Decline of Classical Empires

The Roman Empire, Han China and Gupta India
Why did empires decline?

- Internal factors
  - Demographic shifts
    - Effect on tax base, trade
  - Size of empire?
  - Corruption and moral decay?
  - Political instability
    - Succession issues
    - Fighting among elites
    - Loss of central control over regional governors, elites
- Taxation and other government policies
  - Effect on relations between social classes?
- Lack of cultural cohesion
  - New values?
Why did empires decline?

- External factors
  - Invasions
  - Shifting trade routes
Roman Empire

- INTERNAL:
  - Population decline
    - Effect on army, tax base?
  - Size of empire
    - Split into East and West
      - Disparities in wealth
    - Costs of defense
  - Quality of rulers declined
    - Violence and instability
      - "Barracks Emperors"
  - Shift in values?
    - Patricians
    - Christianity?
Roman Empire, pt. 2

- EXTERNAL:
  - Invasions
    - Goths
      - Alaric sacked Rome – 410 CE
    - Huns
      - Pushed Gothic tribes into boundaries of Roman Empire
        - Pope – not emperor – stopped destruction of Rome!

- RESULT:
  - Empire split in two
    - Last Western Emperor deposed 476 CE . . .
After the Fall of Rome

- Christian Church (and pope) only authority in Western half of empire
  - Monasteries = refuge, places of learning
  - Formal hierarchy of Church grew
- Territory in western half fragmented
  - Ruled by Germanic tribes
    - Did all Roman culture die out?
After Rome, pt. 2

- Byzantine Empire in eastern half
  - Continued caesaropapism
  - Remained urbanized
  - Began losing territory after 650 CE to Muslims
- Economy became localized, depressed
  - Feudalism
  - Long-distance trade declined
  - Effect on cities?
  - Population?
Han Dynasty - China

- INTERNAL:
  - Poor central leadership
    - Allowed court infighting (imperial relatives, eunuchs, scholar bureaucrats)
    - Landowners and regional officials ignored govt.
      - Exploited peasants → rebellions
        - Yellow Turbans (184 CE)
        - Developed own armies
  - Population declines
    - Occurred only at end of dynasty
  - Size of empire

- EXTERNAL
  - Invasion by Huns only at very end – already weak

- 220 CE: Last Han emperor deposed . . .
  - Territory divided into 3 regional kingdoms among warlords
  - Nomads conquered territory
After the Han

- Philosopies/religions
  - Buddhism gained ground (after 300 CE)
    - Came through nomads/trade routes
    - Why was it appealing?
  - Confucianism lost legitimacy (but didn’t disappear)
    - Why?
  - Daoism gained ground
- No central political authority
  - Wars and nomadic invasions
    - Effect on cities?
- Population decline
  - Plague, famine
- “Sinicization” of nomadic peoples
Attempts to reform and stave off disaster . . .

- **Rome**
  - Diocletian (284-305 CE)
  - Constantine (312-327 CE)
- **China**
  - Wang Mang (9-23 CE)
Mauryan Empire - India

- Chandragupta and Ashoka built well organized, bureaucratized govt.
- After Ashoka
  - Army, bureaucracy salaries = expensive
  - Inflation – debased currency
  - Poor leaders
- Empire ended 185 BCE
Gupta Empire - India

- Regional kingdoms followed end of Mauryans
- INTERNAL:
  - Political decentralization – vassals ruled
    - Difficult to fight off invaders
  - Quality of leaders
- EXTERNAL:
  - Invasion by White Huns
    - Costs of defense HUGE
- Last Gupta king deposed 550 CE
- But wealth continued = TRADE!
- Caste system, religion kept society together