

**DECLINE****COLLAPSE****FALL**

Era 4 Overview

Early in Era 4, the two pillars of the Eurasian trading network, the Roman Empire and Han Dynasty China, collapsed. These weren't the only societies to go into decline or break down during this era. As a result, European historians in particular have labelled much of this era a "dark age". But was this true everywhere, or anywhere? Looking at Era 4 on a global scale, we see restructuring and rebuilding, often in the aftermath of crisis, both in the Americas and in Afro-Eurasia.



00:01

Colby Burnett surprises Kim Lochner just as she is pulling a piece from a Jenga puzzle – the Jenga tower then collapses!

Hey, Kim! (Kim sighs in exasperation)

Well, this era is about collapse!

Hi, I'm Kim Lochner, and along with Colby Burnett, we're introducing Era 4.

00:21

Animations of humans as foragers, farmers, and eventually village and city dwellers

From a certain perspective, humans progress in every era. Each society builds on the one before. Humans evolve, learn to use tools, and make cognitive breakthroughs that allow us to communicate and build larger societies. As a result, humans developed farming and herding and migrated around the world. This drove more innovations like cities, states, empires, portable religions, and ultimately great trading systems like the Silk Road. This system stretched all the way across Eurasia from east to west. It connected the Han Dynasty China and the Roman Empire, among others. And even if each of these innovations came at some cost, altogether they seem to tell a story of human societies becoming progressively larger and more complex.

01:14

Animation of empires – Han Dynasty China, and the Roman Empire—turning into ruins

But then the progress seemed to hit a bump. Beginning around 200 CE—1,800 years ago—the Eurasian system faced a series of problems. First, Han Dynasty China and later the Roman Empire collapsed. These collapses resulted in smaller and less complex communities. Where once there'd been large empires, there were now small kingdoms, groups ruled by chieftains or even anarchy. In the resulting chaos, travel became unsafe, and the networks connecting societies began to grow smaller. Those factors led to rapid declines in the production and distribution of goods.

01:58

In this era, we'll ask: How do societies respond to these kinds of demographic, environmental, or political catastrophes? How do they restructure themselves or rebuild? When we look more closely at the human story, we see that breakdowns like these were quite frequent, not only during this period but before and even after.

But this one seems especially dramatic. This is partly because its impact was deep and devastating. In fact, for a long time, European historians called the era the Dark Ages. Archaeologists see this decline in a wide variety of evidence.

02:43

Colby Burnett A chart in the shape of a mound—for a long time, moving steadily up, and then dramatically going down. This is true for every type of evidence explained.

Look, for example, at this chart. It shows a number of different types of data in the Roman Empire between the years 500 BCE and 500 CE. Note how each type of evidence shows a major change. The number of shipwrecks from each year indicates the amount of trade. The number of artifacts dug up, the size of the army, and the number of new coins minted, tell us about how much money the empire had to spend. Finally, the amount of silver in each coin tells us about the relative wealth of the empire. All of these sources show a dramatic decline. But some seem to point to about 400 CE as the indicator of a coming collapse, while others suggest it began as early as 200 CE. We can learn more about this collapse by changing scales to zoom in on particular sites. Here is one.

03:28

Animated map zooms in on Tintagel; photo of the fortress, which is now in ruins.

Painting of King Arthur wearing a crown and holding up a flag.

More artwork depicts war – men fighting on horses.

The fortress of Tintagel perched on the western edge of Eurasia. It was perhaps the darkest of Dark Age Eurasian sites following the collapse of the Roman Empire. Tintagel is famous as the alleged seat of King Arthur, a legendary and probably mythical British ruler. He supposedly defended the island kingdom after the Roman departure. The real story of this era is one of constant war and destruction. Without Roman administrators and legions, central authority fell apart. Competing chieftains divided the countryside and fought each other. A Saxon invasion devastated the island's towns and villages.

04:02

A photo shows a serene hillside town along the water

The 6th century monk Gildas wrote of the ruin of one previously Roman town, that “in the midst of the streets “lay the tops of lofty towers, “tumbled to the ground, stones of high walls, “holy altars, fragments of human bodies, “covered with livid clots of coagulated blood, looking as if they had been squeezed together in a press.” To Gildas, Tintagel seemed isolated and primitive. But some archaeologists aren't so sure that this is an accurate description of Tintagel in the post-Roman era.

04:32

Animation of nobles wearing crowns among the ruins

Animation of the legend of King Arthur—a young King Arthur trying to pull the sword from stone

Both archaeological remains and written texts suggest that so-called Dark Ages Britain had pockets of learning and sophistication. They suggest circles of priests and nobles were educated, and even spoke Latin, the language of Rome. Tintagel itself remained a quite large town. It was part of a wide trading world, and its people purchased pottery, olive oil, and other goods from as far away as the Mediterranean Sea. It was the seat of the King of Cornwall, and powerful enough to inspire the legend of King Arthur.

05:01

Kim Lochner

Paintings depict scenes of war: Men fighting outside a castle on horseback; men fighting with swords; men injured or dying

The question of whether or not this was a dark age for Tintagel helps us to think about some of the larger questions of this era.

What do historians or others mean when they describe a collapse or “fall” of a society, such as the fall of the Roman Empire? Were these breakdowns devastating events? And for whom? What evidence might suggest they were less destructive, more like transformations than true collapses?

These are crucial questions to consider when studying this era. These questions are also critical for considering catastrophic events in recent history, or in the future. It reminds us that what we name events in the past influences how others-- including ourselves-- think about those events.

05:49

Animated map showing the spread of Islamic Empires

Collapse, or transformation, occurred differently in different places. In the eastern portions of the Roman Empire, far away from Tintagel, Roman rule held on for quite a while through the city of Byzantium. And during the so-called Dark Ages, Islamic empires expanded out of Arabia and launched a new golden age for science, medicine, and astronomy. These states held a high standard of living and preserved Roman knowledge. And in China, the chaos following the fall of the

Han Dynasty was relatively brief, and more quickly replaced by a new centralized state. In Mesoamerica, similarly, the periodic collapses of large cities like Teotihuacan rapidly led to the rise of neighboring cities that, in many cases, were culturally quite similar.

06:43

Paintings depicting ruin and terror in cities—bodies piled upon each other and citizens revolting; men dying from disease
Colby Burnett

Nevertheless, the years after a large-scale collapse might have been truly awful. The disintegration of political authority frequently led to invasion or war between local chieftains and warlords. The collapse of organized economies meant that trade dried up, goods were hard to find, and people starved. Disease and theft went uncontrolled. Sometimes this could go on for a long time.

But often these were relatively short periods, followed by the reestablishment of some sort of order. A new order could bring about regrowth of government, trade, and stability. It is important that we ask these questions and that we study collapses. These were often times of great suffering and that's something we want to avoid. How can we avoid future collapses? How can we recover faster when they happen?

07:34

Animation showing a building in 'decline': the building begins to crack; 'collapse': parts of the building fall down; and 'fall': the building is now a pile of rubble
Kim Lochner

People today regularly draw lessons from catastrophes or collapses in the past to inform their thinking about the present and the future. So understanding what people mean by words such as "decline" or "collapse" or "fall" is crucial. And it's important to understand what evidence supports naming events in this way.

So, as you study events in this era, look for chances to consider how do societal collapse or demographic catastrophe affect the lives of people in different regions? How might the interconnections or networks among regions of the world accelerate or limit the spread of a catastrophe? And how do different organizational structures of different communities respond to disruptions in daily life? Who labels catastrophic events as "collapses" or "declines" or "falls"? What evidence supports such a view? Is there evidence to contest it? In what ways might these events be transformations? Does it make a difference what we name events in the past?

08:46

Kim Lochner and Colby Burnett in conversation

Those are all good questions.

Well, I agree.

- But I'd like to add one more.

- What's that?

Who's going to clean up all of these blocks?

That would be you.

- (sighs) Fine.