

Foundations of World Civilization: Notes 19
Globalization and Collapse of the Classical World

© Copyright Bruce Owen 2009

- Hellenistic empires (323 – ~50 BCE), especially Alexander's and Seleucid, fostered trade towards East of the Mediterranean
 - Seleucids
 - established military colonies that attracted Greek traders, etc.
 - but remained foreigners in Persia and Central Asia
 - during the 200s BCE, the indigenous Parthians gradually took back more and more of the Seleucid empire
 - just like the Macedonians and Greeks, they did not change much, continuing many of the practices of the former Persian Achaemenid empire
 - but the Parthians did control trade within their territory
 - they generally did not allow foreign traders to pass through, insisting on handling the trade themselves
 - this put them between the Roman Mediterranean world and China, allowing great profits for them in land trade
 - Ptolomies
 - controlled travel in Red Sea
 - built Red Sea port of Berenice
 - built Mediterranean port of Alexandria
 - used monsoon winds (as did earlier mariners)
 - from SW in summer
 - from NE in winter
 - allows reliable travel to all Arabian and Indian ocean ports
 - also with smaller, simpler polities in Africa, most famously Rhapta
 - precise location still unknown
 - Ptolomies combated piracy between the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea and India Ocean
 - much like today!
 - why is this problem still with us, in this same place?
 - what similarities do you see in who cares about the problem, who is fighting it, why, etc.?
- Why does all this trade matter?
 - it increases the exchange of ideas, thus (according to Diamond) speeding up cultural, scientific, and technical innovation
 - this is Eurasia reaping the rewards of its geographic advantages
 - and even more so when we look at the Silk routes in a moment
 - some of that innovation is in political organization
 - when a simpler society begins interacting with a more complex one, as in trade, it has to develop corresponding complex features
 - the foreign traders want someone to trade with
 - who can amass a large quantity of goods when needed
 - who can take orders for future delivery, and actually deliver on them

- who can keep records, understand contracts, deal honestly, etc.
- foreign traders also want a political and judicial authority that can keep the peace, control crime, enforce contracts, etc.
- any people or institutions that start providing these services will get the business of dealing with the foreigners
 - will profit
 - and will grow important in the peripheral society
 - so that society becomes more complex, and in some ways picks up the organizational features of the foreign traders
- and, as Bentley and Ziegler point out, trade means an exchange of disease organisms, too
 - which ultimately led to repeated extremely serious plagues
 - that seriously reduced the populations of the classical societies of the Mediterranean and China
 - also presumably Central Asia and India, although the records for checking this are poor
- The Silk Routes (“Silk Roads”)
 - connected the Roman Empire to China, and many points in between
 - land routes north of the Himalayas
 - sea routes
 - almost no one traveled a whole route from one end to the other
 - on land:
 - Chinese traders to Bactria
 - Parthians to northern Mesopotamia/eastern Levant (Palmyra)
 - various Roman imperial people from there throughout the Mediterranean
 - by sea:
 - Indian and Malay mariners from China to India
 - from there:
 - Parthians, Greeks, Egyptians in the Arabian Sea
 - Parthians in the Persian Gulf to Mesopotamia
 - Ptolemies, and later Roman imperial traders in the Red Sea towards the Eastern Mediterranean
 - various Roman imperial people from Alexandria to the Eastern Mediterranean
 - Roman colonies in India!
- example: 50 AD, near the peak of the Roman Empire
 - Sheer silk dresses from China were very popular in Rome
 - Acquired in the Levant from Central Asian traders who took an overland “silk road” from China, then shipped by sea to Rome
 - Some in the Roman Senate thought them immoral, because they were too sheer and revealing, and sought to ban them, but failed
 - a more serious objection, also voiced in the Senate: the injustice of tremendous labor by poor people in a distant land in order to meet the faddish fancy of Roman girls
 - Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History* VI, 54:
 - “So manifold is the labor employed, and so distant is the region of the globe drawn upon, to enable the Roman maiden to flaunt transparent clothing in public.”

- Seneca the Younger c. 3 BC–AD 65, *Declamations Vol. I*:
 - “Wretched flocks of maids labor so that the adulteress may be visible through her thin dress.”
 - does this sound familiar – like objections people make today to globalization?
- at about the same time, Roman traders left coins at a port in the Mekong delta, found in archaeological excavations
 - later known to have used a route from the northern end of the Red Sea (now the Suez canal) to Vietnam, where traders brought the Chinese silks to sell
- by 166, a Chinese historical document claims that the Romans had established an embassy in China
 - although this might have actually been private traders
- so the demand for silk and the quest for profits evidently won out over conservative objections
- Spread of Buddhism
 - established in northern India in 200s BCE
 - spread among silk route land traders, popular from 200 BCE to 1000 CE
 - concentrations in ethnic enclaves of traders in Chinese cities
 - spread into Chinese population in the 400s CE
- “Indianization” of Java, Sumatra, Malay peninsula: along maritime silk routes
 - political (“Rajas”), art styles, Buddhism, Hinduism
 - adoption of Sanskrit
- Spread of Christianity
- Spread of Manichaeism
 - propounded by the prophet Mani (216-272 CE)
 - a syncretic religion combining teachings of three prophets: Zarathustra (Zoroastrian), Buddha, and Jesus.
 - famously dualistic: good vs. evil; good=light, evil=dark, etc.
 - valued high ethical standards, ascetic lifestyle
- Epidemic disease
 - Roman empire: 100s – 200s CE: several plagues of smallpox and measles reduced population of the entire Roman empire by 25%!
 - normally, populations grow... this is a very serious
 - in the following centuries, still more plagues, probably including bubonic plague
 - finally leaving the Roman empire by 600 CE with only 2/3 the population it had had at 100 CE
 - Han China: 200s-400s CE: similar plagues reduced population of entire Han Empire by almost 1/5
 - by 600 CE, Han China had only 3/4 of its population of 200 CE
 - these losses may not sound like much, but imagine removing one out of every four people in a business or government, at all levels, at random
 - it would cause chaos

- the plagues did not do this all at once, but still, institutions would be terribly weakened by this
- think of the economic impacts
- property values would plummet
- there would not be enough of any kind of labor, skilled or not
- supply chains for many materials, foods, manufactured goods, etc. would break down
- tax income for the state would plummet, just when services were most needed to keep order and help the public
 - the government would be unable to meet needs
 - would lose its reputation for effectiveness and legitimacy...
- and so on... a chronic disaster that would continue for generations

- Han China breaks up into smaller kingdoms around 300 CE
 - since we did not discuss China much, I'll leave this to the book

- Fall of the Roman Empire
 - starting around 200 CE: factions, weakening government
 - population decline and economic disruption led to regions becoming more self-sufficient, less integrated and interdependent
 - thus developing different interests
 - and harder to control
 - 235-284 CE: the “barracks emperors”: 26 in 49 years, averaging less than two years each
 - and only one is known to have died a natural death
 - Emperor Diocletian: 284-305 CE
 - divided the Roman empire into two parts: Western and Eastern
 - each ruled by a co-emperor, each with a powerful assistant
 - thus four leaders, the “tetrarchs”
 - Diocletian ruled the Western Roman Empire, with his seat at Rome
 - brought back some order
 - began to balance the Roman budget
 - (heard that one before?)
 - instituted price caps to control inflation
 - (heard that proposed, or used in other countries?)
 - when Diocletian retired, civil war broke out
 - between the three remaining tetrarchs and various generals who wanted control of parts or all of the empire
 - Constantine, son of Diocletian’s co-emperor (of the Eastern Roman empire) finally gained control by 313 CE
 - reunited the Roman empire
 - established Constantinople, located in the Eastern Roman empire, as his capital
 - functional as the capital of the whole Roman empire by 330 CE
 - promoted Christianity
 - several religions and cults were current at the time
 - cult of Isis, Mithraism, Judaism (albeit restricted to one ethnic group)

- Manichaeism
- Christianity was widespread, but technically illegal and occasionally persecuted
 - because Christians would not recognize the Roman emperor as divine
 - and promoted the value of lower classes – feared to possibly foment rebellion
- according to one historian, Constantine decided to try out Christianity, and had his soldiers paint the Christian cross on their shields
 - he won the battle that followed, and took this as proof that the Christian god was powerful and was helping him
- immediately upon gaining control of most of the Roman empire, Constantine legalized Christianity
- Constantine formally converted to Christianity himself
 - convened the Council of Nicea in 325 CE,
 - which defined a specific “Nicean” form of Christianity (there were others)
 - in which Jesus was the son of God, just as divine as God, but made incarnate
 - the basis of most of the modern forms of Christianity
- Christians came to hold many high offices in the imperial government
- 380 CE: several emperors later, Theodosius, the last effective emperor of the unified Roman empire, made Christianity the official state religion
- meanwhile, Rome was dealing with external troubles, too
 - to the east
 - the Sasanid dynasty took over the Parthian empire in 224 CE
 - disastrous wars between Roman and Sasanid forces in Anatolia, Syria, Mesopotamia, including some severe losses
 - especially the Sasanid capture of the Roman Emperor Valerian
 - to the north
 - various groups on the northern periphery of the empire were beginning to cause problems in the 300s
 - many of these “Germanic” groups had converted to Christianity
 - they wanted, and got, lands granted to them along the borders of the Roman empire
 - in the later 300s, they were even more pushed into the empire by raids by Attila the Hun, leading nomads from the Central Asia
 - armed Germanic groups (Visigoths, Ostrogoths, Franks, Vandals, etc.) moved into the empire, and found that the empire had no ability to stop them from taking any land they wanted
- 383 CE: Theodosius declares his older son, Arcadius, to be emperor of the Eastern Roman Empire
- a year later, 384 CE: Theodosius dies, leaving the Western empire to his nine-year-old son, Honorius
 - both were essentially controlled by high officials of mixed Roman and Germanic descent (Arcadius with a Vandal, Honorius with a Visigoth)
 - in the following decades, the Western Roman empire continued to suffer attacks and lose battles with Germanic invaders
 - Rome was eventually sacked in 410 CE
 - the last nominal emperor of the Western Roman empire,

- a fourteen-year-old who was called “Augustulus” (“little Augustus”)
- was captured and killed in 476 by Odovacer, a “barbarian” leader of mixed Germanic and Hun descent
- according to a later Byzantine historian, before killing him, Odovacer made Augustulus write a letter to Zeno, emperor of the Eastern Roman empire
 - saying that Rome no longer needed a western emperor, and should be ruled only from Constantinople
 - that he had chosen Odovacer to handle affairs in the west
 - and sending back his imperial regalia
- the Eastern Roman empire survived intact
 - with its capital at Constantinople
 - now known as the Byzantine empire, but at the time still considered the Roman empire
 - due to strong Greek influence, eventually called by some at the time the “Empire of the Greeks”
 - lasting up to 1453 CE