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## The Historical Context

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The era from 200 to 600 CE was a time of dramatic change across much of Afroeurasia. Successful, long-enduring empires that had risen and flourished during the preceding centuries began to flounder. One by one, nearly all were extinguished by the end of the sixth century. Why and how this happened in such a limited span of time is the subject of this unit.

**The Han empire in China.** The first to fall was the Han Dynasty in China. The Han demise was a complicated affair. Not surprisingly, a large part of the story involved pressure from pastoral nomads who lived along China’s northern borders. Over the preceding centuries a confederation of nomadic groups known as the Xiongnu amassed so much power in horse cavalry that they were able to extort resources from the Han in return for agreeing to keep the peace. The Han cooperated, finding it cheaper to pay the Xiongnu than to fight them. For a while, this compromise worked well. But in 51 CE, a succession dispute divided the Xiongnu into two groups. This set off a chain reaction that had a severe impact on the Han. The Xiongnu nearest the Chinese border took the payment intended for the entire confederation. The farther group immediately retaliated, attacking the Han (for not paying) as well as their greedy Xiongnu kinsmen. As the confederation disintegrated, individual groups began to demand separate payments from the Han. The costs to the Han rose considerably, and at the same time nomadic cavalry raids increased. The Han were not getting what they continued to pay for.

At the same time, nature entered the fray as an enemy of the Han. In 153 CE a swarm of locusts laid waste to large areas of farmland. Deforestation that had started in much earlier times produced erosion and floods. The Huang He (Yellow River) filled with silt and began to flood more frequently, with more devastating results. Infectious diseases new to China began to arrive via the silk roads causing widespread epidemics.

The misery these disasters caused was compounded by the increasingly desperate economic situation of the peasants. Over time, the long-standing tradition of dividing land equally among all sons had reduced the size of the average farm to the point where farmers could not make enough from the land to pay their taxes. Farmers had little choice but to give over their small plots to wealthy aristocratic landlords whose legal status exempted them and their dependents from taxes. Thus the wealthy landlords grew richer, the peasants became poor tenant farmers, and the Han government lost tax revenue. As conditions worsened, poverty and frustration fueled a series of peasant revolts.

All of these dilemmas placed heavy demands on the Han government and called for creative and decisive leadership. But internal competition for power among factions within the Han court paralyzed the government and left it incapable of dealing effectively with the empire's many problems. The rising power of large landowners and the increasing independence of Han generals continually eroded the power of the emperor. In 220 CE the dynasty collapsed, and the most powerful among the generals divided the empire into several smaller kingdoms.

**The Roman empire.** Rome was next. Many of the same pressures that brought down the Han plagued the Romans as well. Similar in size to the Han empire, but more linguistically and culturally diverse, Rome was even more difficult to hold together in the face of such pressures.

As with the Han, increased trade along the silk roads brought new contagious diseases from afar. These diseases repeatedly ravaged populations throughout the empire. Because conditions were worst in the cities during such outbreaks, those who could afford to do so fled to their country villas.

Neighboring pastoral societies were also a problem for both the Han and Roman empires. Rome had a long and turbulent border with Germanic peoples, called Goths, who lived to the north and east along the Rhine and Danube Rivers. Roman rulers wished to keep the Germanic Goths out of Roman territory, but raids were frequent and the financial and logistical burden of maintaining troops along the border was enormous. Eventually, the Romans ended up with an arrangement similar to the one established by the Han with the Xiongnu. The Romans paid Gothic chiefs an annual tribute in return for an end to raids on Roman territory. In addition, the Romans allowed Goths to cross the border to sell their goods in Roman markets. In fact, many Germanic warriors served in the Roman army. This arrangement worked well for a time. One result of this interaction was that many Germanic men and women converted to Christianity, which by the fourth century CE was the religion of Rome.

The Huns brought this fragile peace to an abrupt end around 375 CE. After crossing the Volga River from Central Asia and conquering the farming peoples there, the Huns swept into eastern Europe and attacked Germanic settlements. Trapped between the borders of Rome and the onrushing Huns, the terrified Goths requested and received Rome's permission to migrate west of the Danube. The crossing was a disaster. According to the Roman historian Ammianus, the desperate refugees took to the dangerous, rain-swollen river, clinging to almost anything that would float. Some tried to swim. For those who survived the crossing, their problems were just beginning. The generals in charge of the refugees mishandled their resettlement, starving and mistreating them in the process. Within three years, these Germanic groups had regrouped and took their revenge, defeating a Roman army at Adrianople and killing the emperor Valens. This was the first time a Roman army had been beaten by Germanic peoples in Roman territory. It signaled an end to Roman military superiority. Other Goths, as well as the Huns, soon took notice.

The disappearance of Roman military invincibility was due in large part to serious economic and political problems within the empire. Epidemics and war led to a steep decline in population

during the third and fourth centuries. The loss may have been as high as thirty percent. Labor shortages developed. Trade and business slowed. Tax revenues plummeted. At the same time, the gulf between rich and poor grew. The emperor Diocletian attempted to save the empire by dividing it into more manageable eastern and western sectors governed by its own set of co-rulers. Making such reforms was politically risky and required the cooperation of the wealthy senatorial class. To gain that cooperation, Diocletian exempted rich families from taxes, shifting the burden to the lower classes. Members of the senatorial class could expect to earn as much as 120,000 gold pieces a year. Peasant farmers typically earned about five. Farmers who could not pay their taxes were sold into slavery along with their children. Aristocratic landlords gained land and wealth, while ordinary Romans sank into poverty or slavery. The benefits of Roman citizenship became less apparent to many Romans and loyalties faded accordingly. With conditions deteriorating in Rome, the emperor Constantine established a new capital at the Greek city of Byzantium, known henceforth as Constantinople. This city was in more populous and richer eastern part of the empire. And its strategic and easily defensible location astride the major maritime trade route between the Mediterranean and Black seas ensured its survival and continued prosperity regardless of Rome's fate. The elites of Rome flocked to the new city, continuing the economic abandonment of the old capital that had started during earlier outbreaks of disease.

So by the time the Germanic army defeated Rome in 378 CE, the stage was set for collapse. The western empire, all but abandoned by the east, was ill-equipped to deal with the flood of Germanic and Hunnic migrants who surged across the borders. Indeed, these movements had the character of migrations of entire populations, along with their livestock and belongings, intent on making parts of the western empire their home. The Goths were divided into a number of groups. One of them were the Visigoths. Their chieftain Alaric led an attack on Rome and sacked the city in 410. Another group, the Vandals, did so again in 455. In 476 a Germanic general deposed the last western emperor. Meanwhile, the eastern empire, which became known as the Byzantine empire, or Byzantium, had enough financial and military resources to deter would-be invaders, including the Huns. In fact, Byzantium survived for another thousand years.

**The Gupta empire in India.** The story of the rise and fall of the Gupta empire is in many ways different from that of the Han and Roman empires. The Gupta empire was much younger, dating to about 320 CE. Before the rise of the Gupta, India had been governed by a number of kingdoms. All of them prospered from the enormous amount of trade that flowed through the region. Both the Han and Roman empires were major consumers of Indian cotton and spices. Chandra Gupta, the Gupta founder, built his empire by conquering some neighboring kingdoms and establishing alliances with others. Unlike the Romans or Han, who favored central control, the Guptas gained the loyalty and support of regional kingdoms by allowing them to retain a great deal of autonomy.

So long as the empire remained united and good order was maintained by regional authorities, Gupta rulers were content to devote most of their energy to promoting learning, religion, and art. This they did in spectacular fashion, resulting in what has been termed a "golden age" for India. Gupta scholars made remarkable achievements in many fields including literature, astronomy, and mathematics. Important discoveries were passed along the trade routes to be adopted by

other civilizations. One example is the use of Hindi (later termed Arabic) numbers, place value, and the decimal system. Gupta rulers also enthusiastically supported a revival of Hinduism, which had earlier suffered a decline owing to the rise of Buddhism. During Gupta rule the caste system was codified in greater detail, forming the basis for Indian law for centuries to come. For over two hundred years, India enjoyed a high level of organization, peace, and prosperity.

While Han China and Rome struggled to deal with attacks by pastoral nomads, the formidable Hindu Kush and Himalaya Mountains gave the Gupta some protection. The powerful Sassanian empire in Persia also provided something of a buffer against nomad invasion. But such defenses could not last forever. Central Asian nomads, sometimes referred to as “White Huns” or Hephthalites, invaded and occupied Bactria (Afghanistan) during the fourth century. In 455 CE, they crossed the Hindu Kush and invaded Gupta territory. Gupta forces at first repulsed the Hephthalites. But defense was costly, and attrition of resources eventually left the Gupta at the mercy of the invaders, who finally rampaged across northern India. With Gupta authority fading, India broke up once more into regional kingdoms. By 550 the empire was gone. So, in contrast to the complicated stories of disintegration that explain the fall of the Han and Roman empires, the Gupta story is relatively simple.

Common elements help explain why all of these empires collapsed between 300 and 600 CE. The most obvious common thread is the role of pastoral nomads. 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, helped bring down the Han and the Romans, while the Gupta simply fell victim to their conquests directly. The growth of trans-hemispheric trade, which had greatly enriched all three empires, also helped destroy the Han and Roman empires because long-distance communications permitted infectious diseases to travel across Afroeurasia and trigger widespread epidemics. India, however, seems to have been little affected by such outbreaks.

In the case of both the Han and Roman empires, wealth from trade was accumulated and concentrated in the hands of a relatively small elite class whose greed and indifference toward ordinary citizens led to widespread poverty and disillusionment. In the end, neither empire had the support of the majority of its own people. When these empires fell, few ordinary people mourned their passing. Internal political struggles also marked the final days of both the Han and Roman empires. Both had long survived such struggles in the past, but combined with other pressures, chronic infighting left governments unable to deal with crises at critical times.

By the time the Gupta succumbed to the Hephthalites, trade and communication had already begun to falter across Afroeurasia. Trade became more limited and dangerous to conduct. Warfare became more local. Where once great empires tied many diverse peoples together, there stood fragmented, regional kingdoms whose outlook was far more geographically and culturally limited. China, with its common script and traditions was eventually able to regain unity under the Sui. India would not see unification again until the Mughals arose in the early sixteenth century. The Mediterranean basin never regained unity.