

5.12 What is a Golden Age?

A “Golden Age” in any society is not always easy to define. For example, everybody might not agree that the characters in the cartoon on the right are living in a “Golden Age.” Generally, a golden age is a time in a specific culture when advancements are at their highest point. For example, many refer to the Golden Age of Classical Greece as a time in the 5th century BC when literature, drama, philosophy, art and politics were most developed. However, not all people who lived in ancient Greece benefited. Slaves and women had few rights. A “Golden Age” is often preceded and followed by a period of decline, which makes its achievements look even greater.

Questions

1. What are some factors that define a “Golden Age”?
2. Why is there disagreement about whether a “Golden Age” existed?
3. In your opinion, do we live in a “Golden Age” today? Explain.



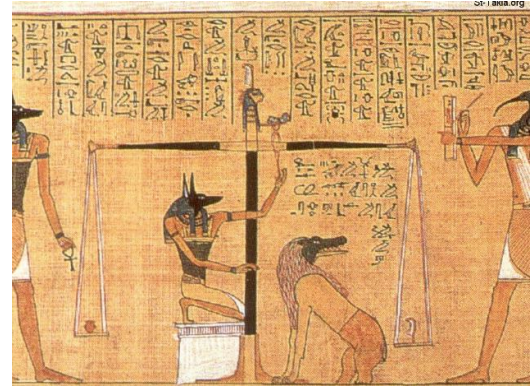
" Thank goodness we live in the golden age of inequality! "

Golden Ages in Human History

Working in teams, examine each of the Golden Ages described in this section. Your task is to decide what qualities defined each Golden Age and to identify similarities and differences. (Source: Wikipedia)

1. Ancient Egypt
2. Ancient Athens (Greece)
3. Gupta (India)
4. Tang (China)
5. Timbuktu (Sahel region of Africa)
6. Italian Renaissance

Golden Age of Ancient Egypt



The Fourth Dynasty of ancient Egypt (notated Dynasty IV or Dynasty 4) is characterized as a "golden age" of the Old Kingdom. Dynasty IV lasted from c. 2613 to 2494 BC. It was a time of peace and prosperity as well as one during which trade with other countries is documented. The Fourth Dynasty heralded the height of the pyramid-building age. The relative peace of the Third Dynasty allowed the Dynasty IV rulers the leisure to explore more artistic and cultural pursuits. Sneferu's building experiments led to the evolution from the mastaba styled step pyramids to the smooth sided "true" pyramids, such as those on the Giza plateau. No other period in Egypt's history equaled Dynasty IV's architectural accomplishments. Each of the rulers of this dynasty commissioned at least one pyramid to serve as a tomb or cenotaph.

The pharaohs of the Fourth Dynasty ruled for approximately 120 years, from c. 2613 to 2494 BC. Sneferu, the first king of Dynasty IV, is given the credit of completing the first true pyramid, known as the Red Pyramid, after he built and abandoned the Bent Pyramid and probably after he finished the Meidum Pyramid. He also constructed a number of smaller step pyramids, making him the most prolific pyramid builder of the era.[2] It is said that Sneferu had more stone and brick moved than any other pharaoh.

Sneferu's chief wife was Hetepheres I, his half-sister and mother of his son Khufu. His other two wives bore him more children. Organizing and feeding the workforce needed to create these pyramids required a centralized government with extensive powers, and Egyptologists believe that at this time the Old Kingdom demonstrated this level of sophistication and the long period of prosperity required to accomplish such projects. In fact, recent excavations outside the Wall of the Crow by Dr. Mark Lehner have uncovered a large city which seems to have housed, fed, and supplied the pyramid workers of Khafre and Menkaure.

Although it was once believed that slaves built these monuments—a bias based on the biblical Exodus story—study of overseers' tombs has shown that they were built by a *corvée* of peasants drawn from across Egypt. Apparently, they worked during idle periods, while the annual Nile flood covered their fields, along with a very large crew of specialists including stonecutters, painters, mathematicians, and priests. Some records indicate that each household was responsible for providing a worker for civic projects and the wealthy could hire others to take their places. Civic duties were not necessarily building projects; there were duties for the temples, libraries, and festivals as well, and both men and women filled some of the positions.

These pyramids suggest that Egypt enjoyed unparalleled prosperity during the fourth dynasty. The later bias of Herodotus (Histories, 2.124-133) has helped instill the idea that the pyramids survived as a reminder to the inhabitants of the forced labor that created them, however, although there was a tradition of the negative memory of Khufu presented in Papyrus Westcar, these kings were not tyrannized. In fact, the very same Papyrus Westcar presents Sneferu in a very benevolent light — even though he moved more stone to construct his pyramids than Khufu. This demonstrates that these pharaohs may have been remembered for their own individual reigns and personalities, rather than the sheer size of the monuments they built—monuments that, in all probability, were built by a "willing" public.

Golden Age of Athens

The “golden age” of Greece lasted for little more than a century but it laid the foundations of western civilization. The age began with the unlikely defeat of a vast Persian army by badly outnumbered Greeks and it ended with an inglorious and lengthy war between Athens and Sparta. This era is also referred to as the “Age of Pericles” after the Athenian statesman who directed the affairs of Athens when she was at the height of her glory.

During this period of time significant advances were made in a number of fields including government, art, philosophy, drama and literature. Some of the Greek names most familiar to us lived in this exciting and productive time. It was an era marked by such high and diverse levels of achievement that many classical scholars refer to the phenomenon as “the Greek miracle.” Even those who don't believe in miracles will concede that it is possible that the ever-competitive Greeks were spurred on to higher levels of innovation in their field by seeing the bar being raised in so many other areas.

None of this would have happened without an encouraging environment and Athens was at that time at the “top of her game”. Her citizens were supremely confident, filled with energy and enthusiasm and utterly convinced that their city provided what a combined London - Paris - New York might offer today.

Military victory over the Persians, largely achieved under Athenian leadership, set the stage. The transition in government from the reluctant hands of the aristocratic elite into the mass of common people also played an important role. More people felt that their opinions mattered than ever before. One of the greatest inventions of the ancient Greeks was drama. It evolved out of religious ritual and promptly proved to be both an enduring and popular creation. Greek tragedies, featuring historical and mythological events, were written and directed by authors such as Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides.

Golden Age of India

The Gupta Period of India was not characterized by enormous material wealth or by elaborate trade activity. It was defined by creativity. Flourishing arts, fabulous literature, and stupendous scholars are just a few of the things that marked the period. In 185 B.C.E., the Mauryan empire collapsed when the last of the Mauryan kings was assassinated. In its place, small kingdoms arose throughout India.

For nearly 500 years, the various states warred with each other. In the northern territories, a new empire arose when a ruler named Chandragupta I ascended the throne in 320 C.E. He revived many principles of Mauryan government and paved the way for his son, Samudragupta, to develop an extensive empire. Samudragupta was a great warrior and conquest was his passion. He sought to unite all of India under his rule and quickly set out to achieve this goal by waging wars across much of the Indian subcontinent. Hoping for mercy, many potential victims offered tribute and presents to Samudragupta as he swept through the territories. But little mercy was granted. One by one, he defeated nine kings in the north and twelve in the south. In addition to the human devastation countless horses were slaughtered to celebrate his victories.

The Gupta territories expanded so greatly under Samudragupta's reign that he has often been compared to great conquerors such as Alexander the Great and Napoleon. But of course he did not achieve military success singlehandedly. Local squads — which each consisted of one elephant, one chariot, three armed cavalymen, and five foot soldiers — protected Gupta villages from raids and revolts. In times of war, the squads joined together to form a powerful royal army. But Samudragupta was more than a fighter; he was also a lover of the arts. Engraved coins and inscribed pillars from the time of his reign provide evidence of both his artistic talent and his patronage.

Chandragupta II gave great support to the arts. Artists were so highly valued under his rule that they were paid for their work — a rare phenomenon in ancient civilizations. Perhaps it is due to this monetary compensation that such considerable progress was made in literature and science during the period. Nalanda University was founded during India's Golden Age. This center of Buddhist learning was built in a place that the Buddha himself had visited a number of times, and was patronized by the Gupta kings.

Much of the literature produced during the Gupta dynasty was poetry and drama. Narrative histories, religious and meditative writing, and lyric poetry emerged to enrich, educate, and entertain the people. Aryabhata, a scientist ahead of his time, went out on a limb and proposed that earth was a rotating sphere centuries before Columbus made his famous voyage. Aryabhata also calculated the length of the solar year as 365.358 days — only three hours over the figure calculated by modern scientists. Alongside these scholarly achievements, magnificent architecture, sculpture, and painting also developed. Among the greatest paintings of this period are those that were found on the walls of the Ajanta Caves in the plains of southern India. The paintings illustrate the various lives of the Buddha. An 18-foot statue of the Hindu god Shiva was also found within a Gupta-dynasty rock temple near Bombay.

Golden Age in China (618 – 1305 AD)

Dynastic periods in Chinese history were interspaced with tumultuous events. At the end of the sixth century, China was reunited after nearly four centuries of political fragmentation. The start of the Tang Dynasty (618 – 907 AD) precipitated a wave of prosperity and innovations in the arts, especially poetry, and technology. The population of its largest city, Chang'an was more than two million, and its streets were laid out in a rectangular grid pattern. During this period, trade with other regions flourished and foreign merchants were allowed to settle in China. Buddhism became the predominant religion in China and was even adopted by the imperial family.

The Song Dynasty (960 – 1279 AD), which followed the Tang after a fifty-year period of political disunity, governed for approximately three hundred years, although during their reign they were sometimes forced shared power with a dynasty based in the north. This was a period of great technological achievement that included the development and use of gunpowder in weapons, advances in metallurgy, and the maintenance of a permanent standing navy for the first time in Chinese history. The design of the compass and of ships dramatically improved and Chinese traders began to challenge Indian and Arab merchants for dominance in Southeast Asia and Indian Ocean ports.

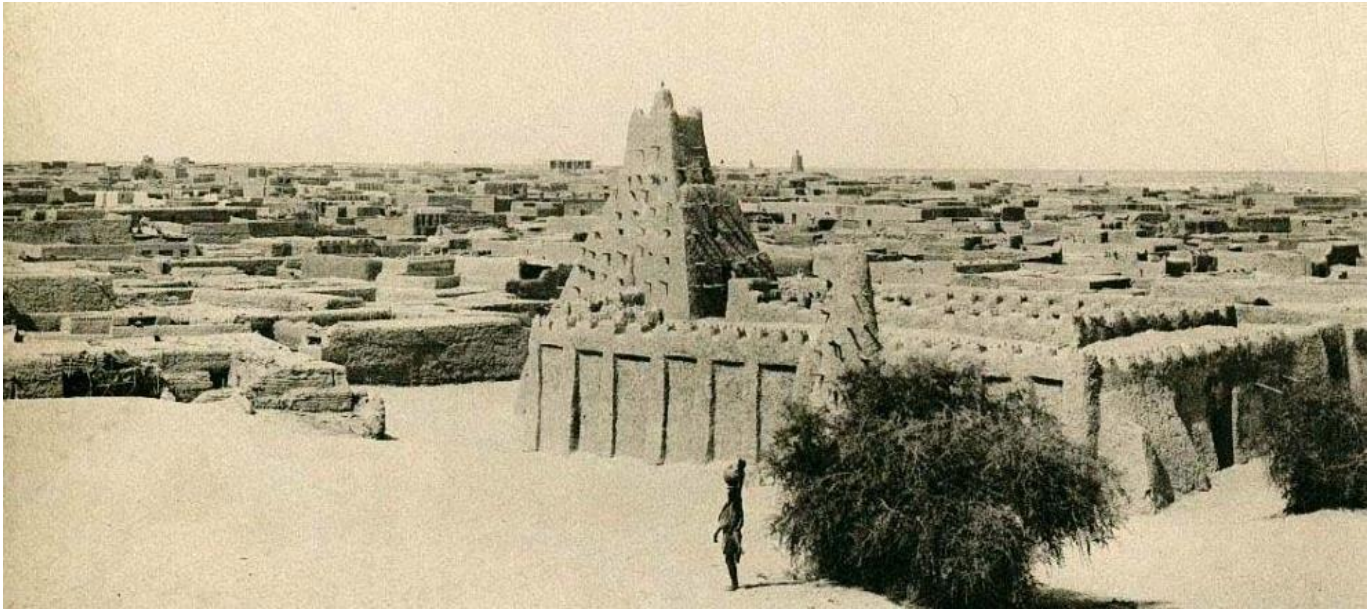
Trade was facilitated by the first-government issued paper money in the world, which was commented on by Marco Polo in his journals. The expansion of trade led to increased specialization, the growth of merchant guilds, and the formation of “companies” with partners and shareholders. Block printing on printing presses had been invented during the Tang dynasty. Continued innovation under the Song dynasty led to the development of movable type four hundred years before it appeared in Europe.

Rice cultivation expanded in south and central China and with the increased food supply so did population, which probably reached 100 million by 1100 AD. Farmers increasingly produced for the market, which allowed ordinary people to share in China's growing prosper. Affluence also had a negative impact on Chinese culture, especially women. Concubinage increased, women had no say in the disposal of family property, and the practice of foot binding to keep a young girl's feet small and “attractive,” spread amongst the elite.

The Song were eventually defeated by Mongols from the north, who were initially led by Genghis Khan. Kublai Khan, one of his grandsons, adopted Chinese customs and established the Yuan Dynasty (1234–1305 AD) with Beijing as the capital. The Mongols improved road and water travel in China, built a system of granaries for protection against famine, and rebuilt Beijing, adding new palace grounds with artificial lakes, hills, and parks. However, a long period of warfare led to a dramatic decline in the population of China from an estimated high of 120 million people to approximately 60 million in 1300. The population continued to decline for most of the 14th century because of epidemic disease, especially the Bubonic or Black Plague.



Golden Age of Timbuktu



Sankore Madrasah

Timbuktu became a permanent settlement early in the 12th century. After a shift in trading routes, Timbuktu flourished from the trade in salt, gold, ivory and slaves. It became part of the Mali Empire early in the 14th century. In the first half of the 15th century, the Tuareg tribes took control of the city for a short period until the expanding Songhai Empire absorbed the city in 1468. In its Golden Age, the town's numerous Islamic scholars and extensive trading network made possible an important book trade: together with the campuses of the Sankore Madrasah, an Islamic university, this established Timbuktu as a scholarly centre in Africa. The Sankore University prospered and became a very significant seat of learning in the Muslim world, especially under the reign of Mansa Musa (1307-1332) and the Askia Dynasty (1493-1591).



Several notable historic writers, such as Shabeni and Leo Africanus, have described Timbuktu. A Moroccan army defeated the Songhai in 1591 and made Timbuktu, rather than Gao, their capital. The invaders established a new ruling class, the Arma, who after 1612 became virtually independent of Morocco. However, the golden age of the city, during which it was a major learning and cultural centre of the Mali Empire, was over, and it entered a long period of decline. Different tribes governed until the French took over in 1893, a situation that lasted until it became part of the current Republic of Mali in 1960. Presently, Timbuktu is impoverished and suffers from desertification.

The Italian Renaissance



The ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Vatican City was painted by Michelangelo between 1508 and 1512.

The Italian Renaissance was a period of European history that began in Italy in the 14th century and lasted until the 17th century. It marked the transition of Europe from the Middle Ages to Modernity. The French word *renaissance* means "Rebirth." It defines the period as one of cultural revival and renewed interest in classical antiquity after the centuries labeled the Dark Ages by Renaissance humanists. The Renaissance author Giorgio Vasari used the term "Rebirth" in his *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* but the concept became widespread only in the 19th century.

The European Renaissance began in Tuscany (Central Italy), and was centered in the city of Florence. Florence, one of the several city-states of the peninsula, rose to economic prominence by providing credit for European monarchs and laying down the groundwork for capitalism and banking. The Renaissance later spread to Venice, heart of a Mediterranean empire and in control of the trade routes with the east, where the remains of ancient Greek culture were brought together and provided humanist scholars with new texts. Finally the Renaissance had a significant effect on the Papal States and Rome, largely rebuilt by Humanist and Renaissance popes (such as Alexander VI and Julius II), who were frequently involved in Italian politics, in arbitrating disputes between competing colonial powers.

The Italian Renaissance is best known for its achievements in painting, architecture, sculpture, literature, music, philosophy, science and exploration. Italy became the recognized European leader in all these areas by the late 15th century. The Italian Renaissance peaked in the mid-16th century as domestic disputes and foreign invasions plunged the region into the turmoil. However, the ideas and ideals of the Italian Renaissance endured and spread into the rest of Europe. Italian explorers from the maritime republics served under the auspices of European monarchs, ushering the Age of Discovery. The most famous were Christopher Columbus who served for Spain, Giovanni da Verrazzano for France, Amerigo Vespucci for Portugal, and John Cabot for England. Italian universities attracted polymaths and scholars such as Copernicus, Vesalius, Galileo and Torricelli, playing a key role in the scientific revolution.