and the breadth of the Indian Ocean. Long-distance trade passed through much of Eurasia and north Africa, from China to the Mediterranean basin, and to parts of sub-Saharan Africa as well.

This long-distance trade profoundly influenced the experiences of peoples and the development of societies throughout the eastern hemisphere. It brought wealth and access to foreign products, and it enabled peoples to concentrate their efforts on economic activities best suited to their regions. It facilitated the spread of religious traditions beyond their original homelands, since merchants carried their beliefs and sometimes attracted converts in the lands they visited. It also facilitated the transmission of disease: pathogens traveled the trade routes alongside commercial wares and religious faiths. Indeed, the transmission of disease over the silk roads helped bring an end to the classical societies, since infectious and contagious diseases sparked devastating epidemics that caused political, social, and economic havoc. Long-distance trade thus had deep political, social, and cultural as well as economic and commercial implications for classical societies.

# Long-Distance Trade and the Silk Roads Network

Ever since the earliest days of history, human communities have traded with one another, sometimes over long distances. Before classical times, however, long-distance trade was a risky venture. Ancient societies often policed their realms effectively, but since they were relatively small and compact, extensive regions lay beyond their control. Trade passing between societies was therefore liable to interception by bandits or pirates. That risk increased the costs of long-distance transactions in ancient times.

During the classical era, two developments reduced the risks associated with travel and stimulated long-distance trade. In the first, rulers invested heavily in the construction of roads and bridges. They undertook those expensive projects primarily for military and administrative reasons, but roads also had the effect of encouraging trade within individual societies and facilitating exchanges between different societies. In the second, classical societies built large imperial states that sometimes expanded to the point that they bordered on one another: the campaigns of Alexander of Macedon, for example, brought Hellenistic and Indian societies into direct contact, and only small buffer states separated the Roman and Parthian empires. Even when they did not encounter each other so directly, classical empires pacified large stretches of Eurasia and north Africa. As a result, merchants did not face such great risk as in previous eras, the costs of long-distance trade dropped, and its volume rose dramatically.

## *Trade Networks of the Hellenistic Era*

The tempo of long-distance trade increased noticeably during the Hellenistic era, partly because of the many colonies established by Alexander of Macedon and the

**Parthian merchants and other travelers like the soldiers depicted here followed in the footsteps of their Achaemenid and Seleucid predecessors and became regular visitors to northern India. This gray schist carving from Gandhara dates from the second century B.C.E.**

Seleucid rulers in Persia and Bactria. Though originally populated by military forces and administrators, these settlements soon attracted Greek merchants and bankers who linked the recently conquered lands to the Mediterranean basin. The Seleucid rulers worked diligently to promote trade. They controlled land routes linking Bactria, which offered access to Indian markets, to Mediterranean ports in Syria and Palestine. Archaeologists have unearthed hundreds of coins, pieces of jewelry, and other physical remains, including Greek-style sculptures and buildings, that testify to the presence of Greek communities in Persia and Bactria during the Hellenistic era.

Like the Seleucids, the Ptolemies maintained land routes—in their case, routes going south from Egypt to the kingdom of Nubia and Meroë in east Africa—but they also paid close attention to sea lanes and maritime trade. They ousted pirates from sea-lanes linking the Red Sea to the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean. They also built several new ports, the most important being Berenice on the Red Sea, and Alexandria served as their principal window on the Mediterranean.

Even more important, perhaps, mariners from Ptolemaic Egypt learned about the monsoon winds that governed sailing and shipping in the Indian Ocean. During the summer the winds blow regularly from the southwest, whereas in the winter they blow from the northeast. Knowledge of these winds enabled mariners to sail safely and reliably to all parts of the Indian Ocean basin. During the second century B.C.E., Hellenistic mariners learned the rhythm of these winds from Arab and Indian seamen whose ancestors had sailed before the monsoons for centuries. Merchant seamen then established regular links by way of the Red Sea between India and Arabia in the east and Egypt and the Mediterranean basin in the west.

*The Monsoon System*

Establishment and maintenance of these trade routes was an expensive affair calling for substantial investment in military forces, construction, and bureaucracies to administer the commerce that passed over the routes. But the investment paid handsome dividends. Long-distance trade stimulated economic development within the Hellenistic realms themselves, bringing benefits to local economies throughout the empires. Moreover, Hellenistic rulers closely supervised foreign trade and levied taxes on it, thereby deriving income from even foreign products.

*Trade in the
Hellenistic World*

With official encouragement, a substantial trade developed throughout the Hellenistic world, from Bactria and India in the east to the Mediterranean basin in the west. Spices, pepper, cosmetics, gems, and pearls from India traveled by caravan and ship to Hellenistic cities and ports. Grain from Persia and Egypt fed urban populations in distant lands. Mediterranean wine, olive oil, jewelry, and works of art made their way to Persia and Bactria. And throughout the region from India to the Mediterranean, merchants conducted a brisk trade in slaves, largely kidnapping victims or prisoners of war.

Indeed, maritime trade networks through the Indian Ocean linked not only the large classical societies of Eurasia and north Africa but also smaller societies in east Africa. During the late centuries B.C.E., the port of Rhapta emerged as the principal commercial center on the east African coast. Archaeologists have not discovered the precise location of Rhapta, but it probably was located near modern Dar es Salaam in Tanzania. With increasing trade, groups of professional merchants and entrepreneurs emerged at Rhapta, and coins came into general use on the east African coast. Merchants of Rhapta imported iron goods such as spears, axes, and knives from southern Arabia and the eastern Mediterranean region in exchange for ivory, rhinoceros horn, tortoise shell, and slaves obtained from interior regions. Just as trade in the Mediterranean basin encouraged economic and political development in regions such as western Europe, far-flung commercial networks of the Hellenistic era fostered economic organization and the emergence of states in the distant lands that they brought into interaction.

## *The Silk Roads*

The establishment of classical empires greatly expanded the scope of long-distance trade, as large portions of Eurasia and north Africa fell under the sway of one classical society or another. The Han empire maintained order in China and pacified much of central Asia, including a sizable corridor offering access to Bactria and western markets. The Parthian empire displaced the Seleucids in Persia and extended its authority to Mesopotamia. The Roman empire brought order to the Mediterranean basin. With the decline of the Mauryan dynasty, India lacked a strong imperial state, but the Kushan empire and other regional states provided stability and security, particularly in northern India, that favored long-distance trade.

*Overland
Trade Routes*

As the classical empires expanded, merchants and travelers created an extensive network of trade routes that linked much of Eurasia and north Africa. Historians refer to these routes collectively as the silk roads, since high-quality silk from China was one of the principal commodities exchanged over the roads. The overland silk roads took caravan trade from China to the Roman empire, thus linking the extreme ends of the Eurasian landmass. From the Han capital of Chang'an, the main silk road went west until it arrived at the Taklamakan desert, also known as the Tarim Basin. This desert is one of the most dangerous and inhospitable regions of the earth: its very name, Taklamakan, warns that "he who enters does not come back out." The silk road then split into two main branches that skirted the desert proper and passed through oasis towns that ringed it to the north and south. The branches came together at Kashgar (now known as Kashi, located in the westernmost corner of modern China). From there the reunited road went west to Bactria, where a branch forked off to offer access to Taxila and northern India, while the principal route continued across northern Iran. There it joined with roads to ports on the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf and proceeded to Palmyra (in modern Syria), where it met roads coming from Arabia and ports on the Red Sea. Continuing west, it terminated at the Mediterranean ports of Antioch (in modern Turkey) and Tyre (in modern Lebanon).

A cave painting from the late seventh century C.E. depicts the Chinese emperor Han Wudi (seated on horse) as he dispatches Zhang Qian (kneeling at left) on his mission to western lands in search of an alliance against the Xiongnu.

*Sea-Lanes and Maritime Trade*

The silk roads also included a network of sea-lanes that sustained maritime commerce throughout much of the eastern hemisphere. From Guangzhou in southern China, sea-lanes through the South China Sea linked the east Asian seaboard to the mainland and the islands of southeast Asia. Routes linking southeast Asia with Ceylon (modern Sri Lanka) and India were especially busy during classical times. From India, sea-lanes passed through the Arabian Sea to Persia and Arabia, and through the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea they offered access to land routes and the Mediterranean basin, which already possessed a well-developed network of trade routes.

*Trade Goods*

A wide variety of manufactured products and agricultural commodities traveled over the silk roads. Generally speaking, silk and spices traveled west from producers in southeast Asia, China, and India to consumers in central Asia, Iran, Arabia, and the Roman empire (including Egypt and north Africa as well as the European regions of the empire). Silk came mostly from China, the only land in classical times where cultivators and weavers had developed techniques for producing high-quality silk fabrics. The fine spices—cloves, nutmeg, mace, and cardamom—all came from southeast Asia. Ginger came from China, cinnamon from China and southeast Asia, pepper from India, and sesame oil from India, Arabia, and southwest Asia. Spices were extremely important commodities in classical times because they had many more uses than they do in the modern world. They served not only as condiments and flavoring agents but also as drugs, anesthetics, aphrodisiacs, perfumes, aromatics, and magical potions.

**Map 12.1** **The silk roads, 200 B.C.E.–300 C.E.** Note the extent of the land and sea routes known collectively as the silk roads. Consider the political and economic conditions that would be necessary for regular travel and trade across the silk roads.

Apart from spices, India also exported cotton textiles and valuable exotic items such as pearls, coral, and ivory.

Central Asian and Mediterranean lands exchanged a variety of manufactured goods and other commodities for the silks and spices that they imported. Central Asia produced large, strong horses and high-quality jade, much prized in China by stone carvers. From the Roman empire came glassware, jewelry, works of art, decorative items, perfumes, bronze goods, wool and linen textiles, pottery, iron tools, olive oil, wine, and gold and silver bullion. Mediterranean merchants and manufacturers often imported raw materials such as uncut gemstones, which they exported as finished products in the form of expensive jewelry and decorative items.

Some individuals made very long journeys during classical times: Zhang Qian ventured from China as far west as Bactria; Chinese merchants traveled regularly to central Asia and Persia; several Indian embassies called on Roman emperors; Roman merchants traveled by sea at least as far east as southern India; and Malay merchant mariners sailed from the islands of southeast Asia to India and east Africa. On a few occasions individuals even traveled across much or all of the eastern hemisphere between China and the Roman empire. A Chinese ambassador named Gang Ying embarked on a mission to distant western lands in 97 C.E. and proceeded as far as Mesopotamia before reports of the long and dangerous journey ahead persuaded him to return home. And Chinese sources reported the arrival in 166 C.E. of a delegation claiming to represent the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius. No information survives to throw light on the experiences of this party—or even to confirm its identity—but

Roman subjects from Egypt or Syria might well have traveled as far as China in search of trading opportunities.

Individual merchants did not usually travel from one end of Eurasia to the other. Instead, they handled long-distance trade in stages. On the caravan routes between China and Bactria, for example, Chinese and central Asian nomadic peoples dominated trade. Rarely if ever did they go farther west, however, because the Parthians took advantage of their power and geographic position to control overland trade within their boundaries and to reserve it for their subjects. Once it reached Palmyra, merchandise passed mostly into the hands of Roman subjects such as Greeks, Jews, and Armenians, who were especially active in the commercial life of the Mediterranean basin.

Meanwhile, on the seas, other peoples became involved in long-distance trade. From south China through southeast Asia to Ceylon and India, the principal figures were Malay and Indian mariners. In the Arabian Sea, Persians joined Egyptian and Greek subjects of the Roman empire as the most prominent trading peoples. The Parthian empire largely controlled trade in the Persian Gulf, whereas the Ptolemaic dynasty and later the Roman empire dominated affairs in the Red Sea. After Roman emperors absorbed Egypt in the first century C.E., their subjects carried on an especially brisk trade between India and the Mediterranean. The Greek geographer Strabo reported in the early first century C.E. that as many as 120 ships departed annually from the Red Sea for India. Archaeologists have unearthed the remains of a Roman trading outpost at Arikamedu, near modern Pondicherry in southern India, and literary sources report that merchants subject to Roman rule established Indian colonies also at Muziris (near modern Cranganore), Barygaza (near modern Broach), Barbarikon (near modern Karachi), and other sites as well. Meanwhile, since the mid-first century C.E., the Romans also had dominated both the eastern and the western regions of mare nostrum, the Mediterranean.

It is impossible to determine the quantity or value of trade that passed over the silk roads in classical times, but it clearly made a deep impression on contemporaries. By the first century C.E., pepper cinnamon, and other spices graced the tables of the



*The Organization of Long-Distance Trade*

**During the first century B.C.E. Romans developed advanced glass-blowing techniques that enabled them to produce wares such as this jar that were popular with wealthy consumers.**



**A Roman coin dated 189 C.E. depicts a merchant ship near the lighthouse at Alexandria. Ships like this one regularly picked up pepper and cinnamon from India along with other cargoes.**

A mosaic of the second century C.E. depicts a musician playing flutes and a dancer wearing a thin and revealing silk garment.

wealthy classes in the Roman empire, where silk garments had become items of high fashion. Indeed, silk was in such demand that Roman merchants often stretched their supplies by unraveling the densely woven fabrics that came from China and then reweaving them into larger numbers of sheer garments that were sometimes so light as to be transparent. Some Romans fretted that see-through silk attire would lead to moral decay, and others worried that hefty expenditures for luxury items would ruin the imperial economy. In both cases their anxieties testified to the powerful attraction of imported silks and spices for Roman consumers.

As it happened, long-distance trade did not cause moral or economic problems for the Roman empire or any other state in classical times. Indeed, it more likely stimulated rather than threatened local economies. Yet long-distance trade did not occur in a vacuum. Commercial exchanges encouraged cultural and biological exchanges, some of which had large implications for classical societies.

# Cultural and Biological Exchanges along the Silk Roads

The silk roads served as magnificent highways for merchants and their commodities, but others also took advantage of the opportunities they offered to travel in relative

safety over long distances. Merchants, missionaries, and other travelers carried their beliefs, values, and religious convictions to distant lands: Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity all traveled the silk roads and attracted converts far from their original homelands. Meanwhile, invisible travelers such as disease pathogens also crossed the silk roads and touched off devastating epidemics when they found fresh populations to infect. Toward the end of the classical era, epidemic disease that was spread over the silk roads caused dramatic demographic decline especially in China and the Mediterranean basin and to a lesser extent in other parts of Eurasia as well.

## *The Spread of Buddhism and Hinduism*

By the third century B.C.E., Buddhism had become well established in northern India, and with the sponsorship of the emperor Ashoka the faith spread to Bactria and Ceylon. Buddhism was particularly successful in attracting merchants as converts. When they traveled, Buddhist merchants observed their faith among themselves and explained it to others. Gradually, Buddhism made its way along the silk roads to Iran, central Asia, China, and southeast Asia.

Buddhism first established a presence in the oasis towns along the silk roads—notably Merv, Bukhara, Samarkand, Kashgar, Khotan, Kuqa, Turpan, and Dunhuang—where merchants and their caravans found food, rest, lodging, and markets. The oases depended heavily on trade for their prosperity, and they allowed merchants to build monasteries and invite monks and scribes into their communities. Because they hosted travelers who came from different lands, spoke different languages, and observed different religious practices, the oasis towns became cosmopolitan centers. As early as the second century B.C.E., many residents of the oases themselves adopted Buddhism, which was the most prominent faith of silk roads merchants for more than a millennium, from about 200 B.C.E. to 1000 C.E.

*Buddhism in Central Asia*

From the oasis communities Buddhism spread to the steppe lands of central Asia and to China. Nomadic peoples from the steppes visited the oases regularly to trade animal products from their herds for grains and manufactured items. They often found Buddhism intriguing, and in the early centuries C.E. they increasingly responded to its appeal. By the fourth century C.E., they had sponsored the spread of Buddhism throughout much of central Asia.
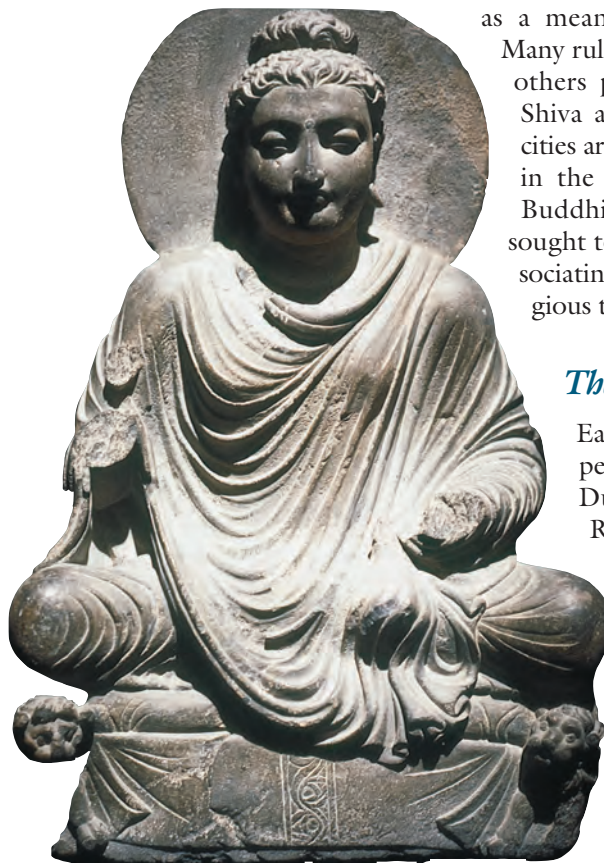
By the first century B.C.E., Buddhism had also established a foothold in China. The earliest Buddhists in China were foreign merchants—Indians, Parthians, and central Asian peoples—who observed their faith in the enclaves that Han dynasty officials allowed them to inhabit in Chang'an and other major cities. For several centuries Buddhism remained the faith largely of these expatriate merchants, and it did not appeal very strongly to native Chinese. Yet the presence of monasteries and missionaries offered Buddhism the potential to attract Chinese converts. Beginning about the fifth century C.E., Chinese began to respond enthusiastically to Buddhism, which during the postclassical era became the most popular religious faith throughout all of east Asia, including Japan and Korea as well as China.

*Buddhism in China*

As Buddhism spread north from India into central Asia and China, both Buddhism and Hinduism also began to attract a following in southeast Asia. Once again, merchants traveling the silk roads—in this case the sea lanes through the Indian Ocean—played prominent roles in spreading these faiths. Merchant mariners regularly plied the waters between India and southeast Asia during the late centuries B.C.E. By the first century C.E., clear signs of Indian cultural influence had appeared in southeast Asia. In Java, Sumatra, and other islands, as well as in the Malay peninsula and territories in modern Vietnam and Cambodia, rulers of southeast Asian states called themselves *rajas* ("kings"), in the manner of Indian rulers, and they adopted Sanskrit

*Buddhism and Hinduism in Southeast Asia*

as a means of written communication. Many rulers converted to Buddhism, and others promoted the Hindu cults of Shiva and Vishnu. They built walled cities around lavish temples constructed in the Indian style. They appointed Buddhist or Hindu advisors, and they sought to enhance their authority by associating themselves with honored religious traditions.

## The Spread of Christianity

Early Christians faced intermittent persecution from Roman officials. During the early centuries C.E., Roman authorities launched a series of campaigns to stamp out Christianity, since most Christians refused to observe the state cults that honored emperors as divine beings. Paradoxically, imperial officials viewed Christians as irreligious because they declined to participate in state-approved religious ceremonies. They also considered Christianity a menace to society because zealous missionaries attacked other religions and generated sometimes violent conflict. Nevertheless, Christian missionaries took full advantage of the Romans' magnificent network of roads and sea-lanes, which enabled them to carry their message throughout the Roman empire and the Mediterranean basin.



Early Buddhist sculpture in Bactria reflected the influence of Mediterranean and Greek artistic styles. This seated Buddha from the first or second century C.E. bears Caucasian features and wears Mediterranean-style dress.

*Christianity in the Mediterranean Basin*

During the second and third centuries C.E., countless missionaries took Paul of Tarsus as their example and worked zealously to attract converts. One of the more famous was Gregory the Wonderworker, a tireless missionary with a reputation for performing miracles, who popularized Christianity in central Anatolia during the mid-third century C.E. Contemporaries reported that Gregory not only preached Christian doctrine but also expelled demons, moved boulders, diverted a river in flood, and persuaded observers that he had access to impressive supernatural powers. Gregory and his fellow missionaries helped to make Christianity an enormously popular religion of salvation in the Roman empire. By the late third century C.E., in spite of continuing imperial opposition, devout Christian communities flourished throughout the Mediterranean basin in Anatolia, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and north Africa as well as in Greece, Italy, Spain, and Gaul.

*Christianity in Southwest Asia*

As Christianity became a prominent source of religious inspiration within the Roman empire, the young faith also traveled the trade routes and found followers beyond the Mediterranean basin. By the second century C.E., sizable Christian com-

**Map 12.2** **The spread of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity, 200 B.C.E.–400 C.E.** Compare the routes taken by Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity with the routes followed by merchants on silk roads depicted on Map 12.1. How might you account for the similarities?

munities flourished throughout Mesopotamia and Iran, and a few Christian churches had appeared as far away as India. Christians did not dominate eastern lands as they did the Roman empire, but they attracted large numbers of converts in southwest Asia. Indeed, beside Jews and Zoroastrians, Christians constituted one of the major religious communities in the region, and they remained so even after the seventh century C.E., when the Islamic faith of Arab Muslim conquerors began to displace the older religious communities.

Christian communities in Mesopotamia and Iran deeply influenced Christian practices in the Roman empire. To demonstrate utter loyalty to their faith, Christians in southwest Asia often followed strict ascetic regimes: inspired by Indian traditions, they abstained from sexual contact, refused fine foods and other comforts, and sometimes even withdrew from family life and society. These practices impressed devout Christians in the Roman empire. By the third century C.E., some Mediterranean Christians had begun to abandon society altogether and live as hermits in the deserts of Egypt, the mountains of Greece, and other isolated locations. Others withdrew from lay society but lived in communities of like-minded individuals who devoted their efforts to prayer and praise of God. Thus ascetic practices of Christians living in lands east of the Roman empire helped to inspire the formation of Christian monastic communities in the Mediterranean basin.

After the fifth century C.E., Christian communities in southwest Asia and the Mediterranean basin increasingly went separate ways. Most of the faithful in southwest Asia became Nestorians—followers of the Greek theologian Nestorius, who lived during the early fifth century and emphasized the human as opposed to the divine nature of Jesus. Mediterranean church authorities rejected Nestorius's views, and many of his disciples departed for Mesopotamia and Iran. They soon became

prominent in local Christian communities, and they introduced a strong organizational framework to the church in southwest Asia. Although they had limited dealings with Mediterranean Christians, the Nestorians spread their faith east across the silk roads. Nestorian merchants took their faith with them on trade missions, and by the early seventh century they had established communities in central Asia, India, and China.

## *The Spread of Manichaeism*

*Mani and Manichaeism*

The explosive spread of Manichaeism dramatically illustrated how missionary religions made effective use of the silk roads trading network. Manichaeism was the faith derived from the prophet Mani (216–272 C.E.), a devout Zoroastrian from Babylon in Mesopotamia. Apart from Zoroastrianism, Mani drew deep influence from Christianity and Buddhism. He regarded Zarathustra as the prophet of Persia, Buddha as the prophet of India, and Jesus as the prophet of the Mediterranean world. Because of the intense interaction between peoples of different societies, Mani saw a need for a prophet for all humanity, and he promoted a syncretic blend of Zoroastrian, Christian, and Buddhist elements as a religious faith that would serve the needs of a cosmopolitan world.

Mani was a dualist: he viewed the world as the site of a cosmic struggle between the forces of light and darkness, good and evil. He associated light with spiritual awareness and darkness with the material world. He urged his followers to reject worldly pleasures, which entangled the spirit in matter, and rise toward the light. His doctrine had strong appeal because it offered a rational explanation for the presence of good and evil in the world while also providing a means for individuals to achieve personal salvation and contribute to the triumph of good over evil.

*Manichaean Ethics*

Mani promoted an ascetic lifestyle and insisted that disciples observe high ethical standards. Devout Manichaeans, known as "the elect," abstained from marriage, sexual relations, fine clothing, meat, rich foods, and other personal comforts, dedicating themselves instead to prayer, fasting, and ritual observances. Less zealous Manichaeans, known as "hearers," led more conventional lives, but they followed a strict moral code and provided food and gifts to sustain the elect. All Manichaeans looked forward to individual salvation and eternal association with the forces of light and good.

Mani was a fervent missionary: he traveled widely to promote his faith, corresponded tirelessly with Manichaean adherents, and dispatched disciples to lands that he could not visit himself. He also created a Manichaean church with its own services, rituals, hymns, and liturgies. His doctrine attracted converts first in Mesopotamia, and before Mani's death it had spread throughout the Sasanid empire and into the eastern Mediterranean region. In spite of its asceticism, Manichaeism appealed especially strongly to merchants, who adopted the faith as hearers and supported the Manichaean church. By the end of the third century C.E., Manichaean communities had appeared in all the large cities and trading centers of the Roman empire.

*Decline of Manichaeism*

Manichaeism soon came under tremendous pressure. Zoroastrian leaders urged the Sasanid rulers to suppress Mani's movement as a threat to public order. Mani himself died in chains as a prisoner of the Sasanid emperor, who sought to use Zoroastrianism as a cultural foundation for the unification of his realm. Authorities in the Roman empire also persecuted Manichaeans, whom they suspected because of the religion's origins in the rival Sasanid empire. Indeed, during the fifth and sixth centuries, political authorities largely exterminated Manichaeism in the Mediterranean

**A cave painting from about the seventh century C.E. depicts a group of devout Manichaean faithful, whose austere regimen called for them to dress in plain white garments and keep their hair uncut.**

basin. Yet Manichaeism survived in central Asia, where it attracted converts among nomadic Turkish peoples who traded with merchants from China, India, and southwest Asia. Like Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity, then, Manichaeism relied on the trade routes of classical times to extend its influence to new lands and peoples.

## The Spread of Epidemic Disease

Like religious faiths, infectious and contagious diseases also spread along the trade routes of the classical world. Aided by long-distance travelers, pathogens had opportunities to spread beyond their original environments and attack populations with no inherited or acquired immunities to the diseases they caused. The resulting epidemics took a ferocious toll in human lives.

Information about human populations in classical times is scanty and full of gaps. Scholars often do not have records to work with and must draw inferences about population size from the area enclosed by city walls, the number of houses discovered in a settlement, the agricultural potential of a region, and similar considerations. As a result, population estimates for premodern societies are rough approximations rather than precise figures. Moreover, within a single society, individual regions often had very different demographic experiences. Nevertheless, even for classical times, the general outlines of population history are reasonably clear.

*Epidemic Diseases*     During the second and third centuries C.E., the Han and Roman empires suffered large-scale outbreaks of epidemic disease. The most destructive diseases were probably smallpox and measles, and epidemics of bubonic plague may also have erupted. All three diseases are devastating when they break out in populations without resistance, immunity, or medicines to combat them. As disease ravaged the two empires, Chinese and Roman populations declined sharply.

During the reign of Augustus, the population of the Roman empire stood at about sixty million people. During the second century C.E., epidemics reduced Roman population by about one-quarter, to forty-five million. Most devastating was an outbreak of smallpox that spread throughout the Mediterranean basin during the years 165 to 180 C.E. The epidemic was especially virulent in cities, and it even claimed the life of the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius (180 C.E.). In combination with war and invasions, continuing outbreaks caused a significant population decline during the third and fourth centuries: by 400 C.E. the number of Romans had fallen to perhaps forty million. During the fifth and early sixth centuries, the Roman population stabilized, but an epidemic of bubonic plague broke out in the mid-sixth century and caused a general population decline throughout the Mediterranean region.

Epidemics appeared slightly later in China than in the Mediterranean region. From fifty million people at the beginning of the millennium, Chinese population rose to sixty million in 200 C.E. As diseases found their way east, however, Chinese numbers fell back to fifty million by 400 C.E. and to forty-five million by 600 C.E. Thus by 600 C.E. both Mediterranean and Chinese populations had fallen by a quarter to a third from their high points during classical times.

*Effects of*
*Epidemic Diseases*     Demographic decline in turn brought economic and social change. Trade within the empires declined, and both the Chinese and the Roman economies contracted. Both economies also moved toward regional self-sufficiency: whereas previously the Chinese and Roman states had integrated the various regions of their empires into a larger network of trade and exchange, after about 200 C.E. they increasingly established several smaller regional economies that concentrated on their own needs instead of the larger imperial market. In the Roman empire, for example, the eastern Mediterranean regions of Anatolia, Egypt, and Greece continued to form a larger, integrated society, but regional economies increasingly emerged in western Mediterranean lands, including Italy, Gaul, Spain, and northwest Africa.

The demographic histories of classical Persia, India, and other lands are not as clear as they are for China and the Roman empire. Persia most likely experienced demographic, economic, and social problems similar to those that afflicted China and the Mediterranean basin. India may well have suffered from epidemic disease and population losses, although there is limited evidence for those troubles in south Asia. In east Asia and the Mediterranean basin, however, it is clear that epidemic disease seriously weakened Chinese and Roman societies. Indeed, epidemic disease contributed to serious instability in China after the collapse of the Han dynasty, and in weakening Mediterranean society, it helped bring about the decline and fall of the western Roman empire.

## Sources from the Past

### St. Cyprian on Epidemic Disease in the Roman Empire

*St. Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, was an outspoken proponent of Christianity during the early and middle decades of the third century C.E. When epidemic disease struck the Roman empire in 251 C.E., imperial authorities blamed the outbreak on Christians who refused to honor pagan gods. Cyprian refuted that charge in his treatise* On Mortality, *which described the symptoms of epidemic disease and reflected on its significance for the Christian community.*

It serves as validation of the [Christian] faith when the bowels loosen and drain the body's strength, when fever generated in bone marrow causes sores to break out in the throat, when continuous vomiting roils the intestines, when blood-shot eyes burn, when the feet or other bodily parts are amputated because of infection by putrefying disease, when through weakness caused by injuries to the body either mobility is impeded, or hearing is impaired, or sight is obscured. It requires enormous greatness of heart to struggle with resolute mind against so many onslaughts of destruction and death. It requires great loftiness to stand firm amidst the ruins of the human race, not to concede defeat with those who have no hope in God, but rather to rejoice and embrace the gift of the times. With Christ as our judge, we should receive this gift as the reward of his faith, as we vigorously affirm our faith and, having suffered, advance toward Christ by Christ's narrow path. . . .

Many of us [Christians] are dying in this epidemic—that is, many of us are being liberated from the world. The epidemic is a pestilence for the Jews and the pagans and the enemies of Christ, but for the servants of God it is a welcome event. True, without any discrimination, the just are dying alongside the unjust, but you should not imagine that the evil and the good face a common destruction. The just are called to refreshment, while the unjust are herded off to punishment: the faithful receive protection, while the faithless receive retribution. We are unseeing and ungrateful for divine favors, beloved brethren, and we do not recognize what is granted to us. . . .

How suitable and essential it is that this plague and pestilence, which seems so terrible and ferocious, probes the justice of every individual and examines the minds of the human race to determine whether the healthy care for the ill, whether relatives diligently love their kin, whether masters show mercy to their languishing slaves, whether physicians do not abandon those seeking their aid, whether the ferocious diminish their violence, whether the greedy in the fear of death extinguish the raging flames of their insatiable avarice, whether the proud bend their necks, whether the shameless mitigate their audacity, whether the rich will loosen their purse strings and give something to others as their loved ones perish all around them and as they are about to die without heirs.

**FOR FURTHER REFLECTION**

To what extent do you think St. Cyprian was effective in his efforts to bring inherited Christian teachings to bear on the unprecedented conditions he and his followers faced?

SOURCE: Wilhelm von Hartel, ed. *S. Thasci Caecili Cypriani opera omnia* in *Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum*. Vienna: 1868, vol. 3, pp. 305–6. (Translation by Jerry H. Bentley.)

## China after the Han Dynasty

By the time epidemic diseases struck China, internal political problems had already begun to weaken the Han dynasty. By the late second century C.E., Han authorities had largely lost their ability to maintain order. Early in the third century C.E., the central government dissolved, and a series of autonomous regional kingdoms took the place of the Han state. With the disappearance of the Han dynasty, China experienced significant cultural change, most notably an increasing interest in Buddhism.

**Map 12.3** **China after the Han dynasty, 220 C.E.** Compare this map with Map 8.2 showing the Han empire at its height. What geographical considerations might help explain why the Han empire broke up into the three kingdoms shown here?

## Internal Decay of the Han State

The Han dynasty collapsed largely because of internal problems that its rulers could not solve. One problem involved the development of factions within the ranks of the ruling elites. Marriage alliances between imperial and aristocratic families led to the formation of many factions whose members sought to advance their prospects in the imperial government and exclude others from important positions. That atmosphere led to constant infighting and backstabbing among the ruling elites, which in turn reduced the effectiveness of the central government.

An even more difficult problem had to do with the perennial issue of land and its equitable distribution. At the turn of the millennium, the usurper Wang Mang had attempted to redistribute land in China, but his program did not survive his brief reign (9–23 C.E.). During the last two centuries of the Han dynasty, large landowners gained new influence in the government. They managed to reduce their share of taxes and shift the burden onto peasants. They even formed private armies to advance their class interests.

*Peasant Rebellion*

Those developments provoked widespread unrest, particularly among peasants, who found themselves under increasing economic pressure with no means to influence the government. Pressures became particularly acute during the late second and third centuries when epidemics began to take their toll. In 184 C.E. peasant discontent fueled an immense uprising known as the Yellow Turban rebellion, so called because the rebels wore yellow headbands that represented the color of the Chinese earth and symbolized their peasant origins. Although quickly suppressed, the rebellion proved to be only the first in a series of insurrections that plagued the late Han dynasty.



After the collapse of the Han dynasty, China experienced social and economic difficulty. Wealthy classes often traveled in ox carts instead of more expensive, horse-drawn carriages. Archaeologists found this ceramic model of an ox cart in a tomb from the sixth century C.E.

*Collapse of the Han Dynasty*

Meanwhile, Han generals increasingly usurped political authority. By 190 C.E. the Han emperor had become a mere puppet, and the generals effectively ruled the regions controlled by their armies. They allied with wealthy landowners of their regions and established themselves as warlords who maintained a kind of rough order based on force of arms. The generals continued to recognize an emperor for a short time, but in 220 C.E. they formally abolished the Han dynasty and divided the empire into three large kingdoms.

Once the dynasty had disappeared, large numbers of nomadic peoples migrated into China, especially the northern regions, and they helped to keep China disunited for more than 350 years. Between the fourth and sixth centuries C.E., nomadic peoples established large kingdoms that dominated much of northern China as well as the steppe lands.

## Cultural Change in Post-Han China

In some ways the centuries following the fall of the Han dynasty present a spectacle of chaos and disorder. One kingdom toppled another, only to fall in its turn to a temporary successor. War and nomadic invasions led to population decline in much of northern China. By the mid-fifth century, the region around Chang'an and Luoyang—the heartland of classical China—had experienced almost complete devastation because of armies that ravaged the region in search of food and plunder. Contemporaries reported that the Former Han capital of Chang'an had no more than one hundred households and that the Later Han capital of Luoyang resembled a trash heap more than a city.

*Sinicization of Nomadic Peoples*

Beneath the disorderly surface of political events, however, several important social and cultural changes were taking place. First, nomadic peoples increasingly adapted to the Chinese environment. They took up agriculture and built permanent settlements. They married Chinese spouses and took Chinese names. They wore the clothes, ate the food, and adopted the customs of China. Some sought a formal Chinese education and became well versed in Chinese philosophy and literature. In short, nomadic peoples became increasingly sinicized, and as the generations passed, distinctions between peoples of nomadic and Chinese ancestry became less and less obvious. Partly because

of that development, a new imperial dynasty was eventually able to reconstitute a centralized imperial state in north China.

Second, with the disintegration of political order, the Confucian tradition lost much of its credibility. The original goal of Confucius and his early followers was to find some means to move from chaos to stability during the Period of the Warring States. As long as Confucian methods and principles helped to maintain order, ruling elites and intellectual classes honored the Confucian tradition. When the Han dynasty collapsed, Confucianism seemed irrelevant.

Individuals who in earlier centuries might have committed themselves to Confucian values turned instead to Daoism and Buddhism. As in the Period of the Warring States, Daoism once again offered a way to find peace in a turbulent world. Originally, Daoism was a school of speculative philosophical thought that appealed mostly to an educated elite. After the fall of the Han, however, it became more a religious than a philosophical doctrine. Daoist sages not only promised salvation to those who observed their doctrines and rituals but also experimented with spices, herbs, and drugs to concoct elixirs or potions that supposedly conferred health and immortality. Daoism attracted widespread interest among a population afflicted by war and disease and became much more popular than before, especially because it faced less competition from the Confucian tradition.

*Popularity of Buddhism*

Even more important than Daoism for Chinese cultural history was Buddhism. Until about the fourth century C.E., Buddhism was largely the faith of foreign merchants in China and attracted little interest on the part of native Chinese. After the fall of the Han empire, however, Buddhism received strong support from nomadic peoples who migrated into northern China and who in many cases had long been familiar with Buddhism in central Asia. Meanwhile, as a result of missionary efforts, the Indian faith began to attract a following among native Chinese as well. Indeed, between the fourth and sixth centuries C.E., Buddhism became well established in China. When a centralized imperial state took shape in the late sixth century C.E., Buddhism provided an important cultural foundation for the restoration of a unified political order.

# The Fall of the Roman Empire

Moralists have often interpreted the fall of the Roman empire as a symbol of the transitory nature of human creations. Fascination with imperial Rome has encouraged the proliferation of theories—many of them quite silly—seeking to explain the fall of the empire as the result of some single, simple cause. By various accounts, the Roman empire declined and fell because of lead poisoning, radiation given off by bricks, immorality, or the rise of Christianity. Notwithstanding the zeal with which proponents have promoted pet theories, there was no single cause for the decline and fall of the Roman empire. Instead, a combination of internal problems and external pressures weakened the empire and brought an end to Roman authority in the western portion of the empire, whereas imperial rule continued until the fifteenth century C.E. in the eastern Mediterranean. In the Mediterranean basin as in China, imperial weakness and collapse coincided with significant cultural change, notably the increasing popularity of Christianity.

## *Internal Decay in the Roman Empire*

*The Barracks Emperors*

As in the case of the Han dynasty, internal political problems go a long way toward explaining the fall of the Roman empire. Like their Han counterparts, the Roman

emperors faced internal opposition. During the half century from 235 to 284 C.E., there were no fewer than twenty-six claimants to the imperial throne. Called the "barracks emperors," most of them were generals who seized power, held it briefly, and then suddenly lost it when they were displaced by rivals or by their mutinous troops. Not surprisingly, most of the barracks emperors died violently: only one is known for sure to have succumbed to natural causes.

Apart from divisions and factions, the Roman empire faced problems because of its sheer size. Even during the best of times, when the emperors could count on abundant revenues and disciplined armed forces, the sprawling empire posed a challenge for central governors. After the third century, as epidemics spread throughout the empire and its various regions moved toward local, self-sufficient economies, the empire as a whole became increasingly unmanageable.

The emperor Diocletian (reigned 284–305 C.E.) attempted to deal with this problem by dividing the empire into two administrative districts. The eastern district included the wealthy lands of Anatolia, Syria, Egypt, and Greece, and the western district embraced Italy, Gaul, Spain, Britain, and north Africa. A coemperor ruled each district with the aid of a powerful lieutenant, and Diocletian hoped the four officials, known as the *tetrarchs,* would be able to administer the vast empire more effectively than an individual emperor could. Diocletian was a skillful administrator. He managed to bring Rome's many armies, including unpredictable maverick forces, under firm imperial control. He also tried to deal with a crumbling economy by strengthening the imperial currency, forcing the government to adjust its expenditures to its income, and imposing price caps to dampen inflation. His economic measures were less successful than his administrative reforms, but they helped stabilize an economy ravaged by half a century of civil unrest.

Yet Diocletian's reforms also encouraged ambition among the four top corulers and their generals, and his retirement from the imperial office in 305 C.E. set off a round of internal struggles and bitter civil war. Already in 306 C.E. Constantine, son of Diocletian's coruler Constantius, moved to stake his claim as sole emperor. By 313 C.E. he had defeated most of his enemies, although he overcame his last rivals only in 324 C.E. Once he had consolidated his grip on power, Constantine ordered the construction of a new capital city, Constantinople, at a strategic site overlooking the Bosporus, the strait linking the Black Sea to the Sea of Marmara and beyond to the wealthy eastern Mediterranean. After 330 C.E. Constantinople became the capital of a united Roman empire.



Sculpture of the tetrarchs, or four corulers of the Roman empire, during the late third century C.E.; from left, Galerius, Constantius, Diocletian, and Maximian.

*Diocletian*

*Constantine*

Constantine was an able emperor. With the reunion of the eastern and western districts of the empire, however, he and his successors faced the same sort of administrative difficulties that Diocletian had attempted to solve by dividing the empire. As population declined and the economy contracted, emperors found it increasingly difficult to marshal the resources needed to govern and protect the vast Roman empire. The need for protection against external threats became especially acute during the late fourth and early fifth centuries C.E.

## *Germanic Invasions and the Fall of the Western Roman Empire*

Apart from internal problems, the Roman empire also faced several formidable military threats. One arose on the empire's southeastern frontiers when the Sasanid dynasty toppled the Parthians in 224 C.E. and established a powerful state in Iran. Sasanid and Roman forces clashed repeatedly in Anatolia, Syria, and Mesopotamia as each side sought to consolidate its authority in border regions. Some of the conflicts dealt devastating blows. In the year 260 C.E., the Roman emperor Valerian fell captive to Sasanid forces. He spent his last few years at the Sasanid court in Ctesiphon, where his captors forced him to stoop and serve as a mounting stool when the Sasanid king wanted to ride his horse. (After his death, the Sasanids preserved Valerian's skin as a memento of their victory over the Romans.) Romans and Sasanids engaged in intermittent hostilities until the sixth century C.E., but a series of buffer states between the two empires reduced the intensity of conflict after the third century.

Migratory Germanic peoples posed a more immediate and serious military threat to the Roman empire. Indeed, during the fifth century C.E., Germanic invasions brought an end to Roman authority in the western half of the empire, although imperial rule survived for an additional millennium in the eastern Mediterranean.

*Germanic Migrations*   Germanic peoples had migrated from their homelands in northern Europe and lived on the eastern and northern borders of the Roman empire since the second century C.E. Most notable were the Visigoths, who came originally from Scandinavia and Russia. Like the nomadic peoples who moved into northern China after the fall of the Han dynasty, the Visigoths settled, adopted agriculture, and drew deep inspiration from Roman society. They adapted Roman law to the needs of their society, for example, converted to Christianity, and translated the Bible into the Visigothic language. They also contributed large numbers of soldiers to the Roman armies. In the interests of social order, however, the Romans discouraged settlement of the Visigoths and other Germanic peoples within the empire, preferring that they constitute buffer societies outside imperial borders.

*The Huns*   During the late fourth century, the relationship between Visigoths and Romans changed dramatically when the nomadic Huns began an aggressive westward migration from their homeland in central Asia. The Huns spoke a Turkish language, and they probably were cousins of the nomadic Xiongnu who inhabited the central Asian steppe lands west of China. During the mid-fifth century C.E., the warrior-king Attila organized the Huns into a virtually unstoppable military juggernaut. Under Attila, the Huns invaded Hungary, probed Roman frontiers in the Balkan region, menaced Gaul and northern Italy, and attacked Germanic peoples living on the borders of the Roman empire.

*Collapse of the Western Roman Empire*   Attila did not create a set of political institutions or a state structure, and the Huns disappeared as a political and military force soon after his death in 453 C.E. By that time, however, the Huns had placed such pressure on Visigoths, Ostrogoths, Vandals, Franks, and other Germanic peoples that they streamed en masse into the Roman empire in search of refuge. Once inside imperial boundaries, they encoun-

**Map 12.4**   **Germanic invasions and the fall of the western Roman empire, 450–476 C.E.** Many different groups invaded the Roman empire following many different routes. Why did the Germanic invasions concentrate on the western Roman empire?

tered little effective resistance and moved around almost at will. They established settlements throughout the western half of the empire—Italy, Gaul, Spain, Britain, and north Africa—where populations were less dense than in the eastern Mediterranean. Under the command of Alaric, the Visigoths even stormed and sacked Rome in 410 C.E. By the middle of the fifth century, the western part of the Roman empire was in shambles. In 476 C.E. imperial authority came to an ignominious end when the Germanic general Odovacer deposed Romulus Augustulus, the last of the Roman emperors in the western half of the empire.

Unlike the Han dynasty, the Roman empire did not entirely disintegrate: imperial authority survived for another millennium in the eastern half of the empire, known after the fifth century C.E. as the Byzantine empire. In the western half, however, Roman authority dissolved, and nomadic peoples built successor states in regions formerly subject to Rome. Vandals and then Visigoths governed Spain, Franks ruled Gaul, Angles and Saxons invaded Britain, and Italy fell under the sway of a variety of peoples, including Visigoths, Vandals, and Lombards.

**In this relief sculpture carved in the second century C.E., a Roman soldier battles Germanic forces along the Danube river.**



## *Cultural Change in the Late Roman Empire*

In the Roman empire, as in China, the collapse of the imperial state coincided with important social and cultural changes. The Germanic peoples who toppled the empire looked to their own traditions for purposes of organizing society and government. When they settled in the regions of the former empire, however, they absorbed a good deal of Roman influence. They adapted Roman law to their needs, for example, thus preserving one of the most important features of Roman society. Over time, the mingling of Roman and Germanic traditions led to the emergence of an altogether new society—medieval Europe.

*Prominence of Christianity*

Christianity was perhaps the most prominent survivor of the western Roman empire. During the fourth century C.E., several developments enhanced its influence throughout the Mediterranean basin. In the first place, Christianity won recognition as a legitimate religion in the Roman empire. In 312 C.E., while seeking to establish himself as sole Roman emperor, Constantine experienced a vision that impressed on him the power of the Christian God. He believed that the Christian God helped him to prevail over his rivals, and in 313 he promulgated the Edict of Milan, which allowed Christians to practice their faith openly in the Roman empire. At some point during his reign, perhaps after his edict, Constantine converted to Christianity, and in 380 C.E. the emperor Theodosius proclaimed Christianity the official religion of the Roman empire. By

the mid-fourth century, Christians held important political and military positions, and imperial sponsorship helped their faith to attract more converts than ever before.

Christianity also began to attract thoughtful and talented converts who articulated a Christian message for the intellectual elites of the Roman empire. The earliest Christians had come largely from the ranks of ordinary working people, and their doctrine struck philosophers and the educated elites as both unsophisticated and unbelievable. During its first three centuries, the new faith grew as a popular religion of salvation favored by the masses, rather than as a reasoned doctrine of intellectual substance. During the fourth century, however, intellectual elites began to take more interest in Christianity.

The most important and influential of these figures was St. Augustine (354–430 C.E.), bishop of the north African city of Hippo (modern-day Annaba in Algeria). Augustine had a



**Only the colossal head of Constantine survives from a statue that originally stood about 14 meters (46 feet) tall.**

*St. Augustine*

fine education, and he was conversant with the leading intellectual currents of the day. During his youth he drew great inspiration from Stoicism and Platonism, and for nine years he belonged to a community of Manichaeans. Eventually he became disillusioned with both Hellenistic philosophy and Manichaeism, and in 387 C.E., while studying in Italy, he converted to Christianity. For the remainder of his life he worked to reconcile Christianity with Greek and Roman philosophical traditions, especially Platonism, and to articulate Christianity in terms that were familiar and persuasive to the educated classes. More than any others, Augustine's writings made Christianity an intellectually respectable alternative to Hellenistic philosophy and popular religions of salvation.

Besides winning the right to practice their faith openly and attracting intellectual talent, Christian leaders constructed an institutional apparatus that transformed a popular religion of salvation into a powerful church. In the absence of recognized leadership, the earliest Christians generated a range of conflicting and sometimes contradictory doctrines. Some taught that Jesus was a mortal human being, others that he was a god, and yet others that he was both human and divine. Some allowed women to serve as priests and attributed great powers to Jesus' mother, Mary, and others restricted church offices to men and conceived of Christian deities as males.

Early Christians might well have continued to express their understandings of their faith in individual ways. During the third and fourth centuries, however, as the Roman empire experienced political turmoil and underwent administrative changes, some church leaders sought doctrinal stability and worked to define essential tenets that all Christians must accept. As Christians became more prominent in the Roman empire, state authorities also promoted efforts to standardize teachings. Emperor Constantine himself pushed for a clear statement of Christian doctrine that he hoped would create a foundation for cultural unity in the Roman empire.

*The New Testament and the Emergence of Orthodox Christianity*

*The Institutional Church*



**Portrait of St. Augustine holding a copy of his most famous work**, *The City of God,* **which sought to explain the meaning of history and the world from a Christian point of view.**

In search of clearly defined doctrine, church leaders conducted intense debates about the quality and authority of the numerous writings that the earliest Christians had generated expressing their understandings of their newly adopted faith. Those writings, which numbered in the scores or perhaps even hundreds, included gospels that told the story of Jesus' life, epistles that outlined the authors' views of moral and religious issues, and historical accounts that offered interpretations of early Christian experiences from different perspectives. By the late fourth century, church leaders were reaching consensus that twenty-seven short writings were more authoritative than the others, and they recognized these writings as canonical scriptures known later as the New Testament. By adopting a small number of writings as canonical, church leaders rejected many others as misguided, untruthful, or even heretical. As a result, they profoundly influenced the development of doctrine that most Christian authorities eventually came to recognize as the orthodox or correct teaching.

To standardize their faith, Christian leaders also instituted a hierarchy of church officials. At the top were five religious authorities—the bishop of Rome and the patriarchs of Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria, and Constantinople—who resided in the most important spiritual and political centers of the Roman empire. These five authorities wielded roughly equal influence in the larger Christian community, although the bishop of Rome enjoyed somewhat greater prestige than the others. (His enhanced status derived both from his claim to be the spiritual descendant of Jesus' chief disciple, St. Peter, and from the fact that he had his seat at Rome, the original imperial capital.)

Subordinate to the five principal authorities were bishops, who presided over religious affairs in their districts, known as dioceses, which included all the prominent cities of the Roman empire. When theological disputes arose, the patriarchs and bishops assembled in church councils to determine which views would prevail as official doctrine. The councils at Nicaea (325 C.E.) and Chalcedon (451 C.E.), for example, took up the difficult and contentious issue of Jesus' nature. Delegates at the councils proclaimed that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine at the same time, in contrast to Nestorians, Arians, and other Christian groups who held that Jesus was either primarily human or primarily divine. The decisions and decrees of the church councils did not put an end to all debate, nor did they prevent new divisions and new grounds of contention from arising. Nevertheless, by defining the doctrines that most church authorities regarded as orthodox, council delegates left enduring influences on the beliefs and values of Christianity.

As Roman imperial authority crumbled, the bishop of Rome, known as the pope (from the Latin *papa,* meaning "father"), emerged as spiritual leader of Christian

patriarch  (PAY-tree-ahrk)

communities in the western regions of the empire. As the only sources of established and recognized authority, the popes and the bishops of other important cities organized local government and defensive measures for their communities. They also mounted missionary campaigns to convert Germanic peoples to Christianity. Although Roman imperial authority disappeared, Roman Christianity survived and served as a foundation for cultural unity in lands that had formerly made up the western half of the Roman empire.

**B**y 500 C.E. classical societies in Persia, China, India, and the Mediterranean basin had either collapsed or fallen into decline. Yet all the classical societies left rich legacies that shaped political institutions, social orders, and cultural traditions for centuries to come. Moreover, by sponsoring commercial and cultural relations between different peoples, the classical societies laid a foundation for intensive and systematic cross-cultural interaction in later times. After the third century C.E., the decline of the Han and Roman empires resulted in less activity over the silk roads than in the preceding three hundred years. But the trade routes survived, and when a new series of imperial states reestablished order throughout much of Eurasia and north Africa in the sixth century C.E., the peoples of the eastern hemisphere avidly resumed their crossing of cultural boundary lines in the interests of trade and communication.

## CHRONOLOGY

| | |
|---|---|
| **3rd century B.C.E.** | Spread of Buddhism and Hinduism to southeast Asia |
| **2nd century B.C.E.** | Introduction of Buddhism to central Asia |
| **139–126 B.C.E.** | Travels of Zhang Qian in central Asia |
| **1st century B.C.E.** | Introduction of Buddhism to China |
| **2nd century C.E.** | Spread of Christianity in the Mediterranean basin and southwest Asia |
| **184 C.E.** | Yellow Turban rebellion |
| **216–272 C.E.** | Life of Mani |
| **220 C.E.** | Collapse of the Han dynasty |
| **284–305 C.E.** | Reign of Diocletian |
| **313–337 C.E.** | Reign of Constantine |
| **313 C.E.** | Edict of Milan and the legalization of Christianity in the Roman empire |
| **325 C.E.** | Council of Nicaea |
| **451 C.E.** | Council of Chalcedon |
| **476 C.E.** | Collapse of the western Roman empire |

# F O R   F U R T H E R   R E A D I N G

Thomas J. Barfield. *The Perilous Frontier: Nomadic Empires and China.* Cambridge, Mass., 1989. Provocative study of the Xiongnu and other central Asian peoples.

Jerry H. Bentley. *Old World Encounters: Cross-Cultural Contacts and Exchanges in Pre-Modern Times.* New York, 1993. Studies the spread of cultural and religious traditions before 1500 C.E.

Luce Boulnois. *The Silk Road.* Trans. by D. Chamberlain. New York, 1966. Popular account of trade and travel over the silk roads.

Peter Brown. *The Making of Late Antiquity.* Cambridge, Mass., 1978. Brilliant and evocative analysis of the cultural and religious history of the late Roman empire.

———. *The World of Late Antiquity, A.D. 150–750.* London, 1971. Well-illustrated essay concentrating on social and cultural themes.

Averil Cameron. *The Later Roman Empire, A.D. 284–430.* Cambridge, Mass., 1993. A lively synthesis.

———. *The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity, A.D. 395–600.* London, 1993. Like its companion volume just cited, a well-informed synthesis.

Philip D. Curtin. *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History.* New York, 1984. A synthetic work that concentrates on merchant communities in distant lands and their roles in facilitating cross-cultural trade.

Edward Gibbon. *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.* Many editions available. A classic account, still well worth reading, by a masterful historical stylist of the eighteenth century.

C. D. Gordon, ed. *The Age of Attila: Fifth-Century Byzantium and the Barbarians.* Ann Arbor, 1972. Translations of primary sources on the society and history of nomadic and migratory peoples.

A. H. M. Jones. *The Decline of the Ancient World.* New York, 1966. Synthetic study of the Roman empire in decline by a foremost scholar of the subject.

J. Innes Miller. *The Spice Trade of the Roman Empire, 29 B.C. to A.D. 641.* Oxford, 1969. Scholarly study of long-distance trade during classical times.

Samuel Hugh Moffett. *A History of Christianity in Asia,* vol. 1. San Francisco, 1992. An important volume that surveys the spread of early Christianity east of the Roman empire.

Elaine Pagels. *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas.* New York, 2003. Discusses the emergence of orthodox Christianity and the recognition of the New Testament as a body of canonical writings.

Joseph A. Tainter. *The Collapse of Complex Societies.* Cambridge, 1988. Scholarly review of theories and evidence bearing on the fall of empires and societies.

Mortimer Wheeler. *Flames over Persepolis.* New York, 1968. Well-illustrated volume dealing with the interactions of Greek, Persian, and Indian peoples during the Hellenistic era.

Susan Whitfield. *Life along the Silk Road.* Berkeley, 1999. Focuses on the experiences of ten individuals who lived or traveled along the silk roads.

Francis Wood. *The Silk Road: Two Thousand Years in the Heart of Asia.* Berkeley, 2002. A brilliantly illustrated volume discussing the history of the silk roads from antiquity to the twentieth century.