



## LESSON 2.2.7 | READ | A Tale of Three Empires – Bridgette Byrd O’Connor

### PURPOSE

Empire building and maintenance is a complicated process. By 300 CE, the great empires of the Afro-Eurasian ancient world were in trouble. The article defines what it means to be an empire and examines how empires fall. Students

will read about the Roman Empire in the Mediterranean, Han Dynasty in China, and Gupta Empire in India, will compare struggles each empire faced, and will determine the forces that ultimately brought the empire to fall.

### PROCESS

Have students read the article and instruct them to pay particular attention to the challenges and struggles each empire faced. Host a discussion of themes following their completion of the reading.

### ATTACHMENT

- A Tale of Three Empires

Potential Questions & Discussion Points:

- What’s needed to keep an empire balanced and flourishing?
- Are the forces that bring an empire down from the inside, outside or both? What instances can students reference to support their claims?



## READING | A Tale of Three Empires — Bridgette Byrd O'Connor

In order to understand the fall of an empire, we must first define the concept. I'm sure many of you are familiar with the definition of a kingdom, which is usually a small geographic region ruled by a monarchy and composed of a rather homogenous group of people. These people share a common culture and can reasonably get along with each other without too many issues. You could think of a kingdom like your immediate family where your parents rule over you and your siblings. An empire is a little different in that it encompasses a larger area and while it may still be governed by one ruler, it also has a number of local officials or bureaucrats, who have the power to maintain order in the empire but also report back to the central government. Empires are also composed of people who have different cultures, customs, and languages, which makes it hard to keep everyone happy and orderly.

One of the greatest accomplishments of these large empires, which existed in various forms from the ancient world through the early 20th century, was organization. Empires had to make sure that their laws were carried out and that they could collect taxes from their citizens, and as a result, they often connected the empire by creating roads and establishing communication systems. These roads would not only connect the empire and allow for the swift transport of military personnel and supplies but they also enhanced trade. The communication posts, which usually functioned as ancient pony expresses, eventually developed into border towns that grew into large cosmopolitan cities. In order for all areas of the empire to trade efficiently and effectively, a common currency was established, which further increased trade and wealth.

Maintaining an empire was a monumental task and one that required finesse and balance. Rulers wanted to extend their empires in order to increase their tax revenues but they couldn't tax their citizens too much or they would face a revolt. Therefore, they had to carefully determine the level of taxes so that no one group was taxed too much. If rulers had to increase taxes by a considerable sum then they often decided it would be best to conquer more territory. However, conquering more land meant they needed more money, which became a vicious cycle until it was too much to maintain. Rights of citizenship were also extended to the conquered people in order to make them feel like they were truly part of the empire. Once again, this was yet another balancing act as rulers didn't want to extend too much power to the conquered peoples but also wanted to give them enough so that they wouldn't rebel. Empire building and maintenance was a complicated process! Once you factor in all of these issues, it's not surprising that even the most organized empires eventually came to an end.

By 300 CE the great empires of the Afro-Eurasian ancient world were in trouble. These empires long provided their citizens with stability in the form of large armies for protection, an increase in the trade of goods and ideas, and governments that enforced laws and justice. It wasn't all roses and chocolates though because these empires did have their issues just as any large empire would. However, it was better to live under Roman rule, the Han dynasty in China, or the Gupta Empire in India than to be a resident of one of those in-between periods that saw civil war and uncertainty. While the Han dynasty collapsed in 220 CE, the Western Roman Empire did not fall until 476 CE, and the Gupta Empire faded out by 550 CE. However, two of these empires were in trouble long before that. ►



## HAN DYNASTY, CHINA

China has been a large and populous region for thousands of years and consequently, it has also had to deal with outsiders attempting to invade the area for just as long, which was the main reason they built that “great” wall. The Han dynasty (206 BCE to 220 CE) entered into an agreement with these nomadic tribes that lived on its northern borders. The dynasty would pay them in return for peace and this agreement worked for many years until one of these nomadic groups got greedy. Instead of dividing the payment from the Han amongst all the nomads, one group kept it all for themselves. This, of course, angered the other nomadic tribes and they attacked both the Han and the nomadic traitor. As a result, each nomadic group negotiated individual payments and costs increased to the point that the Han could not keep up. While the government had issues with external forces, there were internal forces that also weakened the dynasty. Peasant farmers were experiencing an economic crisis and were forced to sell their property to wealthy landlords. These aristocrats were exempt from paying taxes, which meant that the peasant farmers lost their land and the government lost tax revenue. The Han dynasty appeared to be losing money at a rapid rate but then their luck really took a turn for the worse.

In 153 CE, locusts destroyed a large portion of China’s farmland while the Yellow River also began to flood uncontrollably due to years of deforestation and erosion. These natural disasters crippled the ability of the Han to provide for its people. Add a generous helping of infectious diseases, which were brought to China via the Silk Road trade routes, and we have a recipe for dynastic disaster. Had the Han dynasty been controlled by a powerful ruler, he or she might have been able to make policies to get China out of this mess. However, the Han court was a mess as

well. Competing factions were vying for power at court while military generals were attempting to increase their power as well. As a result, the dynasty fell in 220 CE when the generals decided to divide the empire amongst themselves.

## WESTERN ROMAN EMPIRE

The Roman Empire had grown substantially from the end of Augustus’ reign in 14 CE to the death of Trajan in 117 CE and stretched from modern day Britain to Syria. As the Romans were increasing the territory of the empire, the government made sure to extend Roman citizenship to conquered lands but also allowed the conquered people to keep many of their local traditions. This was an incredibly smart way to govern as all people had the opportunity to become citizens of the Roman Empire and therefore achieve a semblance of equality under the law while also maintaining their local customs and religious beliefs. The Roman government also benefitted from the expansion of the empire since they could now collect taxes from a large population and increase the size of their army with new recruits. While this appears to be a win-win situation for all involved, the empire soon became too large to govern effectively.

Protecting the vast borders of the empire was a logistical nightmare and the Roman government soon found it easier to pay off the Germanic tribes that were known to raid the border towns of the Roman Empire. While this arrangement, which was similar to the Han dynasty’s bribery of the nomadic tribes surrounding China, appeased the Germanic tribes for a period of time, the Huns soon ended this peace. The Huns were a nomadic tribe that lived predominantly in Central Asia and Eastern Europe. Most students of history remember them because of their leader Attila the Hun, who united the Huns under his leadership and set about warring with neighboring nomadic tribes such as the Goths raping, ►



pillaging, plundering, and burning as his troops moved from city to city. As Attila and his men moved farther and farther west, the Germanic tribes that lived on the edges of Roman Empire began to move into Roman territory. The Romans generally accepted the Germanic refugees until some of the generals in the area began treating the Germanic people poorly. As revenge for this mistreatment, the Germanic tribes attacked the Romans and killed approximately two-thirds of the army including Valens, the emperor of the Eastern Roman Empire. The once great Roman army had been horribly defeated, and this provided inspiration and courage for other Germanic tribes and the Huns to attack the borders of the Roman Empire. While the Germanic attacks on the Western Roman Empire ultimately led to the empire's defeat, there were many other factors that contributed to the western empire's demise.

The decline of the Roman Empire began long before the "official" fall of the western portion in 476 CE. Once Rome stopped expanding in the 2nd century CE, ordinary citizens of the empire were burdened with high taxes and many farmers were in debt, while aristocratic landlords became wealthier. This, of course, is a recipe for internal disaster. Loyalty to the empire began to fail, borders were harder to control, and the government began relying on mercenary soldiers to defend its interests. Mercenaries or soldiers for hire are generally loyal to money rather than to the empire or nation they are hired to protect. The emperor Diocletian, who reigned from 284 to 305 CE, attempted to institute reforms to save the empire including appointing a co-emperor, Maximian, in 286 CE and finally dividing the empire into a tetrarchy seven years later. Diocletian, however, is probably best known for his persecution of Christians, who were considered traitors under Roman law because they refused to worship the emperor and the Roman pantheon of gods. Edward Gibbon, an eighteenth-century British historian famous for writing a lengthy work

on the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, includes the rise of Christianity as one of the factors that led to the death of the empire along with the reliance on mercenaries, and the rise of the Praetorian Guard, who were the bodyguards of the emperor but also responsible for the deaths of at least two emperors. Other causes played a role as well including a series of rather awful emperors during the 3rd century CE when 21 men ascended to power in the course of 50 years along with an increase in plagues brought forth by trade exchanges along the Silk Road.

The Western Roman Empire serves as a prime example of how great empires come to an inevitable end. Once the empire expands to a size that is hard to manage and cracks begin to appear in the internal structure of the government and economy then the empire cannot sustain itself. The Eastern Roman Empire with its capital at Constantinople continued for almost another thousand years before the Ottoman Turks conquered it in 1453 CE. Constantine, the emperor who succeeded Diocletian in 306 CE, built a new capital in the eastern portion of the empire and named it Constantinople (present day Istanbul). Constantinople, and its surrounding area, was much wealthier than the western empire due in large part to its location along the trade route connecting the Black Sea and Asia to the Mediterranean and Europe. The city marked the end of the major Silk Road trade route that extended from China to the Mediterranean, but more on that later. For now, we shift our attention back to India and one of its most successful dynasties, the Gupta.

## THE GUPTA EMPIRE, THE "GOLDEN AGE" OF INDIA

The Gupta Empire began rather late when compared to the Han and Roman empires. Founded in 320 CE by Chandra Gupta I, who united a large section of modern day India by conquering the smaller kingdoms that had risen to power after the fall of the Mauryan and Kushan empires. These small kingdoms



had grown extremely wealthy due to their location in the middle of the Silk Road trade routes. Those empires that existed simultaneously with the Gupta in India, such as the Han and Rome, desired Indian spices and cotton. Once Chandra Gupta I consolidated his power, his empire benefitted from the wealth that trade provided as well as the protection of the natural boundaries of the Himalayas and the Hindu Kush not to mention the fact that the Gupta Empire had the added protection of a huge army complete with elephants.

Due to the relative stability of the dynasty over the course of the next century, the Gupta rulers focused more on becoming patrons of the arts and sciences rather than the conquest of new territories, which is why this period of Indian history is often referred to as the “Golden Age”. This stability was, in part, generated by the fact that the Guptas allowed some of the conquered rulers to keep their power in exchange for their loyalty to the Gupta dynasty, and of course it didn’t hurt to have that huge army to back you up either. Gupta rulers paid artists, writers, and mathematicians to create amazing works. These scholars made significant contributions to Indian society including the use of the numbers 0 through 9 and the decimal system along with numerous plays and one of the most renowned pieces of Indian literature, the Kama Sutra. Aryabhatiya, the man responsible for creating the number system we all use today, discovered some astronomical principles that would take a century for his European counterparts to discover such as the fact that Earth is spherical and rotates on its own axis. The Gupta also created an empire based primarily on Hinduism while also allowing Buddhists to worship freely. The caste system was strengthened under Gupta rule, which makes sense considering they believed primarily in Hinduism. The peace and prosperity of the empire soon began to fade as the dynasty struggled with increasing attacks by nomadic groups from Central Asia. Therefore, just as the Han and Roman

empires succumbed to these nomadic tribes so too did the Gupta. A little more than 200 years after its founding, the Gupta empire broke apart into regional kingdoms.

## COMPARING EMPIRES

The main theme connecting these empires together was obviously the problem of the nomadic tribes attacking their borders. Ernest O’Roark and Eileen Wood sum up this theme quite nicely:

Competition among various groups of herding peoples for diminishing land and resources, combined with the comparative wealth of the settled empires they bordered, led nomadic confederations to first raid, then invade their neighbors. This set off a chain reaction of events that, when combined with internal weaknesses, helping bring down the Han and the Romans, while the Gupta simply fell victim to their conquests directly. (6)

Disease was another common factor in the fall of the empires as all were linked to the Silk Road trade routes. While these routes were responsible for sharing goods and ideas across thousands of miles and very different cultures, they also brought new diseases. Many of these diseases killed thousands of people but they also allowed for immunities to build up over time and therefore gave the people of Afro-Eurasia a huge advantage when they set sail across the Atlantic in search of new trade routes.

Internal struggles also played a role in the demise of these civilizations and this will be a recurring theme throughout history including some of the most famous revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. If a small portion of society becomes wealthy at the expense of a larger and poorer portion of society then conflict will ultimately be the result. Those in poverty see the wealth and success



of the elite, which inspires and fuels revolutions.

Finally, the stability that these empires gave the area surrounding the Silk Road allowed for the expansion of trade, wealth, and the sharing of information. However, once these empires fell, wars increased and trade became more localized. It would take another 900-to-1000 years for new empires to gain control of the area and promote a revival of the Silk Road.

*Sources;*

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