

CHAPTER 6 - AN AGE OF EMPIRES: ROME AND HAN CHINA, 753 B.C.E.–330 C.E.

- I. Rome's Creation of a Mediterranean Empire, 753 B.C.E.–330 C.E.
 - A. Geography and Resources
 1. Italy and Sicily are at a crossroads of the Mediterranean and serve as a link between Africa and Europe. Rome is at a crossroads of the Italian peninsula.
 2. Italy's natural resources included navigable rivers, forests, iron, a mild climate, and enough arable land to support a large population of farmers whose surplus product and labor could be exploited by the Roman state.
 - B. A Republic of Farmers, 753–31 B.C.E.
 1. Rome was inhabited at least as early as 1000 B.C.E. According to legend it was ruled by seven kings between 753 B.C.E. and 507 B.C.E. Kingship was eliminated in 507 B.C.E. when representatives of the senatorial class of large landholders overthrew the last king and established a republic.
 2. The centers of political power were the two consuls and the Senate. In practice, the Senate made laws and governed.
 3. The Roman family consisted of several generations living under the absolute authority of the oldest living male, the *paterfamilias*.
 4. Society was hierarchical. Families and individuals were tied together by patron/client relationships that institutionalized inequality and gave both sides of the relationship reason to cooperate and to support the status quo.
 5. Roman women had relatively more freedom than Greek women, but their legal status was still that of a child, subordinate to the *paterfamilias* of her own or her husband's family. Eventually procedures evolved which made it possible for some women to become independent after the death of their fathers.
 6. Romans worshiped a large number of supernatural spirits as well as major gods such as Jupiter and Mars. Proper performance of ritual ensured that the gods continued to favor the Roman state.
 - C. Expansion in Italy and the Mediterranean
 1. Rome began to expand, at first slowly and then very rapidly in the third and second centuries B.C.E. until it became a huge Mediterranean empire. Possible explanations for this expansion include greed, aggressiveness, the need for consuls to prove themselves as military commanders during their single year in office, and a constant fear of being attacked.
 2. During the first stage of expansion, Rome conquered the rest of Italy (by 290 B.C.E.). Rome won the support of the people of Italy by granting them Roman citizenship. As citizens, these people then had to provide soldiers for the military.
 3. In the next stages of expansion, Rome first defeated Carthage to gain control over the western Mediterranean and Sicily, Sardinia, and Spain (264–202 B.C.E.). Next, between 200 and 30 B.C.E., Rome defeated the Hellenistic kingdoms to take over the lands of the Eastern Mediterranean. Between 59 and 51 B.C.E., Gaius Julius Caesar conquered the Celts of Gaul.
 4. The Romans used local elite groups to administer and tax the various provinces of their rapidly expanding and far-flung empire. A Roman governor, who served a single one-year term in office, supervised the local administrators. This system was inadequate and prone to corruption.

D. The Failure of the Republic

1. As Rome expanded, the social and economic bases of the Roman republic in Italy were undermined. While men from independent farming families were forced to devote their time to military service, large landowners bought up their land to create great estates called *latifundia*. This meant both a decline in Rome's source of soldiers and a decline in food production, as *latifundia* owners preferred to grow cash crops like grapes rather than staple crops such as wheat.
2. Since slave labor was cheap in an expanding empire, Italian peasants, driven off the land and not employed by the *latifundia*, drifted into the cities where they formed a fractious unemployed underclass.
3. As the independent farming family that had been the traditional source of soldiers disappeared, Roman commanders built their armies from men from the underclass who tended to give their loyalty, not to the Roman state, but to their commander. This led to generals taking control of politics, to civil wars, and finally to the end of the republican system of government.
4. Julius Caesar's grandnephew Octavian (also known as Augustus) took power in 31 B.C.E., reorganized the Roman government, and ruled as a military dictator. After Augustus died, several members of his family succeeded him. However, the position of emperor was not necessarily hereditary; in the end, armies chose emperors.

E. An Urban Empire

1. About 80 percent of the 50 to 60 million people of the Roman Empire were rural farmers, but the empire was administered through and for a network of cities and towns. In this sense, it was an urban empire. Rome had about a million residents, other large cities (Alexandria, Antioch, and Carthage) had several hundred thousand each, while many Roman towns had populations of several thousand.
2. In Rome, the upper classes lived in elegant, well-built, well-appointed houses; many aristocrats also owned country villas. The poor lived in dark, dank, fire-prone wooden tenements in squalid slums built in the low-lying parts of the city.
3. Provincial towns imitated Rome both in urban planning and in urban administration. The local elite, who served the interests of Rome, dominated town councils. The local elite also served their communities by using their wealth to construct amenities such as aqueducts, baths, theatres, gardens, temples, and other public works and entertainment projects.
4. Rural life in the Roman Empire involved lots of hard work and very little entertainment. Rural people had little contact with representatives of the government. By the early centuries C.E., absentee landlords who lived in the cities owned most rural land, while the land was worked by tenant farmers supervised by hired foremen.
5. Manufacture and trade flourished under the "pax romana." Grain had to be imported to feed the huge city of Rome. Rome and the Italian towns (and later, provincial centers) exported glass, metalwork, pottery, and other manufactures to the provinces. Romans also imported Chinese silk and Indian and Arabian spices.
6. One of the effects of the Roman Empire was Romanization. In the western part of the Empire, the Latin language, Roman clothing, and the Roman lifestyle were adopted by local people. As time passed, Roman emperors gradually extended Roman citizenship to all free male adult inhabitants of the empire.

F. The Rise of Christianity

1. Jesus lived in a society marked by resentment against Roman rule, which had inspired the belief that a Messiah would arise to liberate the Jews. When Jesus sought to reform Jewish religious practices, the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem turned him over to the Roman governor for execution.
2. After the execution, Jesus' disciples continued to spread his teachings; they also spread their belief that Jesus had been resurrected. At this point, the target of their proselytizing was their fellow Jews.
3. The target of proselytizing changed from Jews to non-Jews in the 40s–70s C.E. First, Paul of Tarsus, an Anatolian Jew, discovered that non-Jews (gentiles) were much more receptive to the teachings of Jesus than Jews were. Second, a Jewish revolt in Judaea (66 C.E.) and the subsequent Roman reconquest destroyed the original Jewish Christian community in Jerusalem.
4. Christianity grew slowly for two centuries, developing a hierarchy of priests and bishops, hammering out a commonly accepted theological doctrine, and resisting the persecution of Roman officials. By the late third century, Christians were a sizeable minority in the Roman Empire.
5. The expansion of Christianity in the Roman Empire came at a time when Romans were increasingly dissatisfied with their traditional religion. This dissatisfaction inspired Romans to become interested in a variety of "mystery cults" and universal creeds that had their origins in the eastern Mediterranean.

G. Technology and Transformation

1. The Romans were expert military and civil engineers. Among their accomplishments were: bridge-building, ballistic weapons, elevated and underground aqueducts, the use of arches and domes, and the invention of concrete.
2. Following Augustus' death, the army was organized primarily for defense. The Rhine-Danube frontier was protected by a string of forts; long walls protected the frontiers of North Africa and Britain. On the eastern frontier, the Romans fought for centuries against the Parthians. Neither side made any significant gains.
3. The state system constructed by Augustus worked well until what historians call Rome's "third-century crisis." The symptoms of this crisis were frequent change of rulers, raids by German tribesmen from across the Rhine-Danube frontier, and the rise of regional power when Rome seemed unable to guarantee security.
4. Rome's economy was undermined by the high cost of defense, debasement of the currency and consequent inflation, a disruption of trade, reversion to a barter economy, disappearance of the municipal aristocracy of the provincial cities, and a movement of population out of the cities and back into the rural areas.
5. The emperor Diocletian (r. 284–305 C.E.) saved the Roman state by instituting a series of reforms that included price controls and regulations that required certain people to stay in their professions and to train a son to succeed them. Some side effects of these reforms include a flourishing black market and a growing feeling of resentment against the government.
6. Constantine (r. 306–37 C.E.) formally ended the persecution of Christians and patronized the Christian church, thus contributing to the rise of Christianity as the official religion of the empire. Constantine also transferred the capital of the empire from Rome to the eastern city of Byzantium, which he renamed Constantinople.

II. The Origins of Imperial China, 221 B.C.E.–220 C.E.

A. Resources and Population

1. China is a large region marked by significant ecological, topographical, biological, and climatic diversity.
2. The two most important resources that supported the imperial Chinese state were agricultural production and labor. Agricultural production in China was intensive and was taxed by the government. The most productive agricultural region was the Yangzi Valley, which began to be linked to the centers of political power (Chang'an and Luoyang) by canals.
3. Both the Qin and the Han governments exploited the labor power of rural China by demanding that peasant families supply men for labor and for service in the military. A periodic census and regularly updated records of land and households enabled officials to collect the proper amount of taxes, labor service, and military service.
4. Throughout antiquity, the Han Chinese people expanded at the expense of other ethnic groups. Han expanded into areas that were suitable for settled agriculture. They did not expand into areas that were suitable only for nomadic economies.

B. Hierarchy, Obedience, and Belief

1. The family was the basic unity of society. The family was conceived of as an unbroken chain of generations including the ancestors as well as the current generations. Ancestors were thought to take an active interest in the affairs of the current generation, and they were routinely consulted, appeased, and venerated.
2. The teachings of Confucius were a fundamental source of values for family, social, and political organization. Confucius regarded hierarchy as natural and placed absolute authority in the hands of the father. Family members were thought of as part of the group, not as individuals. Confucius also believed that people would properly fulfill their roles if they were correctly instructed and imitated good role models.
3. According to the ideals of the upper classes, women were to cook, take care of household chores, respect their parents-in-law, and obey their husbands. Lower-class women may have been less constrained. Marriages were arranged, and a new wife had to prove herself to her husband and to her mother-in-law through hard work, obedience, devotion, and by bearing sons.
4. Chinese believed in a number of nature spirits to whom they sacrificed. Unusual natural phenomena were regarded as ill omens. The landscape was thought to channel the flow of evil and good power, and experts in fengshui (geomancy) were employed to identify the most fortunate location and orientation for buildings and graves.

C. The First Chinese Empire, 221 – 201 B.C.E.

1. After the Warring States Period (480–221 B.C.E.), the state of Qin united China. Factors that enabled Qin to accomplish reunification may include: the ability and ruthlessness of the Qin ruler, Shi Huangdi and his prime minister, Li Si; Qin's location in the Wei valley with its predominantly rural population of independent farming households; and Qin's experience in mobilizing manpower for irrigation and flood-control projects, which had strengthened the central government.
2. Upon uniting China, the Qin established a strong centralized state on the Legalist model. Shi Huangdi and Li Si suppressed Confucianism, eliminated rival centers of authority, abolished primogeniture and slavery, and constructed a rural economy of free land-owning/tax-paying farmers. They standardized weights and measures, knit the empire together with roads, and defended it with a long wall.

3. The oppressive nature of the Qin regime and its exorbitant demands for taxes and labor led to a number of popular rebellions that overthrew the dynasty after the death of Shi Huangdi in 210 B.C.E.
- D. The Long Reign of the Han (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.)
1. Liu Bang, a peasant who defeated all other contestants for control of China, established the Han dynasty. The Han established a political system that drew on both Confucian philosophy and Legalist techniques.
 2. After a period of consolidation, the Han went through a period of territorial expansion under Emperor Wu (r. 140–87 B.C.E.). During the Western Han period (202 B.C.E.–8 C.E.) the capital was at Chang’an. During the Eastern Han (23–220 C.E.) the capital was at Luoyang.
 3. Chang’an was an easily defended walled city with easy access to good arable land. The population in 2 C.E. was 246,000. Other cities and towns imitated the urban planning of Chang’an.
 4. The elite of Chang’an lived in elegant multistoried houses arranged on broad, well-planned boulevards. They dressed in fine silks, were connoisseurs of art and literature, and indulged in numerous entertainments. The common people lived in closely packed houses in largely unplanned, winding alleys.
 5. The emperor was supreme in the state and in society. He was regarded as the Son of Heaven, the link between heaven and the human world. Emperors were the source of law. But anything that went seriously wrong could be interpreted to mean that the emperor was guilty of misrule and that he was losing the Mandate of Heaven. Emperors lived in seclusion, surrounded by a royal retinue that included wives, family, servants, courtiers, and officials.
 6. The central government was run by two chief officials and included a number of functionally specialized ministers. Local officials collected taxes, drafted men for corvée labor and military service, and settled local disputes. Most people had no contact with the central government.
 7. Local officials were supplied by a class of moderately wealthy, educated local landowners whom historians refer to as the “gentry.” The gentry adopted Confucianism as their ideology and pursued careers in the civil service.
- E. Technology and Trade
1. In the field of metallurgy, China advanced from bronze to iron by about 500 B.C.E. Rather than make wrought-iron goods (as the Romans did), Chinese ironworkers melted the iron and used molds to make harder and more durable cast-iron and steel tools and weapons.
 2. Other technological innovations of the Han period include the crossbow, cavalry, the watermill, and the horse collar. New transportation and communications technology included a road system, courier systems for carrying government communications, and canals.
 3. The Han period also saw significant growth in the size and number of urban areas. Somewhere from 10 to 30 percent of the population of Han China lived in towns.
 4. Long-distance commerce was a significant part of the Han economy. The most important export was silk, and the most important export route was the Silk Road through Central Asia. The Chinese government sought to control this route by sending armies and colonists to Central Asia.

F. Decline of the Han Empire

1. The Han Empire's major security problem was the nomadic tribes on its northern border. Nomadic groups were usually small, but during the Han, the Chinese faced a confederacy of nomads called the Xiongnu. China attempted to deal with the Xiongnu threat by strengthening its defenses (particularly its cavalry) and by making more compliant nomads into "tributaries."
2. The Han Empire was undermined by a number of factors. First, the expense of defending the northern borders was a tremendous financial burden. Second, nobles and merchants built up large landholdings at the expense of the small farmers. These large landholders were able to resist taxation and became independent of government control. Third, the system of military conscription broke down and the central government had to rely on mercenaries whose loyalty was questionable.
3. These factors compounded by factionalism at court, official corruption, peasant uprisings, and nomadic attacks led to the fall of the dynasty in 220 C.E. China entered a period of political fragmentation that lasted until the late sixth century.

III. Imperial Parallels

A. Similarities

1. The Han and Roman Empires were similar in respect to their family structure and values, their patterns of land tenure, taxation, and administration, and in their empire building and its consequences for the identity of the conquered areas.
2. Both empires faced common problems in terms of defense, and found their domestic economies undermined by their military expenditures.
3. Both empires were overrun by new peoples who were then deeply influenced by the imperial cultures of Rome and of China.

B. Differences

1. In China, the imperial model was revived and the territory of the Han Empire re-unified. The former Roman Empire was never again reconstituted.
2. Historians have tried to explain this difference by pointing to differences between China and the Roman world in respect to the concept of the individual, the greater degree of social mobility in Rome than in Han China, and the different political ideologies and religions of the two empires.