The Dynamics of Ancient Empires

State Power from Assyria to Byzantium

Edited by

Ian Morris and Walter Scheidel

THE DYNAMICS OF ANCIENT EMPIRES

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Preface

The world's first known empires took shape in Mesopotamia between the eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea and the Persian Gulf, beginning around 2350 B.C.E. The next 2,500 years witnessed sustained imperial growth, bringing a growing share of humanity under the control of ever-fewer states. Two thousand years ago, just four major powers—the Roman, Parthian, Kushan, and Han empires—ruled perhaps two-thirds all the people on Earth. Yet, despite empires' prominence in the early history of civilization, there have been surprisingly few attempts to study the dynamics of ancient empires in the western Old World comparatively. Such grand comparisons were popular in the eighteenth century, but scholars then only had Greek and Latin literature and the Hebrew Bible as evidence and necessarily framed the problem in different, more limited, terms. Near Eastern texts, and knowledge of their languages, appeared in large amounts only in the late nineteenth century. Neither Karl Marx nor Max Weber could make much use of this material, and not until the 1920s were there enough archaeological data to make syntheses of early European and west Asian history possible. But one consequence of the increase in empirical knowledge was that twentieth-century scholars generally defined the disciplinary and geographical boundaries of their specialties more narrowly than their Enlightenment predecessors had done, shying away from large questions and cross-cultural comparisons. As a result, Greek and Roman empires have been studied largely in isolation from those of the Near East. Our book is designed to address these deficits and to encourage dialogue across disciplinary boundaries by examining the fundamental features of the successive and partly overlapping imperial states that dominated much of the Near East and the Mediterranean in the first millennia B.C.E. and C.E.: the Neo-Assyrian, Achaemenid Persian, Athenian, Roman, and Byzantine empires.

This volume has grown out of a series of conferences sponsored by Stanford University's Social Science History Institute (SSHI). Founded as an interdepartmental program involving faculty and graduate students from the Departments of Anthropological Sciences, Classics, Economics, History, Political Science, and

Sociology, SSHI aimed to combine the analytical tools and techniques of the social sciences with the appreciation for institutions and evidence associated with the discipline of history. From the start, ancient history occupied a prominent position in SSHI's research agenda. Following a conference on the ancient economy in 1998 that resulted in a collection of essays edited by Joe Manning and Ian Morris,[1] SSHI sponsored a conference titled "Empires and Exploitation in the Ancient Mediterranean" at Stanford in May 2000, organized by the editors of this book. Follow-up meetings at Stanford in May 2001 and a final gathering at the University of Western Australia at Perth in August 2002 allowed the contributors to present and discuss revised papers and strengthen the thematic and methodological coherence of their studies.

At these meetings, internationally recognized experts in the history of the principal empires of ancient western Eurasia addressed a set of key issues such as the nature of the evidence, geographical context, the main historical developments, the role of material resources and modes of exploitation and redistribution, economic development, institutional frameworks, administrative and political practices, ideology, center-periphery relations, and the demise of imperial states. We did not impose a rigid template but left it to each contributor to emphasize some of these features in accordance with the potential of the source material and the preoccupations of pertinent scholarship. As a result, the individual chapters differ in terms of focus and scope, yet they also address the same crucial problems: how empires were run, how they extracted resources, and what their long-term consequences were.

A substantial introductory discussion of recent thought on the mechanisms of imperial state formation prefaces the five case studies of the Neo-Assyrian, Achaemenid Persian, Athenian, Roman, and Byzantine empires. Coauthored by a sociologist with strong historical interests (Jack Goldstone) and a historian with strong sociological interests (John Haldon), this introductory chapter situates the study of ancient empires within the broader context of related work in historical sociology and political science. The final chapter, on the sexual dimension of empire, adopts an explicitly comparative and multidisciplinary perspective, drawing on the findings of evolutionary psychology to improve our understanding of ultimate causation in imperial predation and exploitation in a wide range of historical systems from all over the globe.

We hope that, taken together, these seven contributions will encourage more systematic and comparative thinking about the nature and development of imperial states in early history, and serve as building blocks for cross-cultural studies. This project has inspired all the participants to engage in more explicitly comparative and multidisciplinary work on early empires, and we will measure this book's success by its capacity to motivate our present and future colleagues to do the same.[2]

We particularly want to thank our longtime colleague Steve Haber, SSHI's founder and director, for his invaluable intellectual and financial support. This volume would never have been conceived without his generosity and example. We are

also grateful to the University of Western Australia at Perth for hosting the group's third meeting. We especially thank our host on that occasion, Brian Bosworth, who also delivered a paper at the first conference at Stanford, as did William Harris. Lance Davis, Erich Gruen, Steve Haber, David Laitin, and Gavin Wright kindly offered valuable comments on the papers presented at our first event.

The meetings that led to this volume were greatly enriched by the formidable presence of Keith Hopkins, who did more than anyone else to hold ancient historians to the standards of social scientific research.[3] He died in March 2004, before he was able to complete the final revision of his contribution. With the kind permission of his literary executor, Christopher Kelly, it is published here for the first time with editorial additions by Walter Scheidel. This book is dedicated to his memory.

Notes

1. Manning and Morris, eds. 2005.
2. The cross-cultural study of ancient empires need not be confined to historically related entities: for comparative perspectives on the ancient Mediterranean and ancient China, see Scheidel, ed., forthcoming, complemented by an investigation organized by Morris and Scheidel of divergent processes of state formation in Europe and China after the Roman period. Cf. also Scheidel, in preparation, on models of causality in the study of ancient empires and now especially the international research project "Tributary Empires Compared," directed by Peter Bang and focusing on the Roman, Mughal, and Ottoman empires.
3. Osborne 2004; Harris 2005.

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Jack A. Goldstone is Hazel Professor and director of the Center for Global Policy at George Mason University and a Scholar at the Mercatus Center. He is the author of *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World* (1981) and editor of *The Encyclopedia of Political Revolutions* (1998). He has received the Distinguished Contribution to Scholarship award of the American Sociological Association, the Arnoldo Momigliano Prize of the Historical Society, and fellowships from the ACLS and the MacArthur Foundation. He is currently working on two books: *Why Europe?: The Rise of the West in World History* and *A Peculiar Path: The Rise of the West in Global Context 1500–1850*.

John F. Haldon is professor of Byzantine history at Princeton University. His research focuses on the history of the early and middle Byzantine Empire, especially from the sixth to twelfth centuries C.E., on state systems and structures across the European and Islamic worlds, and on the production, distribution and consumption of resources in the late Roman and medieval world. He is director of the international project "Medieval Logistics: Movement, Demography and Warfare." He has published many books and articles, including *The State and the Tributary Mode of Production* (1993), *Byzantium in the Seventh Century* (1997), *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World* (1999), *Byzantium: A History* (2006), and *The Palgrave Atlas of Byzantine History* (2005).

Keith Hopkins was professor of ancient history in the University of Cambridge, a Fellow and vice-provost of King's College, Cambridge, and a Fellow of the British Academy. He is best known for his research on Roman social and economic history and on the history of early Christianity. He is the author of *Conquerors and Slaves* (1978), *Death and Renewal* (1983), *A World Full of Gods* (1999), and *The Colosseum* (2005, with Mary Beard) and the editor of *Hong Kong: The Industrial Colony* (1971). A collection of his articles will be edited by Christopher Kelly. He died in 2004.

Ian Morris is Jean and Rebecca Willard Professor of Classics and professor of history at Stanford University. He works on ancient Greek and Mediterranean history and archaeology and directs an excavation at Monte Polizzo in Sicily. He has authored or (co-)edited ten other books, including *Burial and Ancient Society* (1987), *Death-Ritual and Social Structure in Classical Antiquity* (1992), *Archaeology as Cultural History* (2000), *The Greeks: History, Culture, and Society* (2005, with Barry Powell), *The Ancient Cconomy: Evidence and Models* (2005, co-edited with Joe Manning), and *The Cambridge Economic History of the Greco-Roman World* (2007, co-edited with Walter Scheidel and Richard Saller). He is currently working on two studies of world history.

Walter Scheidel is professor of classics and, by courtesy, history at Stanford University. His research focuses on ancient social and economic history, historical demography, and comparative and transdisciplinary world history. He has authored or (co-)edited eight other books, including *Measuring Sex, Age and Death in the Roman Empire* (1996), *Death on the Nile: Disease and the Demography of Roman Egypt* (2001), *Debating Roman Demography* (2001), and *The Cambridge Economic History of the Greco-Roman World* (2007, with Ian Morris and Richard Saller). He is currently editing *Rome and China: Comparative Perspectives on Ancient World Empires* and *The Cambridge Companion to the Roman Economy*, co-editing *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Studies* and *The Oxford Handbook of the Ancient State*, and working on monographs on ancient empires and ancient demography.

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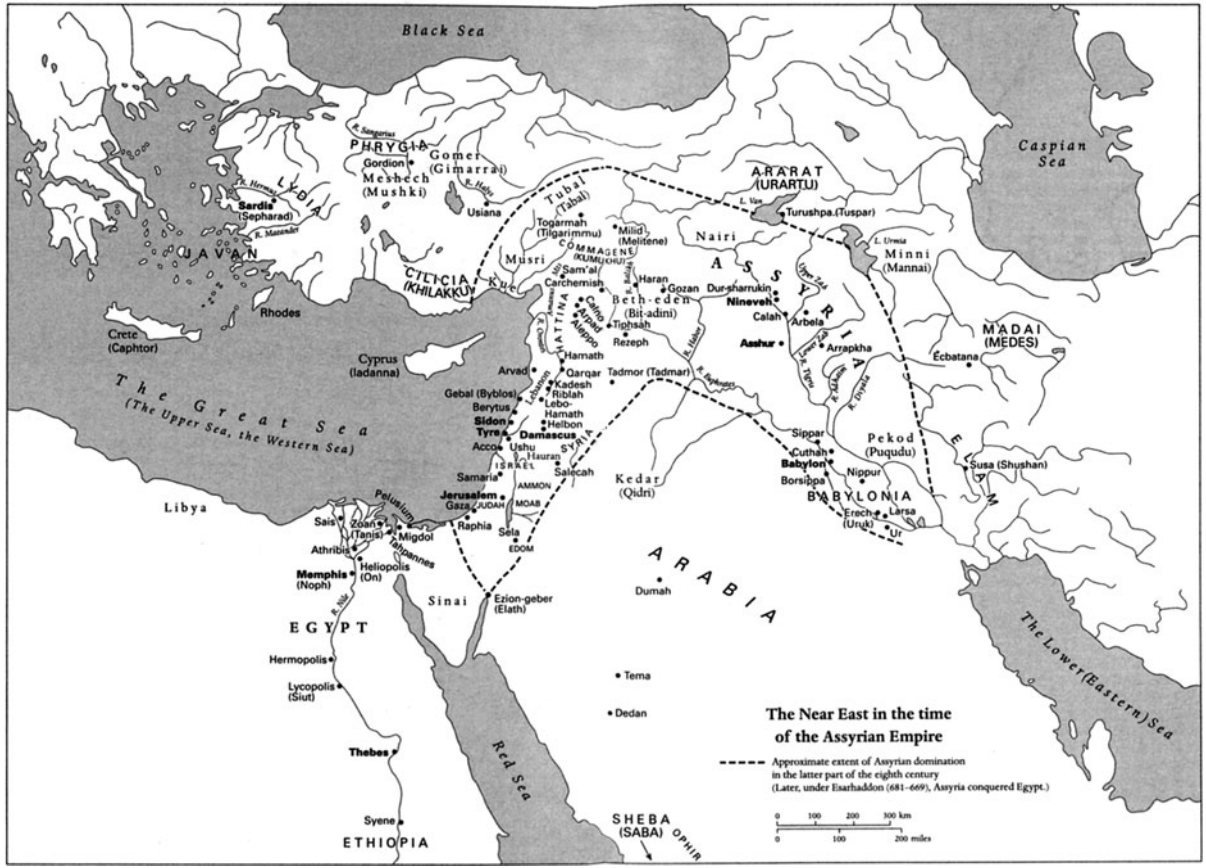

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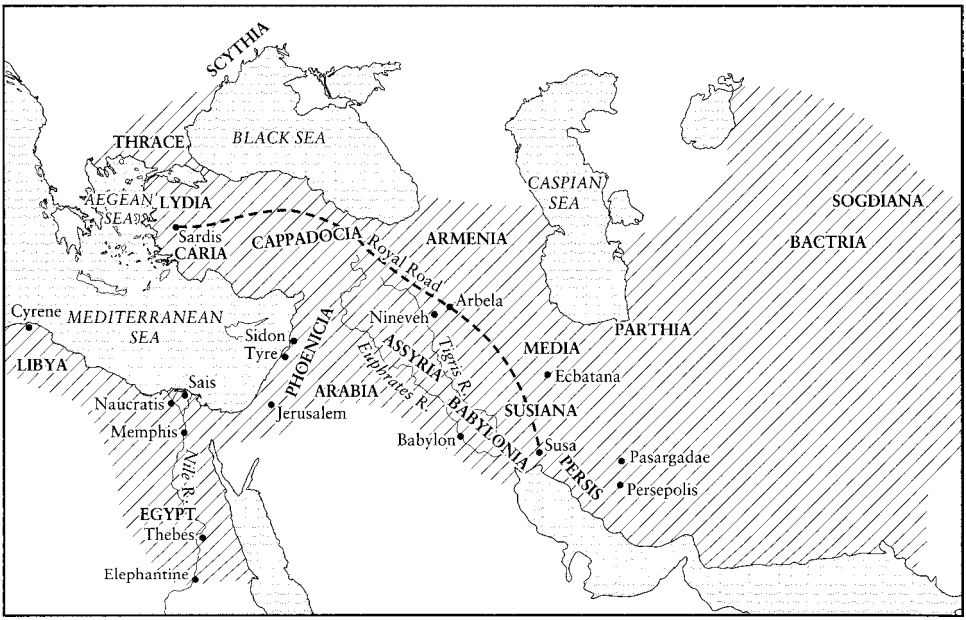

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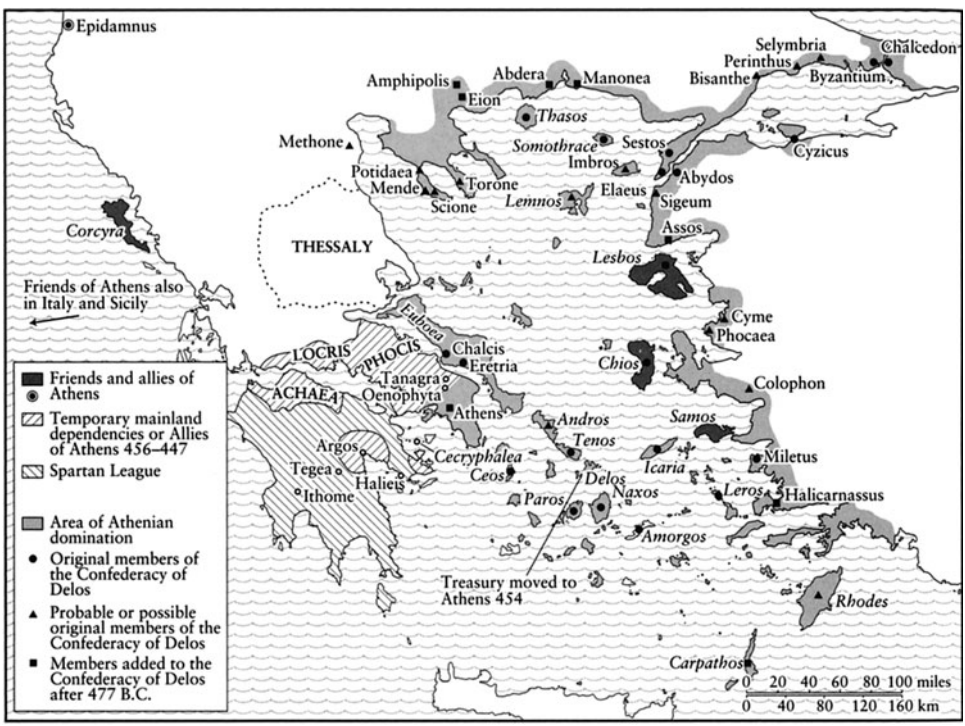

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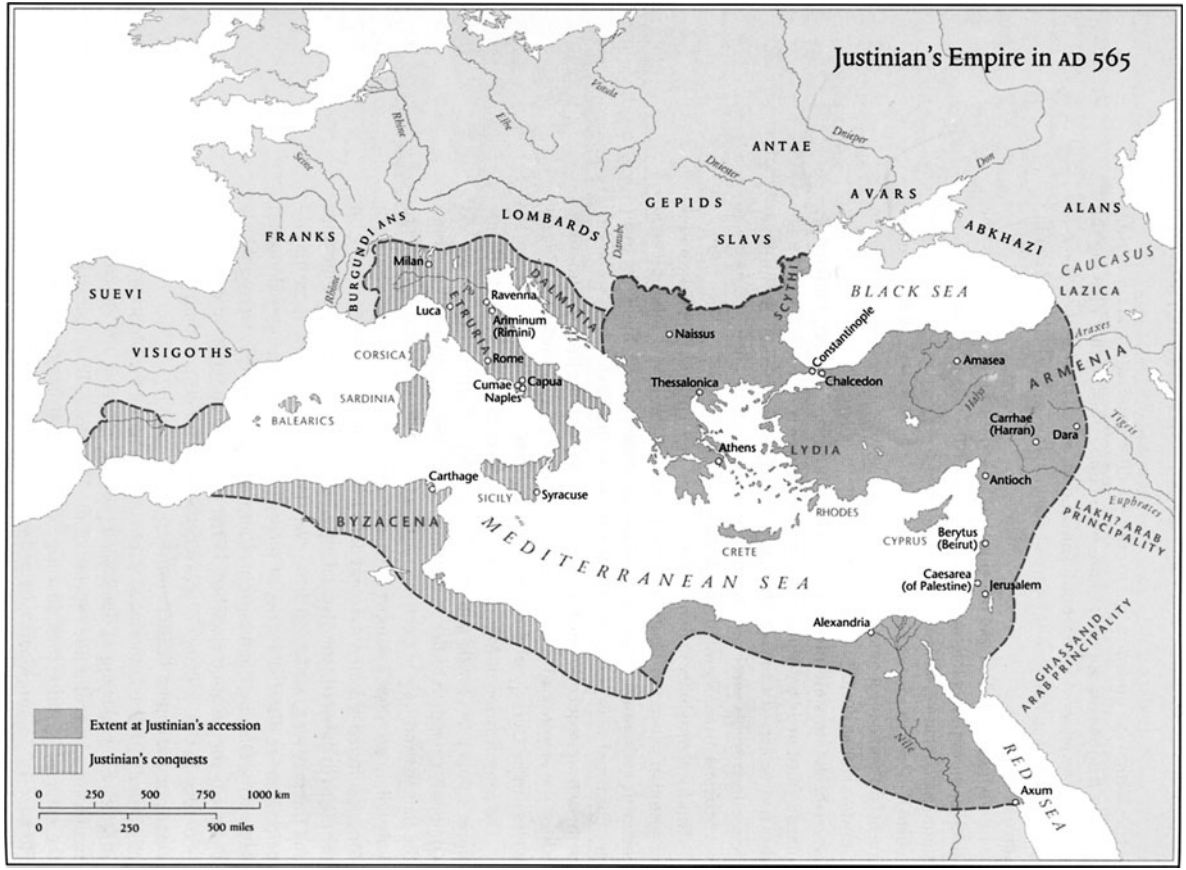

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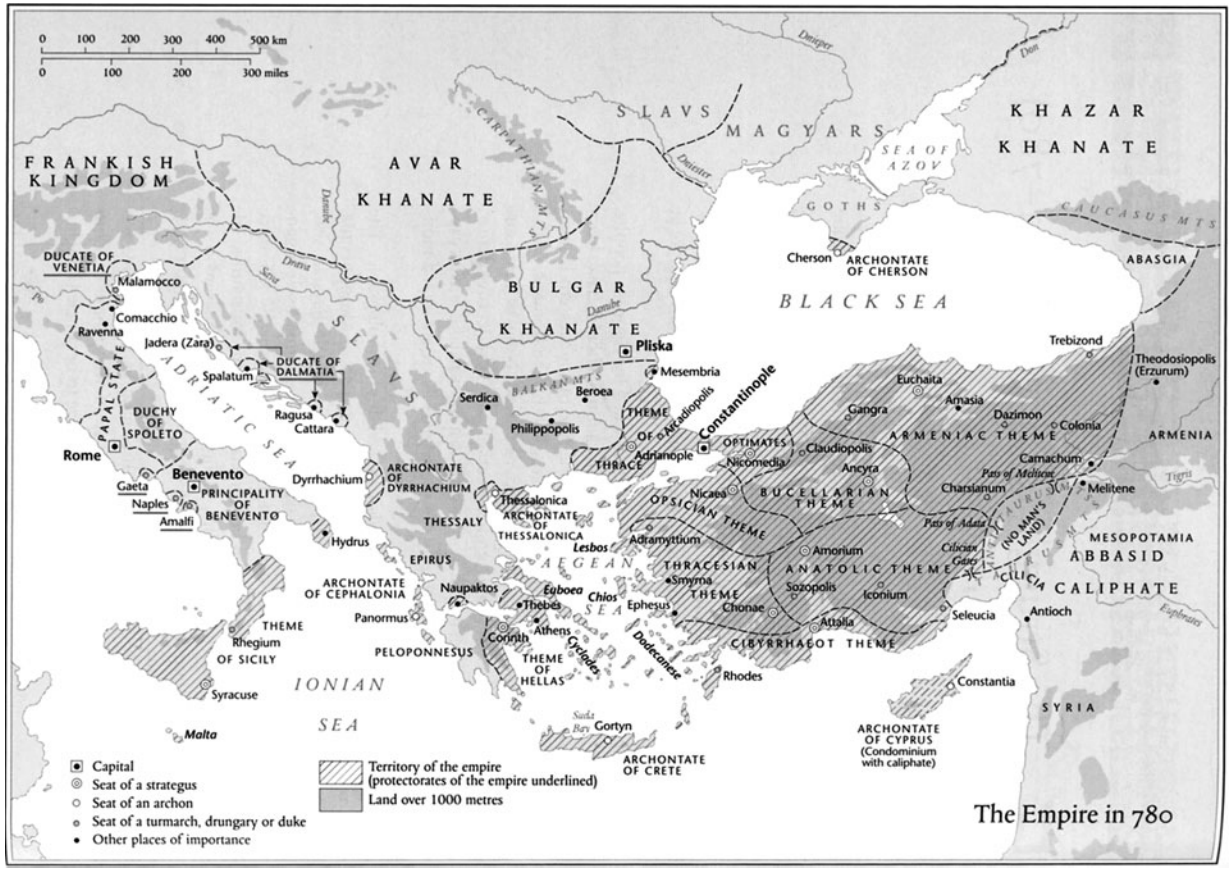

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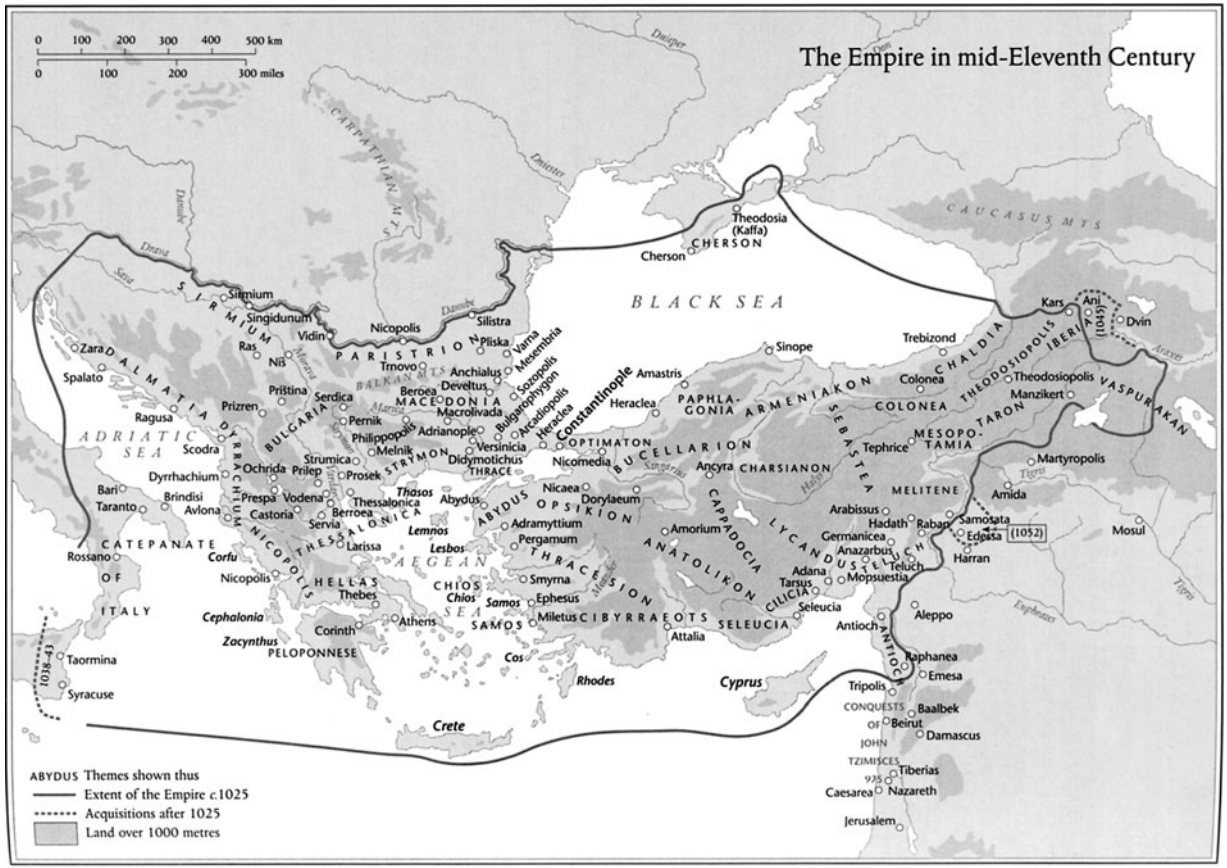

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THE DYNAMICS OF ANCIENT EMPIRES

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1

Ancient States, Empires, and Exploitation

Problems and Perspectives

Jack A. Goldstone and John F. Haldon

The rise and fall of ancient empires and states has been a popular theme in comparative social and political history for many years, yet we still find the whole process fascinating—perhaps because, in the modern world, notions of the "end of history" and "imperial overstretch" have raised questions about whether decline and fall affect the modern Western world as well as the past. Yet beyond such simple slogans lies a deeper truth: the dynamics of historical social change remain problematic because there are no simple answers to the question "Why did such-and-such an empire rise when it did, and why did it collapse or succumb to external pressures when it did?" The resurgence of interest in the fates of empires, as well as in meta-theoretical discussion about the structures of historical change on the grand scale, is evidenced in a number of current projects and recent publications.[1]

In the past thirty years or so, questions regarding the dynamics of empires have also been related to wider issues of cultural transformation, in which the appearance of particular religious-ideological and intellectual tendencies has been seen to play a more important and causal role. The impact of religious and intellectual change has especially been highlighted in the evolution of the political systems and state structures of a range of "axial civilizations," in relation to both their impact on the formation and developmental trajectory of social and political elites and the psychological-ideological systems that underpin forms of political and social power. The phrase "axial age" was coined in 1949 by Karl Jaspers to characterize the period of formation of the world's major religions as distinct belief systems based on canonical texts, roughly from 600 B.C.E. to 600 A.D., and which, it was argued, were one result of the evolution of cultural elites that were able to theorize a transcendental vision of their world and "the order of things," exemplified in the cultural-intellectual traditions of Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism, of the ancient Greek cities and early Christianity, of Zoroastrianism and, by extension, of Islam. Several comparative sociological-historical analyses have tried to build on this.[2] But the premise on which concepts of "axial civilizations" was constructed has been

challenged, partly because it failed to grapple adequately with the multiplicity of cultural and political forms and the divergences between different cultural systems that supposedly shared a common "axial" significance.[3] A more fruitful approach, although it, too, has been subjected to some criticism, was outlined by Mann, in which the role of the major transcendental religions holds the key to the dynamic of the cultures in which they came to dominate, in respect of control over ideological as well as material resources, the articulation of power-structures, and elite identities.[4] What is clear is that understanding the dynamics of empires requires us to grapple with the tensions among the political/military, economic, and ideological/religious structures and elites that together constitute imperial power systems. To return to the notions with which we opened this essay, it may be that the United States and other Western powers face a reduction in their relative military and political power at the very same time that Western ideology regarding human rights and democracy becomes dominant, precisely because the ideals of spreading global democracy and economic development that have been used to justify Western domination are inconsistent with indefinite continuation of that domination.

The contributions to this volume discuss these issues in respect of a number of premodern states or empires and attempt to put them into a comparative context based on a presentation of their economic, social, and political-cultural systems and a comparison of the systemic similarities and dissimilarities they displayed. The neo-Assyrian Empire, Achaemenid Persia, Athens, Rome, Byzantium, and the early Islamic caliphates (Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties) provide the main case histories, although other comparative material is also drawn upon. The contributors in each case do not present their discussions from within any single standpoint but try to draw on a range of sociological and comparative perspectives that may suggest a range of possible approaches.

Yet we may attempt to derive certain general conclusions from the sum of these discussions. The first issue is to define the terms of the discussion. What is an empire? Indeed, how should we define a state? What differentiates "empire" from "state," if there is a difference? Should our definitions be descriptive (i.e., empires are just big states) or analytical (i.e., empires operate on different structural bases from simple states)?[5]

1. States

To begin with the notion of the state:[6] no agreement has ever been reached on a universally acceptable general definition that has any real analytic value, partly because historians and anthropologists tend to define "the state" in terms of the different questions they wish to ask. Indeed, for much of human history the state is not a relevant concept to the forms and functions of social and political organization. It is difficult to point to institutions that formally constitute "the state" until the evolution from the third millennium B.C.E. of sacred monarchical authority concentrated in the hands of an individual supported by an intellectual-religious elite.

Yet thereafter, too rigid a definition merely acts as a conceptual straitjacket that ignores the fundamentally dynamic and dialectical nature of human social organization, and so, as with any definition, the notion of "the state" must remain flexible if it is to generate explanations; it should function as a heuristic tool.

A great deal of ink has flowed in attempts to generate all-embracing concepts of the state, ranging from Marx's various definitions of the state as the embedded forms of property relations and social power in social formations, in which religious-ideological power was the form through which political structures were expressed (his "Asiatic" mode, for example), and also as the instrument of domination by a ruling class, to Max Weber's concept of the state as a system of institutions and impersonalized relationships evolving out of late medieval society or as a territorial entity with a central power monopolizing coercive power. At the same time, emphasis has been placed by some, following the approach elaborated by Norbert Elias, on tracing the points or periods at which differential rates of socioeconomic and institutional change attain a certain qualitative evolutionary departure, during which modes of resource extraction and the political forms through which these were achieved undergo transformative changes, and studying how these impact upon yet are also affected by the processes of sociocultural class formation, awareness, and conflict.[7] Modern discussion has tended to focus around efforts to reconcile these alternative and in many respects conflicting approaches centered on "structure" or "process"—Mann's approach, for example, which sees the state as both an instrument of coercive and ideological power and an organ through which elites may reproduce their domination and which places emphasis on process as much as on structure.[8]

Adopting a provisional working definition of the "state" that encompasses yet allows us to identify what is unique about "empires" would therefore seem appropriate at this stage (although we shall see in what follows that the contributors vary in both their emphases and their perspectives). At one extreme of social-political organization, the term "state" can refer to a relatively short-lived grouping of tribal or clan communities united under a warlord or chieftain who is endowed with both symbolic and military authority—in anthropological terms, a "Big-man" confederacy. Such "states" rarely survive for long, however, and are sometimes referred to as "proto-states," since they have not yet attained a degree of institutional permanence and authority is generally exercised over a mobile people rather than a sovereign territory. Examples include the majority of the "nomad empires" that arose on the Eurasian steppe zone from the beginning of the first millennium B.C.E. and periodically re-appeared until the seventeenth century C.E., with the possible exception—although the point is certainly debateable—of the postconquest Mongol "hordes" in the early thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and certainly of Nurhaci's formation of the Manchu Empire.[9] At the other extreme we find more or less territorially unified political entities, with an organizational "center" (which may be peripatetic) from which a ruler or ruling group exercises political authority and that maintains

its existence successfully over several generations; a key element in the formation and degree of permanence of such formations is that the authority of the ruler or ruling group is recognized as both legitimate and exclusive. In this respect, the ideological aspect is absolutely fundamental to state-building, a point to which we will return later.

This more permanent type of state formation might be defined in the first instance as a territorially demarcated region* controlled by centralized governing or ruling establishments, which may or may not have a monopoly over the use of coercion but which usually have the coercive power to assert their authority over the territories they claim, at least on an occasional "punitive" basis when needed. If the central state had a monopoly on coercive power, this would fit Weber's "ideal type" definition of the state.

How exactly such central authorities achieve these ends varies enormously from state to state and society to society. In all premodern states there have been gaps in the extent of state authority—border or mountainous regions, for example, difficult of access and untouched by state supervision, or "tribal" groups nominally owing allegiance and occupying territory claimed by the state but not always easily brought under the state's authority or control. Where geography has favored a tribal pastoral and/or nomadic economy, the nomads have frequently formed important elements in the armies of conquest states, certainly in the initial stages of their evolution. However, this has also meant that, because of the mobility of such pastoralists, because of their internal social cohesion and self-sufficiency, and because their wealth is generally easily moved out of the reach of state officials, they are both able and sometimes inclined to resist any central authority that does not directly favor their own interests.

By the same token, the relative patchiness of central control may represent a point on the line from local state to supra-local state to empire (and back again), as with Assyrian control over neighboring territories in the early period of expansion (ninth century B.C.E.). Ideological power can overcome this at certain times, but by itself generally remains a short-term means of cementing such power relationships.[10] The very different configuration of power relationships within three late ancient or early medieval states, for example—late Rome and early Byzantium, Sasanian Iran, and the early Umayyad caliphate, partly discussed in chapter 6—provides striking examples of the ways in which the features of official military versus nomad militias, and central control versus central authority with varying local control, were combined.

A key element in state formation is the generation of fairly complex ideological and legitimating systems, on the one hand, and at the same time more

* Although lands may well have been geographically dispersed and frontiers ill defined or fluctuating, reflecting the process of formation through amalgamation, conquest, inheritance, and so forth.

impersonalized and institutionalized modes of surplus extraction than proto-states or clan or tribal groupings are capable of developing. In Weber's concept, a focus around sacred monarchical and priestly authority is seen as one important initial stimulus to the formation of administrative-bureaucratic institutions evolved to secure the surpluses required for the temple and related religious-social functions. Administration based on kinship and lineage relationships, and the exploitation of kin-based modes of subordination, tend then gradually to be replaced by non-kinship-based bureaucratic or administrative systems (although kin and lineage are rarely entirely absent—again, the Assyrian example, on the one hand, with provincial governors appointed from among the ruling families, and that of the later Byzantine Empire, with its close familial networks, provide useful but very different illustrations). In most examples, a bureaucratic-administrative structure of some sort confers a clear advantage and appears to be a necessity if the political system is to retain its nontribal existence and cohesion. This point was made already by the Muslim philosopher and political analyst Ibn Khaldun, who saw this process as generally following the initial formation of a supra-tribal political entity from tribal elements under a chieftain of some sort, in which a crucial role was played by religion as a unifying element providing a new, supra-kinship set of relationships, identities, and loyalties. While Ibn Khaldun was clearly working on the basis of his knowledge of the evolution of Islamic states, his main point remains valid for any state formative process.[11]

A relatively open-ended account, allowing for both variety and evolution in state forms, is thus to be preferred to a closed and descriptive formulation, which would otherwise exclude features found in some state formations but perhaps not in others. An obvious reason for this preference is the fact that the formation of a state, and the civilizational system it may represent, is never a single event but rather a longer-term evolutionary process in which social habits and institutions and state organizations respond to changing conditions through what Runciman refers to as "competitive selection" of practices—where they fail to respond adequately, the state fails to develop further and fails. There are many different shades of "state-ness," both in respect of the degree of actual physical control and in the degree of ideological integration of the varying and often antagonistic elements occupying the territory claimed by a given central authority. Some historical states have been represented by claims to legitimacy based on consensus, having little or no power of coercion, and have survived generally for only a relatively short time. Those state elites that have military coercion at their disposal, at least in the early stages of their development, may remain relatively isolated from the social structures they live off, surviving only as long as they are able effectively to coerce or persuade support and resources. Others may move toward the establishment of a permanent and self-regenerating body of administrators, which draws its recruits from either specific groups within the state (tribal groups, for example), from particular family dynasties, or from those of a particular social or cultural background (which includes the

establishment of slave bureaucracies and armies, deracinated from their original social and cultural context and dependent entirely on the system to which they owe their position). They thus tend to evolve institutional structures—fiscal systems, military organizations, and so forth—that establish their own sets of roles and discourses, divorced from the daily practices of "ordinary" society. The state becomes a specialized and dominant set of institutions, which may even undertake the creation *ab initio* of its own administrative personnel and that can survive only by maintaining control over the appropriation and distribution of surplus wealth that this specialized personnel administers.[12] This certainly became the case in Rome and Byzantium, in the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates, and in the Ottoman and Mughal empires, for example. And it seems also that this distancing of administrative apparatus from social base as well as from the kinship ties of the royal household represents a developmental shift, a process of maturation, as we follow the evolution of state formation through time. Where the Assyrian and Achaemenid empires recruited their administrative infrastructure from the elite families of the center and provinces, bound through kinship ties or vested interests shared with the ruling dynasty and its kin, more developed bureaucratic systems recruited their personnel from a wider social range and depended upon more broadly available literary and educational possibilities. Of course, the picture is in all cases uneven and patchy, a mix of both "types," and this simplification does a certain amount of injustice to the historical cases we examine. But where we find these phenomena, we have also found "states" in the more modern sense of the term.

A key issue is clearly the potential for state formations to reproduce themselves, in contrast to the potential of a particular dynasty with its retinues based upon personal loyalties and notions of honor, obligation, and reciprocity, to maintain itself in power over a number of generations. A crucial factor in state reproduction is the evolution of a bureaucratic elite that has a sense of its own function within the state or society, even if this elite remains closely tied to a particular social stratum (such as the slave administrators of the imperial household in first-century imperial Rome or the royal household in Assyria and Persia). At higher levels of state development, this elite identifies with a particular set of ideological and symbolic narratives and can recruit and train its personnel into the institutional roles and behavioral patterns relevant to the maintenance and even expansion of these structures. The relative success of the first Islamic caliphates, the Roman and Byzantine, or the Chinese and Ottoman states, in their different forms over time in this regard, to name just a few examples, provides good illustrations of the ways in which some political formations evolved stable yet flexible structures sufficient to permit their survival over a long period, despite often major shifts in dynastic arrangements and the nature of the central authority itself. The relative failures of the early Frankish kingdoms illustrate the fate of political formations that failed to generate such structures.

The case of the Athenian Empire may be used as an illustration. In spite of its success in mobilizing a vast resource catchment area, in the form of allies and

dependent cities and territories, Athens remained remarkably jealous of its rights of citizenship, although this by no means reflected a wholly impermeable system (see Morris, in this volume). But the failure to expand citizenship and to create identities between center and periphery (with notable exceptions—Samos, for example, toward the end of the Peloponnesian War) reflected the failure to evolve an integrated imperial elite based on a broad tax base within the core territories. Athens was thus always parasitical in respect to its allied and subordinate territories, and this deprived it of the sort of structural flexibility that would have permitted it to survive the crisis of 405–404 B.C.E. and the defeat at Aegospotamoi. The failure to generate common identities within Athenian tributary territories vitiated Athenian strength at precisely the point at which it was most severely challenged.

Failure to bridge both regional and lineage identities (however spurious or artificial the latter may usually in fact have been) thus dramatically vitiated attempts by a central authority, even when supported by elements of a permanent civil or military bureaucracy, to maintain itself as an effective power with real coercive potential over more than a few generations. A similar situation was evident when the Spanish conquistadors entered Mesoamerica. The Aztec Empire they faced was not a centralized and ideologically unified organization but rather a loose tribute federation in which different Native American nations with distinct identities had been forced to pay tribute to, and recognize the suzerainty of, the Aztec leadership in Tenochtitlan. Instead of the various domains of the Aztec Empire uniting against the foreign invaders, the Tlaxcalans and other former tributary tribes took advantage of the opportunity to join with the Spanish invaders to destroy the Aztecs' power.

In general, the maintenance of ideological legitimacy and hegemony must accompany the maintenance of appropriate coercive potential in situations during which external pressures build up, and the combination is central to the long-term survival of state systems. The relatively short lifespan of the Athenian Empire and the rapid collapse of the Aztecs after the arrival of the Europeans must owe something to these systemic weaknesses. In contrast, the neo-Assyrian state of the tenth through the eighth centuries B.C.E. does appear to have been able to maintain an administrative apparatus that, although dependent upon a social and ethnic identity within the palace, was supported by the spread of a unifying religious belief in the cult of Assur. The taxation and tribute raising (and associated bureaucratic skills) that provided a stable basis for supporting this apparatus was integrated into a system of vassalage and dependency upon both the royal dynasty and the cult of Assur, which was quite deliberately introduced into the pantheon of conquered peoples.[13]

The late ancient and early medieval Persian kingdom of the Sasanids provides a good example of a remarkably successful dynasty in which ideological legitimacy and a bureaucratic administrative structure were successfully combined to hold in check powerful centrifugal tendencies, including competition among several equally powerful clans, for some four centuries. The power of the Sasanid royal house depended very largely on two interlinked factors: an ideological commitment

by a powerful group of regional clan or dynastic chiefs (the Sasanian "aristocracy," from whom the royal house was itself drawn) to the legitimacy of the dominant dynasty (which claimed politico-religious authority sanctioned both by a claim to ancient lineage and military leadership) and the willingness of that dynasty to rule without challenging the key ideological, political, or economic interests of the aristocracy upon which it was in part dependent.[14]

The failure to maintain these two interlinked factors in the course of dynastic rivalries, as well as questions of honor, shame and competition, inevitably undermined central authority. The Abbasid caliphate (750–1258) can be understood from this perspective, for already by the later ninth century the central power was heavily compromised by the growing autonomy of provincial governors and by generals commanding armies in the central lands. It could be argued that it was only the need to attain ideological legitimacy within Islam that held the wider polity together, and successful religious-ideological opposition in Africa, Egypt, and the Arabian peninsula led to its disintegration into multiple caliphates.

2. State Success and Ideological Integration

The preceding discussion emphasized the importance of an integrated bureaucratic elite with its own resource base, as well as an ideologically rooted identity and legitimacy, to sustain state formation. Yet it is clear from a cursory comparison of a number of ancient and medieval state formations that a central authority can survive for substantial periods simply through the manipulation of key ideological and symbolic elements in the cultural system of the social formation as a whole. South Indian temple culture and the attendant state structures, particularly as exemplified in the Chola and Vijayanagar empires, provide classic examples. They also illustrate the central importance of legitimation within symbolic terms of reference—that is, within the symbolic universe of a given cultural formation—and of the social and cultural groups that are generally responsible for their maintenance, whether priestly groups or official churches or cult organizations or aristocratic elites endowed with particular symbolic authority.[15]

Thus, states may have ideological lives that are not necessarily tied to their actual political and institutional efficacy or power. Political ideologies and belief systems, once in existence, are sometimes well able to adapt and to survive in conditions that have evolved significantly from those within which they were originally engendered, provided the contradictions between the two are not too extreme or insurmountable in terms of social praxis and psychology. Those that respond to long-term functional needs in human society provide the best examples and include religious systems in particular, such as Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. These systems did, to a greater or lesser degree, free themselves in certain respects from both the political and the social and economic conditions that produced them (although they may at the same time constrain the direction of social-economic evolution within those societies).

Political ideologies too can be extremely flexible. They may provide a rationale for conflict where no visible or obvious reason in terms of competition for material resources exists, for example. And they can also be extremely powerful. Many states were, in effect, little more than territories under the nominal authority of a ruler but in which actual power was exercised by a tribal-, clan- or family-based socioeconomic elite. The position of such an elite might originally have depended upon the central ruler and/or the conditions in which the state came into being (by conquest, for example), but, because of their actual control over resources or because of other historical conditions, that elite became in practice independent of the center. Yet, in such cases, we find that the very idea of a centralized kingdom or state, together with the residual power of concepts such as honor or loyalty to a particular dynastic succession or to a set of constitutional arrangements, was enough to maintain at least a fictional unity of identity. The later history of the Byzantine state from the thirteenth century to its final extinction in 1453 exemplifies this particular type of development. The Assyrian Empire in the late ninth century and the first half of the eighth century B.C.E. survived partly at least, it appears, because of the strength of these symbolic and ideological relationships, in spite of political strife at the center and the loss of certain more distant western territories. The Holy Roman Empire provided an expanded base for Hapsburg rule in central Europe up to the seventeenth century primarily through the ideological power of the Roman imperial ideal, rather than through the dynasty's coercive or organizational strength. The Japanese shogunate continued to derive legitimacy from the concept of the semidivine emperor's dominion over all Japanese, long after the role of the imperial court in national politics had become insignificant. Finally, the repeated unification of China after its initial integration under the Qin and early Han appears to be at least partly rooted in the persistent ideal of a single Chinese imperium, an ideal that survived multiple defeats and disintegrations of particular dynasties.

These points suggest that a crucial element in the longer-term success of a state formation is a degree of acceptance of that state as normatively desirable, especially by elites, but even by the broader populace from which it draws its resources. We do not mean to revive the "consensus" theory of state formation but rather to stress the significance in the structuring of political relations of power and resource distribution of rules, "law," and forms of normative behavioral patterns. These differed enormously in different historical cases. Some states survived only by virtue of their ability to coerce submission and the extraction of revenues and resources on a more or less continuous basis, such as the Aztec Empire of Mesoamerica or the empires of the Mongol "hordes." But, over the longer term, this has not been a particularly effective way of evolving or maintaining state power. A good example of more lasting imperial power is provided by the case of Rome, in which a conquest state was able to evolve an ideological hegemony that in turn generated a consensual identity among the conquered territories.[16] Although most states first evolved in the context of an imbalance between military coercion and cooperative participation,

those that have been most successful have usually generated increasingly complex relationships of reciprocity, consensus, and interdependence with leading elements of conquered groups or previous political formations, such as tribal and clan leaders, merchant elites, or aristocracies.

Many states, established after a relatively brief period of military expansion and conquest, came to rest very heavily on such ideological structures for gaining the support of varied elites, and the Indian examples mentioned already provide a good illustration of such systems. Equally, the Merovingian kingdom during the sixth and seventh centuries depended very heavily on the support and goodwill of the preexisting Gallo-Roman elite and the episcopal establishment (the two were anyway very closely integrated), especially in its southern regions,[17] while the Ottoman rulers during the fifteenth century in particular relied on their Christian vassals as a counterweight to the power of the Turkish tribal and clan elites both in the Balkans and in Asia Minor.

In the Western tradition, this ideological integration has generally been seen, until recently, at least, as a secondary aspect of state formation, a reflection, perhaps, of the dominance of military institutions and coercion in the political history of the western Eurasian world. In fact, comparison with different types of state suggests that this prioritization may be misplaced. In the southern Indian state of Vijayanagar, political power rested on the exploitation of a core region, the source of immediate royal income, while the areas furthest away from the center of military and political coercion were attached primarily through occasional military expeditions and by connections of a ritual nature. Royal rituals were centered on key religious centers and temples, through whose religious-ideological authority the rulers reinforced their legitimacy and claims to overlordship, in return for which they undertook to support such institutions through a variety of endowments, regular gifts in cash and in kind, grants of labor services, and so on. It was through their involvement in such rituals that members of dominant social groups could be incorporated within what was in practice a network of royal and spiritual patronage. At the same time, the rituals legitimated more localized authority and power, so the system as a whole provided a rationale for the prevailing political institutions and social-economic relations.

To some extent, this set of structured relationships can also be approached from Durkheim's perspective of religion as the primary and totalizing set of practices through which societies become both self-aware and can realize their identity through various political-institutional arrangements: stable and coherent social organization requires not just a degree of unifying coercion and/or lineage-based vested interests but also a normative level of mutually accepted perceptions, which exist outside such "secular" relationships yet at the same time serve to explain or situate the position of the individual or group within them. This is the function and effect of ritual observance and "religion," in the broadest sense, so that the state can also be understood—following Durkheim's logic—as the interface or instance

at which religion and the institutionalized practice of a political elite meet and integrate.[18]

The political relationships of the Vijayanagar state, and to a degree the Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, and other empires in which religious or priestly elites and temple economies played a central role, have been described by the concept "ritual polity"[19] or as the "intense ritual penetration of everyday life." But there is, of course, a danger in this notion of turning these specifically structured systems of governance into an idealist notion of theocratic, "Asiatic" stability, in which the rise and fall of states and power elites is determined by "religion" and in which economic relationships are created by the demands of religious observance and beliefs or perceptions.

In fact, it is clear that rulers were generally quite aware of the process of religious-political manipulation necessary to the maintenance of their power and especially of the need to maintain control over resources in order to invest in this ritual system on a grand scale in order to continually legitimate their position. More significant, it is clear that, when we examine a number of ancient state formations more closely, this ritual incorporative facet and the ways in which cultic systems function at both the political and the economic levels to bind a wider territory together was widespread and represented in practice one of the commonest means of empire building—whether we are concerned with the Babylonian, Assyrian, or any of the other early Near Eastern empires. The point is clear in the contributions to this volume that deal with the Assyrian and Achaemenid Persian empires, where the rulers of both empires became actively involved in the dominant cults of conquered territories, which were then assimilated into a broader network of divine relationships, participation in which guaranteed both continuing divine support and therefore political and institutional stability. Indeed, the "ritual penetration" of a society as represented by specific sets of social practices that express the legitimacy and belief system underpinning elite and central authority and that generally express and reinforce the structure of social relations of production is common to all premodern (precapitalist) social formations, but in different degrees.

The differing combinations of a specific political universe, ecological context, kinship structure, and religious configuration promoted the varying role and position of such ritual, transactional networks. In southern India, the centering of social life around a temple-oriented system of redistribution of surplus wealth and political legitimacy, combined with the particular, highly fragmented character of the political geography of the region, meant that the process of state formation was always inscribed within such relationships and the structures they generated, producing a highly inflected set of political-religious relationships in which legitimacy depended to a very great extent on consensual acceptance. The situation was not so different in ancient Assyria and Babylon.

But, in the case of Indian states, there is an additional factor to be taken into account. The ideological structures of Hinduism, and its contingent social practices,

which marked every aspect of Hindu social and political life across the whole subcontinent, tended under certain conditions to render the functions normally assumed and required of any state structure, especially those of maintaining order and internal cohesion, dangerously redundant. If we assume that states provide both centralized authority and, more important, normative rules for legal, social and economic relationships, then it becomes clear that in the Hindu context these characteristics of state organization are already present in the internal order of religious and social life—the lineage structures and caste attributions alone provide for much of this.[20] Given the permeative strength of Shari'a as a guide to day-to-day patterns of behavior down to the humblest levels of household existence, a similar case could, in fact, be made for certain varieties of Islam, although the two cases have rarely been compared, while in a few cases within Christianity—especially in certain post-Reformation movements—one could draw similar conclusions about the interface between state structures (and their functions), law, and normative social behavior. It would be interesting to examine some of the ancient state formations about which we have evidence in an attempt to see whether similar relationships did, or could, prevail, or whether, as argued by Mann, it is only the most recent salvationist systems that can achieve these results.[21]

The persistence of ideological integration can allow states to survive even with considerable administrative decentralization. State centers that are unable to maintain control and participation in the process of primary surplus distribution (through direct taxation, for example, or the ability always to coerce militarily) must attempt to survive by promoting their interests through alternative, *secondary* means of surplus *re*-distribution. Such means include the "devolution" of military and other authority, for example, to the level of the fief or an equivalent institution, as in western Europe during the period from the sixth to the sixteenth century. They include also networks of redistribution reinforced and operated through primarily religious structures.

Of course, both Islamic and Christian rulers in East and West legitimated the extraction and distribution of surplus—which is to say, in effect, the continued existence of their respective states—through political theologies, ideological narratives that highlighted the necessary duty of the state and its rulers to defend the faith and to promote the variety of associated activities which this entailed. At the same time, they had to be seen to reinforce and reaffirm their particular symbolic universe through ritualized expressions of faith and the redistribution of considerable amounts of surplus wealth to religious foundations of various types or through certain ideologically legitimating ritual actions. In the Byzantine world, the complex ceremonial of the imperial palace, the close relationship between the emperor (with the state) and the Church, and the supervision by the Church of popular beliefs and kinship structures created an impressive ideological and symbolic system of legitimation. Yet, in this particular formation, in contrast with the South Indian examples, it did not itself express also, or serve as, a key institution of surplus

distribution necessary to the economic survival of the state institution. Similar ritual networks can be seen in the Islamic world, in western Christendom, and in the Chinese Empire. And, in the case of both Christianity and Islam, ritual incorporation (that is to say, conversion) served as a fundamental tool of political integration and domination. The "segmentary" states (discussed later) of South and Central America provide closer parallels to the South Indian case, for here temple-centered redistribution of surplus and tribute was a crucial means through which surplus appropriation and political authority were maintained.[22]

An additional point should be made: such ideologically integrative systems coexist at varying levels and interact differentially with local or group-based "social memories," that is, the narratives peculiar to particular socially and/or culturally distinct groups within a social formation.[23] Various elites—religious, political, warrior, mercantile—may each have their own ideological basis for defining their identity and their relationship and integrating ties with the central authorities. Similarly, different popular groups likely have their own group narratives that establish both their identity and the accepted basis of their relationships to local elites and to central state powers. To varying degrees, these legitimating narratives for various groups need to overlap and interpenetrate in a way that creates a network of ties that supports the authority of the state. However they may have evolved, such narratives serve not only to differentiate particular sets of individuals or subgroups—families, clans, kinship units, functionally distinct entities (craftsmen and artisans, slaves, servants, soldiers, clerics, aristocrats and so forth)— from one another (dependent on cultural, political, and geographical context) but at the same time to offer a source of common ideas and shared identities when the group as a whole is confronted with something external or imposed from outside. The historical context will determine how this takes place, but it is clear that both commemorative practices and public or private ritual observance derive from such narrative structures and can offer both oppositional and integrative possibilities to both subjects and rulers of empires.[24]

3. States and Elites

Since S. N. Eisenstadt's classic study of the dynamics of empires, the pursuit of resources by elites has been seen as central to understanding imperial states. Particularly important is the nature of the power-relations that dominated elite relationships—both within state apparatuses and between elites and the broader social formation.[25] How independent of society were state functionaries, individually or as a group? How limited was state power by the social and economic relationships that dominated a given society? Was the state, as a set of institutions, dependent upon a social and economic elite or "ruling class," or upon an alliance of tribal lineages and identities (which may or may not have had any historical substance), or upon some combination of these?[26] To what extent did emergent

states incorporate existing elites? The relationships between these considerations and the origins of a given state system, on the one hand, and the appropriation, allocation, and distribution or redistribution of resources, on the other, constitute a series of focal issues.

These considerations are important because the state, through its need to establish and then maintain a regular and predictable structure for extracting revenues and resources, also enables or facilitates the evolution of new practices and relationships. This is clear in the evolution of the Roman state and empire, outlined in chapter 5, as well as in the way in which the East Roman/Byzantine state transferred the focus of its attention in fiscal matters away from urban centers to village communities during the course of the seventh and eighth centuries, thereby radically altering the ways in which social relationships between landlords and tenants, on the one hand, and between peasant producers, the state, and towns, on the other, functioned.[27] Similar examples exist in the cases of the Ottoman and Mughal states. In the Ottoman case, the growth during the seventeenth century of a local "nobility," together with the garrisoning of imperial salaried troops and Janissaries in the provinces on a permanent basis, radically altered the relationship between central government and regions (generally seen as to the disadvantage of the former); yet, such changes were made possible precisely because of the state's perceived fiscal and military requirements.[28]

Thus, the state also created spaces in which new developments could take place—the role of tax farmers in the Byzantine, Ottoman, and Mughal contexts, for example, both as extractors of revenue and as potential stimulants to changed patterns of investment or consumption of wealth, to changed structures of money use on the part of both producers and state administrations, and so on. In some cases, the existence of a central fiscal administration may have given hitherto unimportant local leaders—village headmen, small-scale local landlords—a more significant role in the process of fiscal extraction and accumulation, leading to shifts in the political order of power at the local level and ultimately reacting back on the state itself. In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Indian states, the role of pre-imperial village elites and rank attributions had a significant influence on the ways the Mughal state, for example, and its regional predecessors and successors could organize, just as the existence of centralized state apparatuses and their demands for revenue in turn affected the ways in which these local relationships worked, shaping the social space within which they could evolve.[29]

As we shall see again and again in the chapters that follow, the evolution of states, as well as considerations bearing on their stability and collapse, turned on how rulers sought new ways to maintain control over state (and often nonstate) elites, while elites sought to maintain their authority, whether at the expense of the state or of rivals for local power. And this leads in turn to a consideration of how such state-elite relationships form part of a social totality, especially in the context of both local and international pools of influence—the concentric, overlapping, and

reciprocally (but unevenly) influencing relationships that cross the boundaries of social formations.[30]

4. States, Empires, and Complexity

One important aspect of any discussion of states and their histories must be the differential processes of evolution reflected in their age or maturity. "Mature" states must confront very different problems from "young" states. The degree to which their various institutional and ideological systems become well established and embedded into the basic fabric of the social formations that support them must play an important role.

In newly formed conquest states, the conquerors are rarely integrated into the wider structure of social and economic relationships; they remain, in effect, parasitic consumers of wealth extracted by force, or the threat of force, alone. The "empire" of the late Roman Republic can be examined from this perspective. In others, while this may once have been the case, centuries of "state embedding" have occurred, so that the state elite, its apparatuses, and its ideology are inextricably interwoven into the social fabric of society at large.

Mature states also have a sense of identity and tradition, one based on generations of continuity of ideological and power structures, that is very different from that of newly founded states. These factors also influence both the contemporary and the modern views of certain states. The Byzantine "empire" was, in many respects, just a small, territorially unified state; its "imperial" aspect was both short lived and occasional, yet it retains the image of an empire because of its "imperial" origins, as part of the Roman imperial system.

This brings us at last to the question at the heart of this volume: the nature, constitution, and dynamics of empires. In a recent discussion, empires have been described very straightforwardly as the effects of the imposition of political sovereignty by one polity over others, however achieved, and the key marker of an "imperial" state was thus the degree of "foreign-ness" perceived to exist between rulers and ruled, conquerors and conquered.[31] In the simplest terms, then, the study of empires becomes the study of the subordination of one "state" or social formation by another and the extent to which the conquerors are successful in converting these peripheral zones into a part of their original state, both ideologically and in terms of fiscal, military, and administrative structures.

In some respects, this definition overlaps with the notion of the "segmentary" state, intended to suggest a multicentered, confederated political structure in which ideological elements and consensus play as great a role as centrally exercised coercive power.[32] Although many early states functioned on the basis of a series of concentric zones of power distribution, focused around a political core, we might reasonably describe "empires" on the same lines, in which case the issue of their success and longevity will revolve around the same key questions: to what extent

are empires of conquest able to impose upon the conquered lands and cultures their own ideological and cultural values and patterns of administration and elite formation and thereby create out of a range of different sociocultural formations a more or less homogeneous set of political values and ideological identities? Of all the "empires" discussed in this volume, the Roman—and its successor in the east Mediterranean basin, the Byzantine—states were perhaps the most successful in this respect. Of those not discussed here, the various Chinese states, especially from the T'ang onwards, and perhaps with the exception of the Mongol Yuan and Manchu Qing dynasties, achieved similar rates of successful integration, although the vastness of the Chinese lands and the regionalization of Chinese elites meant that this process was always contested and achieved at some cost.

Historians have generally referred to the expansive political entities of the East and pre-Renaissance Europe as "empires"—whether that of China, of Charlemagne, of Rome, Russia, Persia, Byzantium, or many others. The "national state" is then something that emerges with the renaissance monarchies of Europe. Yet in fact most so-called national states emerged through conquest or inheritance of previously distinct political or cultural domains, even in Western Europe. This was true of the integration of Ireland into the British monarchy (or monarchies, as Scotland remained institutionally distinct as well until the eighteenth century); it was true of the French incorporation of regions such as Flanders, Alsace-Lorraine, and the Burgundian inheritance; it was true of various Italian peninsular states; and it was a fortiori true for such expansive multinational entities as the properly named Prussian, Russian, and Austro-Hungarian empires. In the nineteenth century, much of Africa and south Asia was then forcibly incorporated into empires ruled from European metropoles. "Empire" was thus arguably the normal or modal form of large political entity throughout Eurasia until quite recently.

The true national state claimed by citizens as their own through their identification with a ruling elite to which *all* (or very nearly all) members of society could legitimately aspire is a quite recent phenomenon, perhaps visible only from the end of the eighteenth century in the United States and France and from the nineteenth century in South America and most of Europe. In terms of political, cultural, and social integration and ideological unity, the late Byzantine, Ming Chinese, and Tokugawa Japanese states were more "national" territorial states than was the late-eighteenth-century British monarchy, which ruled over Ireland, Scotland, and England and parts of North America, India, and the Caribbean, as well as other overseas possessions.

While some empires evolved through strategic alliances based on kinship or inheritance through gift or marriage, the majority of those political formations that we conventionally label empires were the direct result of military conquest. However, the key element that defines "empires" here is not simply their origins but rather the mode through which states and elites exercised power and defined their relationships to each other and the broader society. In our terms, an "empire" is a territory (contiguous or not) ruled from a distinct organizational center (which may be mobile) with clear ideological and political sway over varied elites who in turn exercise power over

a population in which a majority have neither access to nor influence over positions of imperial power. Such empires may over time acquire a great deal of cultural unification and identification between rulers and ruled (as in Ming China or late Imperial Rome), or there may be a clear gulf between rulers and ruled (as in the Ottoman rulers of Christian territories in Europe and most of the Mongol empires); or there may be partial integration of local elites and even limited pathways for certain ordinary individuals into broader imperial structures (as in the Janissary recruitment system of the late Ottoman Empire or the multinational elite of the Austro-Hungarians). While the particular patterns of state/elite relations and how they were institutionalized in systems of revenue extraction and distribution varied over space over time, "empire" in this sense was the typical formation by which large territorial states were ruled for most of human history, from several thousand years B.C.E. until the past century or two. While this volume concentrates on those empires that spanned the Middle East and eastern Mediterranean regions—largely because the states of Europe and China have been so often the basis for comparative analyses—the theoretical issues raised here thus are the same basic ones encountered throughout political history.

The following chapters describe and analyse such formations in respect of four key questions: how did they come into being? How did they survive? What was the structure of military/political and ideological power relations that facilitated this (or not)? And what was their economic basis in respect of the production, distribution, and consumption of wealth and also of the expansion of the base upon which wealth could be generated—whether quantitative (territorial expansion, for example), or qualitative (changing technologies of production, expanding trade, or shifts in the structures of capital investment)?

To answer any of these questions, we need first of all to determine at what level of explanatory power we wish to situate our discussion. It seems to us that there are at least three temporal frameworks across which the generation of states may be understood, which we may call for the sake of argument macro-, meso-, and micro-levels. While these are not equivalents for Braudel's long, medium, and short *durées*, they are similar in concept. The macro-level is perhaps best illustrated in the recent work by Diamond, which posits very long-term evolutionary pathways determined primarily by ecological conditions. Once a particular set of conditions has stimulated a particular set of responses in terms of demography, reproductive patterns, nutritional systems and technologies, then micro-level shifts and causal relationships are determined in their effects entirely within that set of constraints. In this framework, once the appropriation of surpluses from nature reach a certain level, and this circumstance is combined with a certain density of settlement and ability to transmit coercive force, then states and empires become possible. Ecological and evolutionary pathways then lead to further increases in density, surplus, extraction, and concentration of coercive force, or not. On these grounds, the geography, flora, and fauna of the fertile crescent at the end of the last ice age (ca. 11,000 B.C.E.) conferred specific advantages that gave the human societies that evolved there a

permanent advantage over those in other areas that were unable to offer those conditions.[33] At this level of generality, of course, the value of specific data in terms of historical political systems is merely that it should not contradict the evolutionary pathways thus sketched out, and it is of little help in determining the causal relationships behind the rise and fall of specific imperial formations within ecological regions.

At the meso-level of explanation, however, we can begin to grasp issues pertaining to specific empires and peoples and the way they affected a particular trajectory of development. Here, we are confronted with particular but broadly located cultural systems set within specific geopolitical contexts (for example, the fertile crescent, the Indus valley, the Eurasian steppe, the central and western European zone, the mountain and plateau regions of central and south America) associated with particular types of political structure. Such differences tend to reflect fairly straightforwardly geographical catchment areas—contrast China, with its extensive cereal and rice culture, extensive power relationships, vast manpower resources, and consequent assumptions about use and availability of labor and so on, and the microcosmic systems of the southern Balkans, Asia Minor and the Mediterranean basin, or again the Indian subcontinent, with its contiguous zones of relatively open plain, semi-arid coastal and plateau regions, mountains, and forest.

At the micro-level, finally, we need to differentiate within these broader contexts and interrogate local variations (in both time and space) in social, cultural, and political life, including fortuitous shifts in social relations instigated by issues of resource availability, competition, and access to centers of production and distribution, density and rate of reproduction of population groups, and the relations of social *re*-production. That is to say, within the broad parameters of a given imperial system, we need to recognize the contingent patterns of kinship, control of resources, and allocation of power and authority, which can vary over time and space in response to highly specific conditions.

The contributions in this volume range from the macro- to the micro-level, although the emphasis is, for most contributors, on the meso- and micro-levels. One of the most important issues that emerges is that of avoiding an overly reductionist model—although lack of firm empirical data often makes this problematic—in grasping the actual workings of a given state formation in its social, economic, and political context. For several of the empires covered in this volume, the preponderance of archaeological and documentary evidence concerns the state, its projects and operations. Thus, an imbalance naturally emerges, with attention to the state's internal structure and its relations to elites playing a far greater role in analysis than the equally important–from a theoretical point of view—relationship between elites and local populations or the social relations governing daily life within the empire.

The limitations of definitions of state organization confined for the most part to governmental and administrative structures must be obvious, yet the discussion has generally been confined—with some exceptions—to this level. Thus, the role

and function of the different elements that constitute the "ordinary" populations of states and their day-to-day activities have been generally ignored. Sadly, concepts of state power and authority have too often built upon this imbalance as if it were natural, so that the study of the state has for the most part been confined by the limits imposed by nineteenth- and twentieth-century concepts of centralized states and societies. This has meant, in particular, that historians have been constrained by notions of societal evolution that begin with "the primitive" and end up with the modern nation state, a teleology that has generally placed Western European societies at the forefront of "progress" and "development" and makes the rest of the world, in consequence, either a victim or a benefactor of Western "advances." While this strongly ideological perspective has been challenged sufficiently strongly in recent decades to merit only a mention here, we should be aware that it continues to exercise a certain attraction, especially when "ancient" empires are discussed as precursors to a later "rise of the West."

Equally suspect has been "state centrism," an approach that conceives of imperial states as sets of centralized operational processes and that denies local infrastructural autonomy to regions away from the central territories. This approach tends also to encourage a cyclical approach to historical change, in which the rise and decline of central state power is seen as a wholly internal process that occurs abstracted from any change in the broader society and its economic and social relations. In contrast to Europe, for example, some regions, such as South Asia, the Islamic realm, and China, are seen as lacking in cumulative and consequential processes. Each polity is taken as an object of research in itself and, usually, in isolation, so that it is characterized as having a period of growth, expansion, and consolidation, followed by a period of decline, to be replaced eventually by a new and, at the same time, derivative political structure, each of which is founded on the same unchanging social base. Again, this has been challenged and a more sophisticated approach proposed in more recent debate.[34]

One way of challenging these assumptions—where the empirical data are available, of course—is to attempt a detailed analysis of the evidence for what have been referred to as the "unofficial infrastructures" within which and upon which the more obvious "official" or public forms of government and state administration in most states are built. This may take a variety of forms, but its premise is that only rarely do novel forms of political structure arise from a vacuum (i.e., the complete annihilation of all that went before). Rather, elements of processual and structural continuity as well as change are universally present in the growth of any "new" system. The analysis may be focused on a range of themes, including, for example, the role of household administrations, of accounting systems, of clerical and exchange media, of networks of inherited rights and jurisdictional claims, and of popular socioeconomic solidarities and local ideologies and identities.

Wider structures of governmental administration arise out of a multiplicity of infrastructural relationships, many of which may remain entirely invisible to the