

**HOMEWORK:** Answer the questions in complete sentences on a separate sheet of paper.

- 1) *What is periodization? Why do historians use periodization?*
- 2) *What potential problems, or misunderstandings, can arise when looking at history this way?*
- 3) *What key events does the author view as 'bookends' [starting and ending points] for the millennium [one thousand year period] of 500-1500 C.E.?*
- 4) *According to the author, why has this time period been difficult for historians to describe?*
- 5) *What completely new civilizations emerged during this time period? According to the text, what did they have in common with older civilizations?*
- 6) *What does the author mean by civilizations that "persisted" or were "reconstructed"? What examples are provided?*
- 7) *According to the author, in what way was Western Europe unique during this time period?*

### **Overview:**

When you open a world history textbook, you will likely find that it is conveniently divided into chapters and units with titles that mark the major turning points of history. The tendency of historians to group events in this way is known as *periodization*. The assumption behind periodization is that there are moments when a sharp break with the past leads to a new kind of experience or a new way of understanding the world.

### **Excerpt: "Defining a Millennium (500-1500)" by Robert Strayer**

History seldom turns sharp corners, and historians often have difficulty deciding just when one phase of the human story ends and another begins. Between roughly 200 and 850 CE, many of the second-wave states and civilizations (Han dynasty China, the Roman Empire, Gupta India, Meroë, Axum, Maya, Teotihuacán, Moche) experienced severe disruption, decline, or collapse. For many historians, this has marked the end of an era and the start of a new period of world history. Furthermore, almost everyone agrees that the transatlantic voyages of Columbus beginning in 1492 represent yet another new departure in world history. This coupling of the Eastern and Western hemispheres set in motion historical processes that transformed most of the world and signaled the beginning of the modern era.

But how are we to understand the thousand years (roughly 500 to 1500) between the end of the second-wave era and the beginning of modern world history? Historians, frankly, have had some difficulty defining a distinct identity for this millennium, a problem reflected in the vague terms used to describe it: a postclassical era, a medieval or "middle" period between the ancient and modern, or, as in this book, an age of third-wave civilizations. At best, these terms indicate where this period falls in the larger time frame of world history, but none of them are very descriptive.

### **Third Wave Civilizations: Something New, Something Old, Something Blended**

A large part of the problem lies in the rather different trajectories of various regions of the world during this millennium. It is not easy to identify clearly defined features that encompass all major civilizations or human communities during this period and distinguish them from what went before. We can, however, point to several distinct patterns during this third-wave era.

In some areas, for example, wholly new but smaller civilizations arose where none had existed before. Along the East African coast, Swahili civilization emerged in a string of thirty or more city-states, very much engaged in the commercial life of the Indian Ocean basin. The kingdoms of Ghana, Mali, and Songhay, stimulated and sustained by long-distance trade across the Sahara, represented

a new West African civilization. In the area now encompassed by Ukraine and western Russia, another new civilization, known as Kievan Rus, likewise took shape with a good deal of cultural borrowing from Mediterranean civilization. East and Southeast Asia also witnessed new centers of civilization. Those in Japan, Korea, and Vietnam were strongly influenced by China, while Srivijaya on the Indonesian island of Sumatra and later the Angkor kingdom, centered in present-day Cambodia, drew on the Hindu and Buddhist traditions of India.

All of these represent a continuation of a well-established pattern in world history — the globalization of civilization. Each of the new third-wave civilizations was, of course, culturally unique, but like their predecessors of the first and second waves, they too featured states, cities, specialized economic roles, sharp class and gender inequalities, and other elements of “civilized” life. As newcomers to the growing number of civilizations, all of them borrowed heavily from larger or more established centers.

The largest, most expansive, and most widely influential of the new third-wave civilizations was surely that of Islam. It began in Arabia in the seventh century CE, projecting the Arab peoples into a prominent role as builders of an enormous empire while offering a new, vigorous, and attractive religion. Viewed as a new civilization defined by its religion, the world of Islam came to encompass many other centers of civilization — Egypt, Mesopotamia, Persia, India, the interior of West Africa and the coast of East Africa, Spain, southeastern Europe, and more. Here was a uniquely cosmopolitan or “umbrella” civilization that “came closer than any had ever come to uniting all mankind under its ideals.”

Yet another, and quite different, historical pattern during the third-wave millennium involved those older civilizations that persisted or were reconstructed. The Byzantine Empire, embracing the eastern half of the old Roman Empire, continued the patterns of Mediterranean Christian civilization and persisted until 1453, when it was overrun by the Ottoman Turks. In China, following almost four centuries of fragmentation, the Sui, Tang, and Song dynasties (589–1279) restored China’s imperial unity and reasserted its Confucian tradition. Indian civilization retained its ancient patterns of caste and Hinduism amid vast cultural diversity, even as parts of India fell under the control of Muslim rulers.

Variations on this theme of continuing or renewing older traditions took shape in the Western Hemisphere, where two centers of civilization — in Mesoamerica and in the Andes — had been long established. In Mesoamerica, the collapse of classical Maya civilization and of the great city-state of Teotihuacán by about 900 CE opened the way for other peoples to give new shape to this ancient civilization. The most well-known of these efforts was associated with the Mexica or Aztec people, who created a powerful and impressive state in the fifteenth century. About the same time, on the western rim of South America, a Quechua-speaking people, now known as the Inca, incorporated various centers of Andean civilization into a huge bureaucratic empire. Both the Aztecs and the Incas gave a new political expression to much older patterns of civilized life.

Yet another pattern took shape in Western Europe following the collapse of the Roman Empire. There would-be kings and church leaders alike sought to maintain links with the older Greco-Roman-Christian traditions of classical Mediterranean civilization. In the absence of empire, however, new and far more decentralized societies emerged, led now by Germanic peoples and centered in Northern and Western Europe, considerably removed from the older centers of Rome and Athens. It was a hybrid civilization, combining old and new, Greco-Roman and Germanic elements, in a distinctive blending. For five centuries or more, this region was a relative backwater, compared to the more vibrant, prosperous, and powerful civilizations of Byzantium, the Islamic world, and China. During the centuries after 1000 CE, however, Western European civilization emerged as a rapidly growing and expansive set of competitive states, willing, like other new civilizations, to borrow extensively from their more developed neighbors.