



Frames in Era 4

Era 4 gives us an opportunity to re-examine all of our assumptions about history through each of the three frames. Until this period, it largely looked like change happened in human history in one direction—always bigger, more extensive, and more complex. Examining examples of collapse helps us to question these assumptions. But we also need to question what collapse really means through each of the three frames to get an accurate picture of the past.



00:01

*Bob Bain, PhD, University
of Michigan*

Looking back at world history using our frames, it often seems like change within and across the frames followed a simple, straightforward pathway. Production and distribution become more sophisticated over time, more things got made and exchanged. Communities become bigger and more complex. Networks of ideas and relationships stretch further and further until they reach across the globe. But nothing in history happens in a straight line. Things change at different speeds, and change happens sometimes in one direction, and sometimes in another.

00:39

*Photo of abandoned
structures in Teotihuacan;
painting depicting the
Roman Empire in a state
of chaos*

Some of the key events covered in Era 4 are evidence of the irregular nature of history. In this era, we see some unexpected events in the history of communities. Large cities like Teotihuacan declined or were abandoned. Two great empires—Rome and Han Dynasty China— collapsed into chaos and disorder.

*Photo of Roman
architecture, featuring
enormous columns*

In the wake of these catastrophes, similar changes happened in production and distribution. Instead of expanding, both shrank. Sophisticated production techniques were lost— for example, we still don't really understand how the Romans made concrete in their day. Routes were no longer safe and people didn't travel as far. Trade shriveled. And, as a result, networks also contracted. Ideas stopped traveling as much as they had and in many places were lost.

01:30

*Image of a modern
industrial factory*

But, logically, we know these collapses and destructions were not permanent. In fact, when we look around today we see even more extensive networks, many and bigger states, and much, much more production and distribution than we saw at the beginning of Era 4— 1,700 years ago. So how did things turn around again?

Historically, it turns out, collapse usually isn't really the end of a story. There are some continuities, even when societies and states seem to fall almost completely, and there is recovery. These continuities and recoveries are an important theme in Era 4.

02:05

*Montage of Irish, Islamic,
and Chinese art.
Photo of Mayan ruins: A
great staircase leading up
to a temple*

Late in this era, we see societies— like the Islamic world and Ireland— where important innovations and knowledge survived, ready to be spread again when neighboring societies recovered. We see communities, like China, that recovered quite rapidly under new dynasties and rulers. We see communities, like the Mayan cities of the Yucatan Peninsula, that stepped in to replace neighboring cities that had declined or collapsed. We see systems of trade that reformed, reconnecting distant regions with new players and new types of organizations.

02:40

By investigating both decline and recovery in the context of the three frames, we can modify and better understand the big patterns of change and continuity over time. We can see how these events modify and challenge broad stories we may have about each frame, but they also help us to perceive their wider pattern over time.

By comparing and contrasting examples from around the world, we can better understand how our present world came into being. Can it also better prepare for the future?