Chapter Five, "Causes of Decline," for *Lessons from Early Empires*

A clear pattern emerges from studying the decline of twelve early imperial states – all were weakened first by their own mistakes in governing and only later succumbed to foreign attacks. Four principal types of governing mistakes – succession crises, religious excesses, peasant rebellions, and fruitless expansions – created an internal erosion of central government power.

Succession crises, caused by bloody disputes over who would succeed a deceased ruler, were the most common dimension of internal erosion in early empires. Succession disputes were central in the downfall of five of our early empires and kingdoms, and they played contributory roles in most of the other studied states. In three of our case studies, religious excesses triggered internal erosion. So many state resources were devoted to temple societies, religious monuments, or monkish orders that the central government could not provide adequate national defense.

Devastating peasant rebellions led to military coups that ended two of our early multinational empires. Corrupted central

bureaucracies alienated their rural populations by allocating agricultural land to noble estates and refusing to provide food relief after drastic droughts or floods. Many of our imperial states engaged in some fruitless expansions – spending more resources to conquer and control foreign areas than they received back by taxing them. But only two wasted so many resources that they could not sustain imperial rule.

After governing mistakes eroded the ability of imperial states to create wealth and exert power, they became vulnerable to foreign incursions. Typically, foreign invasions led to the ultimate fall of early empires, but not in all instances. The dynasties in both Han and Tang China ended after domestic military coups. Only later did China fall to foreign invaders – Mongols and Manchus. Our ten other early imperial states all fell in part because of foreign incursions. Six of them suffered significant military defeats that precipitated eventual regime change. But after their downfalls, those states escaped from lasting foreign rule – at least for a time.

The other four were less fortunate and were ruled directly by their conquerors.

Our twelve early empires thus crumbled from within because of the internal erosion of their sources of wealth and power. Internal erosion then set the stage for later foreign incursions – migrations, coups d'état, vassalage, or complete takeovers. Contrary to common perception, early empires did not decline and break apart principally because foreign bullies invaded and took them over. Foreigners generally did conquer declining empires, but only after their imperial strength had eroded internally.

Decline from Succession Crises

The most common cause of imperial decline was succession disputes. I illustrate this critical phenomenon with two representative examples. In Imperial Rome, succession crises created instability and undercut military strength and high-living aristocrats over-taxed provincial agriculture. Eventually, invasions of Germanic tribes from the north dismembered the tottering western Roman Empire. Similarly, the Guptan elite in India

became embroiled in debilitating succession controversies over who would become the next king. Consequent military weakness undercut the Guptas' capability to maintain indirect political control of vassal territories in north-central India and to fend off periodic attacks from Hun invaders.

Decline in Imperial Rome. The Roman Empire (509 BCE-476 CE) began its decline in the 3rd century CE when it experienced succession crises and subsequent regional secessions. Rome's mid-3rd century crisis in the east was especially serious. The leaders of Palmyra revolted and captured much of the Roman Empire's eastern provinces. Palmyra was a rich oasis and caravan city of perhaps 200,000 people located in the middle of the eastern Syrian Desert.[1] The enormous Efqa spring provided ample water for nearby agriculture and herding.

[1] Tim Cornell and John Matthews, *Atlas of the Roman World*, New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1995, p. 158.

Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_Ancient_Rome_271_AD.svg>

Rome's Mid-3rd-century Crisis – Secession of the Gallic Empire (Green Area) and the Palmyrene Empire (Yellow Area), 271 CE

Starting in the 1st century CE, Palmyra became a desert entrepôt. Palmyrene entrepreneurs developed a trade route through Palmyra that linked the port of Antioch on the Mediterranean Sea with the Persian Gulf – a key portion of the Silk Road that connected the Roman and Han Chinese Empires. The trading city of Palmyra provided caravanserai services, merchants, and trade

financiers to the camel-based, Silk Road merchants.[2] Chinese silk was the most profitable commodity traded through Palmyra, supplemented by Indian spices, especially pepper.

In the 260s, Septimius Odenathus, the ruler of Palmyra and a Roman senator, saved the Roman Empire in the east. He defeated two pretenders to the throne, Macrianus and Quietus – who were hoping to conquer large portions of the Roman east and later to return to rule Rome. Odenathus then drove the Sassanid Persians out of Antioch and the rest of Syria and recovered the Roman province of Mesopotamia. But in 267, at the peak of his power and prestige, Odenathus was murdered in a dynastic family quarrel. His wife, Zenobia, then ruled on behalf of her minor son, Vaballathus.[3]

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[2] Gary K. Young, *Rome's Eastern Trade, International Commerce and Imperial Policy, 31 BC – AD 305*, London: Routledge, 2001, pp. 149-151, 155.

[3] Richard Stoneman, *Palmyra and Its Empire, Zenobia's Revolt Against Rome*, Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1994, p. 2.

Zenobia, an extraordinary leader, was charismatic, beautiful, and ambitious. She revolted against Roman rule, and in 270-271 she conquered the Roman provinces of Syria, Roman Arabia, Palestine, and Egypt, and half of Anatolia (to Ankara), including the Roman provinces of Cappadocia, Cilicia, and Galatia.

Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Queen_Zenobia_Addressing_Her_Soldiers_sc1080.jpg>

Queen Zenobia, Leading Her Troops – Painting by Giambattista Tiepolo, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C.

But Zenobia's incredible military feat was short-lived.

Emperor Aurelian (ruled 270-275) soon re-conquered the Roman

east. In 272, he besieged Palmyra, captured Zenobia as she tried to flee on a camel to Persia, and exiled her to Rome (where she died a natural death at her palatial home in Tivoli).[4] When other Palmyrenes revolted a second time in 273, Aurelian recaptured Palmyra and destroyed the city. Palmyra never recovered.[5] For centuries thereafter, its substantial ruins reminded tourists of the grandeur that once was possible on ancient Eurasian trade routes in the eastern Syrian Desert.

After nearly collapsing under the weight of succession struggles, foreign invasions, and secessionist crises, the Roman Empire revived for a half century with stable leadership. Constantine (ruled 307-337) improved army mobility, built a new eastern capital city at Constantinople, and converted to Christianity. Yet the oppression of poor farmers increased in the

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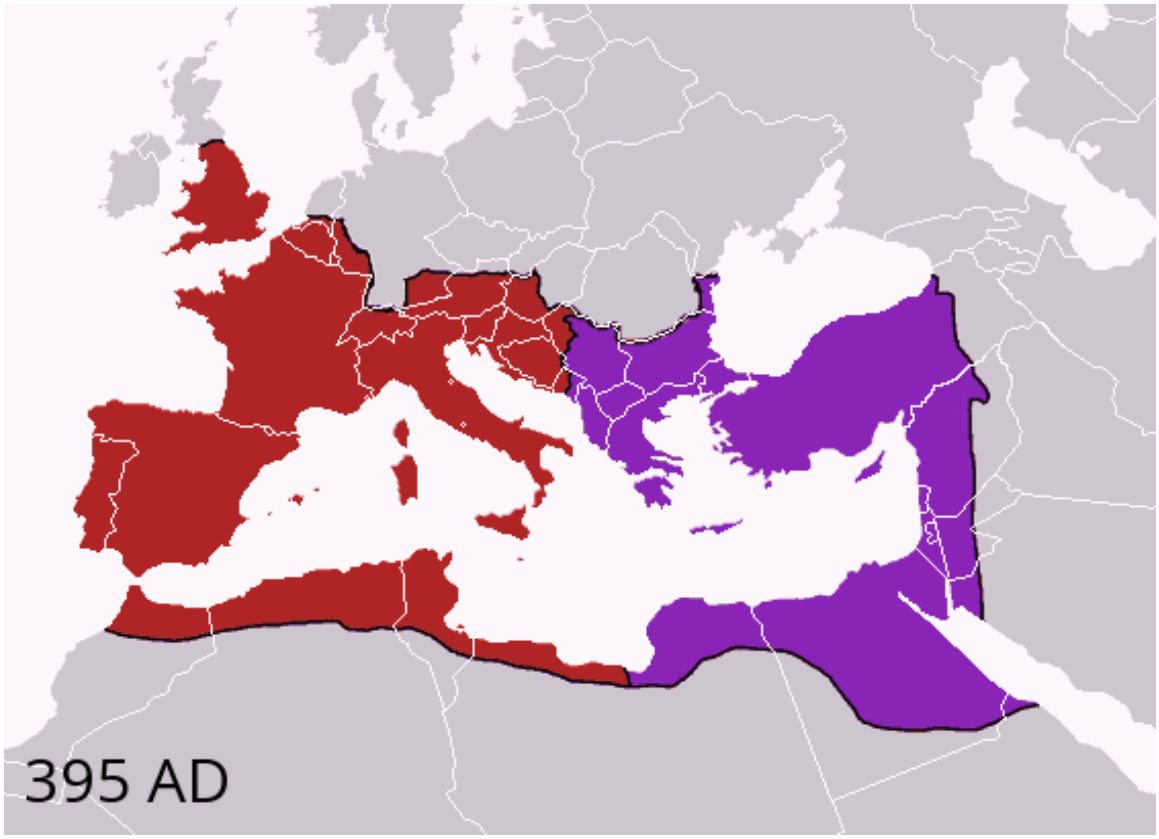
[4] Gary K. Young, *Rome's Eastern Trade, International Commerce and Imperial Policy, 31 BC – AD 305*, London: Routledge, 2001, pp. 178-180.

[5] Chris Scarre, *The Penguin Historical Atlas of Ancient Rome*, London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1995, p. 112.

4th century and income disparities widened. Poor people throughout the empire increasingly resented the conspicuous consumption of the rich, especially their palatial residences, and their ability to avoid taxation.

Theodosius (ruled 379-395) tried to improve imperial governance in 395 by dividing the empire permanently between Rome (the west) and Constantinople (the east). But that division created competitive strains between the two halves of the empire, signaled military weakness, and did little to resolve the deepening problems facing the tottering empire.[6]

[6] Chris Scarre, *The Penguin Historical Atlas of Ancient Rome*, London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1995, pp. 134-135.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Theodosius_I%27s_empire.png>

The Roman Empire After Division by Theodosius I in 395 CE – Western Roman Empire (Red) and Byzantine) Empire (Purple)

Dismemberment of the western half of the Roman Empire by Germanic peoples from the north followed in the 5th century. Between 418 and 439, the Vandals successively conquered Gaul, Spain, and Roman Africa and took over the areas that provided much of Rome's food. The Huns moved into the Hungarian plains in 420 and invaded Gaul and northern Italy in 451. But the Huns

did not settle permanently in Roman territory, and the Hunnish threat subsided after the death of the Huns' leader, Attila, in 453.[7]

The Anglo-Saxons invaded Britain and imposed their Germanic language on the conquered Celtic residents. The Franks displaced the Vandals and Visigoths and captured France. The Ostrogoths took over Italy and Rome and forced the last western Roman emperor, Romulus Augustus, to abdicate in 476 and retire in Campania. After five centuries of rule, the once all-powerful western Roman Empire had fallen. The eastern half of the Roman Empire, centered in Constantinople, became the Byzantine Empire and eventually succumbed to Ottoman Turkish invaders in 1453.

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[7] Tim Cornell and John Matthews, *Atlas of the Roman World*, New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1995, p. 211.

Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Europe_and_the_Near_East_at_476_AD.png>

Western Europe and the Byzantine (Eastern Roman) Empire – After the Fall of the Western Roman Empire, 476

Why did the Roman Empire divide and fall? Edward Gibbon, the 18th century British historian, argued that the loss of individual liberty eroded the Romans' will to resist invasion and that the *pax Romana* led to military indiscipline.[8] Those morale

[8] Tim Cornell and John Matthews, *Atlas of the Roman World*, New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1995, pp. 212-213.

influences can be reinterpreted as parts of a larger process of internal decay and foreign invasion. The Roman Empire collapsed because a long process of internal erosion softened the empire and made it an easy candidate for eventual foreign takeover. Wide income disparities existed in the Roman Empire. The annual income of a typical rich Roman senator was probably 100 times that of a fully-employed worker. As the income inequalities increased in the 2nd and 3rd centuries, the rural poor increasingly resented the heavy agricultural tax burden that funded aristocratic extravagance. Economic disparities created social unrest.[9]

Beginning in the mid-3rd century, succession crises became endemic as many provincial military commanders attempted to become emperor and several succeeded. Chronic instability of government and repeated foreign invasions undercut the political stability and security that had been the main benefits of Roman rule for the oppressed poor. At the same time, religious dissension

[9] Peter Garnsey, *Famine and Food Supply in the Graeco-roman World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 276.

spread and Roman officials increased the persecution of Christians, exacerbating social tensions.[10] Tight central political control might have staved off those growing pressures. But Rome instead experienced political instability.

Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:British_Museum_Thetford_Hoard_Rings.jpg>

Gold Jewelry from the Thetford Hoard –
The Privilege of Ruling in the Roman Empire

Political instability was coupled with a loss of military strength, especially in the Roman west. The Roman Empire lost two-thirds of its eastern field army in the disastrous Battle of

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[10] Peter Garnsey and Richard Saller, *The Roman Empire, Economy, Society and Culture*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987, pp. 174-175.

Hadrianople (modern Edirne, Turkey) in 378, when the invading Goths annihilated the outnumbered and ill-disciplined Roman troops. Rome never recovered from the consequent shortage of military manpower. Its myopic leaders refused to rein in Roman extravagances – food doles, monuments, public games, and rich diets – and transfer funds to the military. To keep their landed estates operating, western Roman aristocrats substituted cash for troops, exacerbating the shortages of military manpower.[11]

Rome thus became ripe for foreign invasion. Fierce Barbarian invaders from central and northern Europe – Vandals, Huns, Anglo-Saxons, Visigoths, Franks, and Ostrogoths – took advantage of Roman military weakness, inflicted large losses on Roman armies, and dismembered the Roman Empire. During the ensuing Dark Ages and Medieval Period, Europe largely abandoned Roman technology, education, law, and long-distance trade. A millennium passed before Europe again achieved

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[11] Tim Cornell and John Matthews, *Atlas of the Roman World*, New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1995, p. 211.

standards of living comparable to those enjoyed by the Romans when the empire was thriving.

Decline in India's Gupta Kingdom. India's Gupta Kingdom thrived for more than two centuries (320-550) by controlling the fertile agricultural regions of north-central India, especially the Indo-Gangetic Plain.[12] An essential Guptan strength was the longevity and continuity of its early rulers.[13] For more than 130 years after its founding in 320, the Gupta Kingdom had only four kings – the founder, Chandragupta I (ruled 320-335), his son, Samudra (ruled 335-375), the expansionist, Chandragupta II (ruled 375-415), and his son, Kumaragupta I (415-454).[14]

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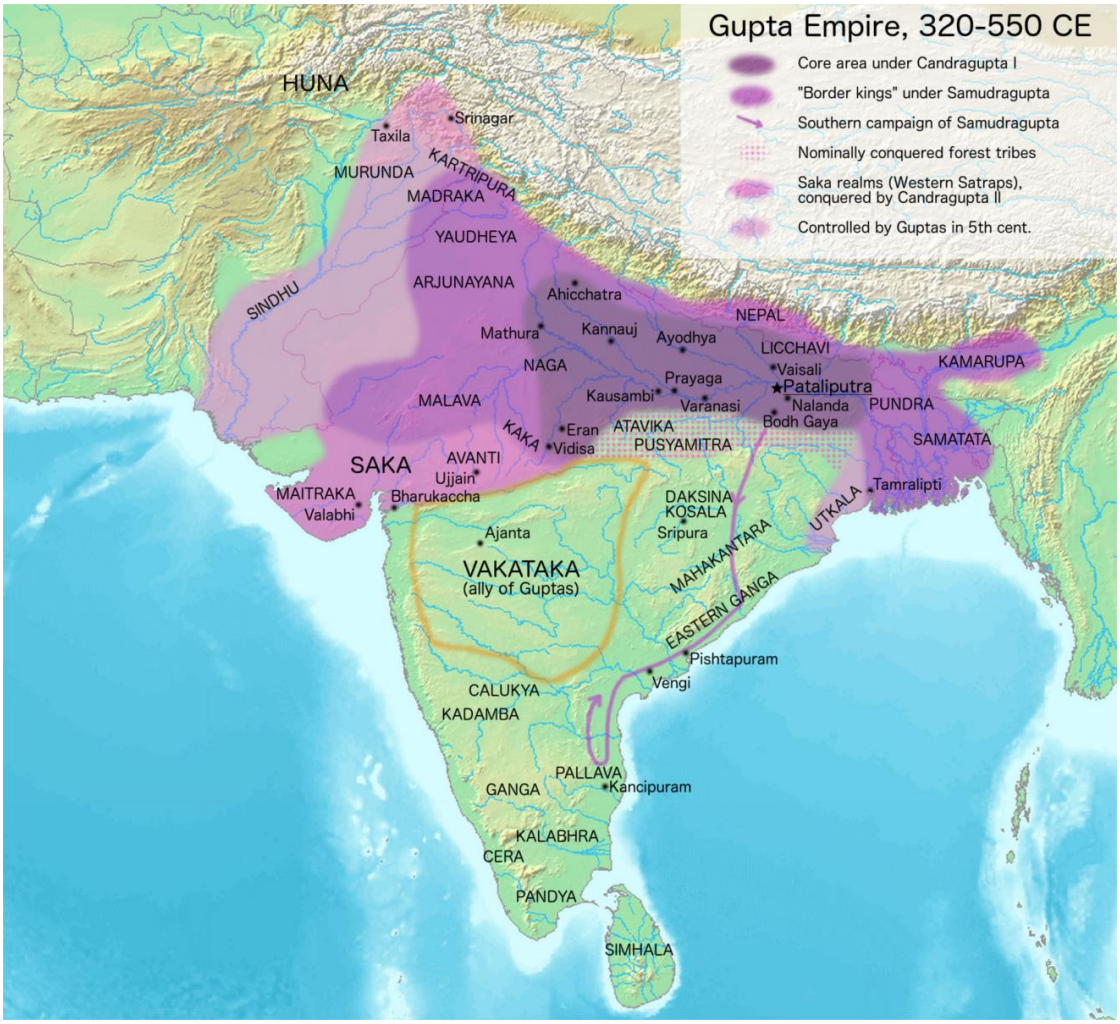
[12] Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 88-89.

[13] Stanley Wolpert, *India*, Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1999, pp. 38-39.

[14] Gordon Johnson, *Cultural Atlas of India*, Abingdon, England: Andromeda Oxford Limited, 1996, p. 75.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gupta_Empire,_320-550_CE.png>

The Gupta Kingdom (320-550 CE)

The Gupta Kingdom fell because of internal weakness – succession crises and local rebellions – and external invasions by the militaristic Huns. The sudden decline of Guptan power began in the early 6th century. Disputes over who would succeed to rule the Gupta Kingdom caused political and military weakening at the

center and fomented local rebellions in the regions that were only indirectly under Guptan control.[15]

The Huns (called the Hunas by Indian historians and known to Chinese historians as the Xiongnu) were militaristic nomads, originally from Mongolia and Turkestan, who subsequently migrated westward to Afghanistan (and later to central Europe). Hun leaders had earlier formed a long-lasting steppe nomadic empire that extorted bribes from Han Chinese rulers, but the Xiongnu federation had disintegrated in the 2nd century. From Afghanistan, the Huns began making periodic predatory raids into northern India in the mid-5th century.[16] Costly efforts to defend against Hun incursions drained the Guptan treasury and weakened Guptan military capability to defend their territory.

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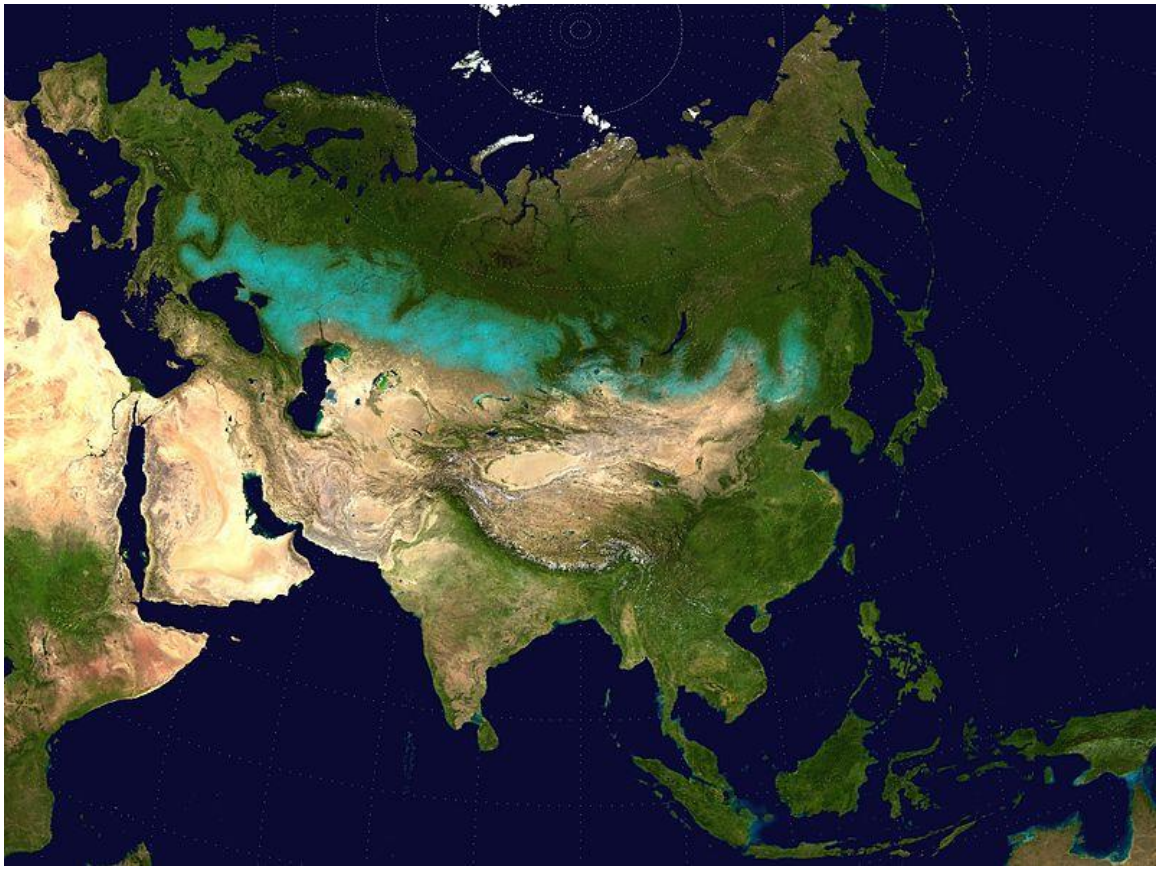
[15] Gordon Johnson, *Cultural Atlas of India*, Abingdon, England: Andromeda Oxford Limited, 1996, p. 79.

[16] Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 94.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Eurasian_steppe_belt.jpg>

The Huns Migrated Along the Eurasian Steppe (Aqua Area) – Disrupted Empires in China, Persia, Rome, and India

Toramana, a powerful Hun leader, conquered Persia in 484 and led an invasion and takeover of the rich agricultural Punjab in 500. Fifteen years later, his son, Mihirakula, conquered Kashmir and most of the Gangetic Plain. The Hun presence in northern India did not abate until the end of the 6th century, when the Huns were overtaken in Bactria (contemporary Afghanistan) by Turks

and Persians and disappeared from history after creating havoc throughout Eurasia – in China, India, Persia, and Rome.

Meanwhile, in northern India Yasodharman, a Hindu leader of Malwa (one of the western kingdoms formerly under Guptan control), declared independence from the Guptas, repelled the Huns, and dismembered the western part of the Gupta Kingdom. After losing much of their territory and agricultural tax base, Guptan leaders fell into disarray. Near the end, the territory under Guptan control was reduced to the areas around their heartland of Magadha (in the eastern Gangetic Plain) and parts of Bengal.[17] After the dissolution of the Gupta Kingdom in 550, northern India disintegrated into small kingdoms and chieftaincies and remained fragmented for another five centuries.

[17] Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 94.

Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mihirakula_portrait.jpg>

Mihirakula, Leader of the Invading Huns – Portrait On One Side of A Minted Coin

The Gupta Kingdom thus fell in the mid-6th century because of internal erosion – succession crises and local rebellions – and external invasions by Huns, predatory nomads from Afghanistan. Disputes over who would succeed to rule the empire caused political and military weakening at the center and fomented local

rebellions.[18] The Huns began periodic predatory raids into northern India in the mid-5th century. Efforts to defend against those incursions gradually drained the Guptan treasury and weakened their military capability to defend their territory. Succession crises and military weakness together undercut the strength of the Gupta Kingdom.

Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Wat_phra_keaw_ramayana_fresco.jpg>

Battle Between Rama and Ravana in the Ramayana – Foretold the Guptan Defeat by the Huns

[18] Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal, *Modern South Asia, History, Culture, Political Economy*, London: Routledge, 1998, p. 20.

Decline from Religious Excesses

One theme is common in the decline of early empires – central authority splintered and military strength waned. But the process of internal erosion differed markedly. Some early empires suffered from excessive spending on religious monuments and orders. Two examples illustrate this pattern of imperial decline.

In Dynastic Egypt, the main causal factor was an excessive devolution of wealth and authority to the temple societies and regional governments. When Alexander the Great conquered Egypt in the 4th century BCE, Dynastic Egypt disappeared. In the Kingdom of Pagan, wealth derived from the production of rice. Pagan declined because its kings allocated excessive amounts of rice-growing land and labor to temple societies and to building religious monuments. Pagan's demise occurred in the late 13th century, after Kublai Khan's armies invaded Burma.

Decline in Dynastic Egypt. How did the omnipotent pharaohs of Dynastic Egypt (*c.* 2900 BCE-332 BCE) lose their power? The erosion of the king's direct control began after the

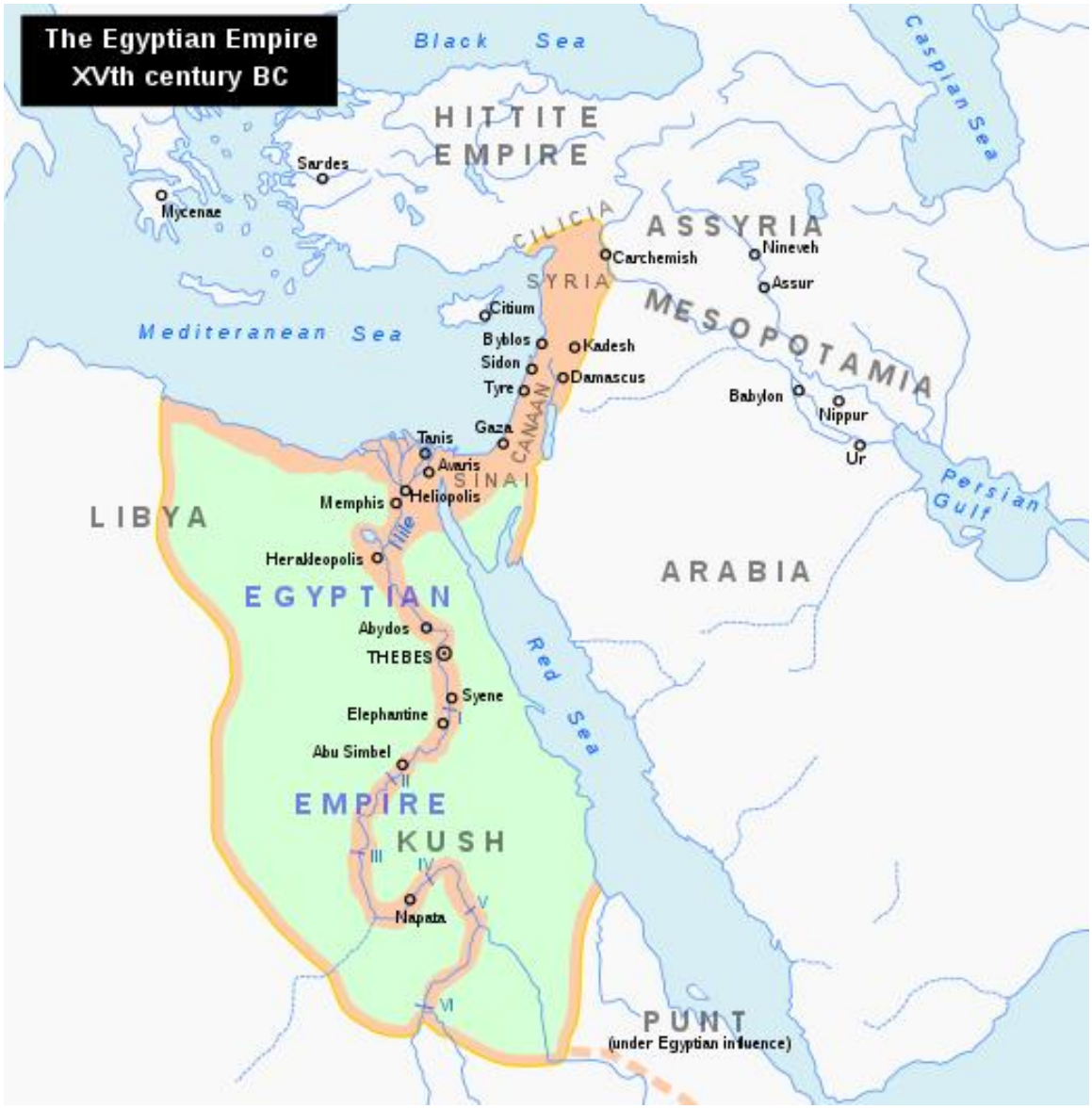
Amarna heresy (14th century BCE) in which Pharaoh Akhenaten overthrew the long-standing pantheistic system and worshipped only one sun-god.[19] Thereafter, pharaohs no longer could claim the divine right of kings and they lost the omnipotent control that they formerly held over their subjects. To maintain political legitimacy, successive pharaohs granted land and tenants to temples, principally to those dedicated to the cult of Amun in Thebes. That political fragmentation and shift of tax revenues resulted in a decline of military power. A weaker military, in turn, led to the loss of Egypt's foreign territories and control over trade networks.

Whenever Egypt had a strong central government, it controlled Nubia (contemporary Sudan), the critical source of gold and African trade goods. When the Egyptian center was weak, Nubia declared independence and Egypt lost its key to foreign-

[19] Ian Shaw (ed.), *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 311-313.

based wealth.[20] Weakened Egypt also lost its influence in the Levant (contemporary Syria, Lebanon, and Israel) and its access there to much-needed timber as well as booty, tribute, and taxes from that economically advanced but politically fractured region. Eventually, after Egyptian wealth was reduced to Nile agriculture, the balance of power switched and foreigners made incursions into Egypt – first as settlers, then as rulers of Egyptian dynasties, and finally as conquerors.

[20] W. Stevenson Smith, *The Art and Architecture of Ancient Egypt*, New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1998, pp. 3-4.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Egypt_1450_BC.svg>

Dynastic Egypt at Its Peak –
The New Kingdom, 16th-11th c. BCE, Linked Kush with the Levant

There are no reports of a declining trend of agricultural production during the period of Egyptian decline (11th-7th centuries BCE). Egypt did not suffer from major infestations of agricultural

pests or diseases or from climatic shifts. Planted area grew throughout this period, but crop yields probably stagnated until the Persians introduced the animal-operated *saqiya* water wheel in the 6th century BCE. Because farm families could produce about three times their subsistence needs, the surpluses available for government to tax were substantial.[21] The problem for dynastic Egypt, therefore, was not declining agricultural production.

Difficulties instead arose from a shift of the agricultural tax base away from the central government. A part of that shift happened gradually as the political power of the regions grew at the expense of the center. The principal shift, however, did not occur until late in the New Kingdom (14th-11th centuries BCE). The rise in the importance of new religious cults undermined the king's political as well as religious power. Kings began to give increasing amounts of productive farmland to temple foundations, which paid no taxes. By the 12th century BCE, temples owned or

[21] Ian Shaw (ed.), *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 305-309.

controlled one-third of all cultivated land.[22] The powerful cult of the Theban god, Amun, alone owned three-fourths of all temple-land. The central government thus suffered a severe loss of tax revenue and grain supplies.

Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Entrance_of_Karnak_Temple_,_Luxor.JPG>

Entrance to Temple of Amun (Karnak), Luxor – Built 1391-1213 BCE

Military discipline broke down during the Third Intermediate Period (11th-7th centuries BCE), when Egypt suffered intermittent civil wars and invasions. Its neighbors asserted their

[22] Joyce Tyldesley, *Hatchepsut, The Female Pharaoh*, London: Penguin Books, 1996, p. 32.

independence, as they always did whenever Egyptian power waned.[23] Egypt lost control of Nubia in the 11th century BCE and of the Levant a century later. Thereafter, Egypt lost forever its monopolistic access to Nubian gold mines and Levantine trade routes. Nubia turned the tables on Egypt in the 8th century when its ruler conquered Upper Egypt and held control in Thebes. In spite of its worsening military weakness, Egypt escaped invasion because of the lack of strong foreign competitors. But the permanent loss of its control of Nubia and the Levant ended Egyptian dominance of foreign trade and its link between Africa and Asia.

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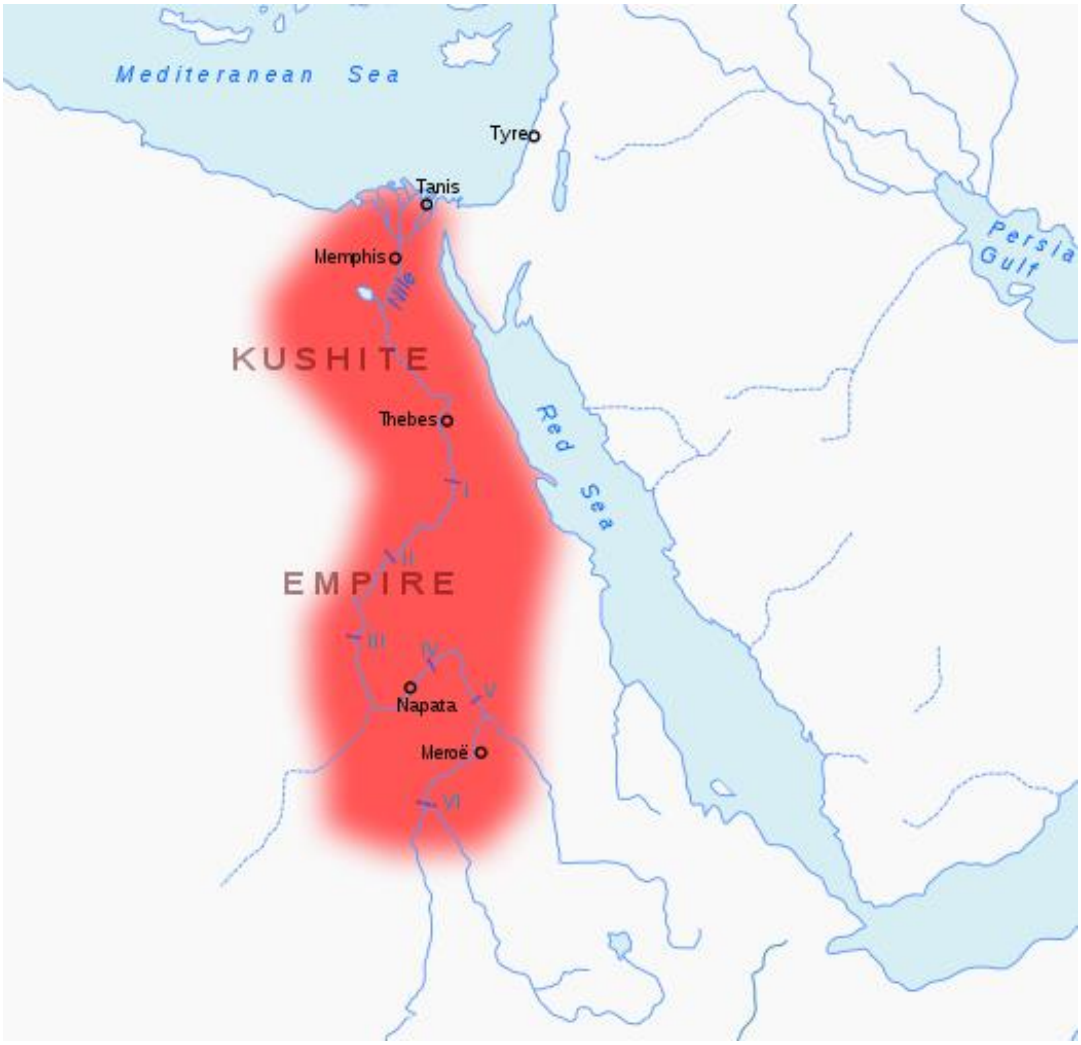
[23] Bill Manley, *The Penguin Historical Atlas of Ancient Egypt*, London: Penguin Books, 1996, p. 88.

Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Third_Intermediate_Period_map.svg>

Dynastic Egypt Declined in the Third Intermediate Period (1064-664 BCE) – c. 730 BCE

Eventually, both Libyans and Nubians asserted political control and established foreign dynasties ruling Egypt while adopting the Egyptian religion and pharaonic system. The 22nd Dynasty (10th-8th centuries BCE) was Libyan. Then in the 25th Dynasty (8th-7th centuries BCE), Kushite Nubians reversed the pattern of rule during the peak of Egyptian power in the New Kingdom. A Kushite king captured Thebes in 760 BCE, and the Nubians took all of Egypt in 716 BCE. The Kushites' culture, language at court, and religion were Egyptian, and the rulers adopted the pharaonic system of autocratic rule. They reigned over a fragmented and declining Egypt with limited foreign influence from their capital at Napata near the Fourth Cataract of the Nile River.[24]

[24] Jaromir Malek (ed.), *Cradles of Civilization, Egypt*, Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993, p. 37.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Egypt_kush.svg>

Kushite Empire, the 25th (Nubian) Dynasty of Egypt (744-656 BCE), c. 730 BCE

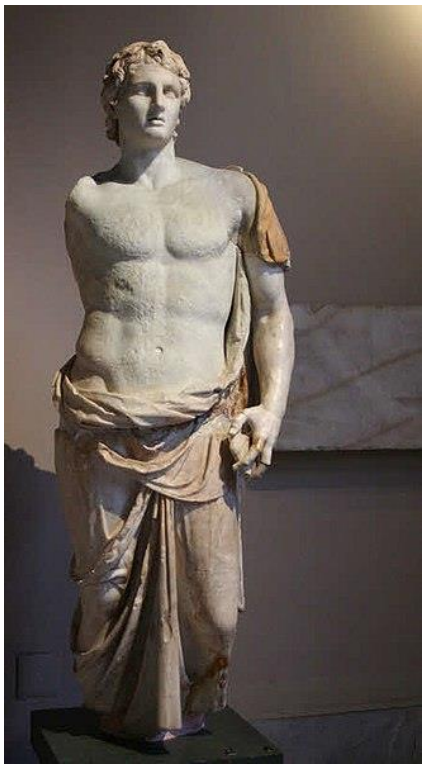
The Achaemenid Persian Dynasty arose in the 6th century BCE and established its capital at Persepolis (modern southern Iran). When Cyrus the Great defeated Babylon in 538 BCE, Persia gained control over the area between the Persian Gulf and the

Mediterranean Sea, including the Levant. Egypt was no match for this new regional power. Persia invaded Egypt in 525 BCE and easily defeated the Egyptian army at the Battle of Pelusium. The first two Persian rulers of Egypt, Cambyses and Darius, ruled via the Egyptian bureaucracy. Egypt, along with the Western Desert oases and Cyrenaica (the northeastern portion of modern Libya), became Persia's Sixth Satrapy (foreign province).[25]

Persia exacted a high tribute from its new vassal and severely reduced the wealth and power of Egyptian temple cults. Xerxes I imposed strict military rule over Egypt, creating much local resentment. In 404 BCE, Egypt regained its independence. But sixty years later, the Persians returned and Artaxerxes III overcame weak Egyptian opposition and reasserted Persian control. The Persians then destroyed Egyptian religious symbols and humiliated Egypt. Alexander the Great entered Egypt as the new conqueror in 332 BCE and initiated three centuries of rule by Macedonians

[25] Barbara Watterson, *The Egyptians*, Oxford, England: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1997, pp. 179-180.

(332-30 BCE) and a millennium of administration in the Greek language (332 BCE-641 CE). Most Egyptians viewed Alexander as a liberator rather than as another foreign conqueror.[26]



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Alexander1256.jpg>

Alexander the Great, 3rd century BCE statue, Istanbul Archaeology Museum – Conquered Egypt in 332 BCE

Two related forces – internal erosion and external incursions – thus caused the demise of a system that had endured in Egypt for

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[26] Bill Manley, *The Penguin Historical Atlas of Ancient Egypt*, London: Penguin Books, 1996, pp. 115-117.

more than 2,500 years. Together those two forces undercut the ability of the pharaonic system to generate wealth and exert power. The weakened system no longer could tax agriculture, control foreign trade, and force tribute from conquered territories. Religious excesses triggered internal erosion. During the 14th-11th centuries BCE, temples (principally the Temple of Karnak in Luxor) appropriated increasing amounts of the agricultural surplus – the primary source of ancient Egyptian wealth.

That shift in control over agricultural land and labor followed a redefinition of religious power that decentralized control to temple foundations. The drain of wealth from the center weakened the military, which had fewer resources and then became involved in fighting the civil wars that ensued from fragmentation.[27] The weakened military meant the loss of Egypt's two key foreign possessions, Nubia and the Levant. Egypt then lost control of the Africa-Asia trade network, and it could not impose taxation on its

[27] Nicholas Reeves and Richard H. Wilkinson, *The Complete Valley of the Kings, Tombs and Treasures of Egypt's Greatest Pharaohs*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1996, pp. 204-205.

neighbors. The intricate system of creating wealth and sustaining power from agriculture, trade, and conquest had unraveled.[28] For the next millennium, Egypt – long the world's most powerful empire – paid tribute to foreign rulers.

Decline in the Pagan Kingdom. The Kingdom of Pagan in Burma (10th-13th centuries) also declined largely because of excessive spending on religious monuments and orders. Religion was tightly linked to politics and the rice-based economy in Pagan.[29] King Anawrahta introduced Theravada Buddhism as the state religion in the mid-11th century.[30] The relationship between state and *sangha* (the Buddhist church) in Pagan initially was complementary. The state provided administration, military protection, and irrigation development, and the king earned merit

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[28] Stephen Quirke and Jeffrey Spencer (ed.), *The British Museum Book of Ancient Egypt*, New York: Thames and Hudson, Inc., 1999, pp. 47-49.

[29] D. R. SarDesai, *Southeast Asia, Past and Present*, Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1994, pp. 31-33.

[30] David Joel Steinberg (ed.), *In Search of Southeast Asia, A Modern History*, Honolulu, Hawaii, University of Hawaii Press, 1987, p. 37.

by donating land and bonded laborers to the *sangha*. The *sangha* constructed temples, supported monasteries, and expanded rice agriculture. But as the *sangha* increasingly usurped state revenues, a dilemma appeared. The *sangha* could develop agriculture and generate wealth, but it could not govern and had no military.[31]

Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Shwesandaw_Pagoda_Bagan_Myanmar.jpg>

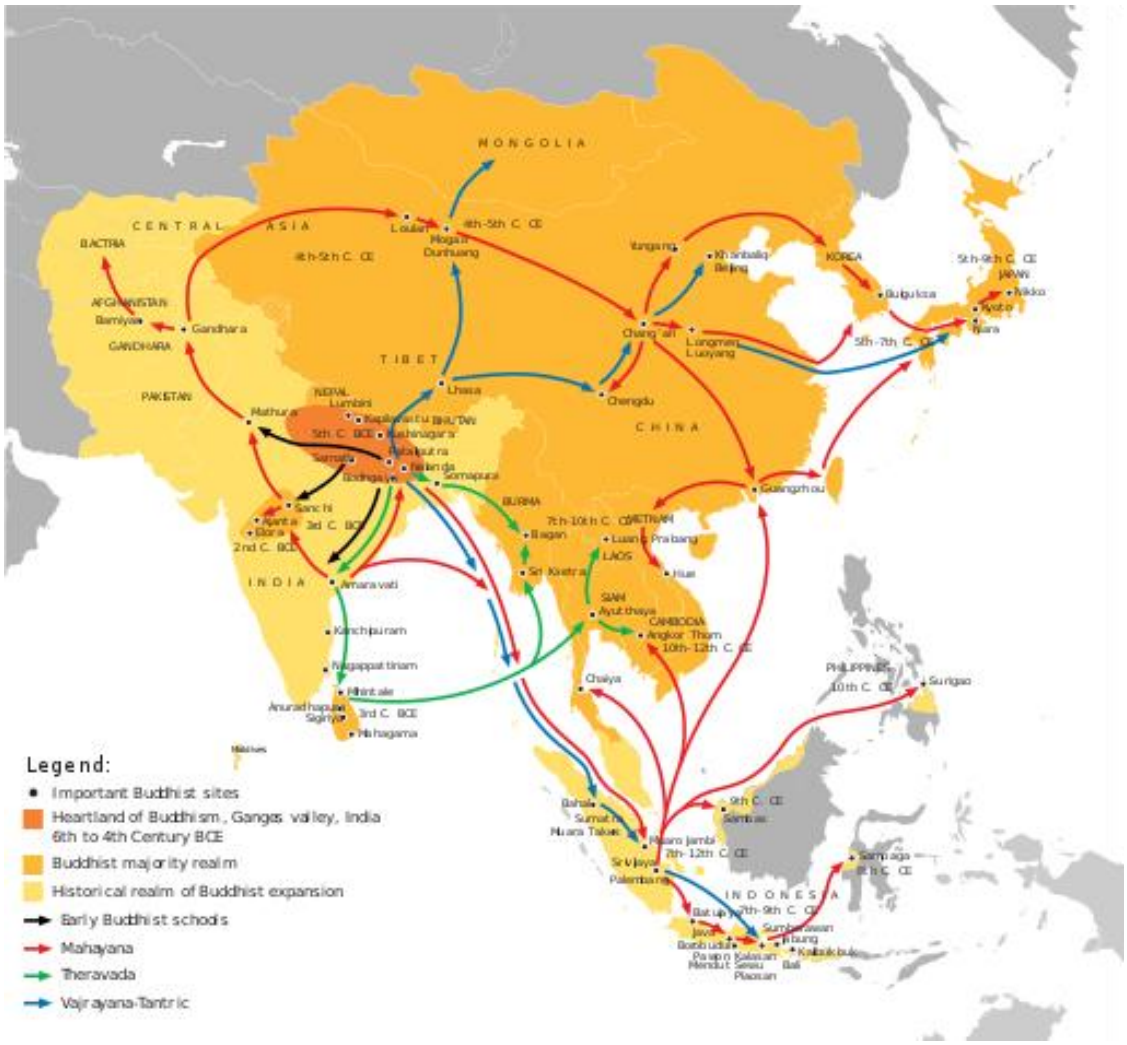
Anawrahta's Shwesandaw Pagoda, Pagan, 1057 – Absorbed State Resources

All of the major kings of Pagan (Anawrahta, Kyanzittha, and Narapatisithu) carried out religious purification (*sasana*) to return

[31] Michael Aung-Thwin, *Pagan, The Origins of Modern Burma*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985, pp. 184-185.

assets to the state. *Sasana* was justified religiously because kings were required to keep the Theravada Buddhist religion pure and to prevent church leaders from becoming sectarian. But *sasana* was risky politically because the landed gentry supported the *sangha* orders in their regions. Only very strong kings could regain control over the *sangha* and shift the balance of economic power from the church back to the state.[32]

[32] Michael Aung-Thwin, *Pagan, The Origins of Modern Burma*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985, pp. 27-28.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Buddhist_Expansion.svg>

Spread of Buddhism in Asia – 6th century BCE-11th century CE

After 200 years of splendor, the Kingdom of Pagan declined and suddenly collapsed in the late 13th century. Pagan fell because of internal erosion and external incursions. Pagan had reached its peak under King Narapatisithu in the early 13th century, and most of its 4,000 Buddhist temples were completed by 1250.

Thereafter, no kings were strong enough to carry out *sasana*, and the revenue drain to the *sangha* became an increasing problem.

By the mid-13th century, the *sangha* owned two-thirds of all productive land and paid no taxes.[33] The cash-strapped state had to reduce spending on its military, irrigation development, and donations to the *sangha*. That belt-tightening resulted in factionalism at court, as interest groups no longer could be bought off, and consequent political instability.[34] The military weakness was reflected in refusals of tributary regions to pay taxes and losses of some vassal areas.

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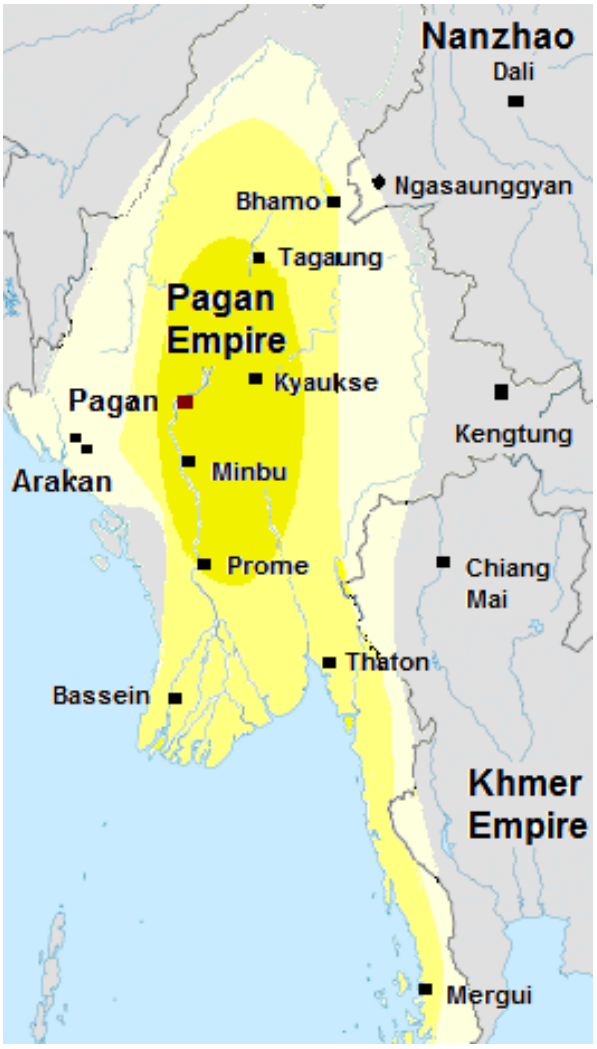
[33] Nicholas Tarling (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia, Volume One, Part One, From Early Times to c. 1500*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 242-244.

[34] Michael A. Aung-Thwin, *Myth and History in the Historiography of Early Burma*, Athens, Ohio: Center for International Studies, Ohio University, 1998, pp. 63-64.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pagan_Empire_--_Sithu_II.PNG>

Pagan At Its Largest Territorial Extent, c. 1200

Foreigners ultimately took advantage of that internal erosion. To the east, a new Thai kingdom, Sukothai, arose in the 13th century and detached the Chiengmai region (in contemporary northern Thailand) from struggling Pagan. The final blow was the Mongol-Yuan Chinese invasion of Pagan that began in 1277 and

ended in 1301. Kublai Khan, a grandson of Genghis Khan and a skilled public administrator, established the Yuan Dynasty in China in 1271 and was the first alien ruler of all China until his death in 1294. Kublai's Mongol armies did not reach Pagan city and destroy its temples. But the brutal war ended in the defeat of Pagan and sapped the energies and resources of the vulnerable kingdom.[35]

The Kingdom of Pagan splintered. The Mons rebelled in 1284, gained their independence, and established the first Mon Kingdom, Ramannadesa, in lower Burma. The hill tribes regained their autonomy and stopped paying tribute.[36] The Three Shan Brothers (Asankhaya, Rajasankram, and Sihasura), who were Tai-speakers but had been in the nobility at the Pagan court, rebelled and defeated Klawcwa, the last Pagan king, in 1298. They abandoned Pagan and relocated their capital nearer two key rice-

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[35] Michael A. Aung-Thwin, *Myth and History in the Historiography of Early Burma*, Athens, Ohio: Center for International Studies, Ohio University, 1998, p. 81.

[36] Michael Aung-Thwin, *Pagan, The Origins of Modern Burma*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985, p. 197.

producing areas – the Mu Valley and Kyaukse.[37] The glorious Kingdom of Pagan was destroyed, and the famed city of Pagan subsequently became a spiritual center, pilgrimage site, and cultural museum – rather than a center of political power.[38]

Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Yuen_Dynasty_1294_-_Goryeo_as_vassal.png>

Yuan (Mongol) Dynasty of China – Invaded Pagan, 1277-1301

Decline from Peasant Rebellions

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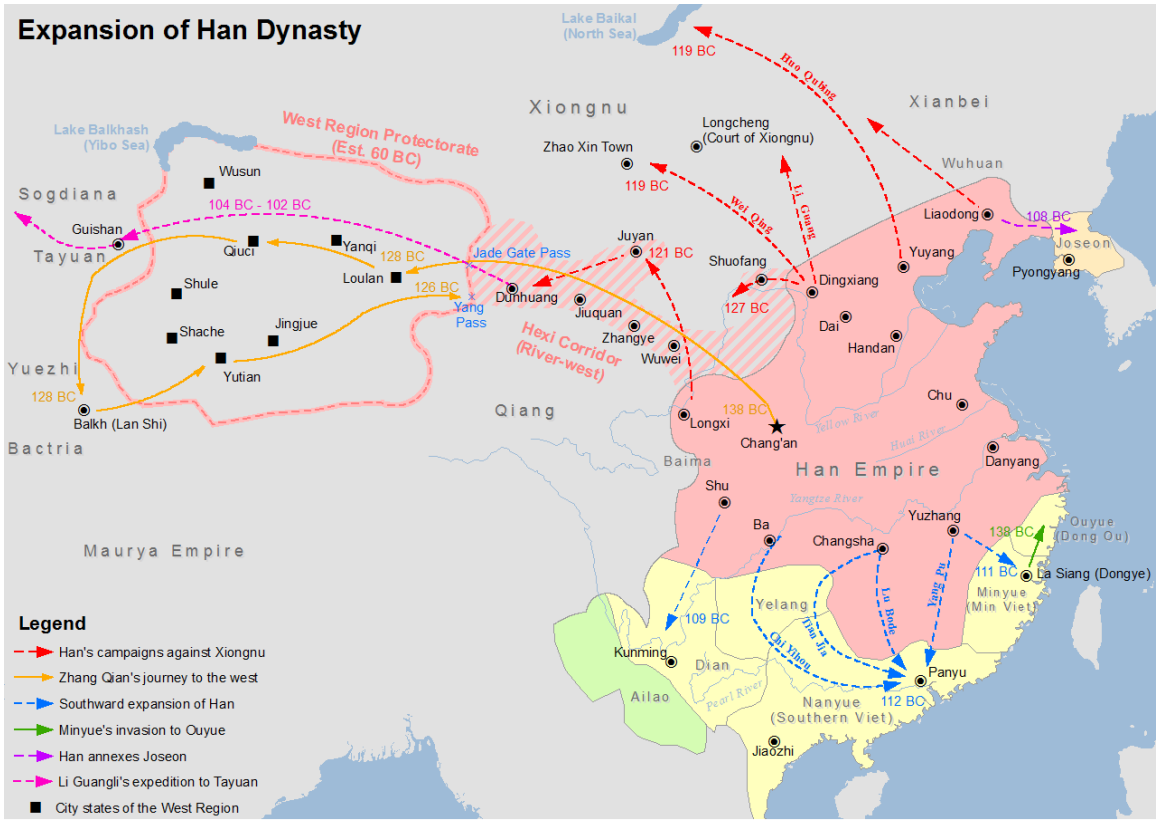
[37] Michael A. Aung-Thwin, *Myth and History in the Historiography of Early Burma*, Athens, Ohio: Center for International Studies, Ohio University, 1998, pp. 94, 120.

[38] Michael Aung-Thwin, *Pagan, The Origins of Modern Burma*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985, p. 28.

Other empires eroded internally because landlord greed led to peasant rebellions. Two examples from Chinese imperial history illustrate that type of internal decline. In Han China, the imperial government imploded because the Confucianist elite lost control of the tax-collecting bureaucracy, greedy nobles usurped land from tax-paying free peasants, and military commanders gained control of provincial governments. Similarly, the Tang dynasty in China was overthrown because its leaders permitted palace eunuchs to corrupt the Confucianist bureaucracy, distribute land to nobles and temples, undercut the tax base, and weaken the military. The final result was a series of debilitating peasant rebellions and an eventual regime-ending coup by a Tang military leader.

Decline in Han China. The Han Empire in China (206 BCE-220 CE) reached its peak under Emperor Wudi in the 1st century BCE, was shocked by the revolutionary takeover of Wang

Mang in 9-23 CE, and then recovered gradually during the 1st century CE.[39]



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Han_Expansion.png>

Han Chinese Expansion – South within Inner China, West into Outer China

Permanent decline during the 2nd century was triggered by an outbreak of peasant rebellions that were caused by weak emperors

[39] John E. Wills, Jr., *Mountain of Fame, Portraits in Chinese History*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994, 77-88.

and an increasing inability of the Confucian bureaucracy to wield strong oversight. Consort family factions (extended families of empresses and would-be empresses) schemed over the succession of emperors and contended for power in the inner court. Scholar-officials squabbled in the outer court, undercutting their bureaucratic authority, and eventually the key office of chief counsel (prime minister) became vacant permanently.[40]

That central weakness permitted the aristocrats to create vast estates by evading taxes (through bribery or falsifying land registers) and enticing free peasants to become tenants (to avoid taxes and labor service). Aristocratic estates, replete with walled cities and urban industries, increasingly usurped land that had been farmed by free peasants. The tax base available to the central government thus shrunk. Remaining free peasants faced increasing tax and labor obligations as the Han governments tried to make ends meet.

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[40] Charles O. Hucker, *China's Imperial Past*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1975, pp. 130-133.

Declining revenues meant that the government was unable to provide sufficient food relief following natural disasters.[41] Desperate peasants turned to Daoist religious cults that set up quasi-governments and led peasant rebellions against central authority.[42] Because the central military was under-funded, regional warlords formed their own armies to take its place and suppress the peasant rebellions. Central authority further splintered.

[41] John Fairbank and Merle Goldman, *China, A New History*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998, pp. 48-49.

[42] Patricia Buckley Erbey, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China*, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 100-102.

Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Han_tomb_figurines,_Luoyang.jpg>

Rebellious Peasantry Used Ox-drawn Carts –
Ceramic Figurines, Tomb, Luoyang

Four competitors – palace eunuchs, the intelligentsia, the great families, and military warlords – vied for control of the central government. The eunuchs, who served as the emperor's spies and controlled his palace guard, took virtual control of the

government in 166 and slaughtered the Confucian intelligentsia. The great families then ran unfettered in the regions.[43]

Source: Wikimedia Commons available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Eastern_Han_Dynasty_tomb_fresco_of_chariots,_horses,_and_men,_Luoyang_2.jpg>

Han Military Warlord with Nine Chariots, 50 Horses and 70 Men – Fresco in Tomb, Luoyang

In 184, a Daoist cult, the Way of Great Peace (commonly known as the Yellow Turbans), rebelled, and 360,000 peasant demonstrators killed local officials and nobles in eight northern

[43] Arthur F. Wright, *Buddhism in Chinese History*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1959, pp. 23-26.

provinces. Most of the south remained loyal to the central government, but Han China was in tatters.[44] In 189, a warlord slaughtered 2,000 palace eunuchs, burned and sacked the Eastern Han capital (Luoyang), and destroyed most official records. Another warlord, Cao Cao, finally suppressed the Yellow Turban rebellion and thereafter ran the government as regent, but tax collection and public administration were sporadic.[45] In 220, upon Cao Cao's death, his son, Cao Bei, created a new dynasty, the Wei, and ended the four-centuries-long Han era – the longest reign in Chinese dynastic history.[46]

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[44] Patricia Buckley Erbey, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China*, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 84.

[45] Valerie Hansen, *The Open Empire, A History of China to 1600*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000, pp. 146-147.

[46] Arthur F. Wright, *Buddhism in Chinese History*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1959, pp. 26-28.

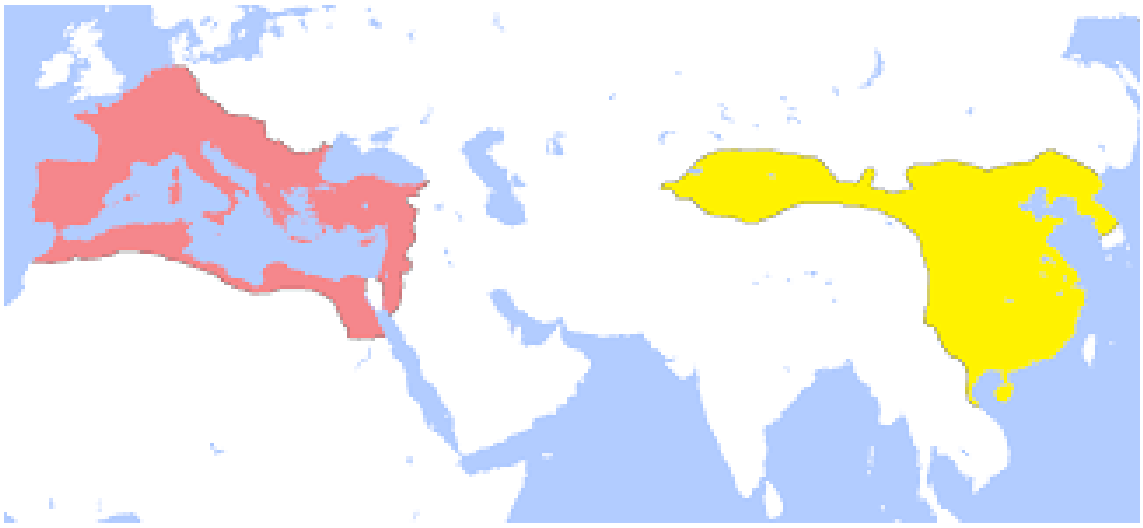
Source: Wikimedia Commons available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:End_of_Han_Dynasty_Warlords.png>

Han Chinese Military Warlords, 190s CE

The Han Empire thus imploded through internal decay and nobles' greed leading to peasant rebellions and regional splintering. Central imperial authority broke down because Confucian officials lost power to palace eunuchs and military leaders. Aristocratic estates increasingly usurped land that had been farmed by free peasants. The tax base available to the central government thus shrunk. Han governments then were unable to

provide food relief during emergencies caused by droughts and floods.

The inability to provide food relief to desperate peasants after prolonged natural calamities and the encroachment by rich aristocrats on free peasant land led to widespread peasant rebellions. Those rebellions drained the central government treasury, forced the squabbling bureaucracy to rely on mercenaries to quell the revolts, and made the empire ripe for coup d'états by rebellious, aristocratic generals. The Han dynasty fell because of internal erosion, not foreign invasions.[47]



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at

[47] John Fairbank and Merle Goldman, *China, A New History*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998, p. 72.

< https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:RomanandHanEmpiresAD1.png>

Han China Imploded in 220 CE –
Two and one-half Centuries Before the Roman Empire Fell

Decline in Tang China. Tang China (618-907) inherited a unified country with a rich agricultural base, and its rulers relied heavily on agricultural production and taxation to underpin their imperial power. The early Tang emperors conquered in Turkestan, Mongolia, Tibet, and Central Asia to force tribute payments and to provide security for trade on the Silk Road.[48] After the An Lushan Rebellion (755-763), ex-rebel regional military governors in the north and northeast created fiefdoms and remitted little tax revenue to the center.[49] But the Tang central government retained control over the provinces in the northwest and the south and managed to

[48] John Fairbank and Merle Goldman, *China, A New History*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998, pp. 78-79.

[49] D. C. Twitchett, *Financial Administration under the T'ang Dynasty*, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1970, p. 91.

prolong the dynasty for another century and a half in a smaller and weaker China.[50]

Source: Wikimedia Commons available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tang_Protectorates.png>

Expansion in the Early Tang Empire, 618-755

In the second half of the 9th century, the Tang faced a series of peasant rebellions that exhausted the imperial treasury. The most serious uprising, led by a salt merchant, Huang Chao, spread throughout much of China between 875 and 884.[51] Desperate

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[50] Caroline Blunden and Mark Elvin, *Cultural Atlas of China*, Abingdon, England: Andromeda Oxford Limited, 1998, p. 99.

[51] Charles O. Hucker, *China's Imperial Past*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1975, pp. 146-147.

peasants, lacking government food relief after a series of floods and droughts, refused to pay taxes, looted cities, and captured the two Tang capitals, Luoyang and Chang'an (contemporary Xi'an). The government was able to quell the rebellion in 884 but only with military aid from Turkic mercenary troops.[52] In 904, a Tang commander, Zhu Wen, murdered the imperial entourage in a coup, and in 907 he declared the formation of a new dynasty, the Liang, thereby ending the crippled Tang Empire.[53]

A series of interlocking changes undercut Tang central control during the second half of the dynasty's rule. The structure of the military shifted from volunteer militias to mercenary forces, often led by alien (Turkic or Manchurian) generals, and regional military governors in the north and northeast controlled their own armies. The end of household registers meant that the central government lost control of land allocations and tax burdens, and

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[52] Stephen G. Haw, *A Traveller's History of China*, New York: Interlink Books, 2003, pp. 107-111.

[53] Valerie Hansen, *The Open Empire, A History of China to 1600*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000, pp. 243-244.

the central government's political and revenue bases were weakened.[54] With a free land market, tenancy arrangements evolved into long-term semi-servile agreements through which aristocratic estate-owners exploited peasants. Peasant resentment increased as free peasants lost their land and as remaining free peasants were forced to pay higher taxes.[55]

Source: Wikimedia Commons available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Spring_Outing_of_the_Tang_Court.jpg>

Tang Nobles Exploited Peasants –
Spring Outing of the Tang Court, by Zhang Xuan (713-755 CE)

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[54] Valerie Hansen, *The Open Empire, A History of China to 1600*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000, p. 221.

[55] Arthur F. Wright and Denis Twitchett (ed.), *Perspectives on the T'ang*, New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1973, pp. 35-36.

Buddhist monasteries created tax-exempt estates with tenants and used the profits to venture into grain-milling and money-lending, thereby removing a growing portion of China's economy from government control and taxation.[56] Palace eunuchs exploited their roles as the emperor's personal spies to foster court intrigue, gain control of the emperor's palace army, and manipulate the inner court (enthroning, controlling, and murdering eight emperors in the 9th century).[57] When the Uighur Empire (located north and west of China) fell in 840, the Tang government lost its steppe protector and became more vulnerable to devastating border incursions.[58] Facing those cumulatively negative forces of change, the Tang Empire was a toothless dragon in the 9th century.[59]

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[56] Patricia Buckley Erbey, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China*, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 121-124.

[57] Valerie Hansen, *The Open Empire, A History of China to 1600*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000, pp. 231-233.

[58] Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier, Nomadic Empires and China, 221 BC to AD 1757*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Inc, 1992, p. 131.

Source: Wikimedia Commons available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Prince_Zhanghuai%27s_tomb,_eunuchs.JPG>

Tang Palace Eunuchs, Mural in Tomb of Prince Zhanghuai, 706 – Manipulated the Tang Inner Court

The Tang dynasty thus fell because of internal erosion, not foreign invasions. A combination of erosive forces caused Tang imperial control to implode. Palace eunuchs exploited their roles as the emperor's personal spies to foster court intrigue, gain

[59] John Fairbank and Merle Goldman, *China, A New History*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998, pp. 86-87.

control of the emperor's palace army, and manipulate the inner court. The emperors and their bureaucratic officials permitted greedy aristocrats to gain control of half of the arable land in China.

Peasant resentment increased as free peasants lost their land and remaining free peasants were forced to pay higher taxes. As a consequence, in the second half of the 9th century, the Tang faced a series of debilitating peasant rebellions that bankrupted the country. The Tang dynasty then fell easily to a military coup. In the immediate aftermath of empire, China escaped foreign rule. The Tang emperors were followed by another Chinese dynasty, the Song, and only later by foreign rulers, Manchus and Mongols.

Source: Wikimedia Commons available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:CMOC_Treasures_of_Ancient_China_exhibit_-_tri-coloured_figure_of_a_civil_official.jpg>

Confucianist Tang Bureaucrat, Tomb Figure –
Lost Power Struggle to Court Eunuchs As Peasants Rebelled

Decline from Fruitless Expansions

Two of our empires fell because they wasted resources in carrying out fruitless expansions to control foreign territory. Ethiopian Axum needed the Red Sea trade routes to generate its

wealth and power. But in the 6th century, when its chauvinistic leaders tried to take over and protect their Christian cousins in Yemen, the Ethiopians lost both Yemen and the Red Sea to the Sasanian Persians.

The Mughal dynasty in India declined after Emperor Aurangzeb bankrupted the empire in his obsession to conquer southern India. After his death, succession crises erupted over political and religious tolerance, military strength dissipated, and regional defections undercut the central tax base. The Mughal Empire was plundered by Nadir Shah's Persia in 1739, but the Persians did not attempt to rule India. Britain then began the process of colonizing India over a century before officially ending Mughal rule in 1858.

Decline in Ethiopia's Axum Kingdom. At its peak, in the 3rd-6th centuries, the Axum Kingdom (2nd century BCE-10th century CE) was the strongest state in northeastern Africa. Some scholars rank it as the world's fifth leading power in that era – after Rome/Byzantium, Han and post-Han China, Gupta India, and

Sasanid Persia. The city-state of Axum expanded until it controlled a sizeable part of the western coast of the Red Sea.[60] The Axum kingdom invaded and took over part of southwestern Arabia during the 3rd century and then lost it. In alliance with the Byzantine Empire and South Arabian Christians who had emigrated to Ethiopia, King Kaleb of Axum sailed 70 ships across the southern Red Sea in 528 and invaded and conquered the Himyarite Kingdom of Yemen. His main purpose was to free Orthodox Christians in southern Arabia from persecution by their Jewish patriarch. Axum ruled Yemen until 575.[61]

[60] Richard Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians, A History*, Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1998, pp. 33-34.

[61] Roland Oliver and Brian M. Fagan, *Africa in the Iron Age, c. 500 B.C. to A.D. 1400*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1975, p. 46.

Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kaleb.jpg>

Silver Coin Commemorating King Kaleb of Axum,
6th century CE – Fruitless Invasion of Yemen

The Sabaean kingdoms in South Arabia resented the outside rule of their distant cousins from Ethiopia, and they invited the Sasanid Persians to assist them in getting rid of the invaders. The Persians went to Yemen and subsequently took it over.[62] Axum began to decline in the late 6th century when Sasanid Persia forced Axum out of Yemen and extended Persian power throughout the Red Sea region. The lengthy Axumite expansion into Yemen

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[62] Stuart Munro-Hay, *Aksum, An African Civilisation of Late Antiquity*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991, p. 7.

drained resources from overextended Axum and gravely weakened the Ethiopian kingdom. Imperial greed and religious fervor debilitated Axum's strength.

Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sasanian_Empire_621_A.D.jpg>

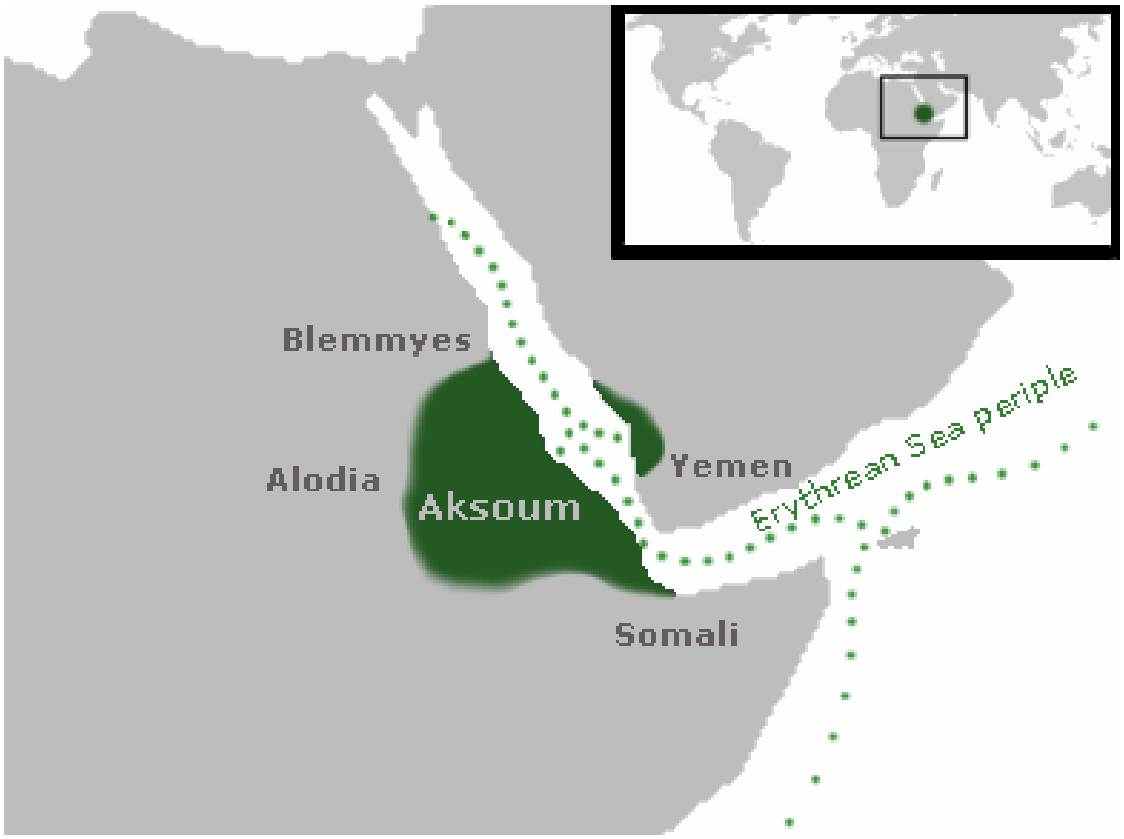
The Sasanian Empire of Persia (230-651 CE) – At Its Greatest Extent, 621 CE

Following the rise of Islam in the early 7th century, the Muslim Arabs replaced the Zoroastrian Persians in the Red Sea

region and effectively severed Axum's trade routes there.[63] Islamic forces did not attack Axum during the Arab Islamic diaspora. Muhammad ibn Abdallah (570-632), the Prophet of Islam, reportedly advised his followers to leave the Abyssinians in peace as long as they did not attack. King Armah of Axum had offered asylum in 616 to early converts to Islam, including a daughter and son-in-law of Muhammad, who had fled to Axum from Mecca to seek protection.[64] But peace did not ease Axum's economic difficulties. The diminution of Axumite trading on the Red Sea was soon followed by the loss of Axum's internal trade monopolies in ivory, gold, salt, and incense.

[63] Roland Oliver and Brian M. Fagan, *Africa in the Iron Age, c. 500 B.C. to A.D. 1400*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1975, p. 33.

[64] Richard Pankhurst, *An Introduction to the Economic History of Ethiopia*, London: Lalibela House, 1961, pp. 54-56.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
< https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:LocationAksumiteEmpire.png>

Kingdom of Axum – At Its Peak, 6th century CE

After the Kingdom of Axum lost its primary source of wealth, its decline was persistent though gradual. The port city of Adulis and the coastal regions withered, and Muslim traders took over the Red Sea communities.[65] Land degradation and local rebellions made the situation worse. Government tax revenues and

[65] Harold G. Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia*, Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1994, p. 11.

tribute from subjected states decreased, and the government no longer could support a strong military to suppress rebellions. Axum lost control of exports from the Agau gold-producing regions to its south.

The Axum Kingdom was on a downward spiral.[66] The Axumites experienced growing isolation and gradually retreated southward into the agricultural highlands occupied by the Cushitic-speaking Agau people. According to legendary Ethiopian history, Axum finally was defeated in the 10th century by a fierce Agau warrior queen named Yudit. It is more likely that Axum was devastated in the late 10th century by an attack of the Damot people, a Cushitic-speaking group whom Axum long had subjugated.

Fruitless expansionism thus precipitated the gradual decline of the Axum Kingdom in Ethiopia. The primary source of wealth in Axum was gains from foreign trade. Axum controlled the main

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[66] Stuart Munro-Hay, *Aksum, An African Civilisation of Late Antiquity*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991, pp. 7-8.

Red Sea ports that linked the Nile Valley with the Indian Ocean. The Axumite royalty constructed a fleet of ships to ply the Red Sea and Indian Ocean, and by the 3rd century their merchant marine regularly visited India and Ceylon. The Axumite kingdom had begun to convert to Orthodox Christianity in the 4th century. Two hundred years later, Axum invaded southwestern Arabia to protect Yemeni Christians and to control both sides of the southern Red Sea. But Axum lost its trading lifeline and began a long period of decline.[67] The Semitic-speaking kingdom of Axum escaped foreign takeover, moved south, became almost wholly agricultural, and finally was conquered by Cushitic-speaking foes in the 10th century.[68]

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[67] Stuart Munro-Hay, *Aksum, An African Civilisation of Late Antiquity*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991, pp. 58-59.

[68] Roland Oliver and Brian M. Fagan, *Africa in the Iron Age, c. 500 B.C. to A.D. 1400*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1975, pp. 133-134.

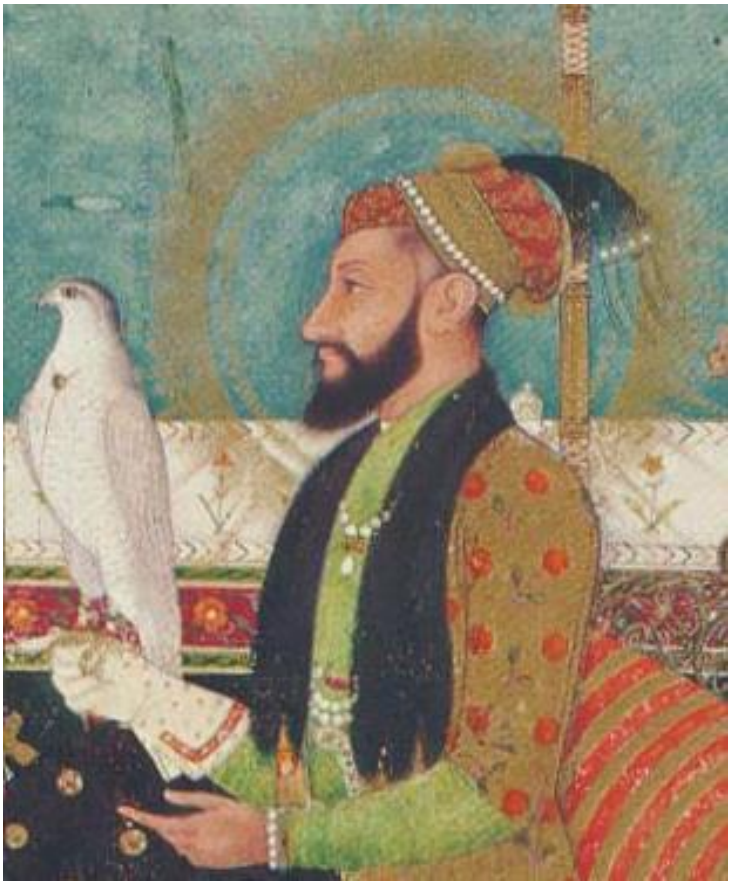
Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
< https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Indo-Roman_trade.jpg>

Trade Routes of the Kingdom of Axum, 2nd-7th centuries CE – Axum Lost Control of the Red Sea Transit Trade

Decline in Mughal India. Mughal India (1526-1858) thrived in part because its early emperors encouraged religious and cultural freedom. But the last great Mughal leader, Aurangzeb (ruled 1658-1707), had a different agenda.[69] His goal was to advance Islamic order in Mughal India through pious practice of the Sunni Muslim faith, attempts to convert nonbelievers, and

[69] Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 157-158.

expansion of the empire.[70] Militaristic by nature, Aurangzeb (whose official title was Alamgir, "World Conqueror") spent the last 25 years of his reign fighting unsuccessful wars in a fruitless attempt to expand into the Deccan region of central-south India.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Aurangzeb-portrait.jpg>

Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb, Holding a Falcon – "World Conqueror" Won Pyrrhic Victories in the Deccan

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[70] John F. Richards, *The Mughal Empire*, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 151-153.

Shivaji Bhonsle (1627-1680), a Maratha Hindu leader and military genius, effectively staved off Aurangzeb's southern incursions. Shivaji and his successors operated from a string of strategically-located hill forts and harassed Mughal armies for decades. Aurangzeb won Pyrrhic victories in the Deccan over the Marathas only to lose the territories to later Maratha recapture.[71] Aurangzeb's obsessive battles cost the Mughal Empire hundreds of thousands of lives and millions of rupees. The endless fighting drained the Mughal treasury, and the government was not able to collect substantial tax revenues from the region. Aurangzeb's Deccan wars thus overextended Mughal capacity and initiated the downfall of the empire. Within three decades (1689-1720), the centralized structure of the Mughal Empire collapsed.[72]

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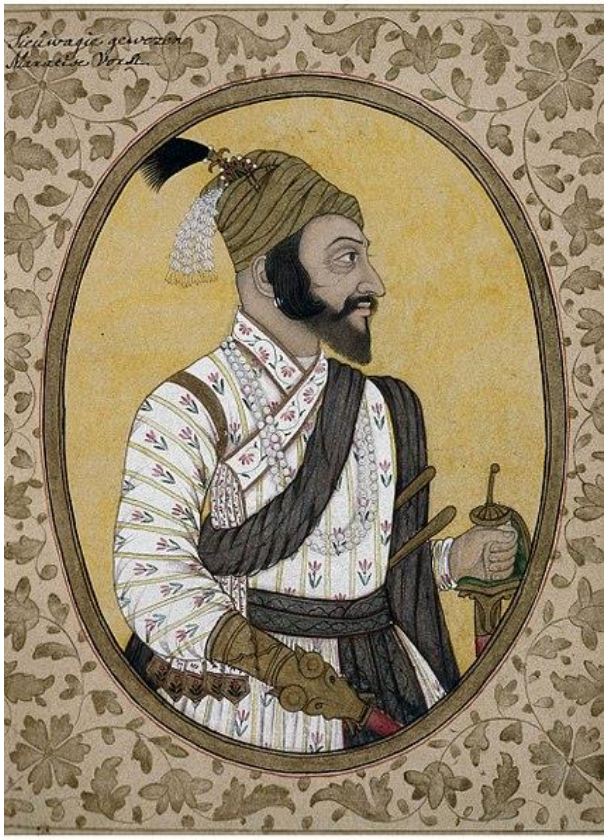
[71] Gordon Johnson, *Cultural Atlas of India*, Abingdon, England: Andromeda Oxford Limited, 1996, pp. 120-122.

[72] Valérie Berinstain, *India and the Mughal Dynasty*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1997, pp. 111-115.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Shivaji_British_Museum.jpg>

Shivaji Bhonsle, Maratha Leader, Posthumous Painting, 1680s – Effective Guerrilla Leader Opposing Aurangzeb

What caused this rapid political fragmentation and economic breakdown? Aurangzeb initiated the process of decline when he persisted in wasting imperial resources on the futile Deccan wars of the late 17th century. As costly as the loss of troops and funds was the shift of the emperor's attention away from central administration. Mughal central revenues depended on the *zabt*

system of tax collection and the *jagir* system of distributing royal lands. In the *zabt* system, agricultural taxes were paid according to historical landholdings and crop yields, limiting corruption and tax avoidance. In the *jagir* system, all grants of royal land (*jagirs*) to noble families terminated on the death of the noble and needed to be re-negotiated. Both administrative systems disintegrated with incompetent central leadership. The *zabt* revenue system slid into tax farming (in which privileged nobles obtained the right to collect arbitrary taxes) and assigned *jagirs* became local fiefs (without any obligation of the nobles to the central government).[73]

[73] John F. Richards, *The Mughal Empire*, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 290-292.

Source: Wikimedia Commons available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rice_fields_water_tank_in_punjab.jpg>

Rice Fields in Modern Punjab, Northwest India – India's Bread Basket, Now As In the Mughal Era

The central weakness in revenue collection was exacerbated by four bloody succession struggles in the thirteen years following Aurangzeb's death in 1707. Bahadur Shah, Aurangzeb's 63-year-old eldest living son, ascended the Mughal throne after his father's death, but his two brothers, Azam and Kam Bakhsh, disputed his claim to power. The succession struggle continued throughout the

five years of Bahadar Shah's rule and among his four sons and their cousins for another eight years thereafter.[74]

Weakness at the center of the empire permitted local rulers to break imperial ties, refuse to transfer tax revenues to the center, and become virtually independent small kingdoms. Regional opposition in Hindu areas was heightened after Aurangzeb abandoned Akbar's system of religious tolerance and Hindu-Muslim equality.[75] Even loyal Rajputana rulers broke away from central control, and the rebellious Marathas plundered or took over other Mughal territories. As the central government lost tax revenue, it was forced to reduce spending on the military. With regional defections, the center no longer could count on troops, war elephants, and supplies from tributary regions.

Military weakness made the empire ripe for foreign plundering. In 1739, Nadir Shah of Persia swept in through the

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[74] Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 168-169.

[75] John F. Richards, *The Mughal Empire*, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 292-294.

Khyber Pass, raided and plundered Delhi, stole the priceless Peacock Throne and countless other Mughal treasures, and annexed the Afghan and Punjabi portions of the Mughal Empire.[76] An Afghan army captured Delhi in 1761, by defeating a Maratha army at Panipat.[77] Meanwhile, European chartered companies had taken over key port cities and much of India's foreign trade. Although it continued to exist in name and pretense, the once great Mughal Empire had become an empty shell in the early 18th century.[78]

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[76] Hugh Tinker, *South Asia: A Short History*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990, pp. 23-24.

[77] Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 172-173.

[78] Stanley Wolpert, *India*, Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1999, p. 44.

Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nader_Shah_Afshar_(cropped).jpg>

Nadir Shah of Persia –
Plundered Delhi and Stole the Peacock Throne, 1739

Mughal India thus declined because of a fruitless attempt to expand followed by a series of succession crises. Aurangzeb's 25 years of fruitless fighting in the Deccan were very costly in lost lives and war materiel, and the government was not able to collect substantial tax revenues from the region. Central administration atrophied, and revenues declined. The central weakness in revenue collection was exacerbated by four bloody succession struggles in the thirteen years following Aurangzeb's death in 1707. Weakness at the center of the empire permitted local rulers to break imperial

ties, refuse to transfer tax revenues to the center, and become virtually independent small kingdoms. Mughal emperors continued to reign for another 150 years, but only as the pawns of increasing British imperialism in India.[79]

Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mughal-empire-map.jpg>

Maximum Size of the Mughal Empire, 1707 – Aurangzeb Could Not Hold His Conquered Territory (Red Area)

[79] Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal, *Modern South Asia, History, Culture, Political Economy*, London: Routledge, 1998, pp. 48-51.

Decline from External Incursions and Political Independence

Although the causes of internal erosion thus differed, the result was always to make each of the imperial states vulnerable to foreign incursions. Our twelve studied states fall into one of four categories in the search for patterns of external invasions as contributing causes of imperial decline – no foreign invasion, foreign invasion but no lasting foreign rule, foreign invasion followed by vassalage, or foreign invasion and takeover. Two empires, Han and Tang China, did not experience any foreign invasion in their final downfall. Han China avoided foreign conquest and instead was taken over by a Chinese warlord. The Tang emperors were followed by the Song Chinese dynasty and only later by Manchu and Mongol foreign rulers.

Five of our studied states – Axum, Gupta, Pagan, Mughal, and Ottoman – were invaded at critical periods, experienced losses that accelerated their downfalls, but did not suffer foreign rule in the immediate aftermath of their decline. Axum was severely weakened when Persia took over the Red Sea trade, the Huns

damaged Gupta beyond easy repair, the Mongols applied a blistering defeat to Pagan, the Persians plundered Mughal Delhi and dismembered the non-Indian parts of the empire, and the Ottomans lost the First World War and then staved off an invasion of Anatolia by Greece. Still, none of those foreign invaders succeeded in ruling the heartland regions of the states that they had defeated. I illustrate this pattern of foreign invasion followed by political independence with reference to the demise of the Ottoman Empire.

Decline in the Ottoman Empire. After peaking in the 16th century, the Ottoman Empire (1300-1923) experienced three centuries of declining power. Succession crises and military conservatism – an inability to adopt new technologies and strategies – were key causes of Ottoman decline. The system of sultanic succession changed in the 17th century, creating political instability. The first ten sultans practiced fratricide to ensure the succession of their eldest sons. Thereafter, competing heirs to the

throne were kept alive and placed in seclusion in the harem. Brutal succession disputes ensued.[80]

Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ottoman_empire.svg>

Territorial Gains in the Ottoman Empire – in Southeastern Europe, Egypt, Syria, and North Africa, Late 17th century

[80] Jason Goodwin, *Lords of the Horizon, A History of the Ottoman Empire*, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1998, pp. 167-169.

The mode of warfare in Europe also changed in the 17th century. Austria and Russia adopted the French system of using massive infantry and mobile field artillery, which required a strong bureaucracy and tax base.[81] But the Ottomans continued to rely on their traditional system – *janissary* infantry, *sipahi* cavalry, and foraging in the field for military supplies.[82] In the 19th century, Ottoman military weakness permitted the defection of key provinces – Egypt, Arabia, and North Africa.[83] Encouraged by French, British and (later) German military advisors, the Ottomans introduced significant military reforms – universal conscription, training in modern tactics, and up-to-date weaponry – in the late 19th century. But those changes came too late to preserve the empire.

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[81] Jason Goodwin, *Lords of the Horizon, A History of the Ottoman Empire*, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1998, pp. 239-240.

[82] Douglas A. Howard, *The History of Turkey*, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2001, 51-52.

[83] Suraiya Faroqhi, Bruce McGowan, Donald Quataert, and Sevket Pamuk, *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire, Volume Two, 1600-1914,* Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 644-645.

The once-strong Ottoman economy failed to keep pace with its competitors after the 16th century. Ottoman agriculture stagnated because of poor policy and corrupt administration. State-owned land was alienated corruptly to allow provincial warlords and absentee landlords to accumulate large estates. Tenant shareholders, facing higher taxes, had little incentive to innovate, and there were few productivity gains in agriculture.[84] While agricultural revolutions took place in Western Europe, the traditional three-field system (one field planted and two lying fallow) continued in the Ottoman Empire. In the 19th century, Ottoman agriculture expanded but only due to increases in areas farmed. Foreign trade declined in the 17th-18th centuries because the Ottomans lost much of the Asian transit trade to European competitors. The Empire participated in the rapid global growth of

[84] Suraiya Faroqhi, Bruce McGowan, Donald Quataert, and Sevket Pamuk, *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire, Volume Two, 1600-1914,* Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 660-672.

trade in the 19th century by reducing protection and state monopolies, but Ottoman exports were mostly agricultural.[85]

Most Ottoman governments faced budget squeezes after the 16th century, because warfare was no longer self-financing. The need to pay for costly, losing wars led to budgetary pressures. Revenue problems were exacerbated in the 19th century after the loss of Ottoman territories in southeastern Europe and northern Africa. Borrowing abroad to pay for the Crimean War (1853-1856) ignited a burst of government loans from France, Britain, and Germany which led to an Ottoman default in 1875 and close foreign monitoring of government finances.[86] By 1914, per capita income in the shrunken Ottoman Empire was only 5 percent of that in Britain.[87]

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[85] Bent Hansen, *Egypt and Turkey, The Political Economy of Poverty, Equity, and Growth*, Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1991, pp. 292-293.

[86] Lord Kinross, *The Ottoman Centuries, The Rise and Fall of the Turkish Empire*, New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1977, pp. 502-509.

Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:%27One_of_the_wards_in_the_hospital_at_Scutari%27._Wellcome_M0007724_-_restoration,_cropped.jpg>

Crimean War, 1853-1856 –
Florence Nightingale Nursed in Selimye Barracks, Istanbul

The decline of the Ottoman Empire was largely the result of succession crises and poor military and economic leadership. But the Ottomans also failed to adjust to changing international realities. Three new European powers – Britain, Russia, and the

[87] Suraiya Faroqhi, Bruce McGowan, Donald Quataert, and Sevket Pamuk, *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire, Volume Two, 1600-1914*, Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 775.

Netherlands – arose in the 17th and 18th centuries.[88] The British and the Dutch joined the erstwhile French in vying for trade influence in the Ottoman ports of Izmir and Salonica. The Russians threatened Ottoman holdings in the Black Sea region and eastern Anatolia. Russian expansionism into Ottoman areas accelerated in the 19th century. Under the self-styled mantle of protecting all Orthodox Christians, Russia aided Greek independence from Ottoman control in 1830.

[88] Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, New York: Warner Books, 1991, pp. 207-208.

Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Catherine_II_by_J.B.Lampi_(1780s,_Kunsthistorisches_Museum).jpg>

Empress Catherine the Great, Russian Expansionist – Gained Territory on the Black Sea from the Ottoman Empire

The survival of the Ottoman Empire depended on European balance-of-power politics. In a policy that became known as the Eastern Question, Britain and France aided the Ottoman Empire to forestall Russian gains in the Black Sea region. The Crimean War resulted from that policy.[89] The locus of the Eastern Question shifted eastward to become the Great Game in Central Asia after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869.

World War I (1914-1918) was the product of two entangling alliances – the Triple Entente (Britain, France, and Russia) versus the Triple Alliance (Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy). The Young Turks governing the Ottoman Empire in 1914 signed a secret pact with Germany after Britain and France, preferring Russia as an ally, rebuffed their overtures to join the Entente. The

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[89] Douglas A. Howard, *The History of Turkey*, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2001, p. 65.

loss of the First World War effectively ended the Ottoman Empire.[90]

Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Map_Europe_alliances_1914-en.svg>

Triple Entente and Triple Alliance (Central Powers) in World War One – The Ottoman Empire Later Joined the Triple Alliance

Britain and France completed the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire after World War I. League of Nations mandates were provided to Britain for Palestine, Transjordan, and Iraq and to France for Syria and Lebanon. Mustafa Kemal (later Atatürk), the

[90] Douglas A. Howard, *The History of Turkey*, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2001, pp. 80-81.

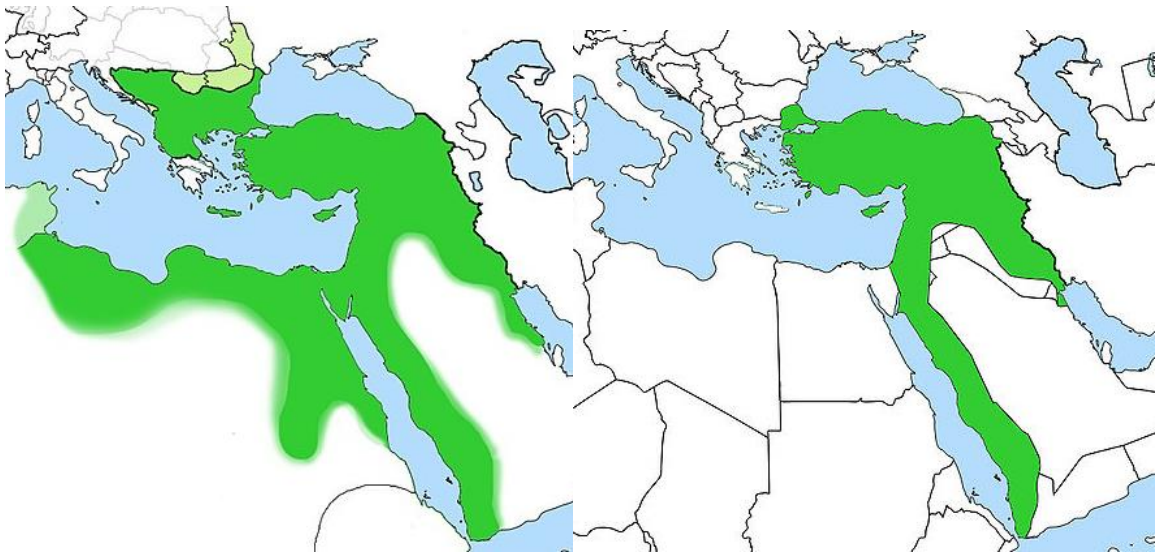
brilliant nationalist leader, revived the Turkish army. The Turkish nationalists successfully fought two wars – one with the Ottoman government, and the other with the Greek army, which had invaded Thrace (the southeastern-most part of continental Europe) and western Anatolia in 1919. The Treaty of Lausanne (1923) was a remarkable victory for the new Republic of Turkey. Turkey gained sovereignty over Anatolia and eastern Thrace, and the Allies agreed that Turkey would not have to pay reparations for World War I.[91]

The collapse of the Ottoman Empire thus began with internal erosion. For three centuries (*c.* 1300-1600), the Ottoman sultans had generated enormous wealth. Things began to fall apart with the appearance of regular succession crises in the early 17th century, which undercut central political authority. Political instability led to military conservatism (an inability to adopt new

[91] Erik J. Zurcher, *Turkey, A Modern History*, London: I. B. Tauris, 2004, pp. 136, 147.

technologies) and economic decline (caused by agricultural stagnation and flagging international trade).

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the Ottoman Empire became entangled in European power politics. Britain and France propped up the weak state to contain Russian expansionism. But the Empire lost its non-Turkish regions and then was ended after the First World War. Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk) outmaneuvered his opponents to gain Turkish political independence. The shrunken Ottoman Empire emerged as the Republic of Turkey in 1923.



1830 1913

Sources: Wikimedia Commons, available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Territorial_changes_of_the_Ottoman_Empire_1830.jpg> and <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Territorial_changes_of_the_Ottoman_Empire_1913b.jpg>

The Declining Ottoman Empire in 1830 and in 1913

Decline from External Incursions and Foreign Vassalage

Only one of our studied empires or kingdoms fell into foreign vassalage after its imperial fall. The Khmer Kingdom of Southeast Asia declined after its leaders allocated excessive amounts of rice-growing land and labor to temple societies and the construction of massive religious monuments. Khmer rulers then struggled on as the heads of a weakened Cambodian state that was plundered and reduced in size by foreign invasions. Cambodia became a vassal state to the Ayudhya Thais for two centuries, before its king invited imperial France to establish a protectorate in 1863. Many historians speculate that Cambodia would have been partitioned between Siam and Vietnam and disappeared as a political entity if the French had not intervened in the 1860s.

Decline in the Khmer Kingdom. The Khmer Kingdom of Cambodia (9^{th}-15^{th} centuries) had two central foundations – irrigated rice agriculture and a politico-religious culture adapted

from India.[92] Most of the kingdom's wealth came from the expansion and intensification of rice production, both within the original Khmer home region of Cambodia and in conquered areas (in the Mekong River Valley and Delta and in the central plain of Thailand).

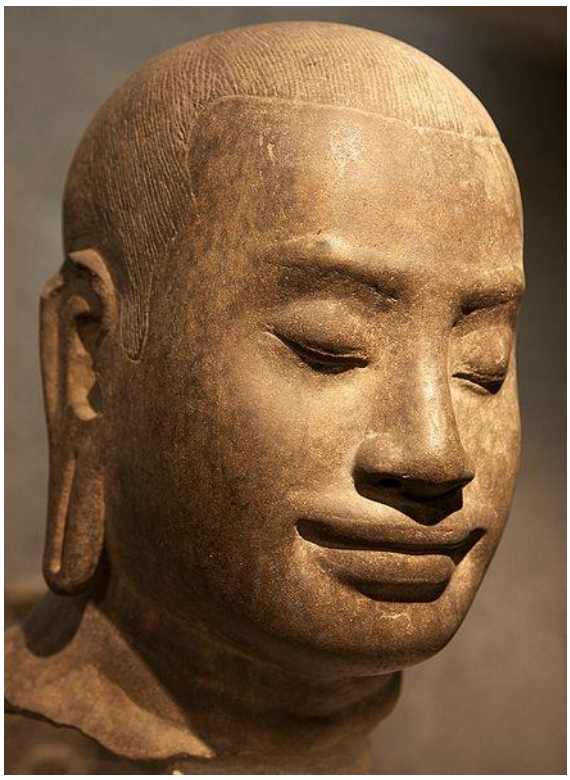
[92] David Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 1998, pp. 16, 21-22.

Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map-of-southeast-asia_1300_CE.png>

Khmer Kingdom (Red), Champa Kingdom (Yellow). and Dai Viet Kingdom (Blue) – c. 1300

Jayavarman VII (ruled 1181-1218) was the last of the great Khmer royal builders.[93] After Jayavarman's costly building spree,

the Khmer Kingdom could no longer afford to construct massive religious monuments. The Khmer era of monumental architecture, which had culminated in the construction of the magnificent Angkor Wat, thus ended.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:JayavarmanVII.jpg>

Jayavarman VII, Portrait in Stone – Guimet Museum, Paris

The Khmer Kingdom went into severe decline in the 13th and 14th centuries because of internal erosion and external incursions.

[93] Charles Higham, *The Civilization of Angkor*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2001, pp. 121-127.

Khmer did not decline because of bureaucratic corruption or civil wars. Instead, the rulers' overspending of resources on religious monuments and temple societies undercut the kingdom's ability to rule tributary areas, weakened its military capability, and increased its vulnerability to foreign incursions. The increasing control of rice land and labor by the tax-free temple societies deprived the royal government of needed resources. The practice of royal polygamy caused succession disputes and factionalism among the nobility. Political instability at the center led to regional splintering, reduced tax collections, and the loss of tribute from vassal states.[94]

The declining rice surpluses could not finance the continual building of vast monuments, the construction and upkeep of more than 20,000 shrines, the support of over 300,000 monks and priests, and at the same time provide for adequate defense of the empire.[95]

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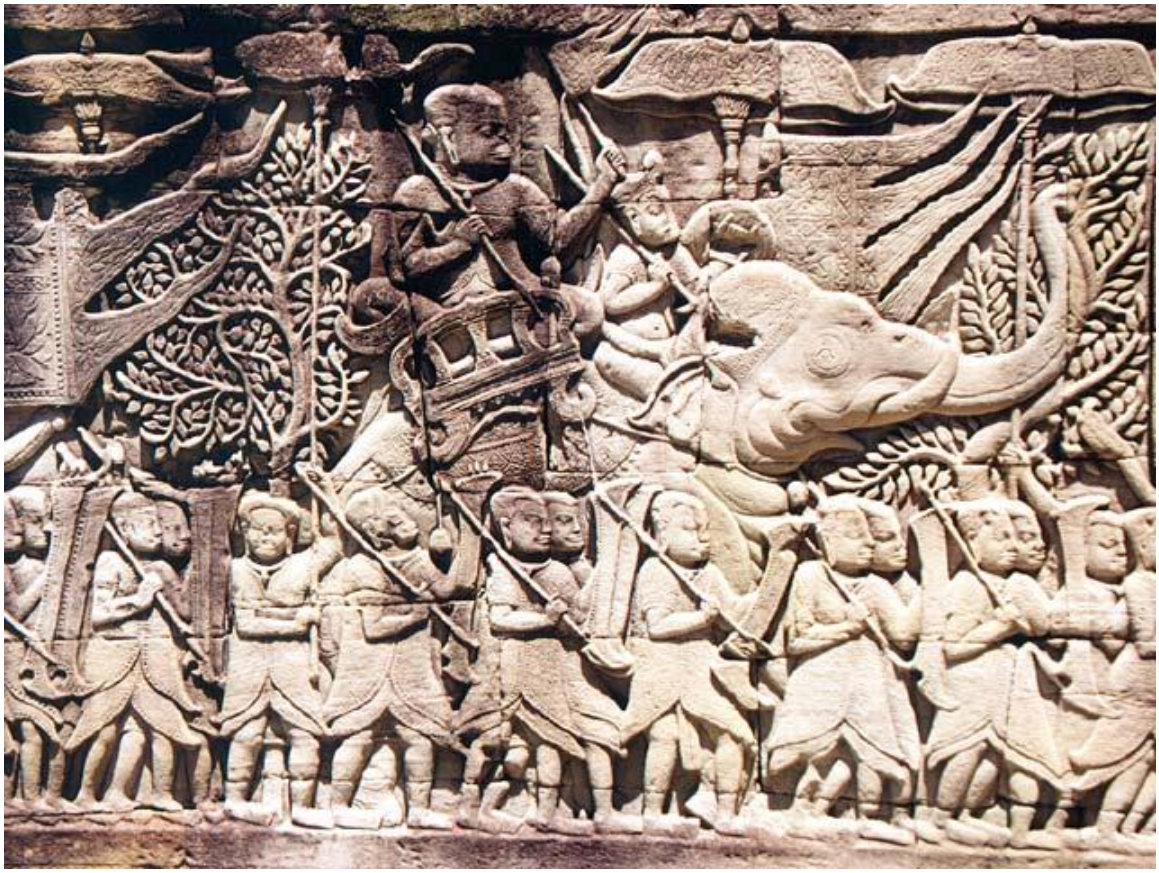
[94] Charles Higham, *The Civilization of Angkor*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2001, pp. 154, 166.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bayon_Angkor_Relief1.jpg>

Marching Khmer Army –
East Wing, Bayon Temple, Angkor Thom

In the early 13th century, after Jayavarman VII's reign, the Khmers converted to Theravada Buddhism and undercut their Hindu-oriented theocracy. Under the new religion, there was no longer divine kingship, strict social castes, Hindu temples, or the need to

[95] D. R. SarDesai, *Southeast Asia, Past and Present*, Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1994, pp. 29-30.

earn Hindu merit by making donations.[96] A technical explanation for the empire's decline – that the irrigation system silted up and was improperly maintained – is highly unlikely, since little rice production depended on large-scale irrigation.[97]

Foreign incursions also contributed to the decline of the Khmer Kingdom. Two new Thai kingdoms – Sukothai (mid-13th–mid-14th centuries) and Ayudhya (after the mid-14th century) successively invaded the western parts of the declining Khmer Kingdom. Champa (contemporary central and southern Vietnam) attacked the eastern part. Squeezed in the middle, the Khmers lost both battles and territory.[98] Soon after the Ayudhya Thais captured Angkor in 1431, the Khmers recaptured their capital. But in 1434 the Khmers abandoned Angkor and relocated their capital to the

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[96] David Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 1998, pp. 78-80.

[97] Charles Higham, *The Civilization of Angkor*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2001, p. 161.

[98] Ian Mabbett and David Chandler, *The Khmers*, Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 1996, pp. 212-216.

south – in Phnom Penh at the confluence of the Mekong and Tonle Sap Rivers.

The Khmer leaders hoped to revive their flagging empire by reorienting it toward maritime commerce, linking into Malay, Indian, and Chinese trading networks. They also expected that the new site would prove more defensible against periodic attacks from their new Thai rivals in Ayudhya.[99] The Khmer state had faded, shrunk, and relocated, but it had not disappeared. Khmer survived, yet only with a shrunken vestige of its former imperial grandeur. For two centuries, Cambodia became a vassal state of the Thai Kingdom of Ayudhya.

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[99] Ian Mabbett and David Chandler, *The Khmers*, Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 1996, pp. 219-220.

Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map-of-southeast-asia_1400_CE.png>

Kingdoms of Ayudhya (Purple), Khmer (Red), Champa (Yellow), and Dai Viet (Blue) – c. 1400

The Khmer imperial system of control thus unraveled because Khmer kings devoted excessive resources to religious monuments and orders and then lost their socio-religious rationale.

In the absence of an esteemed and well-organized center, tributary regions and vassal states leapt at the opportunity to stop paying taxes and gain their freedom from oppressive imperial rule. Foreign incursions also contributed to the decline of the Khmer Kingdom. Two new Thai kingdoms, Sukothai and Ayudhya, invaded the western part of the empire. Champa continued to attack the eastern part. Squeezed in the middle, the Khmers lost both battles and important rice-producing and tribute-paying territories. The once-powerful kingdom slipped into insignificant vassalage.[100]

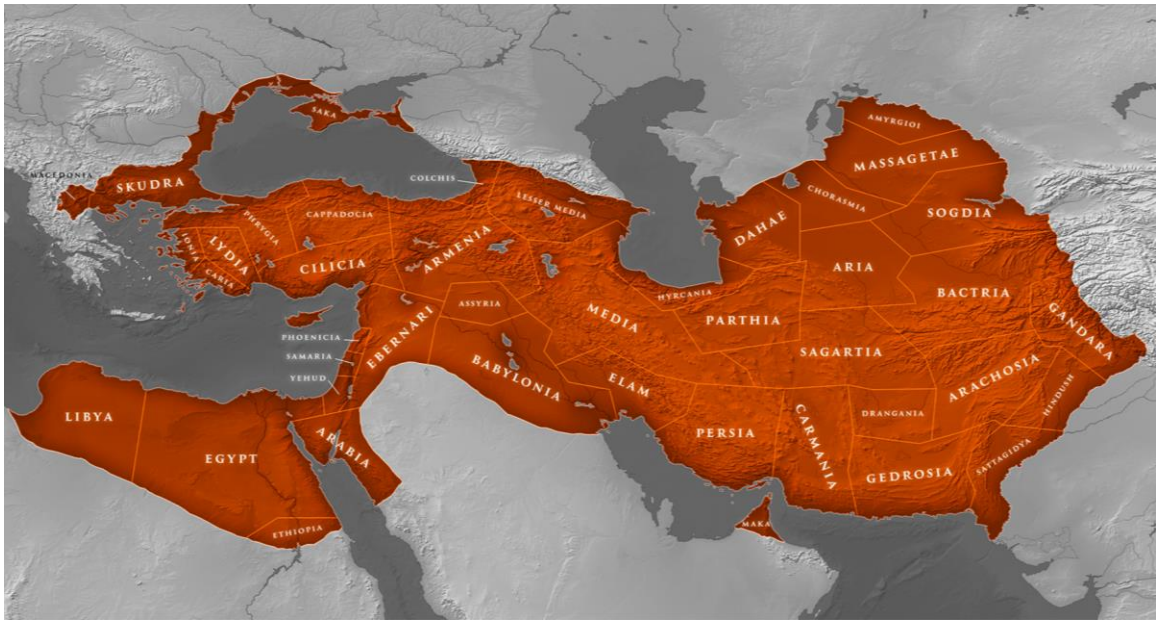
Decline from External Incursions and Foreign Takeovers

Our four remaining states – Achaemenid Persia, Dynastic Egypt, Rome, and Mali/Songhai – also suffered ill fortune in the aftermath of empire. All four were taken over immediately by foreign conquerors or their successors. Achaemenid Persia

[100] Nicholas Tarling (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia, Volume One, Part One, From Early Times To c. 1500*, Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 158, 160, 163.

succumbed to Alexander the Great and thereafter became part of the Hellenistic Seleucid Empire. After its final defeat by Alexander the Great in the 4th century BCE, Egypt experienced foreign rule for two millennia. The Roman Empire was dismembered by Germanic tribes that continued to rule in the conquered areas without producing much wealth. And the West African Sudan, once ruled by Mali and Songhai, fell into three centuries of chronic warfare after Moroccan invaders were unable to establish effective rule. The experience of those imperial states underscores the truth of the old aphorism that it is better to rule than to be ruled. I illustrate this pattern of conquest and foreign rule by analyzing the declines of the Achaemenid Persian Empire and the Songhai Kingdom.

Decline in the Achaemenid Persian Empire. In the early 5th century BCE, the Achaemenid Persian Empire extended across Eurasia from the Indus Valley in the east to southeastern Europe in the west. Persia was the world's greatest power at that time.



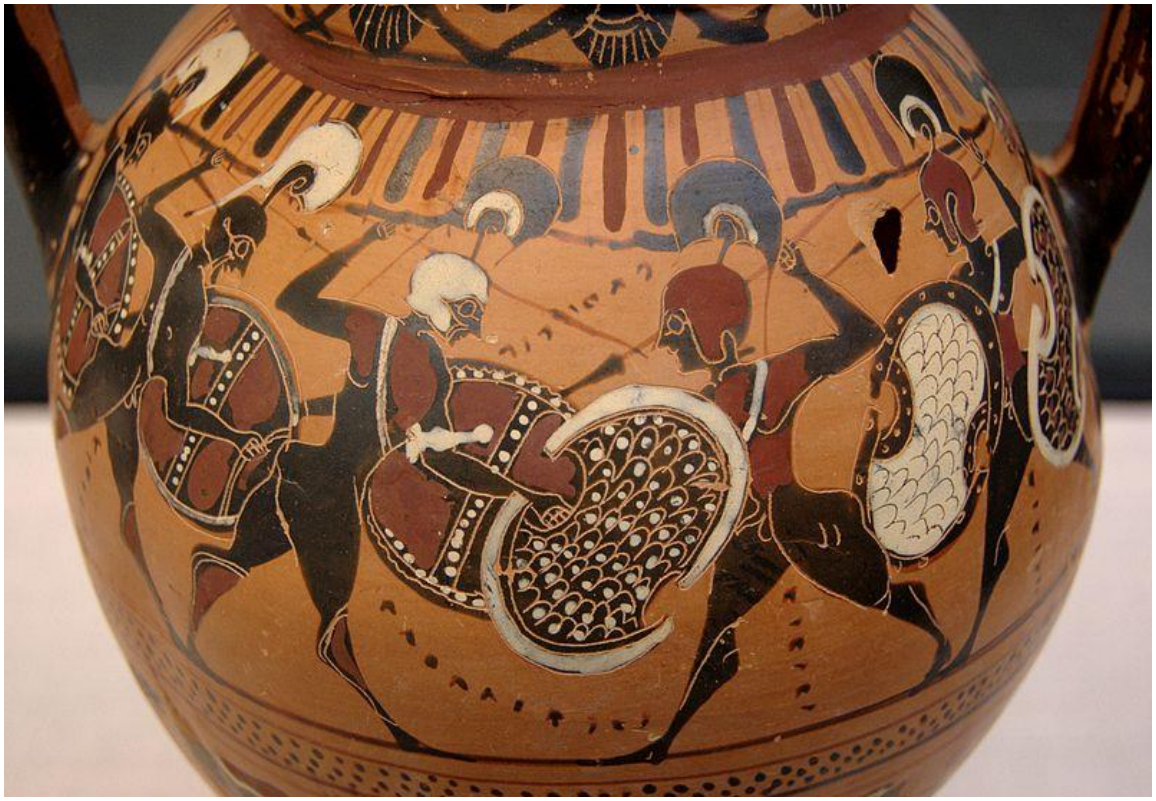
Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at
< https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Achaemenid_(Persian)_Empire_-_Circa_480BC.png>

The Achaemenid Persian Empire At Its Peak, c. 490 BCE

But the Greek city-states, led by Athens and Sparta, ended Achaemenid expansion into Europe. Darius's troops lost the Battle of Marathon (490 BCE) when Greek hoplite warriors, benefiting from better training, shields, and swords, outfought the Persians in hand-to-hand combat.[101] Xerxes' invasion of Greece a decade later resulted in two more military disasters for Persia – the naval Battle of Salamis (480 BCE) and the land Battle of Plataea (479 BCE).

[101] Lindsay Allen, *The Persian Empire*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005, p. 49.

Greek commanders used superior strategy to offset Persia's much larger troop strength.[102] Those defeats stemmed Persian expansion in southeastern Europe, but they did not threaten the stability of the Persian Empire.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Amphora_phalanx_Staatliche_Antikensammlungen_1429.jpg>

Greek Hoplite Warriors in the Phalanx Formation – Amphora, c. 560 BCE

[102] Lindsay Allen, *The Persian Empire*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005, pp. 53-57.

The gradual decline of the Achaemenid Empire was triggered by internal erosion, a steady weakening of imperial government. Provincial rebellions began after Xerxes reversed Darius's approach of tolerance and introduced oppressive policies in the 480s BCE. Royal succession crises precipitated a civil war in 401 BCE and the regicide of Artaxerxes IV in 336 BCE.[103] When Egypt re-gained its independence from Persia (404-343), the Achaemenid Empire lost significant tax revenues. The suppression of rebellions in Babylonia, Bactria, Phoenicia, and Ionia was very costly. The imperial bureaucracy also splintered as satraps (regional governors) revolted against central authority, most importantly in Anatolia (366-359 BCE).[104]

The erosion of governmental control made the empire vulnerable to external threats. In 336 BCE, Philip of Macedonia crossed the Hellespont and invaded western Anatolia under the

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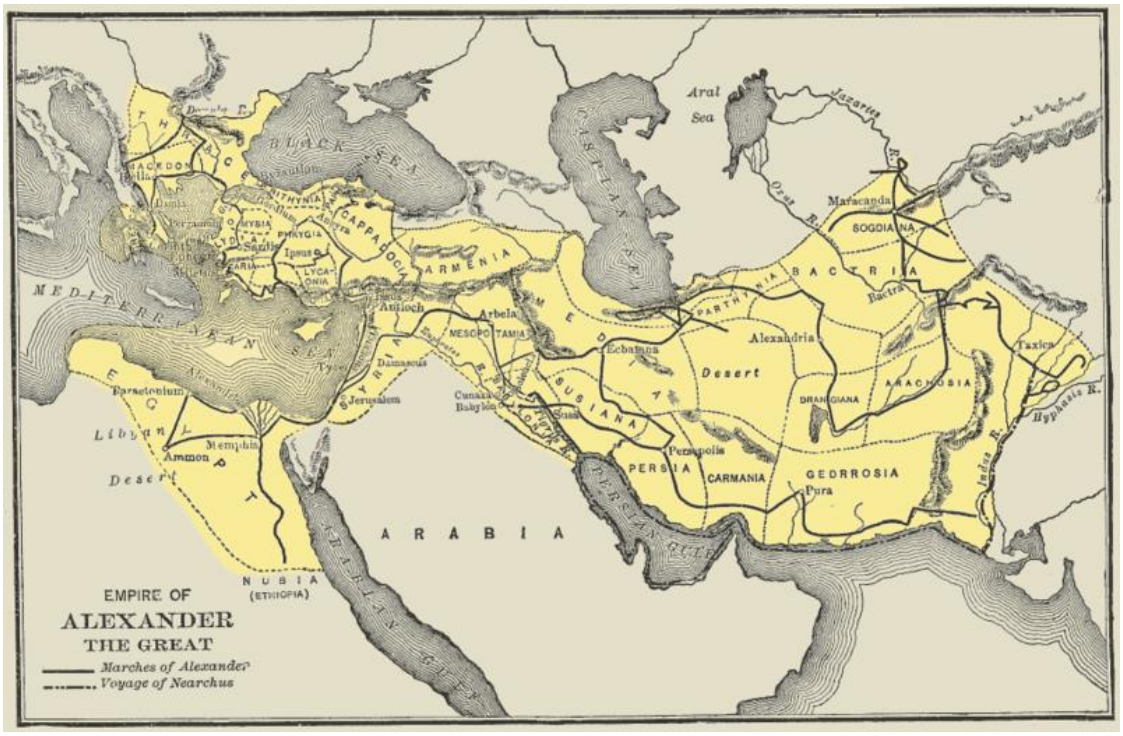
[103] Michael Axworthy, *Empire of the Mind, A History of Iran*, London: Hurst & Company, 2007, pp. 25-27.

[104] John Curtis and Nigel Tallis (ed.), *Forgotten Empire, The World of Ancient Persia*, London: The British Museum Press, 2005, p. 14.

guise of liberating the Greek city-states of Ionia from Persian rule. Philip's son, Alexander the Great of Macedonia (ruled 334-323 BCE), invaded and captured the Achaemenid Empire.[105] Alexander was a charismatic, military-and-organizational genius. He won a series of critical battles to gain control over key pieces of the empire – Granicus River (334 BCE) for Anatolia, Issus (333 BCE) for the Levant and Egypt, Gaugamela (331 BCE) for Babylonia, and Persepolis (330 BCE) for Persia. Alexander spent a decade conquering the Achaemenid Persian Empire, which fell gradually but completely.[106]

[105] Maria Brosius, *The Persians, An Introduction*, Abingdon, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2006, pp. 30-32.

[106] Michael Axworthy, *Empire of the Mind, A History of Iran*, London: Hurst & Company, 2007, pp. 29-32.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map-alexander-empire.png>

Alexander the Great's Empire –
After Defeating Achaemenid Persia, 323 BCE

Alexander was an adroit public administrator as well as a brilliant militarist. Along his route of conquest, he established a series of Macedonian colonies, often led by Persian *satraps* (regional governors). Within ethnic Persia, Alexander adopted a Persianization policy to gain political legitimacy. In Susa in 324 BCE, he organized a mass wedding of Macedonian leaders and Persian aristocratic women. But Alexander died of a fever

(possibly malaria) in 323 BCE at the age of 33. His generals murdered his Bactrian wife and infant son and vied for power.[107]

Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Alexander_the_Great,_from_Alexandria,_Egypt,_3rd_cent._BCE,_Ny_Carlsberg_Glyptotek,_Copenhagen_(5)_(36375553176).jpg>

Alexander the Great – Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen

Following the Wars of Succession (301-280 BCE), Alexander's empire was divided into three kingdoms – Macedon (centered in Greece), Seleucid (Persia, Mesopotamia, and Syria), and Ptolemaic (Egypt). Seleucus Nicator (312-281 BCE) was the

[107] Lindsay Allen, *The Persian Empire*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005, pp. 150-151, 156.

founder of the Seleucid Kingdom, which spread from Anatolia through Persia. Wars with the Ptolemaic Kingdom and royal succession struggles sapped Seleucid strength.[108] Secessions by Bactria (250) and Parthia (238) brought weakness in the east. The Seleucid Kingdom finally disappeared after the Roman Empire conquered Anatolia (130 BCE) and Syria (64 BCE).[109]

Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Diadochi.png?

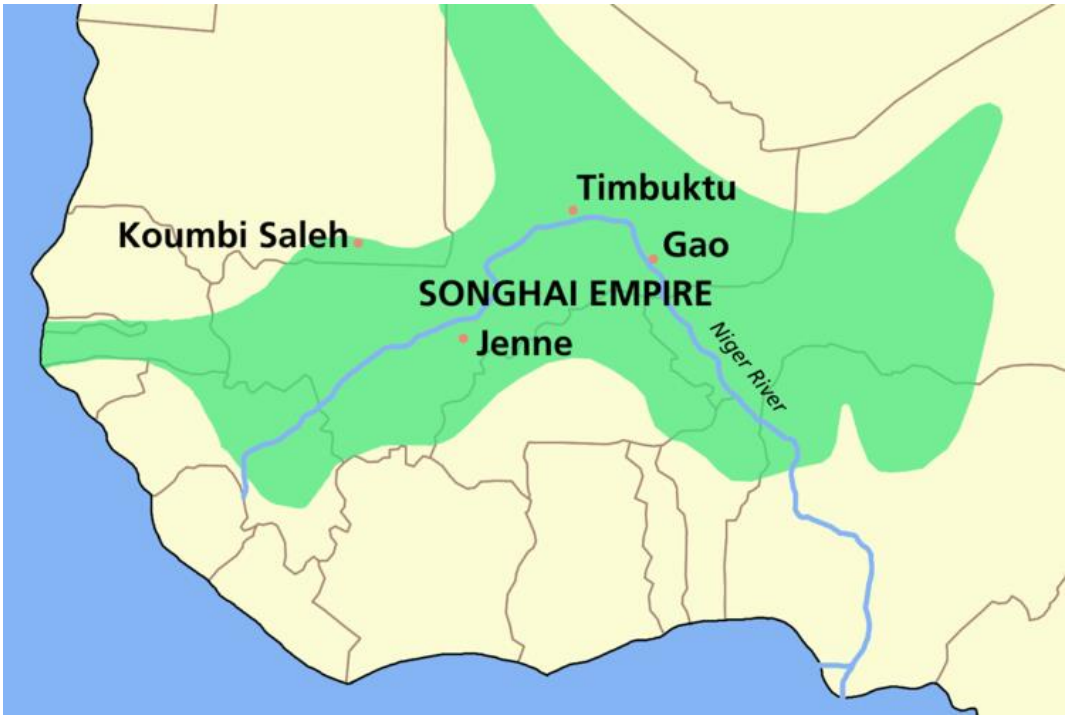
Seleucid, Antoigonid, and Ptolemaic Kingdoms, 2nd century BCE

[108] Ian Shaw (ed.), *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 396-399.

[109] Chris Scarre, *The Penguin Historical Atlas of Ancient Rome*, London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1995, pp. 18-19.

Decline in the Kingdom of Songhai. The Songhai Kingdom (15th-16th centuries) was a prosperous trading state in the Middle Niger region for 700 years beginning in the 9th century. The Nilo-Saharan-speaking Songhai peoples consisted of diverse tribes, including farmers (mostly of millet), fishermen, cattle herders, traders, and caravan suppliers. Songhai's capital was Gao, on the Niger River east of Timbuktu, which became a major terminus for trans-Saharan trade routes across the western and central Sahara. The Kingdom of Songhai was conquered by the Kingdom of Mali in 1325, but regained its nominal independence 50 years later and thereafter paid tribute to Mali for nearly a century. As Mali weakened, Songhai grew. The revitalized kingdom regained its full independence after 1464 when Sonni Ali (ruled 1464-1491) organized a strong government and a professional army.[110]

[110] Edward W. Bovill, *The Golden Trade of the Moors*, Princeton, NJ: Markus Weiner Publishers, 1995**,** pp. 136-140.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:SONGHAI_empire_map.PNG>

The Songhai Kingdom At Its Greatest Territorial Extent, c. 1540

The Kingdom of Songhai reached the peak of its power in the first half of the 16th century. Decline set in after religious controversies and fratricidal struggles precipitated succession disputes, palace revolutions, and civil wars. That internal erosion undercut the kingdom's military strength and made it difficult to control dissident subject peoples in remote provinces who detested paying tribute to the Songhai overlords.[111] Songhai also lost

control of the gold trade. Increasing amounts of the West African gold were sent south to the coast to be exported by the Portuguese, who had established coastal forts to divert the gold trade. Loss of the monopoly over the gold trade put additional economic pressures on the fraying Songhai Kingdom, because it undercut the state's primary source of wealth.[112]

Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Portuguese_discoveries_and_explorationsV2en.png>

Portuguese Exploration, 1415-1543 – Shifted the Gold Trade from the Sahara Desert to the Atlantic Coast

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[111] Edward W. Bovill, *The Golden Trade of the Moors*, Princeton, NJ: Markus Weiner Publishers, 1995**,** pp. 166-171.

[112] Edward W. Bovill, *The Golden Trade of the Moors*, Princeton, NJ: Markus Weiner Publishers, 1995, pp. 117-118.

The Sultan of Morocco, Mulai Ahmad al-Mansur, decided to attempt to take control of the trans-Saharan trade and to occupy the West African goldfields. In 1584, a large Moroccan army perished in the Sahara Desert en route to attack Songhai. But in 1587 a Moroccan force occupied Taghaza, the main source of salt in western Saharan trade. Four years later, Sultan al-Mansur mounted a major expeditionary force to cross 1,500 miles of the Sahara Desert and conquer the Songhai Kingdom. The trans-Saharan expedition was massive – 4,000 troops (half infantry and half light-cavalry), 1,000 camel drivers, 8,000 camels, and 1,000 packhorses. The sultan anticipated that his 2,000 firearms (arquebuses) and six large cannons would overwhelm the Songhai army and offset the Moroccans' numerical disadvantage in warfare.[113]

The incredible Moroccan invasion took the Songhai leaders completely by surprise. The disciplined Moroccan mercenaries,

[113] Edward W. Bovill, *The Golden Trade of the Moors*, Princeton, NJ: Markus Weiner Publishers, 1995**,** pp. 140-141.

with advanced weaponry, easily defeated the uncoordinated Songhai army, using bows and spears, at the Battle of Tondibi, fought north of Gao in 1591.

Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gao_Mali_2006.jpg>

Gao, Mali, Former Capital of the Songhai Empire – The Battle of Tondibi (1591) Was Fought Just North of Gao

The Moroccan invaders won the war but could not govern the conquered people effectively. They successfully looted the cities and transferred much wealth to the sultan. But warlike peoples who formerly had been subjected to Songhai rule – Tuaregs, Fulanis, and Bambaras – raided farming areas and cities. The

Moroccans could neither re-create the Songhai Kingdom nor take control of the gold-producing regions. Their commanders became destructive warlords in the main three cities – Timbuktu, Gao, and Djenné – and were virtually independent of guidance from Morocco.[114]

The glory days of the Kingdoms of Mali and Songhai were over. The once-powerful western Sudan became a weakened scene of chronic warfare and rapacious raiding. Beginning in the 1590s, the trans-Saharan trade went into a three-century decline.[115] The eventual demise of the trade route was brought about by four events – the Moroccan invasion of Songhai, the shift of gold exports to European maritime trade, the rise of the Atlantic slave trade, and the decline of the Ottoman Empire in North Africa – which created instability and decreased trade at both ends of the trans-Saharan trade routes.

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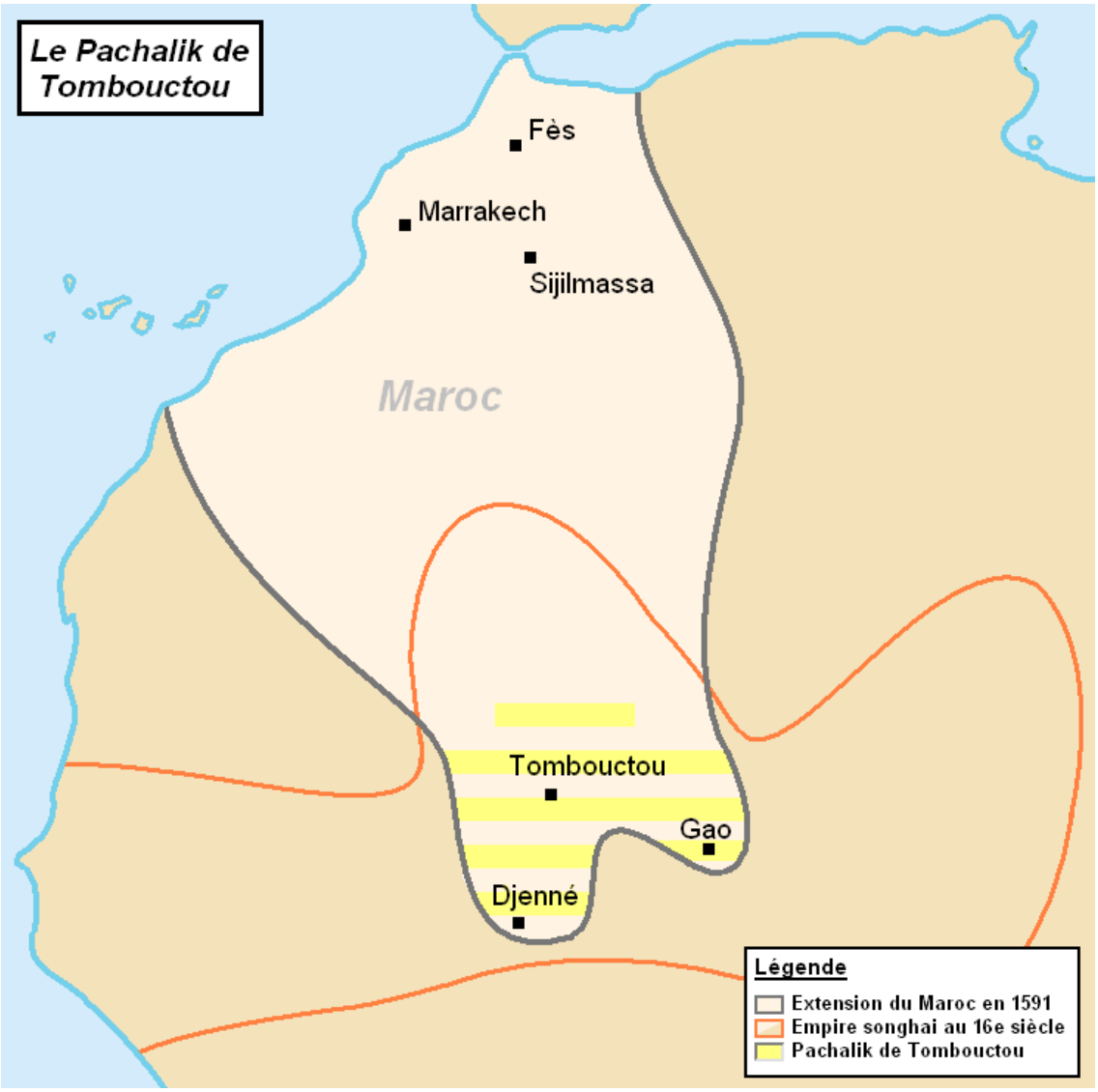
[114] Harry A. Gailey Jr., *History of Africa, Volume I: From Earliest Times to 1800*, New York: Robert E. Krieger Publishing Company, 1981, pp. 72-74.

[115] Paul Bohannan and Philip Curtin, *Africa and Africans*, Prospect Heights, Illinois: Waveland Press, 1995, p. 176.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:TombouctouPachalik_4.png>

Moroccan Rule of Timbuktu, Djenné, and Gao – 1591-1833

Summary of the Decline of Early Imperial States

After generations of exerting power and creating wealth, why did early empires decline and fall? Two related forces – internal erosion and foreign incursions – undercut the ability of the

imperial rulers to generate wealth and exert power. When kings no longer could tax agriculture, control foreign trade, and force tribute from conquered areas sufficiently, their imperial states became vulnerable to foreign takeover. Only rarely did foreign competitors conquer strong, well-functioning empires or kingdoms. Instead, invasion followed long periods of internal decline.

Internal erosion was the gradual downturn in the ability of the central government to collect taxes, provide security, and offer services. In this comparative examination of twelve imperial states, I found four main causes of internal erosion – succession crises, religious excesses, peasant rebellions, and fruitless expansions.

Succession crises (bloody disputes over who would become the next ruler) led to political instability, civil wars, and the loss of tax revenue. Succession disputes precipitated internal erosion in the Achaemenid Persian Empire (Iran), the Roman Empire (Mediterranean region), the Gupta Kingdom (India), the Kingdoms

of Mali and Songhai (contemporary Mali), and the Ottoman Empire (Turkey). Religious excesses arose when tax-free religious societies gained control of substantial portions of an empire's agricultural land and labor force and impeded the government's ability to fund its military and bureaucracy. That kind of internal erosion led to the downfall of Dynastic Egypt, the Pagan Kingdom (Burma), and the Khmer Kingdom (Cambodia).

Debilitating peasant rebellions broke out after corrupt bureaucracies permitted the widespread transfer of agricultural land from tax-paying, free-peasant farms to tax-avoiding, noble estates. Peasant revolts brought an end to both the Han and Tang Dynasties in China. Fruitless attempts to expand the territorial reach of the state into unprofitable regions wasted imperial resources and brought military weakness. Misguided expansion led to internal erosion in the Kingdom of Axum (Ethiopia) and the Mughal Empire (India).

Internal erosion weakened early empires and made them vulnerable to foreign invasion. Some empires escaped foreign

take-over, at least for a while. Han and Tang China fell to internal coups not to foreign conquests, although China later succumbed to Mongol and Manchu invaders. Five other states were defeated by stronger foreign powers yet continued to exist. Axum (defeated by the Persians), Gupta (the Huns), Pagan (the Mongols), Mughal (the Persians), and Ottoman (the Russians, Austrians, British, and French) fall into this category. One state, Khmer (Cambodia), became a vassal of a powerful neighbor (the Ayudhya Thais).

Foreign conquerors directly controlled four other once-strong imperial states – Persia (ruled by the Seleucids), Egypt (the Macedonians), Rome (the Germanic tribes), and Mali/Songhai (the Moroccans). In our twelve former imperial states, foreign incursions thus led to one of four very different outcomes – no foreign invasion (two states), significant foreign invasion but no lasting foreign rule (five), foreign invasion followed by vassalage (one), or foreign invasion and takeover (four).

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As contemporary powers look back on this history of the decline of early empires, what insights can they glean that might help them preserve their hegemonic eras? Some of the threats to imperial preservation – the key sources of internal erosion – are much less pertinent today than they were centuries ago. Succession crises are still a key threat in non-democratic societies and in those with weak democratic institutions. However, democratic societies have evolved methods of lobbying for legislation and of funding elections that supersede the bloody struggles to influence or become the next emperor.

Religious excesses no longer threaten the ability of governments to carry out social and security services. Even those contemporary governments that do not recognize a clear division between church and state rarely have trouble finding adequate resources to fund both types of functions.

Peasant rebellions leading to civil wars remain a threat in less wealthy contemporary states. Most wealthy powers have devised ways to suppress or cope with the unrest of their less fortunate

citizens – provision of social safety nets, income redistributive mechanisms, or law enforcement. Disadvantaged minorities are gradually making their voices heard in efforts to overcome inherent racism and economic inequalities, especially in richer countries.

A constant threat to both early empires and contemporary powers is fruitless expansions into foreign territory. Hegemonic powers rarely colonize weaker regions for economic exploitation. But they continue to engage in attempts to limit the reach of their adversary powers or to precipitate regime change in weaker adversarial states. These bullying efforts have international disadvantages that are only beginning to be understood fully.