

The Post-Classical Era

Summary. The post-classical period extends between the 5th and 15th centuries C.E. A new international framework emerged to produce a genuine world historical dynamic. Explicit exchange became a standard part of world history.

The Chronology of the Postclassical Period. The world civilization map was altered greatly by the decline or collapse of the classical civilizations and by nomadic invasions. The postclassical era closed as new central Asian invasions once again changed patterns. Another phase of world development opened as new empires formed and Europeans explored the wider world.

The Postclassical Millennium and the World Network. Four developments define postclassical centuries: [1] Islamic civilization spread politically and culturally into Asia, Europe, and Africa; [2] civilization expanded into new world regions; [3] the great world religions gained adherents from peoples once following local belief structures; and [4] the creation of a world network linking many of the individual civilizations.

The Rise of Islam. Islam created a new empire encompassing Asian, African, and European territories. In the classical period the three civilizations were roughly in balance; with Islam there was a world leader. Islam's decline marked the end of this phase of world history.

The Expansion of Civilization. Civilization spread into many new regions in Africa and Europe; it became more established in Japan. Both American and Polynesian societies expanded their reach. Seven diverse areas were important in the postclassical era: the Middle East and North Africa, India, China and East Asia, eastern and western Europe, sub-Saharan Africa, India and southeast Asia and the Americas.

The World Religions. In the postclassical era major religions spread into much of Asia, Africa, and Europe. Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism brought a new focus on issues of spirituality and an afterlife. They were able to extend beyond local cultures and draw together diverse peoples, many of whom were living in very confused political times. Growth in international commerce also assisted change.

The World Network. The most important characteristic of the postclassical world was the development of a world network. International trade and military contacts allowed all types of intellectual and material exchanges. Diseases also spread. Once established the network steadily intensified and expanded. Individual civilizations still maintained their essential values, but many were operating in a genuinely international framework. The major limitation was that the Americas, Polynesia, Australia, and a few other places were not yet included.

World History Themes. Although agriculture expanded during the postclassical period, there was not, except in central America, a period of massive environmental problems. Since few new fundamental technological innovations occurred, environmental change mainly reflected population growth. Basic structures of social and gender inequality persisted. The nomadic impact on history peaked with the achievements of the Mongols. Expanding civilizations and new religions provided opportunities for individuals to influence societal developments.

Exchange and Imitation in the Postclassical World. Three characteristics highlighted the importance of imitating established centers. Expanding commercial contacts and missionary activity connected peripheral regions to established civilizations. The expansion of civilization built on the possibility of explicit imitation. The best established civilizations were in roughly the same centers where key classical developments occurred. They were surrounded by areas where there were newer and less strongly organized civilizations. They participated in the world exchange at a disadvantage and attempted to imitate features of the major centers.