

Part II Retrospective

THE CLASSICAL PERIOD, 1000 B.C.E.—500 C.E.: UNITING LARGE REGIONS

CONTACTS AND THEIR LIMITS

In contrast to the early river valley civilizations, which had no regular interregional exchange system (save possibly in the Indian Ocean), reasonably systematic contacts developed during the classical period linking China to India, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean. Some goods were shipped along sea routes in the Indian Ocean, reaching as far as Egypt via the Red Sea. Important overland routes—the routes historians have labeled collectively as the Silk Road—brought goods from western China through central Asia to the Middle East and Mediterranean. Important systems connected south Indian merchants and some Hindu and Buddhist missionaries to various parts of southeast Asia. Ethiopians in northeastern Africa traded actively with both the Mediterranean and the Middle East.

In 70 C.E. in southern Italy, Mount Vesuvius erupted, burying neighboring Roman cities, including Pompeii. Almost 2000 years later archeologists, excavating the ruins of Pompeii, found an ivory carving of a woman made at Taxila in what is now northwestern Pakistan. This find confirmed the importance of trade links between Rome and south Asia. Taxila had been part of the Hellenistic orbit established by Alexander the Great, and exchanges with the Mediterranean continued thereafter. Roman merchants visited India directly, seeking trading opportunities. Taxila was also a major center along the Silk Road, serving as a link not only to the Mediterranean but also to east and southeast Asia. The activity along trade routes gave many elites an active taste for goods, like silk, produced in distant places.

Besides the trade routes, two major episodes occurred that involved direct contact between different civilizations. Alexander the Great's conquests brought Greek culture into interaction with those of Persia and India, as well as with Egypt. We have seen that Indian artists imitated Greek styles in their own work. Greeks and Indians both gained new mathematical knowledge (though it is intriguing that the Greeks did not adopt Indian numbering which, later transmitted to Europe by the Arabs, proved much superior to Greek and Roman numbering systems). Indian missionaries to the Middle East, though failing to establish Buddhism, may have influenced ethical thought in the later Roman Empire and, through this, Christianity.

Interest in Asian goods also motivated Rome, though with less wide-ranging results. Once they controlled Egypt, the Romans established regular Indian Ocean expeditions from the Red Sea. A desire for more direct access to Indian spices and

Chinese silks also helped motivate frequent wars with empires in Persia, though the Romans often fared badly and were unable to break through to the sources of the goods they valued. China, for its part, had established regular diplomatic relations with empires in Persia, largely to further direct trade. None of these interesting interactions, however, seems to have had significant results in terms of institutional or cultural exchange.

The second major contact, toward the end of the classical period, involved China's fascination with Indian Buddhism. Chinese knowledge of Buddhism initially spread as a result of Chinese merchant ventures into India; later, religious students were sent directly. This was the only major case of successful outside influence on Chinese culture until very recent times.

These developments were exceedingly important. They also had serious limits. Interregional trade was certainly vital to some of the trading hubs in central Asia, such as Samarkand, but it had relatively little economic importance to societies like China. It was nothing compared to the growth of production in China's internal trade. There is no uncontested evidence that anyone traveled all the way from Rome to China, and Roman knowledge of China (as well as Chinese knowledge of Rome) was extremely hazy. There was trade, but no interaction between Chinese and Roman culture or technology. The two cases of direct exchange between civilizations described above are fascinating but they also stand out as unusual. And the lasting effects of the Hellenistic experience in northwestern India are questionable. Even in art, after about two centuries, this influence seems to have disappeared, and stylistic differences once again became apparent.

So, while contacts advanced significantly in this period, the primary framework for the major societies remained internal. The classical civilizations developed largely separately. The most important kinds of contacts occurred *within* the civilizations, not among them: the careful, sometimes tense mixing of the northern Chinese with the people of the newer territories in the south; the partial extension of Greek culture to the western Mediterranean and portions of the Middle East and north Africa; the spread of Hinduism and the caste system southward on the Indian subcontinent. These contacts were vital to the formation of larger civilizational areas, which was a fundamental feature of the classical period. Clearly, far more energy went into this process than into interregional linkages at this stage in world history. ■