



Eurasian Social Hierarchies

500 B.C.E.–500 C.E.

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She is a twenty-six-year-old Hindu woman from Goa, on India's west coast. She speaks the Marathi language, has a high school education, is not currently employed, neither smokes nor drinks, but occasionally eats meat. Like millions of other Indians, she is seeking a partner by placing a personal ad in the newspaper or on the Internet. In addition to the personal and professional data found everywhere in such ads, in India they almost always contain another piece of information—the caste of the seeker. The young woman from Goa lists herself as a member of a “scheduled caste” known as Chambar, formerly called “untouchables,” the lowest category in the hierarchy of India's ranked society. That personal ads in twenty-first-century India still refer to caste points out how deeply entrenched and enduring ancient patterns of social life can be.

THE MOST RECENT 250 YEARS OF WORLD HISTORY have called into question social structures long assumed to be natural and permanent. The French, Russian, and Chinese revolutions challenged and destroyed ancient monarchies and class hierarchies; the abolitionist movement of the nineteenth century attacked slavery, largely unquestioned for millennia; the women's movement confronted long and deeply held patriarchal assumptions about the proper relationship between women and men; and Mahatma Gandhi, during India's struggle for independence in the twentieth century, sought to raise the status of “untouchables,” referring to them as Harijan, or “children of God.” Nevertheless, caste, class, patriarchy, and even slavery have certainly not vanished from human society, even now.

Indian Society: A fresco from the time of India's Gupta dynasty (320–600 C.E.) shows townspeople in a royal procession. (© Benoy K. Behl)

During the era of “second-wave” civilizations in Eurasia, these patterns of inequality found expressions and generated social tensions that remain recognizable to the contemporary descendants of these classical societies.

Millions of individual people, inhabiting the classical civilizations of Eurasia, lived within a political framework of states or empires. They occupied as well a world of ideas, religions, and values that derived both from local folkways and from the teaching of the great religious or cultural traditions of their civilizations. They also lived within established societies that defined relationships between rich and poor, powerful and powerless, slaves and free people, and men and women. Those social relationships shaped the daily lives and the life chances of everyone; they provided the foundation for political authority as well as challenges to it; they were both justified and challenged by the religious and cultural traditions of these civilizations.

Like the First Civilizations, those of the classical era were sharply divided along class lines, and they too were patriarchal, with women clearly subordinated to men in most domains of life. In constructing their societies, however, the classical civilizations differed substantially from one another. Chinese, Indian, and Mediterranean civilizations provide numerous illustrations of the many and varied ways in which peoples of the classical era organized their social life. The assumptions, tensions, and conflicts accompanying these social patterns provided much of the distinctive character and texture that distinguished these diverse civilizations from one another.

Society and the State in Classical China

Chinese society was unique in the ancient world in the extent to which it was shaped by the actions of the state. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the political power and immense social prestige of Chinese state officials. For more than 2,000 years, these officials, bureaucrats acting in the name of the emperor both in the capital and in the provinces, represented the cultural and social elite of Chinese civilization. This class had its origins in the efforts of early Chinese rulers to find administrators loyal to the central state rather than to their own families or regions. Philosophers such as Confucius had long advocated selecting such officials on the basis of merit and personal morality rather than birth or wealth. As the Han dynasty established its authority in China around 200 B.C.E., its rulers required each province to send men of promise to the capital, where they were examined and chosen for official positions on the basis of their performance.

An Elite of Officials

Over time, this system of selecting administrators evolved into the world's first professional civil service. In 124 B.C.E., Emperor Wu Di established an imperial academy where potential officials were trained as scholars and immersed in Chinese classical texts dealing with history, literature, art, and mathematics, with an emphasis on Confucian teachings. By the end of the Han dynasty, it enrolled some 30,000

■ Description

How would you characterize the social hierarchy of classical China?

students, who were by then subjected to a series of written examinations to select officials of various grades. Private schools in the provinces funneled still more aspiring candidates into this examination system, which persisted until the early twentieth century. In theory open to all men, this system in practice favored those whose families were wealthy enough to provide the years of education required to pass even the lower-level exams. Proximity to the capital and family connections to the imperial court also helped in gaining a position in this highest of Chinese elites. Nonetheless, village communities or a local landowner might sponsor the education of a bright young man from a commoner family, enabling him to enter the charmed circle of officialdom. One rags-to-riches story told of a pig farmer who became an adviser to the emperor himself. Thus the examination system provided a modest measure of social mobility in an otherwise quite hierarchical society.

In later dynasties, that system grew to be even more elaborate and became an enduring and distinguishing feature of Chinese civilization. During the Tang dynasty, the famous poet and official Po Chu-I (772–846 C.E.) wrote a poem entitled “After Passing the Examination,” which shows something of the fame and fortune that awaited an accomplished student as well as the continuing loyalty to family and home that ideally marked those who succeeded:

For ten years I never left my books,
 I went up . . . and won unmerited praise.
 My high place I do not much prize;
 The joy of my parents will first make me proud.
 Fellow students, six or seven men,
 See me off as I leave the City gate.
 My covered coach is ready to drive away;
 Flutes and strings blend their parting tune.
 Hopes achieved dull the pains of parting;
 Fumes of wine shorten the long road. . . .
 Shod with wings is the horse of him who rides
 On a Spring day the road that leads to home.¹

Those who made it into the bureaucracy entered a realm of high privilege and enormous prestige. Senior officials moved about in carriages and were bedecked with robes, ribbons, seals, and headdresses appropriate to their rank. Even lower officials who served in the provinces rather than the capital were distinguished by their polished speech, their cultural sophistication, and their urban manners as well as their political authority. Proud of their learning, they were the bearers, and often the makers, of Chinese culture. “Officials are the leaders of the populace,” stated an imperial edict of 144 B.C.E., “and it is right and proper that the carriages they ride in and the robes that they wear should correspond to the degrees of their dignity.”²

The Landlord Class

Most officials came from wealthy families, and in China wealth meant land. When the Qin dynasty unified China by 210 B.C.E., most land was held by small-scale peasant farmers. But by the first century B.C.E., the pressures of population growth, taxation, and indebtedness had generated a class of large landowners as impoverished peasants found it necessary to sell their lands to more prosperous neighbors. This accumulation of land in large estates was a persistent theme in Chinese history, and one that was persistently, though not very successfully, opposed by state authorities. Landlords of large estates often were able to avoid paying taxes, thus decreasing state revenues and increasing the tax burden for the remaining peasants. In some cases, they could also mount their own military forces that might challenge the authority of the emperor.

One of the most dramatic state efforts to counteract the growing power of large landowners is associated with Wang Mang, a high court official of the Han dynasty who usurped the emperor's throne in 8 C.E. and immediately launched a series of startling reforms. A firm believer in Confucian good government, Wang Mang saw his reforms as re-creating a golden age of long ago in which small-scale peasant farmers represented the backbone of Chinese society. Accordingly, he ordered the great private estates to be nationalized and divided up among the landless. Government loans to peasant families, limits on the amount of land a family might own, and an end to private slavery were all part of his reform program, but these measures proved impossible to enforce. Opposition from wealthy landowners, nomadic invasions, poor harvests, floods, and famines led to the collapse of Wang Mang's reforms and his assassination in 23 C.E.

Large landowning families, therefore, remained a central feature of Chinese society, although the fate of individual families rose and fell as the wheel of fortune raised them to great prominence or plunged them into poverty and disgrace. As a class, they benefited both from the wealth that their estates generated and from the power and prestige that accompanied their education and their membership in the official elite. The term “scholar-gentry” reflected their twin sources of privilege. With homes in both urban and rural areas, members of the scholar-gentry class lived luxuriously. Multistoried houses, the finest of silk clothing, gleaming carriages, private orchestras, high-stakes gambling—all of this was part of the life of China's scholar-gentry class.

Peasants

Throughout the history of China's civilization, the vast majority of its population has been peasants, living in small households representing two or three generations. Some owned enough land to support their families and perhaps even sell something on the local market. Many others could barely survive. Nature, the state, and landlords combined to make the life of most peasants extremely vulnerable. Famines, floods, droughts, hail, and pests could wreak havoc without warning. State authorities

■ Change

What class conflicts disrupted Chinese society?

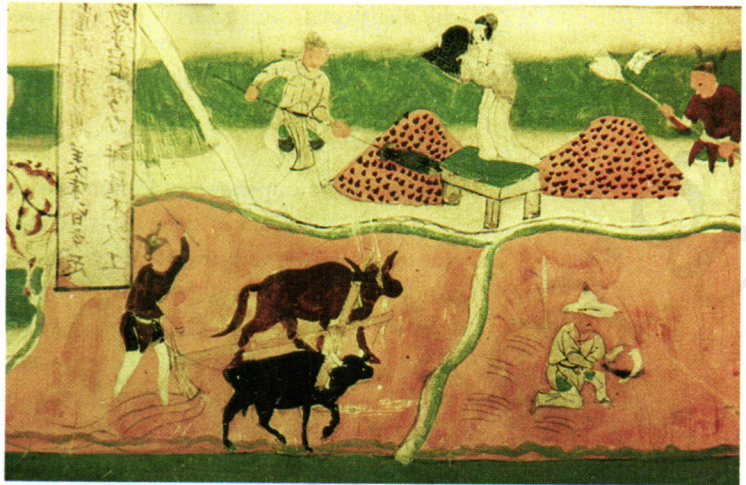
required the payment of taxes, demanded about a month's labor every year on various public projects, and conscripted young men for two years of military service. During the Han dynasty, growing numbers of impoverished and desperate peasants had to sell out to large landlords and work as tenants or sharecroppers on their estates, where rents could run as high as one-half to two-thirds of the crop. Other peasants fled, taking to a life of begging or joining a gang of bandits in a remote area.

An eighth-century C.E. Chinese poem by Li Shen reflects poignantly on the enduring hardships of peasant life:

The cob of corn in springtime sown
In autumn yields a hundredfold.
No fields are seen that fallow lie:
And yet of hunger peasants die.

As at noontide they hoe their crops,
Sweat on the grain to earth down drops.
How many tears, how many a groan,
Each morsel on thy dish did mold!³

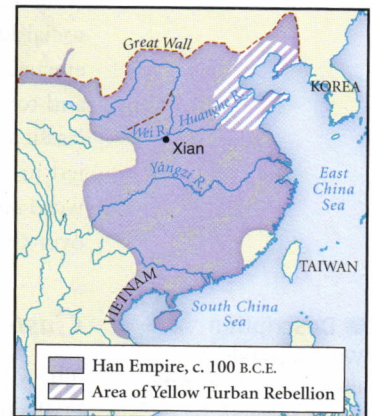
Such conditions provoked periodic peasant rebellions, which punctuated Chinese history over the past 2,000 years. Toward the end of the second century C.E., wandering bands of peasants began to join together as floods along the Yellow River and resulting epidemics compounded the misery of landlessness and poverty. What emerged was a massive peasant uprising known as the Yellow Turban Rebellion because of the yellow scarves the peasants wore around their heads. That movement, which swelled to about 360,000 armed followers by 184 C.E., found leaders, organization, and a unifying ideology in a popular form of Daoism. Featuring supernatural healings, collective trances, and public confessions of sin, the Yellow Turban movement looked forward to the “Great Peace”—a golden age of complete equality, social harmony, and common ownership of property. Although the rebellion was suppressed by the military forces of the Han dynasty, the Yellow Turban and other peasant upheavals devastated the economy, weakened the state, and contributed to the overthrow of the dynasty a few decades later. Repeatedly in Chinese history, such peasant movements, often expressed in religious terms, registered



Chinese Peasants

For many centuries, the normal activities of Chinese peasant farmers included plowing, planting, and threshing grain, as shown in this painting from China's Song dynasty (960–1279 C.E.). (*Farmers at Work*, Northern Song Dynasty, 960–1279 [wall painting]/Mogao Caves, Dunhuang/The Bridgeman Art Library)

Yellow Turban Rebellion



the sharp class antagonisms of Chinese society and led to the collapse of more than one ruling dynasty.

Merchants

Peasants were oppressed in China and certainly exploited, but they were also honored and celebrated in the official ideology of the state. In the eyes of the scholar-gentry, peasants were the solid productive backbone of the country, and their hard work and endurance in the face of difficulties were worthy of praise. Merchants, however, did not enjoy such a favorable reputation in the eyes of China's cultural elite. They were widely viewed as unproductive, making a shameful profit from selling the work of others. Stereotyped as greedy, luxury-loving, and materialistic, merchants stood in contrast to the alleged frugality, altruism, and cultured tastes of the scholar-gentry. They were also seen as a social threat, as their ill-gained wealth impoverished others, deprived the state of needed revenues, and fostered resentments.

Such views lay behind periodic efforts by state authorities to rein in merchant activity and to keep them under control. Early in the Han dynasty, merchants were forbidden to wear silk clothing, ride horses, or carry arms. Nor were they permitted to sit for civil service examinations or hold public office. State monopolies on profitable industries such as salt, iron, and alcohol served to limit merchant opportunities. Later dynasties sometimes forced merchants to loan large sums of money to the state. Despite this active discrimination, merchants frequently became quite wealthy. Some tried to achieve a more respectable elite status by purchasing landed estates or educating their sons for the civil service examinations. Many had backdoor relationships with state officials and landlords who found them useful and were not averse to profiting from business connections with merchants, despite their unsavory reputation.

Class and Caste in India

India's social organization shared certain broad features with that of China. In both civilizations, birth determined social status for most people; little social mobility was available for the vast majority; sharp distinctions and great inequalities characterized social life; and religious or cultural traditions defined these inequalities as natural, eternal, and ordained by the gods. Despite these similarities, the organization, flavor, and texture of ancient Indian society were distinctive compared to almost all other classical civilizations. These unique aspects of Indian society have long been embodied in what we now call the caste system, a term that comes from the Portuguese word *casta*, which means "race" or "purity of blood." That social organization emerged over thousands of years and in some respects has endured into modern times.

■ Description

What set of ideas underlies India's caste-based society?

Caste as Varna

The origins of the caste system are at best hazy. An earlier theory—that caste evolved from a racially defined encounter between light-skinned Aryan invaders

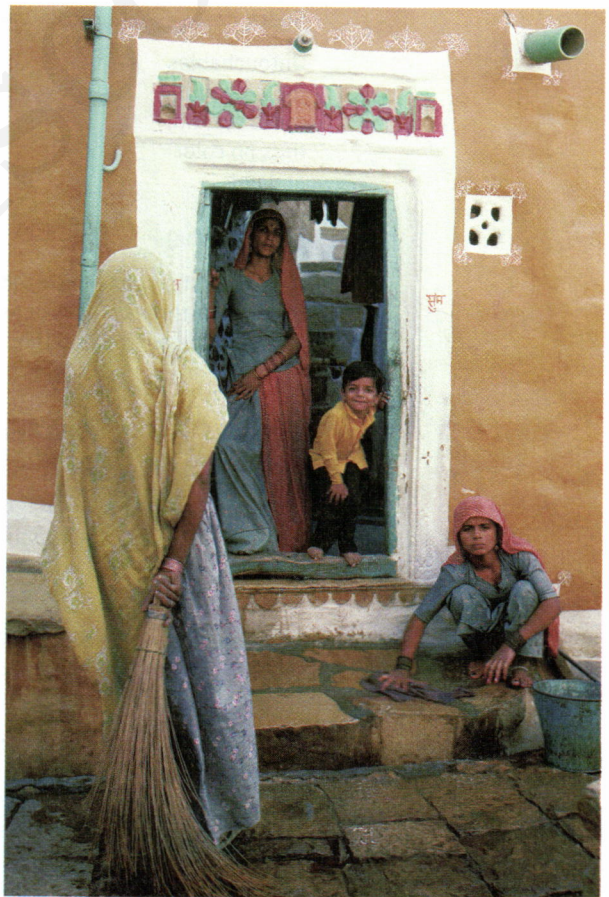
and the darker-hued native peoples—has been challenged in recent years, but no clear alternative has emerged. Perhaps the best we can say at this point is that the distinctive social system of classical India grew out of the interaction of many culturally different peoples on the South Asian peninsula together with the development of economic and social differences among these peoples as the inequalities of “civilization” spread in the Ganges River valley and beyond. Notions of race, however, seem less central to the growth of the caste system than those of economic specialization and of culture.

By the beginning of the classical era, around 500 B.C.E., the idea that society was forever divided into four ranked classes known as *varna* was deeply embedded in Indian thinking. Everyone was born into and remained within one of these classes for life. At the top of this hierarchical system were the Brahmins, priests whose rituals and sacrifices alone could ensure the proper functioning of the world. They were followed by the Kshatriya class, warriors and rulers charged with protecting and governing society. Next was the Vaisya class, originally commoners who cultivated the land. These three classes came to be regarded as pure Aryans and were called the “twice-born,” for they experienced not only a physical birth but also formal initiation into their respective varnas and status as people of Aryan descent. Far below these twice-born in the hierarchy of varna groups were the Sudras, native peoples incorporated into the margins of Aryan society in very subordinate positions. Regarded as servants of their social betters, they were not allowed to hear or repeat the Vedas or to take part in Aryan rituals. So little were they valued that a Brahmin who killed a Sudra was penalized as if he had killed a cat or a dog.

According to varna theory, these four classes were formed from the body of the god Purusha and were therefore eternal and changeless. Although these divisions are widely recognized in India even today, historians have noted considerable social flux in ancient Indian history. Members of the Brahmin and Kshatriya groups, for example, were frequently in conflict over which ranked highest in the varna hierarchy, and only slowly did the Brahmins emerge clearly in the top position. Both of them, although theoretically purely Aryan, absorbed various tribal peoples as classical Indian civilization expanded. Tribal medicine men or sorcerers found a place as Brahmins, while warrior groups entered the Kshatriya varna. The Vaisya varna, originally defined as cultivators, evolved into a business class with a prominent place for

India's Untouchables

Although the Indian constitution of 1950 legally abolished “untouchability,” active discrimination persists against this lowest group in the caste hierarchy, now known as Dalits, or the oppressed. Sweeping is just one of many Dalit occupations; here several sweepers perform their tasks in front of an upper-caste home. (Lindsay Hebbard/Corbis)



merchants, while the Sudra varna became the domain of peasant farmers. Finally a whole new category, ranking lower even than the Sudras, emerged in the so-called untouchables, people who did the work considered most unclean and polluting, such as cremating corpses, dealing with the skins of dead animals, and serving as executioners.

Snapshot Social Life and Duty in Classical India

Much personal behavior in classical India, at least ideally, was regulated according to caste. Each caste was associated with a particular color, with a part of the body of the god Purusha, and with a set of duties.

Caste (Varna)	Color/Symbolism	Part of Purusha	Duties
Brahmin	white/spirituality	head	priests, teachers
Kshatriya	red/courage	shoulders	warriors, rulers
Vaisya	yellow/wealth	thighs	farmers, merchants, artisans
Sudra	black/ignorance	feet	labor
Untouchables (outside of the varna system; thus no color and not associated with Purusha)	—	—	polluted labor

Beyond caste, behavior was ideally defined in terms of four stages of life, at least for the first three varna groups. Each new stage was marked by a *samskara*, a ritual initiating the person into this new phase of life.

Stage of Life	Duties
Student	Boys live with a teacher (guru); learn Sanskrit, rituals, Vedas; practice obedience, respect, celibacy, nonviolence.
Householder	Marriage and family; men practice caste-based career/occupation; women serve as wives and mothers, perform household rituals and sacrifices, actively support children and elders.
Retirement	Both husband and wife withdraw to the forests following birth of grandchildren; diminished household duties; greater focus on spiritual practice; sex permitted once a month.
Wandering ascetic	Only for men (women return to household); total rejection of ordinary existence; life as wandering hermit without shelter or possessions; caste becomes irrelevant; focus on achieving <i>moksha</i> and avoiding future rebirth.

Caste as Jati

As the varna system took shape in India, another set of social distinctions also arose, deriving largely from specific occupations. In India as elsewhere, urban-based civilization gave rise to specialized occupations, many organized in guilds that regulated their own affairs in a particular region. Over time, these occupationally based groups, known as *jatis*, blended with the varna system to create classical India's unique caste-based society.

The many thousands of *jatis* became the primary cell of India's social life beyond the family or household, but each of them was associated with one of the great classes (*varnas*). Thus Brahmins were divided into many separate *jatis*, or sub-castes, as were each of the other *varnas* as well as the untouchables. In a particular region or village, each *jati* was ranked in a hierarchy known to all, from the highest of the Brahmins to the lowest of the untouchables. Marriage and eating together were permitted only within an individual's own *jati*. Each *jati* was associated with a particular set of duties, rules, and obligations, which defined its members' unique and separate place in the larger society. Brahmins, for example, were forbidden to eat meat, while Kshatriyas were permitted to do so. Upper-caste women, of course, covered their breasts, while some lower-caste women were forbidden to do so as a sign of their lower ranking. "It is better to do one's own duty badly than another's well"—this frequently quoted saying summed up the underlying idea of Indian society.⁴

With its many separate, distinct, and hierarchically ranked social groups, Indian society was quite different from that of China or the Greco-Roman world. It was also unique in the set of ideas that explained and justified that social system. Foremost among them was the notion of ritual purity and pollution applied to caste groups. Brahmins or other high-caste people who came in contact with members of lower castes, especially those who cleaned latrines, handled corpses, or butchered and skinned dead animals, were in great danger of being polluted, or made ritually unclean. Thus untouchables were forbidden to use the same wells or to enter the temples designated for higher-caste people. Sometimes they were required to wear a wooden clapper to warn others of their approach. A great body of Indian religious writing defined various forms of impurity and the ritual means of purification.

A further support for this idea of inherent inequality and permanent difference derived from emerging Hindu notions of *karma*, *dharma*, and rebirth. Being born into a particular caste was generally regarded as reflecting the good or bad deeds (*karma*) of a previous life. Thus an individual's own prior actions were responsible for his or her current status. Any hope for rebirth in a higher caste rested on the faithful and selfless performance of one's present caste duties (*dharma*) in this life. Doing so contributed to spiritual progress by subduing the relentless demands of the ego. Such teachings, like that of permanent impurity, provided powerful ideological support for the inequalities of Indian society. So too did the threat of social

■ Comparison

What is the difference between varna and jati as expressions of classical India's caste system?

ostracism, because each jati had the authority to expel members who violated its rules. No greater catastrophe could befall a person than this, for it meant the end of any recognized social life and the loss of all social support.

As caste restrictions tightened, it became increasingly difficult—virtually impossible—for individuals to raise their social status during their lifetimes, but another kind of upward mobility enabled entire jatis, over several generations, to raise their standing in the local hierarchy of caste groups. By acquiring land or wealth, by adopting the behaviors of higher-caste groups, by finding some previously overlooked “ancestor” of a higher caste, a particular jati might slowly be redefined in a higher category. Thus India’s caste system was in practice rather more fluid and changing than the theory of caste might suggest.

■ Comparison

How did India’s caste system differ from China’s class system?

India’s social system thus differed from that of China in several ways. It gave priority to religious status and ritual purity (the Brahmins), whereas China elevated political officials to the highest of elite positions. The caste system divided Indian society into vast numbers of distinct social groups; China had fewer, but broader, categories of society—scholar-gentry, landlords, peasants, merchants. Finally, India’s caste society defined these social groups far more rigidly and with even less opportunity for social mobility than in China.

The Functions of Caste

A caste-based social structure shaped India’s classical civilization in various ways. Because caste (jati) was a very local phenomenon, rooted in particular regions or villages, it focused the loyalties of most people on a quite restricted territory and weakened the appeal or authority of larger all-Indian states. This localization is one reason that India, unlike China, seldom experienced an empire that encompassed the entire subcontinent (see Chapter 4). Caste, together with the shared culture of Hinduism, provided a substitute for the state as an integrative mechanism for Indian civilization. It offered a distinct and socially recognized place for almost everyone. In looking after widows, orphans, and the destitute, jatis provided a modest measure of social security and support. Even the lowest-ranking jatis had the right to certain payments from the social superiors whom they served.

Furthermore, caste represented a means of accommodating the many migrating or invading peoples who entered the subcontinent. The cellular, or honeycomb, structure of caste society allowed various peoples, cultures, and traditions to find a place within a larger Indian civilization while retaining something of their unique identity. The process of assimilation was quite different in China, however; incorporation into Chinese civilization meant becoming Chinese ethnically, linguistically, and culturally. Finally, India’s caste system facilitated the exploitation of the poor by the wealthy and powerful. The multitude of separate groups into which it divided the impoverished and oppressed majority of the population made class consciousness and organized resistance across caste lines much more difficult to achieve.

Slavery in the Classical Era: The Case of the Roman Empire

Beyond the inequalities of class and caste lay those of slavery, a social institution with deep roots in human history. One scholar has suggested that the early domestication of animals provided the model for enslaving people.⁵ Certainly slave owners have everywhere compared their slaves to tamed animals. Aristotle, for example, observed that the ox is “the poor man’s slave.” War, patriarchy, and the notion of private property, all of which accompanied the First Civilizations, also contributed to the growth of slavery. Large-scale warfare generated numerous prisoners, and everywhere in the ancient world capture in war meant the possibility of enslavement. Early records suggest that women captives were the first slaves, usually raped and then enslaved as concubines, whereas male captives were killed. Patriarchal societies, in which men sharply controlled and perhaps even “owned” women, may have suggested the possibility of using other people, men as well as women, as slaves. The class inequalities of early civilizations, which were based on great differences in privately owned property, also made it possible to imagine people owning other people.

Slavery and Civilization

Whatever its precise origins, slavery generally meant ownership by a master, the possibility of being sold, working without pay, and the status of an “outsider” at the bottom of the social hierarchy. For most, it was a kind of “social death,”⁶ for slaves usually lacked any rights or independent personal identity recognized by the larger society. By the time Hammurabi’s law code casually referred to Mesopotamian slavery (around 1750 B.C.E.), it was already a long-established tradition in the region and in all of the First Civilizations. Likewise, virtually all subsequent civilizations—in the Americas, Africa, and Eurasia—practiced some form of slavery.

Slave systems throughout history have varied considerably. In some times and places, such as classical Greece and Rome, a fair number of slaves might be emancipated in their own lifetimes, through the generosity or religious convictions of their owners, or to avoid caring for them in old age, or by allowing slaves to purchase their freedom with their own funds. In some societies, the children of slaves inherited the status of their parents, while in others, such as the Aztec Empire, they were considered free people. Slaves likewise varied considerably in the labor they were required to do, with some working for the state in high positions, others performing domestic duties in their owner’s household, and still others toiling in fields or mines in large work gangs.

The classical civilizations of Eurasia differed considerably in the prominence and extent of slavery in their societies. In China, it was a minor element, amounting to perhaps 1 percent of the population. Convicted criminals and their families, confiscated by the government and sometimes sold to wealthy private individuals, were

■ Comparison

How did the inequalities of slavery differ from those of caste?

among the earliest slaves in Han dynasty China. In desperate circumstances, impoverished or indebted peasants might sell their children into slavery. In southern China, teenage boys of poor families could be purchased by the wealthy, for whom they served as status symbols. Chinese slavery, however, was never very widespread and did not become a major source of labor for agriculture or manufacturing.

In India as well, people could fall into slavery as criminals, debtors, or prisoners of war and served their masters largely in domestic settings, but religious writings and secular law offered, at least in theory, some protection for slaves. Owners were required to provide adequately for their slaves and were forbidden to abandon them in old age. According to one ancient text, “a man may go short himself or stint his

Snapshot **Comparing Greco-Roman and American Slavery**

	Greco-Roman Slavery (500 B.C.E.–500 C.E.)	Slavery in the Americas (1500–1888)
Source of slaves	Majority were prisoners from Roman wars of conquest; victims of pirate kidnapping; obtained through networks of long-distance trade; result of natural reproduction; abandoned children	Derived almost entirely from transatlantic slave trade; many were prisoners of African wars, debtors, or criminals in African societies
Race	Not a major factor	Came to be associated with Africa and “blackness”
Manumission (granting legal freedom to slaves)	Quite common; freed slaves received citizenship in Roman Empire but not in Greece	Much less common, especially in North America; freed slaves were long feared and discriminated against in North America, but less so in Latin America
Roles/Work	No distinction between slave and wage labor; slaves worked at wide variety of jobs, from poets, physicians, scholars, and teachers to field hands and mine laborers	Majority worked as agricultural laborers on plantations producing for export; few held elite occupations
Fate of slavery	Gradual transformation from slavery to serfdom as Roman Empire collapsed; no abolitionist movements; Christianity provided general support for slavery, though some encouragement for manumission	Ended in nineteenth century as a result of slave rebellions, industrialization, and abolitionist movements, some based in Christian teaching; replaced by sharecropping or indentured labor

wife and children, but never his slave who does his dirty work for him.”⁷ Slaves in India could inherit and own property and earn money in their spare time. A master who raped a slave woman was required to set her free and pay compensation. The law encouraged owners to free their slaves and allowed slaves to buy their freedom. All of this suggests that Indian slavery was more restrained than that of other ancient civilizations. Nor did Indian civilization depend economically on slavery, for most work was performed by lower-caste, though free, people.

The Making of a Slave Society: The Case of Rome

In sharp contrast to other classical civilizations, slavery played an immense role in the Mediterranean, or Western, world. Although slavery was practiced in Chinese, Indian, and Persian civilizations, the Greco-Roman world can be described as a slave society. By a conservative estimate, classical Athens alone was home to perhaps 60,000 slaves, or about one-third of the total population. In Athens, ironically, the growth of democracy and status as a free person were defined and accompanied by the simultaneous growth of slavery on a mass scale. The greatest of the Greek philosophers, Aristotle, developed the notion that some people were “slaves by nature” and should be enslaved for their own good and for that of the larger society.

“The ancient Greek attitude toward slavery was simple,” writes one modern scholar. “It was a terrible thing to become a slave, but a good thing to own a slave.”⁸ Even poor households usually had at least one or two female slaves, providing domestic work and sexual services for their owners. Although substantial numbers of Greek slaves were granted freedom by their owners, they usually did not become citizens or gain political rights. Nor could they own land or marry citizens, and particularly in Athens they had to pay a special tax. Their status remained “halfway between slavery and freedom.”⁹

Practiced on an even larger scale, slavery was a defining element of Roman society. By the time of Christ, the Italian heartland of the Roman Empire had some 2 to 3 million slaves, representing 33 to 40 percent of the population.¹⁰ Not until the modern slave societies of the Caribbean, Brazil, and the southern United States was slavery practiced again on such an enormous scale. Wealthy Romans could own many hundreds or even thousands of slaves. One woman in the fifth century C.E. freed 8,000 slaves when she withdrew into a life of Christian monastic practice.

■ Comparison

How did Greco-Roman slavery differ from that of other classical civilizations?

Roman Slavery

This Roman mosaic from the third century C.E. shows the slave Myro serving a drink to his master, Fructus. (Bardo Museum Tunis/Gianni Dagli Orti/The Art Archive)



Even people of modest means frequently owned two or three slaves. In doing so, they confirmed their own position as free people, demonstrated their social status, and expressed their ability to exercise power. Slaves and former slaves also might be slave owners. One freedman during the reign of Augustus owned 4,116 slaves at the time of his death. (For the role of slaves in Roman Pompeii, see Visual Sources: Pompeii as a Window on the Roman World, pp. 272–79.)

The vast majority of Roman slaves had been prisoners captured in the many wars that accompanied the creation of the empire. In 146 B.C.E., following the destruction of the North African city of Carthage, some 55,000 people were enslaved en masse. From all over the Mediterranean basin, such people were funneled into the major slave-owning regions of Italy and Sicily. Pirates also furnished slaves, kidnapping tens of thousands of people and selling them to Roman slave traders on the island of Delos. Roman merchants purchased still other slaves through networks of long-distance commerce extending to the Black Sea, the East African coast, and northwestern Europe. The supply of slaves also occurred through natural reproduction, as the children of slave mothers were regarded as slaves themselves. Such “home-born” slaves had a certain prestige and were thought to be less troublesome than those who had known freedom earlier in their lives. Finally, abandoned or exposed children could legally become the slave of anyone who rescued them.

Unlike New World slavery of later times, Roman slavery was not identified with a particular racial or ethnic group. Egyptians, Syrians, Jews, Greeks, Gauls, North Africans, and many other people found themselves alike enslaved. From within the empire and its adjacent regions, an enormous diversity of people were bought and sold at Roman slave markets.

Like slave owners everywhere, Romans regarded their slaves as “barbarians”—lazy, unreliable, immoral, prone to thieving—and came to think of certain peoples, such as Asiatic Greeks, Syrians, and Jews, as slaves by nature. Nor was there any serious criticism of slavery in principle, although on occasion owners were urged to treat their slaves in a more benevolent way. Even the triumph of Christianity within the Roman Empire did little to undermine slavery, for Christian teaching held that slaves should be “submissive to [their] masters with all fear, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the harsh.”¹¹ In fact, Saint Paul used the metaphor of slavery to describe the relationship of believers to God, styling them as “slaves of Christ,” while Saint Augustine (354–430 C.E.) described slavery as God’s punishment for sin. Thus slavery was deeply embedded in the religious thinking and social outlook of elite Romans.

Similarly, slavery was entrenched throughout the Roman economy. No occupation was off-limits to slaves except military service, and no distinction existed between jobs for slaves and those for free people. Frequently they labored side by side. In rural areas, slaves provided much of the labor force on the huge estates, or *latifundia*, which produced grain, olive oil, and wine, mostly for export, much like the later plantations in the Americas. There they often worked chained together. In the cities, slaves worked in their owners’ households, but also as skilled artisans, teachers, doctors, business agents, entertainers, and actors. In the empire’s many

mines and quarries, slaves and criminals labored under brutal conditions. Slaves in the service of the emperor provided manpower for the state bureaucracy, maintained temples and shrines, and kept Rome's water supply system functioning. Trained in special schools, they also served as gladiators in the violent spectacles of Roman public life. Thus slaves were represented among the highest and most prestigious occupations and in the lowest and most degraded.

Slave owners in the Roman Empire were supposed to provide the necessities of life to their slaves. When this occurred, slaves may have had a more secure life than was available to impoverished free people, who had to fend for themselves, but the price of this security was absolute subjection to the will of the master. Beatings, sexual abuse, and sale to another owner were constant possibilities. Lacking all rights in the law, slaves could not legally marry, although many contracted unofficial unions. Slaves often accumulated money or possessions, but such property legally belonged to their masters and could be seized at any time. If a slave murdered his master, Roman law demanded the lives of all of the victim's slaves. When one Roman official was killed by a slave in 61 C.E., every one of his 400 slaves was condemned to death. For an individual slave, the quality of life depended almost entirely on the character of the master. Brutal owners made it a living hell. Benevolent owners made life tolerable and might even grant favored slaves their freedom or permit them to buy that freedom. As in Greece, manumission of slaves was a widespread practice, and in the Roman Empire, unlike Greece, freedom was accompanied by citizenship.

Resistance and Rebellion

Roman slaves, like their counterparts in other societies, responded to enslavement in many ways. Most, no doubt, did what they had to simply to survive, but there are recorded cases of Roman prisoners of war who chose to commit mass suicide rather than face the horrors of slavery. Others, once enslaved, resorted to the “weapons of the weak”—small-scale theft, sabotage, pretending illness, working poorly, and placing curses on their masters. Fleeing to the anonymous crowds of the city or to remote rural areas prompted owners to post notices in public places, asking for information about their runaways. Catching runaway slaves became an organized private business. Occasional murders of slave owners made masters conscious of the dangers they faced. “Every slave we own is an enemy we harbor” ran one Roman saying.¹²

On several notable occasions, the slaves themselves rose in rebellion. The most famous uprising occurred in 73 B.C.E. when a slave gladiator named Spartacus led seventy other slaves from a school for gladiators in a desperate bid for freedom. The surprising initial success of their revolt attracted a growing following of rebellious slaves, numbering perhaps 120,000 at the height of the uprising. For two years, they set Italy ablaze. In a dramatic reversal of roles, they crucified some captured slave owners and set others to fighting one another in the style of gladiators. Following a series of remarkable military victories, the movement split and eventually succumbed

The Rebellion of Spartacus



to the vastly superior numbers of the Roman legions. A terrible vengeance followed as some 6,000 rebel slaves were nailed to crosses along the Appian Way from Rome to Capua, where the revolt had begun.

Nothing on the scale of the Spartacus rebellion occurred again in the Western world of slavery until the Haitian Revolution of the 1790s. But Haitian rebels sought the creation of a new society free of slavery altogether. None of the Roman slave rebellions, including that of Spartacus, had any such overall plan or goal. They simply wanted to escape Roman slavery themselves. Although rebellions created a perpetual fear in the minds of slave owners, the slave system itself was hardly affected.

Comparing Patriarchies of the Classical Era

No division of human society has held greater significance for the lives of individuals than that between male and female. Every human community has elaborated that basic biological difference into a gender system that sought to define masculinity and femininity and to determine the appropriate roles and positions of men and women in the larger society. At least since the emergence of the First Civilizations, those gender systems have been everywhere patriarchal, featuring the dominance of men over women in the family and in society generally. More widespread than slavery, these inequalities of gender, like those of class or caste, shaped the character of the classical civilizations.

In all of them, men were regarded as superior to women, and sons were generally preferred over daughters. Men had legal and property rights unknown to most women. Public life in general was a male domain, while women's roles—both productive and reproductive—took place mostly in domestic settings. Frequently men could marry more than one woman and claimed the right to regulate the social and sexual lives of the wives, daughters, and sisters in their families. Widely seen as weak and feared as potentially disruptive, women required the protection and control of men.

These common elements of patriarchy have been so widespread and pervasive that historians have been slow to recognize that gender systems evolved, changing over time. New agricultural technologies, the rise or decline of powerful states, the incorporation of world religions, interaction with culturally different peoples—all of these developments and more generated significant change in gender systems. Nor has patriarchy been everywhere the same. Restrictions on women were far sharper in classical civilizations than in those pastoral or agricultural societies that lay beyond the reach of urban centers and powerful empires. The degree and expression of patriarchy also varied from one civilization to another, as the discussion of Mesopotamia and Egypt in Chapter 3 illustrated. (See the Documents: Patriarchy and Women's Voices in the Classical Era, pp. 262–71, for various expressions of and reactions to patriarchy across classical Eurasia.)

Within particular civilizations, gender interacted with class to generate usually a more restricted life for upper-class women, who were largely limited to the home and the management of servants. In contrast, lower-class women often had a some-

what freer but more burdensome life, for economic necessity required them to work in the fields, to shop in the streets, or to serve in the homes of their social superiors. China provides a fascinating example of how patriarchy changed over time, while the contrasting patriarchies of Athens and Sparta illustrate clear variations even within the limited world of Greek civilization.

A Changing Patriarchy: The Case of China

As Chinese civilization took shape during the Han dynasty, elite thinking about gender issues became more explicitly patriarchal, more clearly defined, and linked to an emerging Confucian ideology (see Document 6.1, pp. 262–63, and Document 6.2, pp. 263–66). Long-established patterns of thinking in terms of pairs of opposites were now described in gendered and unequal terms. The superior principle of *yang* was viewed as masculine and related to heaven, rulers, strength, rationality, and light, whereas *yin*, the lower feminine principle, was associated with the earth, subjects, weakness, emotion, and darkness. Thus female inferiority was permanent and embedded in the workings of the universe.

What this meant more practically was spelled out repeatedly over the centuries in various Confucian texts. Two notions in particular summarized the ideal position of women, at least in the eyes of elite male writers. The adage “Men go out, women stay in” emphasized the public and political roles of men in contrast to the domestic and private domain of women. A second idea, known as the “three obediences,” emphasized a woman’s subordination first to her father, then to her husband, and finally to her son. “Why is it,” asked one text, “that according to the rites the man takes his wife, whereas the woman leaves her house [to join her husband’s family]? It is because the *yin* is lowly, and should not have the initiative; it proceeds to the *yang* in order to be completed.”¹³

The Chinese woman writer and court official Ban Zhao (45–116 C.E.), whose *Lessons for Women* is excerpted in Document 6.2, pages 263–66, observed that the ancients had practiced three customs when a baby girl was born. She was placed below the bed to show that she was “lowly and weak,” required always to “humble herself before others.” Then she was given a piece of broken pottery to play with, signifying that “her primary duty [was] to be industrious.” Finally, her birth was announced to the ancestors with an offering to indicate that she was responsible for “the continuation of [ancestor] worship in the home.”¹⁴



Chinese Women Musicians

This tenth-century rendering by the painter Gu Hongzhong shows these upper-class women serving as musicians for a high official of a Tang dynasty emperor. It was titled *The Night Revels of Han Xizai*. The painter was apparently sent by the emperor to spy on the suspicious behavior of the minister, who in various tellings was suspected of either rebellion or undignified activity. (Werner Forman/Art Resource, NY)

■ Change

In what ways did the expression of Chinese patriarchy change over time, and why did it change?



Chinese Women at Work

For a long time, the spinning and weaving of cloth were part of women's domestic work in China. So too was fishing, as illustrated by the woman at the bottom right of this Chinese painting.

(Palace Museum, Beijing)

wise counselors to their fathers, husbands, and rulers and depicted them positively as active agents.¹⁵

Within her husband's family, a young woman was clearly subordinate as a wife and daughter-in-law, but as a mother of sons, she was accorded considerable honor for her role in producing the next generation of male heirs to carry on her husband's lineage. When her sons married, she was able to exercise the significant authority of a mother-in-law. Furthermore, a woman, at least in the upper classes, often brought with her a considerable dowry, which was regarded as her own property and gave her some leverage within her marriage. Women's roles in the production of textiles, often used to pay taxes or to sell commercially, made her labor quite valuable to the family economy. And a man's wife was sharply distinguished from his concubines, for the wife alone produced the legitimate heirs who could carry on the family tradition. Thus women's lives were more complex and varied than the prescriptions of Confucian orthodoxy might suggest.

Much changed in China following the collapse of the Han dynasty in the third century C.E. Centralized government vanished amid much political fragmentation and conflict. Confucianism, the main ideology of Han China, was discredited, while Daoism and Buddhism attracted a growing following. Pastoral and nomadic people invaded northern China and ruled a number of the small states that had replaced the Han government. These new conditions resulted in some loosening of the strict patriarchy of classical China over the next five or six centuries.

The cultural influence of nomadic peoples, whose women were far less restricted than those of China, was noticed, and criticized, by more Confucian-minded male observers. One of them lamented the sad deterioration of gender roles under the influence of nomadic peoples:

In the north of the Yellow river it is usually the wife who runs the household. She will not dispense with good clothing or expensive jewelry. The husband has to settle for old horses and sickly servants. The traditional niceties between hus-

Yet such notions of passivity, inferiority, and subordination were not the whole story of women's lives in classical China. A few women, particularly the wives, concubines, or widows of emperors, were able on occasion to exercise considerable political authority. In doing so, they provoked much antifemale hostility on the part of male officials, who often blamed the collapse of a dynasty or natural disasters on the "unnatural" and "disruptive" influence of women in political affairs. A number of writers, however, praised women of virtue as

band and wife are seldom observed, and from time to time he even has to put up with her insults.¹⁶

Others criticized the adoption of nomadic styles of dress, makeup, and music. By the time of the Tang dynasty (618–907), writers and artists depicted elite women as capable of handling legal and business affairs on their own and on occasion riding horses and playing polo, bareheaded and wearing men's clothing. Tang legal codes even recognized a married daughter's right to inherit property from her family of birth. Such images of women were quite different from those of Han dynasty China.

A further sign of a weakening patriarchy and the cause of great distress to advocates of Confucian orthodoxy lay in the unusual reign of Empress Wu (reigned 690–705 C.E.), a former high-ranking concubine in the imperial court, who came to power amid much palace intrigue and was the only woman ever to rule China with the title of emperor. With the support of China's growing Buddhist establishment, Empress Wu governed despotically, but she also consolidated China's civil service examination system for the selection of public officials and actively patronized scholarship and the arts. Some of her actions seem deliberately designed to elevate the position of women. She commissioned the biographies of famous women, decreed that the mourning period for mothers be made equal to that for fathers, and ordered the creation of a Chinese character for “human being” that suggested the process of birth flowing from one woman without a prominent male role. Her reign was brief and unrepeatable.

The growing popularity of Daoism provided new images of the feminine and new roles for women. Daoist texts referred to the *dao* as “mother” and urged the traditionally feminine virtues of yielding and passive acceptance rather than the male-oriented striving of Confucianism. Daoist sects often featured women as priests, nuns, or reclusive meditators, able to receive cosmic truth and to use it for the benefit of others. A variety of female deities from Daoist or Buddhist traditions found a place in Chinese village religion,¹⁷ while growing numbers of women found an alternative to family life in Buddhist monasteries. None of this meant an end to patriarchy, but it does suggest some change in the tone and expression of that patriarchy.

Contrasting Patriarchies in Athens and Sparta

The patriarchies of the classical era not only fluctuated over time but also varied considerably from place to place. Nowhere is this variation more apparent than in the contrasting cases of Athens and Sparta, two of the leading city-states of classical Greek civilization (see Map 4.2, p. 148). Even within the small area of classical Greece, the opportunities available to women and the restrictions imposed on them differed substantially. Although Athens has been celebrated as a major source of Western democracy and rationalism, its posture toward women was far more negative and restrictive

■ Comparison

How did the patriarchies of Athens and Sparta differ from each other?



Women of Athens

This painting on a seventh-century B.C.E. ceramic vase shows Athenian women gathering water at a fountain. (Museo di Villa Giulia Rome/Gianni Dagli Orti/The Art Archive)

women's exclusion from public life and their general subordination to men. According to Aristotle, "a woman is, as it were, an infertile male. She is female in fact on account of a kind of inadequacy." That inadequacy lay in her inability to generate sperm, which contained the "form" or the "soul" of a new human being. Her role in the reproductive process was passive, providing a receptacle for the vital male contribution. Compared often to children or domesticated animals, women were associated with instinct and passion and lacked the rationality to take part in public life. "It is the best for all tame animals to be ruled by human beings," wrote Aristotle. "For this is how they are kept alive. In the same way, the relationship between the male and the female is by nature such that the male is higher, the female lower, that the male rules and the female is ruled."¹⁸

As in China, proper Greek women were expected to remain inside the home, except perhaps for religious festivals or funerals. Even within the home, women's space was quite separate from that of men. Although poorer women, courtesans, and prostitutes had to leave their homes to earn money, collect water, or shop, ideal behavior for upper-class women assigned these tasks to slaves or to men and involved a radical segregation of male and female space. "What causes women a bad reputation," wrote the Greek playwright Euripides in *The Trojan Women*, "is not remaining inside."

Within the domestic realm, Athenian women were generally married in their mid-teens to men ten to fifteen years older than themselves. Their main function was the management of domestic affairs and the production of sons who would become citizens. These sons were expected to become literate, while their sisters were normally limited to learning spinning, weaving, and other household tasks. The Greek writer Menander exclaimed: "Teaching a woman to read and write? What a terrible thing to do! Like feeding a vile snake on more poison." Nor did women have much economic power. Although they could own personal property

than that of the highly militaristic and much less democratic Sparta.

In the several centuries between about 700 and 400 B.C.E., as the men of Athens moved toward unprecedented freedom and participation in political life, the city's women experienced growing limitations. They had no role whatsoever in the assembly, the councils, or the juries of Athens, which were increasingly the focus of life for free men. In legal matters, women had to be represented by a guardian, and court proceedings did not even refer to them by name, but only as someone's wife or mother.

Greek thinkers, especially Aristotle, provided a set of ideas that justified

obtained through dowry, gifts, or inheritance, land was passed through male heirs, with a few exceptions. By law, women were forbidden to buy or sell land and could negotiate contracts only if the sum involved was valued at less than a bushel of barley.

There were exceptions, although rare, to the restricted lives of Athenian women, the most notable of which was Aspasia (ca. 470–400 B.C.E.). She was born in the Greek city of Miletus, on the western coast of Anatolia, to a wealthy family that believed in educating its daughters. As a young woman, Aspasia found her way to Athens, where her foreign birth gave her somewhat more freedom than was normally available to the women of that city. She soon attracted the attention of Pericles, Athens's leading political figure. The two lived together as husband and wife until Pericles' death in 429 B.C.E., although they were not officially married. Treated as an equal partner by Pericles, Aspasia proved to be a learned and witty conversationalist who moved freely in the cultured circles of Athens. Her foreign birth and her apparent influence on Pericles provoked critics to suggest that she was a *hetaera*, a professional, educated, high-class entertainer and sexual companion, similar to a Japanese geisha. Although little is known about her, a number of major Athenian writers commented about her, both positively and negatively. She was, by all accounts, a rare and remarkable woman in a city that offered little opportunity for individuality or achievement to its female population.

The evolution of Sparta differed in many ways from that of Athens. Early on, Sparta solved the problem of feeding a growing population, not by creating overseas colonies as did many Greek city-states, but by conquering their immediate neighbors and reducing them to a status of permanent servitude, not far removed from slavery. Called *helots*, these dependents far outnumbered the free citizens of Sparta and represented a permanent threat of rebellion. Solving this problem shaped Spartan society decisively. Sparta's answer was a militaristic regime, constantly ready for war to keep the helots in their place. To maintain such a system, all boys were removed from their families at the age of seven to be trained by the state in military camps, where they learned the ways of war. There they remained until the age of thirty. The ideal Spartan male was a warrior, skilled in battle, able to endure hardship, and willing to die for his city. Mothers are said to have told their sons departing for battle to "come back with your shield . . . or on it." Although economic equality for men was the ideal, it was never completely realized in practice. And unlike Athens, political power was exercised primarily by a small group of wealthy men.

This militaristic and far-from-democratic system had implications for women that, strangely enough, offered them greater freedoms and fewer restrictions. Their central task was reproduction—bearing warrior sons for Sparta. To strengthen their bodies for childbearing, girls were encouraged to take part in sporting events—running, wrestling, throwing the discus and javelin, even driving chariots. At times, they competed in the nude before mixed audiences. Their education, like that of boys, was prescribed by the state, which also insisted that newly married women cut their hair short, unlike adult Greek women elsewhere. Thus Spartan women were not secluded or segregated, as were their Athenian counterparts. Furthermore,



A Girl of Sparta

This figurine portrays a young female Spartan athlete or runner. Compare her clothing with that worn by the Athenian women depicted on the vase (shown on page 256. (British Museum, London/The Bridgeman Art Library)

Spartan young women, unlike those of Athens, usually married men of their own age, about eighteen years old, thus putting the new couple on a more equal basis. Marriage often began with a trial period to make sure the new couple could produce children, with divorce and remarriage readily available if they could not. Because men were so often away at war or preparing for it, women exercised much more authority in the household than was the case in Athens.

It is little wonder that the freedom of Spartan women appalled other Greeks, who believed that it undermined good order and state authority. Aristotle complained that the more egalitarian inheritance practices of Spartans led to their women controlling some 40 percent of landed estates. In Sparta, he declared, women “live in every sort of intemperance and luxury” and “the [male] rulers are ruled by women.” Plutarch, a Greek writer during the heyday of the Roman Empire, observed

critically that “the men of Sparta always obeyed their wives.” The clothing worn by Spartan women to give them greater freedom of movement seemed immodest to other Greeks.

Nonetheless, in another way, Sparta may have been more restrictive than Athens and other Greek city-states, particularly in its apparent prohibition of homosexuality. At least this was the assertion of the Athenian writer Xenophon (427–355 B.C.E.), who stated that Sparta’s legendary founder Lycurgus “caused lovers to abstain from sexual intercourse with boys.”¹⁹ Elsewhere, however, homoerotic relationships were culturally approved and fairly common for both men and women, although this did not prevent their participants from entering heterosexual marriages as well. The ideal homosexual relationship—between an older man and a young adolescent boy—was viewed as limited in time, for it was supposed to end when the boy’s beard began to grow. Unlike contemporary Western societies where sexuality is largely seen as an identity, the ancient Greeks viewed sexual choice more casually and as a matter of taste.

Sparta clearly was a patriarchy, with women serving as breeding machines for its military system and lacking any formal role in public life, but it was a lighter patriarchy than that of Athens. The joint efforts of men and women seemed necessary to maintain a huge class of helots in permanent subjugation. Death in childbirth was considered the equivalent of death in battle, for both contributed to the defense of Sparta, and both were honored alike. In Athens, on the other hand, growing

freedom and democracy were associated with the strengthening of the male-dominated, property-owning household, and within that household men, the cornerstone of Athenian society, were expected to exercise authority. Doing so required increasingly severe limitations and restrictions on the lives of women. Together, the cases of Athens and Sparta illustrate how the historical record appears different when viewed through the lens of gender. Athens, so celebrated for its democracy and philosophical rationalism, offered little to its women, whereas Sparta, often condemned for its militarism and virtual enslavement of the helots, provided a somewhat wider scope for the free women of the city.

Reflections: Arguing with Solomon and the Buddha

“What has been will be again; what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun.” Recorded in the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes and generally attributed to King Solomon, this was a despairing view about the essential changelessness and futility of human life. In contrast, central to Buddhist teachings has been the concept of “impermanence”—the notion that “everything changes; nothing remains without change.” These observations from classical-era thinkers were intended to point to other levels of reality that lay beyond the dreary constancy or the endless changeability of this world. For students of history, however, these comments from Solomon and the Buddha serve to focus attention on issues of change and continuity in the historical record of classical Eurasian civilizations. What is more impressive—the innovations and changes or the enduring patterns and lasting features of these civilizations?

Clearly there were some new things under the sun, even if they had roots in earlier times. The Greek conquest of the Persian Empire under the leadership of Alexander the Great was both novel and unexpected. The Roman Empire encompassed the entire Mediterranean basin in a single political system for the first time. Buddhism and Christianity emerged as new, distinct, and universal religious traditions, although both bore the marks of their origin in Hindu and Jewish religious thinking respectively. The collapse of dynasties, empires, and civilizations long thought to be solidly entrenched—the Chinese and Roman, for example—must surely have seemed to people of the time as something new under the sun. Historians therefore might take issue with Solomon’s dictum, should we seek to apply it to the history of the classical era.

Students of the past might also argue a little with the Buddha and his insistence on the “impermanence” of everything. Much that was created in the classical era—particularly its social and cultural patterns—has demonstrated an impressive continuity over many centuries, even if it also changed in particular ways over time. China’s scholar-gentry class retained its prominence throughout the ups and downs of changing dynasties and into the twentieth century. India’s caste-based social structure still endures as a way of thinking and behaving for hundreds of millions

of people on the South Asian peninsula. Although slavery gave way to serfdom in the post-Roman world, it was massively revived in Europe's American colonies after 1500 and remained an important and largely unquestioned feature of all civilizations until the nineteenth century. Patriarchy, with its assumptions of male superiority and dominance, has surely been the most fundamental, long-lasting, and taken-for-granted feature of all civilizations. Not until the twentieth century were those assumptions effectively challenged, but even then patriarchy has continued to shape the lives and the thinking of the vast majority of humankind. And many hundreds of millions of people in the twenty-first century still honor or practice religious and cultural traditions begun during the classical era.

Neither the insight of Solomon nor that of the Buddha, taken alone, offers an effective guide to the study of history, for continuity and change alike have long provided the inextricable warp and woof of historical analysis. Untangling their elusive relationship has figured prominently in the task of historians and has contributed much to the enduring fascination of historical study.

Second Thoughts

What's the Significance?

To assess your mastery of the material in this chapter, visit the **Student Center** at bedfordstmartins.com/strayer.

Wang Mang	"ritual purity" in Indian social practice	the "three obediences"
China's scholar-gentry class		Empress Wu
Yellow Turban Rebellion	Greek and Roman slavery	Aspasia and Pericles
caste as varna and jati	Spartacus	helots

Big Picture Questions

1. What is the difference between class and caste?
2. Why was slavery so much more prominent in Greco-Roman civilization than in India or China?
3. What philosophical, religious, or cultural ideas served to legitimate the class and gender inequalities of classical civilizations?
4. "Social inequality was both accepted and resisted in classical civilizations." What evidence might support this statement?
5. What changes in the patterns of social life of the classical era can you identify? What accounts for these changes?
6. "Cultural and social patterns of civilizations seem to endure longer than the political framework of states and empires." Based on Chapters 4, 5, and 6, would you agree with this statement?

Next Steps: For Further Study

For Web sites and additional documents related to this chapter, see **Make History** at bedfordstmartins.com/strayer.

- Jeannine Auboyer, *Daily Life in Ancient India* (2002). A social history of classical India, with a focus on caste, ritual, religion, and art.
- Sue Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece* (1999). A well-written academic study, with occasional humorous stories and anecdotes.
- Keith Bradley, *Slavery and Society at Rome* (1994). A scholarly but very readable account of slavery in the Roman Empire.

Michael Lowe, *Everyday Life in Early Imperial China* (1968). A vivid description of social life during the Han dynasty.

Bonnie Smith, ed., *Women's History in Global Perspective*, 3 volumes (2004). A collection of thoughtful essays by major scholars covering world history from ancient times to the twentieth century.

"Women in World History," <http://chnm.gmu.edu/wwh/index.html>. Documents, reviews, and lesson plans for learning and teaching about women's history in a global context.
