Patterns in Classical China. Three dynastic cycles—the Zhou, the Qin, and the Han—covered many centuries of classical China. The dynastic patterns begun in classical Chinese history lasted until the early part of the twentieth century. A family of kings, called a “dynasty,” began ruling China with great vigor, developing solid political institutions, and encouraging active economies. Each dynasty over time grew weaker, tax revenues declined, and social divisions occurred as the population outstripped available resources. In addition, internal rebellions and sometimes invasions from the outside contributed to each dynasty’s decline. As the ruling dynasty began to falter, usually another one arose from the family of a successful general, invader, or peasant and the pattern started anew.

The Zhou dynasty (1029–258 B.C.E.) expanded the territorial boundaries of China by seizing the Yangtze River valley. The territory from the Yangtze to the Huang is often called the “Middle Kingdom,” blessed with rich cropland. They promoted Mandarin as the standard language. The Zhou did not establish a strong central government but ruled instead through alliances with regional princes and noble families. This led to vulnerabilities that plagued the Zhou: the regional princes solidified their power and disregarded the central government. When the Zhou began to fail, philosophers sought to explain the political confusion. One of these, Confucius, became one of the most important thinkers in Chinese history. His orderly social and political philosophy became an important doctrine of the Qin and Han dynasties. The next dynasty, the Qin, (221-202 B.C.E.) was begun by the brutal but effective emperor Shi Huangdi. He consolidated his power, built the Great Wall, conducted a census, standardized weights and measures, and extended the borders of his realm to Hong Kong and northern Vietnam. Upon his death, massive revolts broke out and by 202 B.C.E., the Han dynasty (202 B.C.E.–220 C.E.) was established. The Han rulers lessened the brutality of the Qin but maintained its centralized rule. Early Han leaders, like Wu Ti, expanded Chinese territory and set up formal training, based on Confucian philosophy, for bureaucrats. During a long decline, the Han faced invasions and eventually fell to outside forces, especially the Huns. By the sixth century C.E., the Han too collapsed, but not before they had established distinctive political and cultural values that lasted into the twentieth century.

Political Institutions. Throughout the Qin and Han periods, the Chinese state bureaucracy expanded its powers significantly. By the end of the Han dynasty, China had roughly 130,000 bureaucrats all trained by the government to carry out the emperor’s policies. Tax collections and annual mandatory labor services ensured the central government held some power over almost every person in the Middle Kingdom, something no other large government accomplished until the twentieth century.

Religion and Culture. Like many civilizations, China did not produce a unitary belief system. Confucianism and Daoism were two of the major systems that competed for the loyalties of various Chinese communities during the years of the classical period. Kung Fuzi (Confucius) lived from roughly 551 to 478 B.C.E. He was not a religious leader but rather saw himself as a defender of Chinese tradition and espoused a secular system of ethics. Personal virtue, he believed, would lead to solid political institutions. Both rulers and the ruled should act with respect, humility, and self-control. Classical China also produced a more religious philosophy called Daoism, which embraced harmony in nature. According to this movement, politics, learning, and the general conditions in this world were of little importance. Over time, individuals embraced aspects of both philosophies and also Buddhism. Chinese art then was largely decorative, stressing detail and craftsmanship. Artistic styles often reflected the geometric qualities of the symbols of Chinese writing. The practical application of science superseded learning for learning’s sake. Chinese astronomers developed accurate calendars. Scholars studied the mathematics of music. This practical focus contrasted with the more abstract approach to science applied by the Greeks.

Economy and Society. As in many societies, there were large gaps between China’s upper class (about 2 percent of the population) and the peasant farmers. Officially there were three main social groups in classical China. The landowning aristocracy and the bureaucrats formed the top group. Far below them were the laboring peasants and urban artisans. At the bottom of society were the “mean people,” those who performed unskilled labor. Trade became increasingly important, particularly in the Han period. Technology is where the classical Chinese clearly excelled. Many developments of this era were centuries ahead of the rest of the world. Tight-knit family structures were similar to those in other civilizations, except that parents wielded much higher levels of authority over their children. Women were subordinate to men but had clearly defined roles in the family and in larger society.

In Depth: Women in Patriarchal Societies. Agricultural societies were usually patriarchal and as they developed the status of women generally deteriorated. Marriages were arranged for women by their parents and husbands had authority over their wives and children. Later, law codes ensured basic protections but also featured limits to and inferiority of women. There were, of course, exceptions. The Egyptians had powerful queens and Jewish law traced descendance from mothers. Patriarchy responded to economic and legal conditions in agricultural civilizations and often deepened over time. In many societies, women held power through religious functions and had authority over daughters-in-law and unmarried daughters.
CLASSICAL INDIA

The Framework for Indian History: Geography and a Formative Period. Important reasons for India’s distinctive path lie in geography and early historical experience. India’s topography shaped a number of vital features of its civilization. The vast Indian subcontinent is partially separated from the rest of Asia (and particularly from East Asia) by northern mountain ranges. Mountain passes linked India to civilizations in the Middle East. Though it was not as isolated as China, the subcontinent was nevertheless set apart within Asia. The most important agricultural regions are along the two great rivers, the Ganges and the Indus. During its formative period, called the Vedic and Epic ages, the Aryans (Indo-Europeans), originally from central Asia, impressed their own stamp on Indian culture. During these ages, the caste system, Sanskrit, and various belief systems were introduced.

Patterns in Classical India. By 600 B.C.E., India had passed through its formative stage. Indian development during its classical era did not take on the structure of rising and falling dynasties, as in China. Patterns in Indian history were irregular and often resulted from invasions through the subcontinent’s northwestern mountain passes. As a result, classical India alternated between widespread empires and a network of smaller kingdoms. Even during the rule of the smaller kingdoms, both economic and cultural life advanced. The Maurya and Guptas were the most successful in India, run entirely by Indians and not by outside rulers. The greatest of the Mauryan emperors was Ashoka (269–232 B.C.E.). The Guptas did not produce as dynamic a leader as Ashoka, but they did provide classical India with its greatest period of stability.

Political Institutions. Classical India did not develop the solid political and cultural institutions the Chinese experienced, nor the high level of political interest of Greece and Rome. Its greatest features, still observable today, were political diversity and regionalism. The Guptas, for example, did not require a single language for all their subjects. The development of a rigid caste system lies at the heart of this characteristic. In its own way, the caste system promoted tolerance, allowing widely different social classes to live next to each other, separated by social strictures. Loyalty to caste superseded loyalty to any overall ruler. Religion, particularly Hinduism, was the only uniting influence in Indian culture.

Religion and Culture. Two major religions, Hinduism and Buddhism, marked classical India. Hinduism, the religion of India’s majority, is unique among world religions in that no central figure is credited for developing it. Hinduism encouraged both worldly and mystical pursuits and was highly adaptable to varying groups. Buddhism was founded on the teachings of an Indian prince, Gautama, later called Buddha, or “enlightened one.” Buddha accepted many Hindu beliefs but rejected its priests and the caste system it supported. Buddhism spread through missionaries into Sri Lanka, China, Korea, and Japan. Classical India also produced important work in science and mathematics. The Gupta-supported university at Nalanda taught religion, medicine, and architecture, as well as other disciplines. Indian scientists, borrowing ideas from Greek learning provided by Alexander the Great, made important discoveries. Still more important were the mathematical advancements, including the concept of zero, “Arabic” numerals, and the decimal system. Indian artists created shrines to Buddha called stupas and painted in lively colors.

Economy and Society. India developed extensive trade both within the subcontinent and on the ocean to its south. The caste system described many key features of Indian society and its economy. The rights of women became increasingly limited as Indian civilization developed; however, male dominance over women was usually greater in theory than in practice. The economy in this era was extremely vigorous, especially in trade, surpassing that in China and the Mediterranean world. Merchants traded from the Roman Empire to Indonesia to China.

In Depth: Inequality as the Social Norm. The Indian caste system, like the Egyptian division between noble and commoner and the Greco-Roman division between free and slave, rests on the assumption that humans are inherently unequal. All classical social systems (with the partial exception of Athens’ democracy) played down the importance of the individual and emphasized obligations to family, group, and government. This runs counter to modern Western notions about equality. Classical China and Greece probably came closest to modern views about individuality, but in both civilizations, it was largely expected that rulers should come from society’s elites. In nearly all societies throughout most human history, few challenged the “natural order” of social hierarchy and fewer still proposed alternatives.

Indian Influence. Because of its extensive trading network, Indian cultural influence spread widely, especially in Southeast Asia. Buddhism was a leading cultural export. Indian merchants often married into royal families in other areas. Political dominance of outside peoples was not a characteristic of Indian governments.

China and India. China and India offer important contrasts in politics and society, yet they resembled each other in that both built stable structures over large areas and used culture to justify social inequality. The restraint of Chinese art contrasted with the more dynamic style of India. The latter developed a primary religion, Hinduism, while the former opted for separate religious and philosophical systems. Chinese technological advancements stressed practicality, while Indians ventured into mathematics for its own sake. Indian merchants played a greater societal role than their Chinese counterparts. Both, however, relied on large peasant classes in agrarian settings; both accepted political power based on land ownership.

Global Connections: India and the Wider World. No classical civilization was more open to outside influences than India. None were more central to cross-cultural exchanges in the common era. Important innovations in mathematics and science came from classical India. Buddhism is one of the few truly world religions. Indian influence was especially important in Southeast Asia. Placed between the great empires and trading networks of the Mediterranean and of China, India was ideally situated for its culture to influence both East and West.
The civilizations of Greece and Rome rivaled those of India and China in cultural richness and their effect on world history. Their institutions and values reverberated in the later histories of the Middle East and Europe and Europe’s colonies around the world. The study of classical Mediterranean civilization is complicated because it includes Greek and then Roman political, social, and economic institutions, which were sometimes shared but often unique.

**The Persian Tradition.** Greeks and Romans had contacts with and were influenced to some degree by the large Persian Empire and its descendants. The Persians absorbed many of the attributes of earlier Mesopotamian societies. Zoroastrianism, an early monotheistic religion, came from within the empire. After being toppled by the Greek leader Alexander the Great, another empire arose—the Sassanid—during Rome’s imperial era.

**Patterns of Greek and Roman History.** The rise of the dynamic city-states of classical Greece began around 800 B.C.E., reaching a high point in the fifth century B.C.E. with the leadership of the Athenian Pericles. The next major era came under the expansionist Alexander who briefly united Greece and the Persian Empire. The legacy of the combination of the two civilizations was called Hellenism. Rome’s development as a republic began as Hellenism waned. As Rome gained more territory by challenging regional powers and lesser developed cultures, it grew into an empire.

**Greek and Roman Political Institutions.** Greece and Rome featured an important variety of political forms. Both tended to emphasize aristocratic rule but there were significant examples of democratic elements as well. Politics was very important in the classical Mediterranean civilizations and offer similarities to Confucian values, yet the variety of political forms reminds the historian of India. There was no single Greek political style, but democracy is the most famous. Classical Mediterranean political theory involved ethics, duties of citizens, and skills, such as oratory. Governments supported an official religion, but tolerance of other faiths was the norm. The exception, Christianity under the Roman Empire, occurred because Christians refused to place state first in their devotion. The greatest political legacies of the Mediterranean cultures were an intense loyalty to the state, a preference for aristocratic rule, and the development of a uniform set of legal principles.

**In Depth: The Classical Mediterranean Civilization in Comparative Perspective.** The three great classical civilizations of China, India, and the Mediterranean lead historians to espouse a variety of comparisons. Similarities include that each developed into an empire; each relied primarily on an agricultural economy; and each supported the development of science, but for different reasons. All three civilizations emphasized clear social strata with the elites considerably distanced from the masses. Differences included social mobility, with India’s the most restrictive and Rome’s the most fluid, comparatively. In addition, each civilization developed a different cultural “glue” that held society together, with the Mediterranean’s emphasis on devotion to the state for the good of the whole (“civic duty”), while India promised reward for good behavior through reincarnation and Chinese Confucianism promoted obedience and self-restraint as a good unto itself, with the result being peace and prosperity. Over time, Indian and Chinese social structures survived better than those in the Mediterranean because of the introduction of Christianity into the latter’s culture.

**Religion and Culture.** The Greeks and Romans did not create a significant world religion. Their religions derived from a complex set of gods and goddesses who were seen as regulating human life. Both Mediterranean and Indian religious lore reflected the common heritage of Indo-European invaders. Greco-Roman religion tended toward an off–this-world approach with lessons that illustrated human passions and foibles but offered little in regard to modeling ethical behavior. Thus, separate models of moral philosophy were developed, by such men as Aristotle and Cicero, who like Confucius, taught the importance of moderation and balance in human behavior. Socrates taught his followers to question conventional wisdom by using rational inquiry. In the sciences, Greek work in geometry and anatomy were especially important. The greatest Roman contribution to the sciences was in engineering. In the arts and literature, the Greeks had few equals, particularly in sculpture, architecture, and plays. The Romans mimicked but rarely surpassed the Greek innovators in these fields.

**Economy and Society in the Mediterranean.** Most Greeks and Romans were self-sustaining farmers, but there was also a great deal of commercial agriculture, which in turn fueled their establishment of empire. There was also extensive trade. Slavery was an important economic and social institution in the Mediterranean civilization. The family was a tight social structure, with men in firm control; however, women were often active in business and sometimes controlled property. Overall, the status of women in the Mediterranean world was better than in China.

**Toward the Fall of Rome.** The fall of Rome differed from China’s and India’s declines. For instance, no single civilization rose to replace Rome, although several smaller governments claimed to be its inheritor. In addition, Rome’s fall was fragmentary, collapsing in the Western empire long before the Eastern side did.

**Global Connections: Greece, Rome, and the World.** The Greeks set up a widespread colonial and trading network, peaking with Alexander, but it did not last. The much bigger world of the Romans was well aware of the Asian, African, and northern European world outside their realm. Chinese goods were traded in the city of Rome itself, but interest in the Middle Kingdom seems to have been strictly out of a desire for material goods, rather than because of China’s technology or system of governance.
The basic themes of the three great classical civilizations of China, India, and the Mediterranean involved expansion and integration. Throughout the classical world, these themes faltered between 200 and 500 C.E., signaling the end of that era. The response of major religions to political decline formed a leading direction in the next phase of world history. Meanwhile, developments outside the classical orbit gained new prominence.

**Expansion and Integration.** Common themes for the classical civilizations include territorial expansion and efforts to integrate the peoples of the new territories. Responses to expansion included philosophers who commented on the policy, like Confucius, Buddha, and Socrates. Integration involved two basic issues: first, how to govern the new territories, and second, how to create social cohesion throughout the empire. In retrospect, it appears the Chinese and Indians were more successful at establishing social cohesion than the Mediterraneans were.

**Decline in China and India.** A combination of external weakness and invasion led to the decline of classical civilizations in China and then India. From 200 to 600 C.E., all three classical civilizations collapsed entirely or in part, and all three were invaded by outside groups from central Asia. The central Asian nomadic Huns attacked all three classical civilizations. About 100 C.E., the Han dynasty began serious decline. Weakened central government, social unrest led by overtaxed peasants, and epidemics were the most prominent sources of decline. These combined to make the government unable to stop invading nomads. However, by 600, China revived, first with the brief Sui dynasty and later (and more gloriously) with the Tang. Confucianism and bureaucracy revived. Unlike those in Rome, the cultural and political structures in China were too strong to be fully and permanently overturned. The decline in India was not as drastic as in China. By 600, Huns destroyed the Gupta Empire. For several centuries, no native Indian led a large state there. Hinduism gained ground as Buddhism, unappealing to the warrior caste, declined in its native land. After 600, Islam entered India and Arab traders took control of Indian Ocean trade routes. What survived was Hinduism (Islam never gained adherence from a majority of the population) and the caste system.

**Decline and Fall in Rome.** Decline in Rome was multifactorial. Population declined, leadership faltered, the economy flagged, tax collection became more difficult, and, as a result and perhaps most significantly, despondency pervaded much of the citizenry. The decline in Rome was more disruptive than in China or India and was more pronounced in the Western portion of the empire than in the eastern. In Italy, Spain, and points north, the fall of Rome shattered unities and reduced the level of civilization itself. Emperors Diocletian and Constantine slowed the spiral of decay but only temporarily; the latter moved the capital to Constantinople and allowed Christianity. When Germanic tribes invaded in the 400s, there was little power or will to resist. In the eastern half, a remnant of the empire survived as the Byzantine Empire. In earlier days of the Roman Empire, two Middle Eastern civilizations, the Parthian and then the Sassanid, attempted to revive the Persian Empire. Each served as bridges between the Mediterranean the East. The Sassanids were in turn overthrown by Islamic Arab conquerors.

**The New Religious Map.** As the classical civilizations declined, what developed into the world’s major religions—Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam—flourished and shaped the global map of faith into the one we recognize today. People sought solace in the spiritual world as they saw their temporal world collapsing. Christianity, once persecuted in the West, became widespread. Similarly, Buddhism grew in China and the East. Islam surfaced and became a dynamic force in the areas in between. With Hinduism, Islam shared some commonalities: intense devotion, piety, and a hope for a better life after this one. Each also responded to political instability and to poverty. Each often took on features of local cultures, in a process called “SYNCRETISM.”

**Buddhism** altered as it traveled beyond India, and Buddha himself became more of a savior figure than a teacher of a way. Women in China were especially drawn to this faith in that many felt it led to a more meaningful life. Ultimately, with the revival of dynasties in China, Buddhism was persecuted, but it remained a minority current. It had a greater influence in Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. **Christianity** played a major part in the formation of postclassical civilizations in eastern and western Europe. It emphasized missionary activity even more than Buddhism did. Its beginnings were in the early days of the Roman Empire, near the eastern shores of the Mediterranean. Jesus preached compassion with great conviction and charisma, but in his lifetime he had relatively few followers. Over time, his message of the spiritual equality of all people and an afterlife of heavenly communion with God replaced the comparatively unsatisfying traditional polytheistic religion of the Romans. Later Christians, Paul most notably, saw themselves not as part of a reform movement within Judaism but rather as a new religion. The writings of Paul and other Christians became known as the New Testament in the Christian Bible. By the time Rome collapsed, Christianity had demonstrated immense spiritual power and solid organization. For example, Benedict formed a monastery in Italy that became the template for other groups of monks and nuns. Christianity had particular appeal to women, who were offered leadership opportunities in convents and who were encouraged to worship together with men, which was unlike the practices in many faiths of the time. **Islam** will be featured in greater detail in upcoming chapters. With Buddhism and Christianity, the Islamic faith completes the roster of world religions, with most of the earth’s population following one of these three belief systems today. Polytheistic faiths continued to exist, especially in Hinduism and Daoism.