**The Han empire in China.**

The first to fall was the Han Dynasty in China. The Han demise was a complicated affair. Not surprisingly, a large part of the story involved pressure from pastoral nomads who lived along China’s northern borders. Over the preceding centuries a confederation of nomadic groups known as the Xiongnu amassed so much power in horse cavalry that they were able to extort resources from the Han in return for agreeing to keep the peace. The Han cooperated, finding it cheaper to pay the Xiongnu than to fight them. For a while, this compromise worked well. But in 51 CE, a succession dispute divided the Xiongnu into two groups. This set off a chain reaction that had a severe impact on the Han. The Xiongnu nearest the Chinese border took the payment intended for the entire confederation. The farther group immediately retaliated, attacking the Han (for not paying) as well as their greedy Xiongnu kinsmen. As the confederation disintegrated, individual groups began to demand separate payments from the Han. The costs to the Han rose considerably, and at the same time nomadic cavalry raids increased. The Han were not getting what they continued to pay for.

At the same time, nature entered the fray as an enemy of the Han. In 153 CE a swarm of locusts laid waste to large areas of farmland. Deforestation that had started in much earlier times produced erosion and floods. The Huang He (Yellow River) filled with silt and began to flood more frequently, with more devastating results. Infectious diseases new to China began to arrive via the silk roads causing widespread epidemics.

The misery these disasters caused was compounded by the increasingly desperate economic situation of the peasants. Over time, the long-standing tradition of dividing land equally among all sons had reduced the size of the average farm to the point where farmers could not make enough from the land to pay their taxes. Farmers had little choice but to give over their small plots to wealthy aristocratic landlords whose legal status exempted them and their dependents from taxes. Thus the wealthy landlords grew richer, the peasants became poor tenant farmers, and the Han government lost tax revenue. As conditions worsened, poverty and frustration fueled a series of peasant revolts. All of these dilemmas placed heavy demands on the Han government and called for creative and decisive leadership. But internal competition for power among factions within the Han court paralyzed the government and left it incapable of dealing effectively with the empire’s many problems. The rising power of large landowners and the increasing independence of Han generals continually eroded the power of the emperor. In 220 CE the dynasty collapsed, and the most powerful among the generals divided the empire into several smaller kingdoms.