

Student Handout 1 – The Fall of Classical Empires in Afroeurasia

Read each section with the following question in mind to focus your reading:

- **What were the main reasons these powerful empires fell apart during Era 3?**

After reading each section, jot down some notes that can help you answer that question. Try to summarize key ideas about why each empire fell apart.

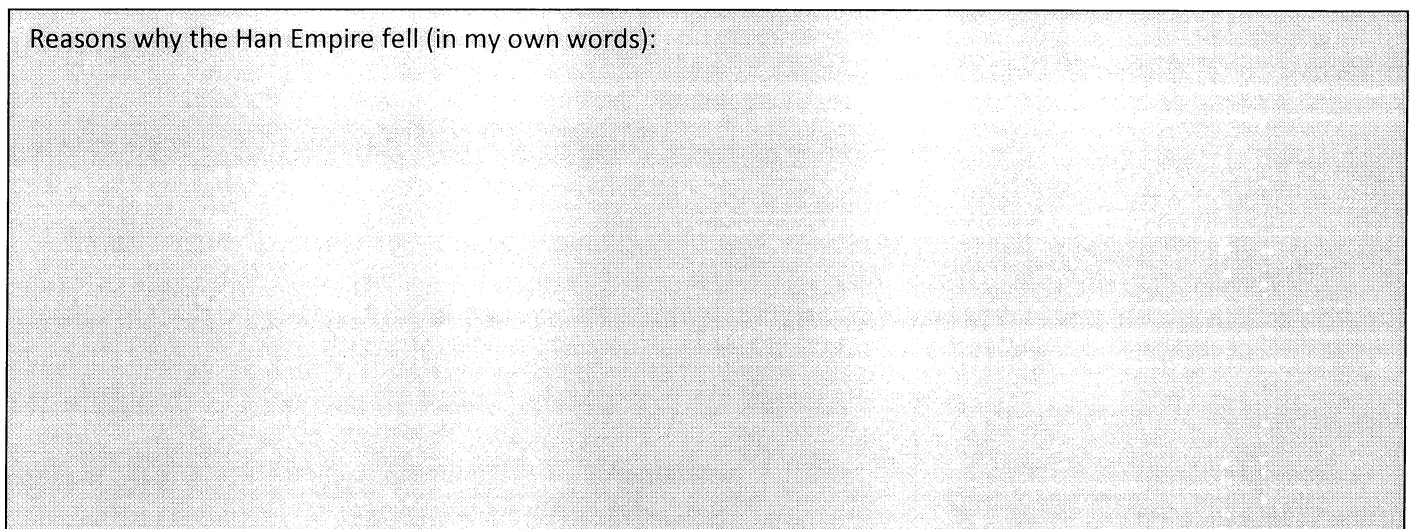
The Fall of the Han Empire:

The Han Empire began to lose power and control of its territory around 100 CE. Natural disasters, including epidemics, droughts, and floods, hurt farm production and also killed many people, and many peasants were left hungry and without work. They began to rebel in different parts of the empire. At the same time, the borders of the empire were under attack by the Huns, a society of nomadic warriors, and so the empire began taxing people more to pay for a larger army. The combination of more taxes and less food made people even more upset, and the rebellions increased, weakening the power of the central government. The army was then also sent to stop the rebellions, and so it became overextended.

Corruption in the government bureaucracy made matters worse. During these times of crisis, some officials were keeping part of the tax money they collected for themselves. Of course, as the people who paid the taxes learned about this over time, they became even angrier. Faced with natural disasters, rebellions from within, enemies from outside, and corruption in their own system, the Han Empire became very weak. Many members of powerful families abandoned the government and tried to escape or hide with their families. Government began to break down, and by 220 CE, the Han Empire was no more.

Although the Han Empire fell, other empires emerged later in China, and they benefitted from the systems and culture that previous empires and dynasties had developed.

Reasons why the Han Empire fell (in my own words):



The Fall of the Roman Empire

At the height of empire, Rome controlled a huge expanse of territory. The borders of these lands began to be attacked by different groups of people the Romans considered “barbarians.” The Huns from Central Asia were included in these groups, along with warriors from different Germanic tribes. The vast borders and numerous enemies meant that Rome needed an even bigger army, and they paid for this army with more and more taxes on the common people. As everyday Romans paid more taxes, wealthy Romans lived in even more luxury and enjoyed greater privileges.

At the same time, disease, which likely began to spread through Rome because of the large and active trade networks, also weakened Rome by killing off many people. Drought and overuse of the land in some areas made farming difficult as well. Facing diseases and more taxes, and seeing the rich people enjoy themselves as if there were no problems, the working people of Rome began to resent this system and lose respect for the empire. As the rich and powerful focused on their own needs, they also seemed to stop supporting public projects and cultural development.

As the empire weakened, the Germanic tribes to the north (Visigoths, Vandals, etc.) began to move into Roman territory and take over different regions, taking advantage of the growing weakness of the empire.

Farmers and working people in Rome began to look to local rulers and their militias for protection as the central government lost control. The emperor Diocletian blamed Christians for these problems, and began to persecute them in an effort to strengthen the government. When that didn’t work, a new emperor, Constantine, converted to Christianity and began to promote Christianity across Rome. He also moved the capital of the empire from the city of Rome to Constantinople.

Still under attack from the Germanic armies though, the empire split into two, and eventually the western half of the Roman Empire was completely taken over by 476 CE. The eastern part of Rome became what is known as the Byzantine Empire and continued to exist for some time afterwards. In the lands of the west though, the systems of the Roman Empire almost completely disappeared.

Reasons why the Roman Empire fell (in my own words):

The Fall of the Gupta Empire:

During the Gupta Empire, the Gupta rulers did not have complete control over their whole empire. They allowed local leaders to control different regions in order to keep them loyal. This helped maintain the empire, but it also gave lots of different people power over different areas of the empire.

The Huns, the nomadic pastoralist society from Central Asia that was spreading into the lands of the major empires, also began to move into what is now India. The lack of central control over their whole territory made it hard for the Guptas to defend the whole empire. The Huns invaded one region at a time, and because these areas were spread out, and because there was no good communication system, no unified defense against the Huns was ever organized by the Gupta Empire. Under this attack by the Huns, the Guptas lost control over these regions and the empire quickly began to unravel.

After the Gupta Empire fell apart around 550 CE, the Huns stayed and began to become part of the existing societies. Control over India remained divided among local rulers for a long time once the Gupta fell. Even so, Indian culture and religion stayed important, and Hinduism, which recognized and honored warriors more than Buddhism, began to have more influence in India.

Reasons why the Gupta Empire fell (in my own words):



Summaries based on the following accounts:

- http://www.historyhaven.com/APWH/Decline_of_%20classical_civilizations.htm
- <http://hendry-schools.org/education/components/whatsnew/default.php?sectiondetailid=23863>
- <http://mrparkswikis.wikispaces.com/Fall+of+the+Classical+Roman,+Han,+and+Gupta+Empires>