Introduction
Empires and Their Space*

Yuri Pines with Michal Biran and Jörg Rüpke

NEBUCHADNEZZAR: Where are you from?
ANGEL: From there, beyond Lebanon.
NEBUCHADNEZZAR: As established by the great king Nebuchadnezzar, the universe ends beyond Lebanon. This view is shared by all the geographers and astronomers.
ANGEL (LOOKING AT HIS MAP): Beyond Lebanon there are still some villages: Athens, Sparta, Carthage, Moscow, Peking. Do you see? (*shows king the map*).
NEBUCHADNEZZAR (ASIDE): I shall also have the Geographer Royal hanged. (*To the Angel*): The great king Nebuchadnezzar will conquer these villages too.
(Friedrich Dürrenmatt, *An Angel Comes to Babylon*, 1953)

This is a book about Eurasian empires and their spatial dimensions. What were the factors that prompted their expansion and caused some of their leaders to embark on ever more costly wars on the increasingly remote frontiers? And, conversely, what were the factors that limited this expansion? How did the builders and custodians of major empires conceive of their space? And what measures did they take to integrate this vast space into a coherent political entity? To what extent were imperial expansion and contraction influenced by common factors – from ecology to ideology, from military and economic considerations to the nature of the ruling elite? How did these distinct factors influence the trajectories of individual empires?

This book is envisioned as the first in a series of focused studies of the common problems faced by the major Eurasian empires throughout history. We start our discussion by outlining the rationale of our project. Then we present our working definition of the term "empire" and briefly outline three waves of empire formation in Eurasia, introducing therewith the empires on which our project – including the current volume – focuses. The largest part of this introduction is devoted to the analysis of ideological, ecological, military, economic, political, and administrative considerations that prompted the imperial

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expansion and contraction. In a nutshell, we believe that so many causes – domestic and foreign, subjective and objective – influenced the trajectories of individual empires that it is all but impossible to come out with an "one-size-fits-all" explanation of the empires' spatial dimensions. What is possible is to outline the relative weight of each of these factors and to analyze commonalities and differences in how empires dealt with spatial challenges.

1 Introducing Comparative Imperiology

To understand the background for our endeavor, it will be useful to briefly revisit the changing attitudes to the word "empire" in political discourse at large and in academic circles in particular during the last century. Recall that at the turn of the 20th century, most of the world was ruled by political entities that proudly identified themselves as "empires." Among the major powers of that age, only France and the United States called themselves republics. Lesser colonial powers – Belgium, Holland, Italy, Portugal, and the then recently battered Spain – were headed by kings. Other great Western powers – Britain, Germany, Russia, and Austria-Hungary – defined themselves as empires. Among the non-conquered parts of Asia and Africa, imperial titles (or their equivalents) were borne by the rulers of China, Japan, Korea, Annam (Vietnam), the Ottoman Empire, and Ethiopia. To be sure, some of these "emperors" were not awe-inspiring rulers: think of the puppet emperor of Annam, ruling a French protectorate, or the short-lived "Great Korean Empire" (1897–1910), en route to being fully annexed by Japan. Yet the very fact that these leaders sought an imperial title testifies to the enormous prestige of the words "emperor" and "empire" at that time.

This prestige, however, turned out to be short-lived. Few empires survived the vicissitudes of World War I, and even fewer remained intact after World War II. Since the abolition of the short-lived Central African Empire (1976–9), only the Japanese head of the state continues to maintain the title of emperor, but "empire" is absent from the official self-designation of Japan. This is not surprising. Already half a century ago, an author of one study of imperial formations noticed: "Empire has become an ugly word" (Hazard 1965: 1; cf. Garnsey and Whittaker 1978: 1). Being associated primarily with the predatory imperialism of the 19th and 20th centuries, the idea of empire was denounced by liberals and Marxists alike. It was correlated with enslavement, denial of freedom, and "unnatural" subjugation to a supreme authority (Wesson 1967).[1] Needless to say, this intellectual atmosphere did not encourage systematic studies of past empires.

[1] This enmity toward the idea of empire, and the view that it is "unnatural" in distinction to the nation-state, can be traced back to Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803). For him and other late 18th-century critics of the imperial idea, and their failure to influence the 19th-century European political thought, see Muthu 2009.

It is against this backdrop that we can understand the immense audacity of S. N. Eisenstadt, who in the early 1960s undertook a bold project of outlining a political typology of the major imperial formations in human history (Eisenstadt 1963). Back then, few if any scholars followed his lead. Throughout the rest of the 20th century, discussions of empires were overwhelmingly focused on the immediate context of the modern-age imperialism and its historical roots (for a notable exception, see Mann 1986). In the meantime, the rapidly accumulating knowledge of the historical peculiarities of each of the major empires of the past has challenged the very possibility that a single scholar – even as brilliant as Eisenstadt – might create an analytical framework able to satisfy critical historians.[2] This may have further discouraged the continuation of Eisenstadt's project.[3]

And then, after a very long lull in interest in empire, the pendulum started swinging back. Since the beginning of the 21st century, and especially in the last decade, the number of publications related to empires as distinct political formations has increased exponentially. Dozens of collected volumes and monographs have appeared, and the pace of publication has accelerated. These volumes differ greatly in their emphasis. Some introduce different case studies of imperial formations worldwide (e.g., Alcock et al. 2001; Münkler 2007; Gehler and Rollinger 2014), while others are more focused spatially or temporally (e.g., Morris and Scheidel 2009; Cline and Graham 2011; Düring and Stek 2018). Some offer a systematic comparison between a few paradigmatic empires, notably the Roman and Chinese Empires (Mutschler and Mittag 2008; Scheidel 2009; Scheidel 2015), while others try to re-chart world history from a distinctive "imperial" perspective (e.g., Burbank and Cooper 2010; Reinhard 2015a). Some focus on empires as promoters of commercial and cultural interaction (Kim et al. 2017; Di Cosmo and Maas 2018), others explore their administrative systems (Crooks and Parsons 2016a), their policies of cultural integration (Lavan et al. 2016a), their cultural arsenal (Bang and Kolodziejczyk 2012), and the like. One cannot but be impressed by the immense richness of these recent studies.

There are many reasons for the renewed interest in the imperial formations of the past among historians, sociologists, and more recently political scientists. Some are related to immediate political contingencies. What appeared at the beginning of the 21st century as the unstoppable rise of US unilateralism and militarism aroused stormy debates about the relevance of past imperial projects

[2] Eisenstadt himself may have realized this difficulty. In his comparative study of urbanization (Eisenstadt and Shachar 1987), he opted at least for a co-author.

[3] Note that whereas Eisenstadt's impact on historians remained limited, his book had a larger impact on sociologists. The imperial visions, elites, and strategies that he discovered were the main themes that ultimately led to the civilizational turn of the 1970s and a radical break with structural-functionalism (Johann Arnason, personal communication, 2018).

to the current US trajectory. Social scientists and historians alike participated in subsequent heated exchanges (see, e.g., Mann 2003; Ferguson 2004; Pomper 2005; Calhoun et al. 2006; Münkler 2007; Pitts 2010; Kagan 2010; McCoy 2012; Blanken 2012, and many others). This is an understandable and common phenomenon of what in China is called "using the past to serve the present."[4] For social scientists, analyzing early empires through the prism of modern politics may well be advantageous, but for historians there is a major pitfall: contemporary concerns may dictate a selective reading of the past and the glossing over of important phenomena that are irrelevant to current questions. Worse, some scholars may be prone to dismiss previous imperial experiences just in order to reject the dangers of modern imperialism (e.g., Parsons 2010).

Yet immediate contingency aside, other developments in recent decades have brought about the resurrection of interest in empires. The most notable was the weakening of the erstwhile paradigm of the progressive shift from empires to "natural" nation-states. The erosion of certain aspects of nation-state sovereignty in the rapidly globalizing world, most notably the formation of the European Union, caused many scholars to critically rethink the centrality of nation-states in world history. Parallel to that, the bloody conflicts of the 1990s with their element of ethnic cleansing (e.g., in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda) further undermined the nation-state appeal. It is against this backdrop that historians turned to imperial examples, absolving the word "empire" from its previous pejorative connotations (Burbank and Cooper 2010; Lavan et al. 2016b). Other scholars questioned the empire/nation-state dichotomy, arguing that at least in some cases empires acted not as an antithesis but as direct precursor to nation-states (Kumar 2010; Berger and Miller 2015; cf. Malešević 2017). As explorations of the imperial trajectories of the past advanced, scholars were able "to shed ourselves of the nineteenth-century baggage which tended to present the great agrarian empires as avatars of stagnation" (Bang and Bayly 2011b, 8). The road to open-minded exploration of the past empires had been cleared.[5]

It is these later trends that inform our project. We want to address Eurasian empires by focusing on their own dynamics: neither through modern, nor through post-modern (Negri and Hardt 2000) lenses; neither as an antecedent to nation-states, nor as a foil to current superpowers or transnational organizations. Empires are fascinating in their own right: owing to their past prestige,

[4] For instance, much of research on early empires in the 19th-century United Kingdom was intrinsically linked with the contemporaneous imperial project (see Bayly 2011). Historically, astute empire builders worldwide were keen students of past precedents (for one example, see Elliott 2005).

[5] For a good example of changing attitudes toward empires, see a highly positive account of the imperial enterprise in Yuval N. Harari's popular *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (Harari 2015, 188–208).

their lasting cultural impact, their remarkable successes, and also to their failures and the historical lessons that can be learned from these. A systematic comparative analysis of major imperial formations in the past will contribute, so we hope, not just to the nascent field of "comparative imperiology," but also to broader studies of Eurasian and global history.

Our project, of which the current volume is the first publication, is aimed to further develop "comparative imperiology" by proposing systematic analyses of certain aspects of empire-building. We want to single out common problems faced by major imperial polities and to investigate how different empires in various parts of the world and in distinct periods of imperial formation tackled those problems. Rather than producing a single volume that would try to amalgamate the entire imperial experience across time and space, we aim at a series of publications with well defined sets of questions addressed by all the contributors. The current volume, which deals with the questions of imperial space and its perceptions, is the first step in this direction.

2 What Is an Empire?

One of the trickiest questions for authors and editors of comparative studies of empires is the definition of empire. The long history of the term "empire" and of its derivative and related terms (Latin *imperium*, *imperator*, or modern "imperialism") creates inevitable terminological confusion (see, e.g., Reynolds 2006). Not a few theorists reject the possibility of producing an adequate definition at the current stage of our knowledge. For instance, Johann Arnason (2015, 494) plainly states: "Given the enormous variety of imperial regimes, and the unsatisfactory state of comparative research, we cannot begin with a general definition of empire as a category." This is a fair assessment (and a fair criticism of comparative research), but it cannot serve as a starting point for a comparative volume. After all, without producing at least a temporary working definition of what an empire is we cannot proceed toward selecting case studies for a comparative endeavor. Although not all of the comparative volumes start with the discussion of what an empire is, several authors and editors did provide useful answers. For instance, Burbank and Cooper proposed:

> Empires are large political units, expansionist or with a memory of power extended over space, polities that maintain distinction and hierarchy as they incorporate new peoples. (Burbank and Cooper 2010, 8)

Burbank and Cooper contrast the empire with the nation-state, which "proclaims the commonality of its people" and "tends to homogenize those inside its borders and exclude those who do not belong." The problem of this juxtaposition, however, is that nation-states are a relatively recent phenomenon, and it is not

clear how to apply the distinction between empires and smaller-scale states in pre-modern periods. This may lead to some questionable conclusions, such as the one reached by Reinhard (2015b, 15): "in the period 1350–1750, there are only 'empires' throughout the world."

One of the most sophisticated recent discussions of empires and states is that by Goldstone and Haldon (2009). They concluded that empire is:

> A territory . . . ruled from a distinct organizational center . . . with clear ideological and political sway over varied elites, who in turn exercise power over a population in which a majority have neither access nor influence over positions of imperial power. (Goldstone and Haldon 2009, 18–19)

Goldstone and Haldon's construct is surely more impressive than a minimalistic definition according to which certain states were empires "because they identified themselves as empires" (Kagan 2010, 9). However, it still poses an immediate problem, well identified by Goldstone and Haldon themselves: it turns an empire into "the typical formation by which large territorial states were ruled for most of human history." Once again, the definition becomes so inclusive as to undermine the possibility of meaningful discussions of imperial peculiarity.[6]

The inclusiveness of the above definitions is mirrored in a great variety of recent volumes that discuss imperial formations (e.g., Alcock et al. 2001; Reinhard 2015b; and even, despite their attempts to narrow the definition of empires, Bang and Bayly 2011a). This inclusiveness is understandable and even laudable as an antidote to the narrow Eurocentric discussions that dominated studies of empires until the relatively recent past (of which Doyle 1978 is a paradigmatic example). However, eagerness to recognize a great variety of pre-modern and early modern polities as "empires" creates a new set of methodological problems. Sheldon Pollock complained:

> The term [empire] has become so elastic that scholars can speak, without qualification, of a Swedish or a Maratha empire in the seventeenth century, a Tibetan or a Wari empire a millennium earlier. (Pollock 2006, 177)

Pollock's complaint is understandable. At times, it seems that the number of polities that can be qualified as "empire" is almost limitless. Should, for instance, the Athenian *thalassokratia* count as an empire?[7] Or regional regimes

[6] In distinction from most other analyses of the term empire, Münkler (2007, 9) proposes to start with a temporal rather than spatial definition. He qualifies as empires polities that "have gone through at least one cycle of rise and decline and had begun a new one." It is an interesting interpretation, but not necessarily useful in determining the distinctions between empires and other large polities. Besides, even a short-lived empire – such as Qin (221–207 BCE) in China or that of Alexander the Great – could have a tremendous long-term impact.

[7] For an excellent discussion which tends to answer negatively, see Morris 2009; cf. Smarczyk 2007.

on Chinese soil during the periods of political fragmentation, even when they controlled just a single province far away from the traditional loci of imperial authority (Schafer 1954)? Or sub-Saharan Ghana (7th–11th centuries) (Tymowski 2011)? Or the "Angevin empire" (1154–1204) (Gillingham 2016)? Or the "kinetic empire" of the Comanches in the 19th century (Hämäläinen 2008)? The answers to each of these questions may well be positive.[8] But there is an obvious danger that by trying to cast our net as widely as possible, we weaken our ability to identify distinctive imperial cultural and political repertoire. Therefore, as the first step it would be advisable to focus only on major imperial polities, the qualification of which as empires is less controversial. Having properly understood their patterns of functioning, we may then utilize these understandings for analyzing other imperial and quasi-imperial cases.

This need to narrow the definition of empire was noticed recently by Bang and Bayly, who proposed a concept of "world empires":

> We have emphasized those that could credibly be called world-empires; in other words, vast empires that dominated their wider worlds and were able to absorb many of their competitors and reduce them either to taxpaying provinces or tributary client kingdoms. Their rulers saw themselves as universal emperors, claiming supremacy over all other monarchs. (Bang and Bayly 2011b, 6–7)

We consider Bang and Bayly's narrower definition as a step in the right direction. In what follows we shall confine ourselves to what they define as "world empires." Two of their points – the universalistic pretensions of the empire's leaders and their ability to dominate their wider world – fit well with each of the case studies discussed in this volume. Moreover, as we shall argue below, it is precisely the avowed desire to attain "universal" rule – at the very least within the empire's macro-region – that distinguished the empires from other expansive territorial states or European colonial powers. Without at least a pretension to maintain superiority over its neighbors, an empire loses its most essential imperial feature.

This understanding explains why we have opted to leave European colonial powers out of this volume. (The only exception is Russia, which, as Burbank [Chapter 10] demonstrates in this volume, was primarily indebted to the Mongolian, or in Burbank's definition, "Eurasian" mode of empire-building.) Europe did not lack individual emperors who tried to dominate the entire continent (and not just their overseas colonies): Charles V (1500–58) (Tracy 2002) and most notably Napoleon (Woolf 1991) come immediately to mind. Yet they were exceptions, not the rule. For most of the time, European colonial empires could satisfy themselves with a status of equality with other major continental powers, or, at most, strive for the *primus inter pares* type of

[8] For the most extreme example of inclusive approach, see the recently published *Encyclopedia of Empire* with over 400 entries (MacKenzie 2016).

dominance (as was observable in the case of Great Britain). This normative acceptance of equality with neighboring states distinguishes European colonial empires from their Eurasian predecessors. Hence, for the time being, we prefer not to discuss these case studies and focus on the empires with less equivocal universalistic claims.

3 Eurasian Empires: Spatial and Temporal Distinctions

Our exploration of "world empires" is limited to the Eurasian continent (including North African regions that were ruled from time to time by Eurasian empires). This spatial focus is not fortuitous. Eurasia comprises no less than five macro-regions – namely, Europe, the Near East, the Indian subcontinent, the steppe belt of Inner Asia, and continental East Asia – that are useful for the comparative study of empires. The macro-regions as defined here are primarily a heuristic construct: namely, vast areas within which human interaction (and the resultant cultural cohesiveness) is usually higher than with the outlying areas. The boundaries of the macro-regions are defined primarily by topography and ecology, especially in the case of the Indian subcontinent and East Asia, in which mountain ranges and deserts separate the agriculturally productive heartland from other macro-regions. In the case of Europe and the Middle East, topography is less inhibitive of intensive contacts and the borders of the areas to the north and to the east of the Mediterranean are less clearly defined. This said, for most of human history, these areas were sufficiently politically and culturally distinct to merit treating them as two separate macro-regions. As for the Inner Asian steppe belt, it is distinguished from other Eurasian areas less by topography and more by a peculiar climate and soil quality that make most of this huge region less productive agriculturally but exceptionally fit for pastoral nomadism. Nomadic mobility and the lack of natural barriers between the steppe and other macro-regions allowed the steppe empires to penetrate other macro-regions (and even to rule parts of them) more easily than was possible in other cases. These penetrations and borrowings from sedentary neighbors notwithstanding, the nomads continuously maintained their distinctive political culture (Biran, Chapter 6, this volume), which allows one to speak of the steppe belt as a specific macro-region.

These five Eurasian macro-regions were selected for this study because of the exceptional importance of imperial formations in their history.[9] First, each had an imperial experience of over twenty centuries. Second, major empires established in each macro-region had a profound impact on the political, social,

[9] To be sure, other parts of the Eurasian continent, such as Southeast Asia, also had their own imperial or quasi-imperial experiments, but, arguably, these were usually shorter and less consequential for their macro-region's history. Hence, these areas are not discussed in our volume.

and cultural history of their respective realms. Third, and importantly for our endeavor, these major empires are usually well documented (through transmitted texts, paleographic sources, and material evidence, or at least through the accounts of their neighbors, biased as they may be), which allows meaningful reconstruction of their distinct trajectories and their political and cultural repertoire. Moreover, although our study does not focus on modern and current politics (except for the final part of Burbank's Chapter 10), it is worth noticing that the imperial past continues to influence the present-day dwellers of each of these macro-regions in myriad ways.

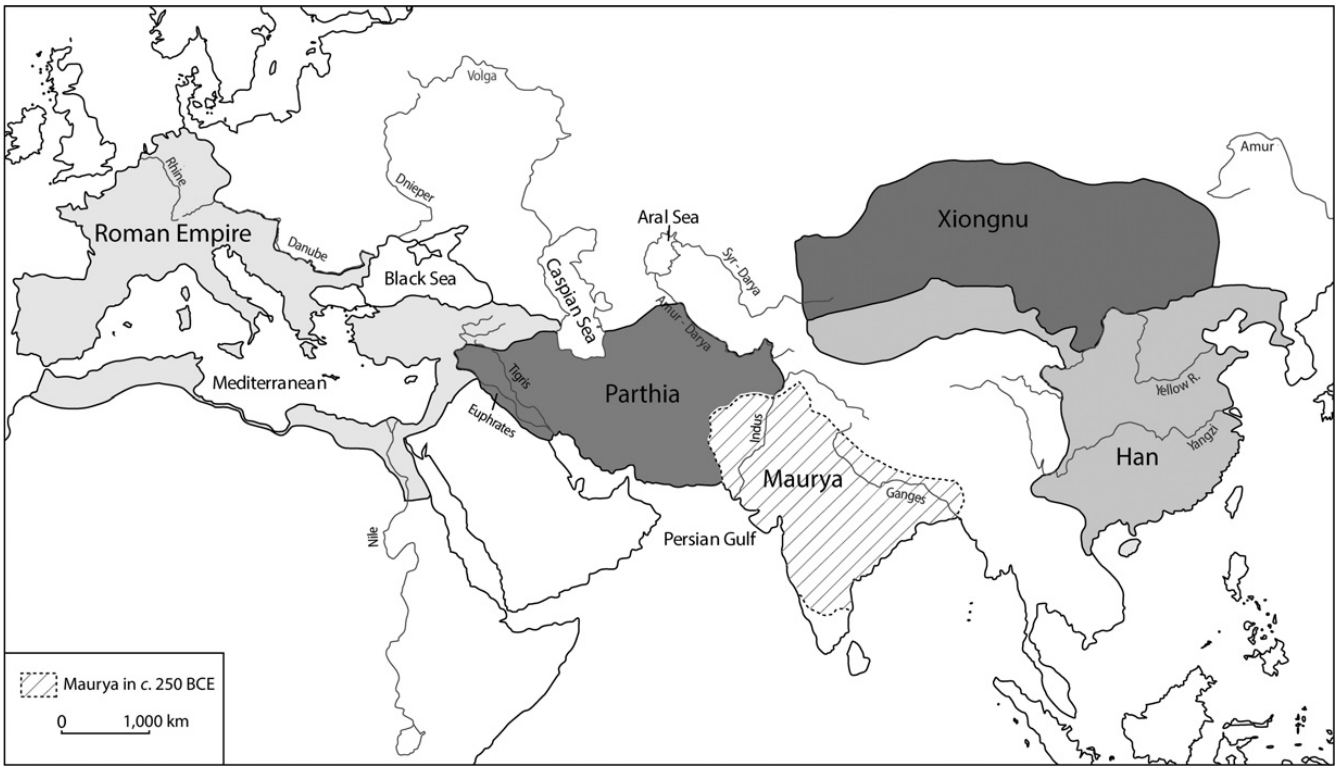
Speaking of macro-regions is furthermore heuristically convenient because most (but not all) of the empires self-styled as "universal" were focused primarily on ascertaining their direct or indirect control over their macro-region, while accepting – openly or tacitly – that areas beyond their immediate realm could neither be fully incorporated nor even meaningfully subjugated. It should be immediately emphasized here that the Eurasian macro-regions were by no means isolated from each other. Some exceptionally powerful imperial polities – from the Achaemenids to the Romans, the Caliphate, and, most notably, the Mongols – were able to transcend, even if briefly, their macro-regional boundaries. More importantly, the rise of the earliest empires in the three western and two eastern regions was an inter-connected process (see below). Moreover, aspects of the imperial repertoire could travel across Eurasia (sometimes even from one edge to another). We should not err by over-emphasizing macro-regional exclusivity. This said, the basic political trajectory of imperial (and non-imperial) formations in each of the macro-regions was usually more indebted to the region's indigenous political culture than to outside influences.

Speaking in macro-historical terms, it may be useful to discern three periods in Eurasian imperial history. The first, spanning the middle of the 1st millennium BCE to the first centuries of the Common Era (but with much earlier antecedents in Mesopotamia), can be called the age of early or "first-wave" empires. In Mesopotamia, the first quasi-imperial polities had already appeared by the end of the 3rd millennium BCE, and by the end of the 2nd millennium BCE territorial expansion had become a regular feature of governance, especially in the case of Assyria (*c.*1300–609 BCE). This expansion radically intensified in the last century and a half of the so-called Neo-Assyrian Empire and its successor, the Neo-Babylonian Empire (609–539 BCE). The latter was taken over by the Achaemenids (539–333 BCE), who dramatically expanded the territory under their control, becoming, arguably, the first "world empire" in Eurasian history (Briant, Chapter 1, this volume). The Achaemenid realm spanned the entire area between the Indian subcontinent and Europe. Their imperial enterprise (inherited and briefly reenacted with even more grandeur by Alexander the Great [356–323 BCE], "the last of the Achaemenids" [Briant 2002: 876]) had profound influence

on both fringes of the Near East. In the east, it may have contributed to the formation and functioning of the Maurya Empire (late 4th to early 2nd centuries BCE), the first imperial entity on the Indian subcontinent (Pollock 2005). In the West, through Alexander's intermediary, it contributed first to the Hellenistic empires (Strootman 2014), and ultimately to the Roman Empire, the single most successful continental imperial enterprise on European soil (Spickermann, Chapter 3, this volume).

Independent of these developments, a parallel process of imperial formation started on the opposite edge of Eurasia. Early dynastic entities in continental East Asia, the Shang (*c.*1600–1046 BCE), and Zhou (*c.*1046–255 BCE), were not empires but contained the seeds of the future imperial repertoire much like early Mesopotamian quasi-imperial entities. The disintegration of the Zhou polity brought about a prolonged period of intense inter-state competition, during which the ideal of political unification of "All-under-Heaven" as the only means for ensuring lasting peace came into being. The Qin unification (221–207 BCE) was the realization – albeit violent and much maligned in later generations – of this common ideal. The Qin model, modified under its heir, the Han dynasty (206/202 BCE–220 CE) became the foundation of subsequent Chinese imperial regimes (Pines, Chapter 2, this volume). Parallel to the Qin unification, the formation of the first nomadic empire – that of the Xiongnu – took place. This empire was preceded by a long period of political experimentation among earlier nomadic polities and the fashioning of a nomadic culture that stretched across the Eurasian Steppe (Khazanov 2015), but the scope and relative stability of the Xiongnu empire were novel in the steppe. The simultaneous appearance of East Asian and Inner Asian empires was not accidental, although the precise nature of the relations between the two processes is still debated (Barfield 1989 vs. Di Cosmo 2002) (Map 0.1).

These first-wave empires played an exceptional role in the subsequent history of their respective macro-regions. They were a source of inspiration for future empire builders. Their political repertoire and its associated cultural symbols were utilized and reinterpreted by numerous political entities within their macro-region and beyond. Their memories lived for centuries and in some cases for millennia to come; their cultural impact is perceptible well into our days. These were also among the most innovative and audacious imperial polities in human history. Aside from synthesizing, adapting, and modifying institutions and practices borrowed from their predecessors and from subjugated contemporaries, these empires had to develop new modes of rulership and a new cultural repertoire to deal with their extraordinary broad space. Having no clear imperial precedents in their respective macro-regions, the leaders of these early empires were most prone to improvise, to develop novel methods of governance, and also to stretch the limits of territorial expansion, as discussed in section 4.



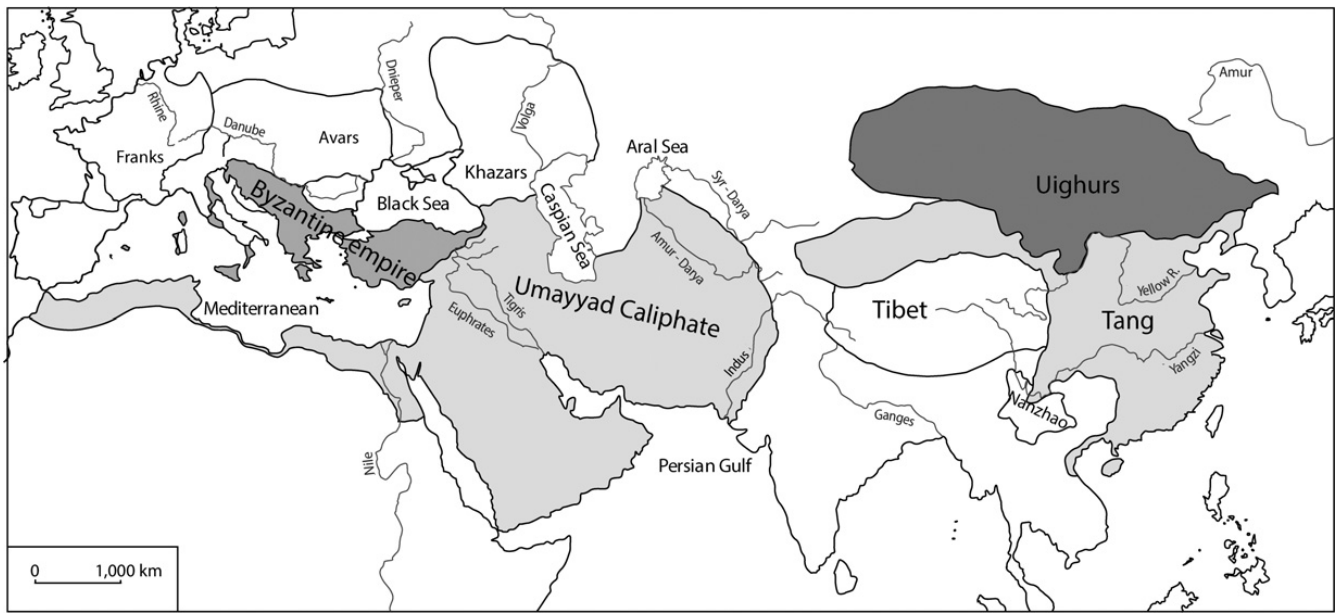
Map 0.1 Major Eurasian empires, *c*.1 CE. Produced on the basis of the "Interactive World History Atlas since 3000 BC" (http://geacron.com/home-en/?sid=GeaCron44764).

Eventually, these early empires entered into their distinctive systemic crises, causing major setbacks to the imperial rule throughout the continent. The crisis first erupted in the Indian subcontinent, where the Maurya empire did not long outlive its most illustrious ruler, Aśoka (r. *c*.268–232 BCE) (Thapar 1961). In Europe and the steppes, the empires survived for much longer, but in both cases the demise of the Xiongnu and the Roman empires caused a prolonged lull in empire-building. Elsewhere (the Near East and East Asia), the rupture was less dramatic, and the imperial system remained largely intact. Yet even the largest empires formed in the second quarter of the 1st millennium CE – such as the Roman Empire of the East (Byzantine Empire) (330–1204; Preiser-Kapeller, Chapter 4, this volume), Sasanian Iran (224–651), some of the Chinese post-Han dynasties, most notably Northern Wei (386–534), as well as the Indian Gupta Empire (fourth-sixth centuries) and the Rouran Khaganate (402–555) in the Mongolian steppes – invariably failed fully to restore the grandeur of their predecessors, especially in spatial terms.

By the 6th and 7th centuries CE we witness the formation of more successful imperial regimes across the continent. Sui (581–618) and Tang (618–907, prosperous until 755) in China, the Turkic Khaganate (552–630/659 and 682–744) in the steppes, and most notably the Arab Caliphate (632–1258, with its peak in the first two centuries) in the Near East and beyond – all succeeded in matching or even outdoing their predecessors in terms of territorial expansion, domestic stability, and dazzling prosperity (Map 0.2). Most of these "second-wave" empires – with the notable exception of the Caliphate – tended to present themselves as restorers of past imperial glory in their macro-region, and were less committed to driving outward into the unknown. Nonetheless, territorially speaking, two of these empires (the Turks and Tang) succeeded, even if briefly, in expanding beyond the limits of the Xiongnu and Han, respectively, thereby becoming an additional and more attractive source of inspiration to future imperial entities in their realm and beyond.

The second age of imperial prosperity did not encompass all of the macro-regions discussed here. In the post-Gupta Indian subcontinent several expansive territorial polities emerged, but these were markedly smaller than either the Maurya or the Gupta empires. In Europe, the successors of the Roman Empire – the Carolingians (800–88) and later the Holy Roman Empire in the West (inasmuch as the latter qualifies as an "empire" at all, which is debatable),[10] and the badly battered Byzantine Roman Empire in the East – remained unable to reenact Roman successes, and in the West were not even able to ensure domestic stability for more than a generation or two. Ultimately, in the history of both India and Europe major continental empires became an exception rather than the rule.

[10] For a short take on this long-debated question, see Scales 2018.



Map 0.2 Major Eurasian empires, *c.*750 CE. Produced on the basis of the "Interactive World History Atlas since 3000 BC" (http://geacron.com/home-en/?sid=GeaCron44764).

In the mid-9th century major empires in Eastern and Western Eurasia entered a new period of prolonged crisis. The Abbasid Caliphate weakened by domestic struggles disintegrated after 861 into what can be called the Muslim Commonwealth: the caliphs preserved their nominal authority over much (but not all) of this commonwealth, but were stripped of a large part of their political power (Bonner 2010; Kennedy 2010; cf. Peacock, Chapter 5, this volume). In the steppe, the extinction of the politically highly successful Uighur Khaganate (744–840) left a power vacuum that was not filled in for centuries to come (Drompp 1999). And in China, the partial resurrection of the Tang dynasty in the early 9th century came to an end with a series of popular rebellions from which the Tang had never recovered, eventually collapsing in 907 (Peterson 1979; Somers 1979).[11]

The 9th century crises had severe repercussions on imperial polities. Throughout Eurasia, the multi-polar systems ("commonwealths"; see more section 4.2) replaced the previous situation in which a single major locus of gravity existed in every macro-region. This multi-polarity was true even in the East Asian subcontinent (Rossabi 1983), where the ideological aversion to political fragmentation was the greatest (Pines 2012: 11–43).[12] Empires formed in the 10th century and later were more modest in their ambitions than their predecessors, and in certain macro-regions, notably the steppe, no empire rose to power for several centuries. Had this situation continued, one may speculate that even the discourse of universality and imperial inclusiveness would have eventually died out. However, this discourse – and the accompanying praxis of an expansionist empire – was resurrected on an unprecedented scale with the advent of the Mongol Empire (13th–14th centuries).

Mongol rule was unique in Eurasian history. For the first and last time, three of the five imperial macro-regions (and precisely the three where the "second-wave" empires were most successful, namely, East Asia, Inner Asia, and much of the Near East) were controlled by a single ruling house (Biran, this volume and Map 6.1, p. 221). The Mongols' century and a half or so of effective control (1206–1368) reshaped the political, social, and cultural dynamics of these regions for centuries to come (Biran 2007, this volume). No single imperial polity, with

[11] The crises that struck major Eurasian empires in the middle of the 9th century (to which one may add the disintegration of the Tibetan Empire in 842 and, on the other edge of Europe, of the Carolingians after 840) were not related to each other. In East Asia, however, they may have been exacerbated due to the severe 9th-century drought (Di Cosmo et al. 2018).

[12] It should be mentioned here that multi-polarity existed in East Asia much earlier: e.g., during the first decades of the Han dynasty, which had to acquiesce to the bi-polar contest with the Xiongnu (Pines, Chapter 2, this volume) and during the lengthy period following the collapse of the Han dynasty in 220 CE. It remained visible even in the period of the Tang dynasty's ostensibly unilateral hegemony (Wang Zhenping 2013). What differed in the 10th to 13th centuries is that the main Chinese dynasty, the Song, had to accept what Wang Gungwu (1983) aptly names "the rhetoric of a lesser empire," undermining therewith its own legitimacy. For the impact of this dramatic change of mind on Song's self-perception, see Tackett 2017.

the major exception of Britain at the apex of its imperial expansion in the 19th century, could rival the Mongol impact throughout the Eurasian continent.

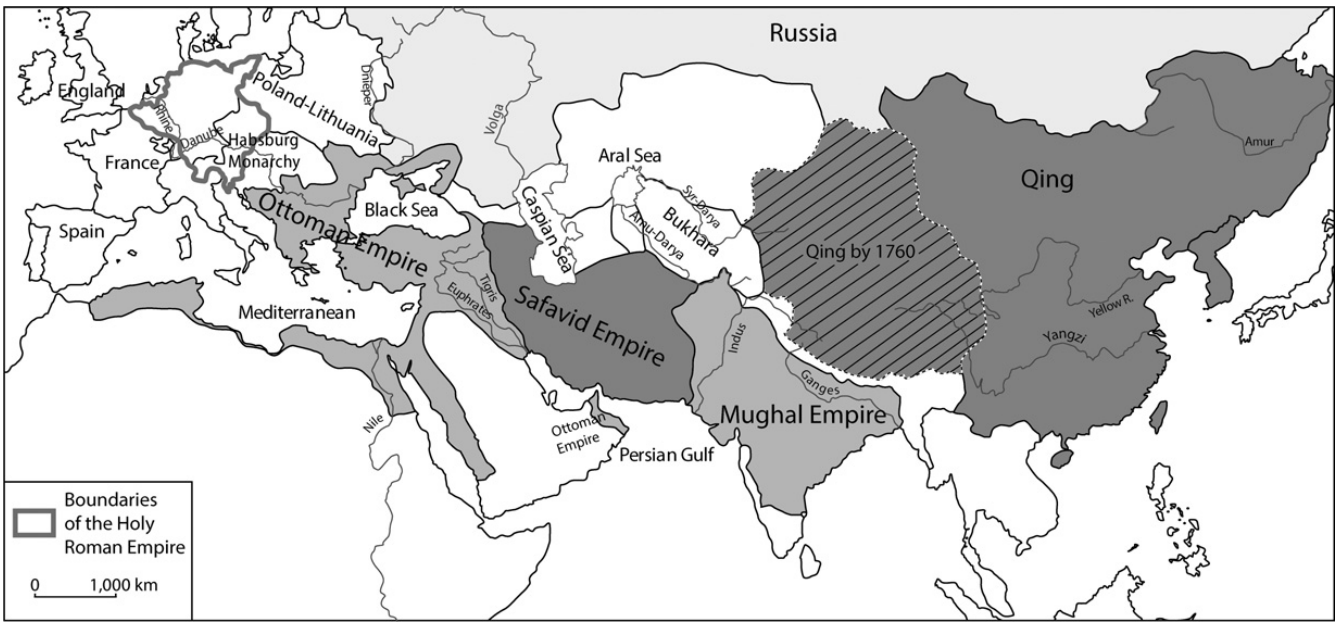
One of the many aspects of the Mongol impact was the reinvigoration of empire-building across Eurasia. The new continental empires that emerged between the 14th and 17th centuries were all indebted to the Mongols, even though this debt was not always readily acknowledged. These "third-wave" or post-Mongol empires include Russia (Burbank, this volume), Chinese Ming (1368–1644, Robinson, Chapter 8 this volume), Manchu Qing (1636/1644–1912, Mosca, Chapter 9 this volume), and the Islamic empires of the Timurids, the Ottomans, the Safavids and the Mughals (for the last three, see Dale, Chapter 7 this volume; Map 0.3). Oddly, the weakest post-Mongol empires were those established in the steppe regions, particularly in Mongolia itself, where the Chinggisid charisma was not enough to overcome either the steppe's centrifugal forces, or the rivalry of the post-Mongol sedentary empires. Ironically, the post-nomadic empires that built on the Mongol experience while combining it with the rich resources and improved technology of the sedentary population – Russia and the Qing China – succeeded in eventually subjugating the descendants of Chinggis Khan (Perdue 2005; Allsen 2015; Biran, this volume).

Our volume aims to provide a sample of major imperial cases from each of the regions and periods under discussion. We first introduce three major first-wave empires (the Achaemenids, Qin-Han China and the Roman Empire). The second-wave empires are represented by the Roman (Byzantine) Empire of the East and the Caliphate. Finally, the Mongol and post-Mongol empires merited five contributions, covering the Mongols themselves, the Muslim empires in Near East and South Asia (the Ottomans, the Safavids, and the Mughals), Ming and Qing China, and the Russian Empire. The result, we hope, is a fair and balanced presentation of major case studies. Below we shall outline the major parameters of our discussion.

4 Universalism and Its Limits

The avowed desire to rule "the four corners of the universe" may be considered the hallmark of imperial political culture worldwide. Actually, it is so old as to predate the creation of the empires *senso strictu*, being associated with the earliest quasi-imperial formations mentioned above. The rulers of Akkad (2334–2193 BCE), founded by Sargon, took the titles "king of the universe, king of the four regions of the world." This "early instance of universalistic discourse" (Strootman 2014: 40)[13] was echoed regularly by all powerful

[13] Strootman associates the earliest instance of this discourse with the Sumerian king Shulgi (r. *c*.2029–1982 BCE), but the precedents can go back already to Sargon and to his singularly important successor, Naram-Sin (r. *c*.2211–2175 BCE), who was the first to call himself "king of the four quarters of the universe" (Van De Mieroop 2016, 73).



Map 0.3 Major Eurasian empires, *c.*1700 CE. Produced on the basis of the "Interactive World History Atlas since 3000 BC" (http://geacron.com/home-en/?sid=GeaCron44764).

rulers in the ancient Near East. Egyptian pharaohs referred to themselves as rulers of "all that sun encircles," "kings of kings," and so forth, allowing Morkot (2001, 227) to conclude that Egypt should be qualified as an empire. This discourse – usually augmented with territorial expansion – remained the *sine qua non* of an imperial self-presentation thereafter.[14] Assyrian kings boasted of ruling the "universe"; China's emperors claimed to control "All-under-Heaven"; Romans proudly spoke of possession of *orbis terrarum*. From the Assyrian "lord of lords, king of kings" and Persian "king of kings" to the Mughal Jahangir ("Conqueror of the World," r. 1605–27) and Shah Jahan ("King of the World," r. 1628–58), rulers of powerful empires overwhelmingly tended to present themselves as rulers of the entire world.

Imperial self-presentation and representation, their discourse of unity and its symbolic manifestations have been explored in many recent studies, most notably by Bang and Kolodziejczyk (2012). Our goal in the present volume is to go beyond the level of presentation and investigate how the ideas of universal rule were actualized (if at all) in imperial praxis. To do so, our contributors tried to address a common set of questions:

> What prompted the imperial expansion?
> Which factors limited expansion?
> How were the territories under the empire's control incorporated?
> And how are these actual achievements and failures related to the presentation of the imperial space?

By answering these questions, we hope to understand the peculiarities of the creation of the empires' space, and the relation between the imperial ideology with its multi-faceted symbolic manifestations and actual spatial dimensions.

4.1 Ideology

The first and most easily observable impetus for an empire's expansion is its universalist ideology noted above. Here, however, a historian faces a trap. Abundant pronouncements in favor of universal rule may as often conceal weakness and retrenchment as they reflect assertiveness and expansionism. They can inspire aggressiveness, or be used as post-factum justification of expansion that had little to do with ideology. And the "universe" due to be conquered can be of quite limited proportions.

First, let us remind ourselves that geographical dimensions of the "world" as envisioned by various empire-builders could differ tremendously. Strootman (2014, 40) explains, following Mario Liverani (1979), that in ancient

[14] For a perceptive discussion of the Near Eastern discourse of universal control and the tension between universalistic claims and the reality on the ground, see Liverani 2001, 23–8ff.

Mesopotamia, the "universe" referred just to a limited civilized space surrounded by chaos. The king controlled the civilized core and only gradually expanded his power into the chaotic periphery. This observation is fully applicable to Bronze Age China. Back then, the term "All-under-Heaven" could refer to a very limited space, not even the Zhou realm as a whole but just the royal domain, that is, areas under the direct control of Zhou kings (Pines 2002, 101–4). The spatial horizons of later Iron Age empires were incomparably broader. Yet even for these, the "universe" normally remained confined to their macro-region. As we shall demonstrate below, topography, ecological conditions, and the problem of maintainability of distant lands – all could limit the expansion of any empire, however loudly its universalistic pretensions were proclaimed.

Second, not only the space of the "universe" could be very limited; the monarch's control over it could be illusionary at best. The language of universal rule, inherited from early empires, was spoken for millennia throughout Eurasia by many rulers who had not the slightest chance of establishing a vast empire, and who employed the symbols of universality just to maintain their domestic prestige. Think for instance of Southeast Asia that "over the course of at least fifteen hundred years, was dotted with universal monarchs, each represented, in the declamations of his cult, as the core and pivot of the universe, yet each quite aware that he was emphatically not alone in such representation" (Geertz 1981, 125). Or think of the carefully orchestrated pageantry of an ecumenical empire, rooted as it is in the Roman past, but performed by the Catholic Church in the early 21st century (Bang and Bayly 2011b, 1–5). In these cases, the symbolic language of universal dominance has very little to do with actual political control. To paraphrase Alexander Martynov (1987, 29), this is no more than a "yardstick" of the erstwhile utopia of universal rule. Elsewhere, the hollowness of the monarchs' universalistic pretensions was less obvious, but was still well observable from their grudging acquiescence to the existence of powerful neighbors in what once was their own imperial space. See, for instance, the case of the Safavids, discussed by Dale in this volume, or the aforementioned Song (960–1279) dynasty in China (Wang Gungwu 1983).

Third, even in the most successful expansionist empires we should not postulate the primacy of ideology as the prime mover of expansion. Quite often, the idea of universal rule (which was frequently conceived of as sanctioned by the divine authority) developed in tandem with the actual expansion rather than preceded it. For instance, in the well-documented Roman case, the idea of universal control evolved gradually in the 1st century BCE, peaking under Augustus (r. 27 BCE–14 CE), that is fully two centuries after the beginning of robust expansion (Spickermann, this volume). In the case of the Caliphate, the concept of dividing the world into *dār al-Islām* (the "abode of Islam"), and *dār al-ḥarb* (the "abode of war") – the major ideological justification for the ongoing

expansion – actually gained prominence long *after* the actual expansion peaked under the Umayyads (660–750).[15] In the Mongol case as well, the idea of truly universal control evolved only in the wake of their unprecedented successes. During the enthronement of Chinggis Khan in 1206, his mandate was limited to controlling "the people of the felt walled tents," i.e., the steppe dwellers (Biran, this volume).

That said, at times ideology could matter a lot. This is most notable in cases of expansion into territories that carried symbolic significance as markers of universal rule. In many early Eurasian empires the ocean (sea) was considered the limit of the universe, and reaching the sea shores, or, better, crossing the sea and subjugating distant islands was the hallmark of territorial success. Robert Rollinger (2013) has shown how Assyrian rulers, eager to outdo their illustrious predecessor, Sargon of Akkad, invested considerable resources in expanding toward the sea shores, be it by absorbing the Phoenician island city of Tyre, or, later, by expanding into the sea itself, e.g., by occupying Cyprus in the middle of the "Upper Sea" (Mediterranean) or Bahrain in the "Lower Sea" (Persian Gulf). The symbolism of reaching (or, better, crossing) the sea was reenacted by the Achaemenid rulers, such as Darius I (r. 522–486 BCE), whose campaign against Scythians "from across the sea" involved the symbolic bridging of the Bosporus (Haubold 2012), and later by Alexander the Great who sought to reach the Indian Ocean (Romm 1992, 25–6, 137–9). Roman leaders and emperors, starting with Julius Caeasar (d. 42 BCE), sought to reach and cross the Ocean, either by expanding into Britain (Braund 1996, 94ff.) or by advancing in other directions (Mattern, 1999, 59ff.).[16] On the opposite side of Eurasia, the First Emperor of Qin (emp. 221–210 BCE) marked his unprecedented achievement of unifying "All-under-Heaven" by touring the newly conquered territories, specifically by going to the sea shores, and even (exceptionally for Chinese emperors) sailing into the sea and killing there a "huge fish" (a whale?) (Watson 1993, 62).[17] More than a millennium later, the ultimate world conqueror, Chinggis Khan, opted for a title meaning "Oceanic Khan." Chinggis Khan's grandson, Qubilai Qa'an (r. 1260–94), tried – unsuccessfully – to demonstrate the universal reach of the Mongol armies by sending naval expeditions to Java

[15] As the recent volume of Calasso and Lancioni (2017) suggests, the *dār al-Islām* and *dār al-ḥarb* antinomy developed relatively late (9th to 10th centuries), and it had multiple meanings, not necessarily mandating the expansionist Holy War. To be sure, the religious ideology of fighting the unbelievers did serve to justify military campaigns under the Umayyads (Peacock, this volume), but it may be significant that the sophisticated ideological justifications of *jihad* appear only under the subsequent and much less expansionist Abbasid dynasty (see, e.g., Denaro 2017).

[16] Mattern shows that many of these attempts to reach the "ocean" were based on misidentification of its location.

[17] Unbeknown to the first emperor, a millennium earlier it was the Assyrian king Tiglath-pileser I (1114–1076 BCE) who prided himself of killing "a *nāḫiru*, which is called a sea-horse" in the middle of the sea (Rollinger 2013, 98–9).

and Japan. For sure, in each of the above cases the expansionist policies had a variety of different motivations, but the desire to manifest one's achievements by reaching the limits of earth and "conquering" the ocean was arguably among the major drivers for this persistent push toward the sea shores.

The quest for universal rule could influence the course of the imperial expansion on yet a deeper level: in certain circumstances, it could become the defining factor behind the shaping of the imperial space. Perhaps the most notable case is that of the Chinese Empire, which was to a certain extent "envisioned" even if not necessarily "pre-planned" in the centuries preceding the actual imperial unification. In particular, the idea that political fragmentation means ongoing bloodshed and that unification of All-under-Heaven – referring at the very minimum to the "civilized" agricultural core of the East Asian subcontinent – is the only way to peace and prosperity became the cornerstone of Chinese political culture long before the empire actualized (Pines, this volume). From the Warring States period (453–221 BCE) on, political fragmentation was perceived as coequal with permanent war: it was a zero-sum game from which only one winner could emerge. The determination of competing regimes during periods of fragmentation to attain political unity became a self-fulfilling prophecy as it precluded the long-term peaceful coexistence of rival emperors. Thus, after longer or shorter periods of division, a unified empire in China's core territories invariably re-emerged (Pines 2012, 11–43).

Elsewhere the dictum of annihilation of alternative loci of power in the given macro-region could similarly become a potent political force. Rolf Stoorman (2014, 43) retells an anecdote about Alexander the Great. When, in 331 BCE, Darius III offered Alexander huge territorial concessions and enormous payment in exchange for peace, Alexander "told the envoys that the earth could not preserve its plan and order if there were two suns, nor could the inhabited world remain calm and free from war so long as two kings shared the rule" (Diodorus 17.54). We cannot ascertain the veracity of the anecdote, but there is little doubt that the idea of singularity and universality of the "king of kings" adopted by Alexander from his Persian foes served him well. Even if not necessarily the primary reason for his quest to annex the Achaemenid realm in its entirety, this ideological orientation certainly played an important role in determining Alexander's course of action.

The example of Alexander is indicative of another dimension of the ideological impetus for the empire's expansion, namely reenacting the glory of its major predecessor(s). It was the size of the Persian realm that dictated Alexander's course of conquests (Briant, this volume). Later, the Hellenistic empires sought to reenact Alexander's (and earlier Achaemenid) success within more-or-less the same territorial framework. Like their predecessors, they adopted the language of universal rule. From time to time they tried to subjugate each other and reunify the realm, albeit with little success (Stoorman

2014). Much later, the Sasanian kings of Iran may have been inspired by Achaemenid precedent as well, although the evidence is not conclusive.[18] What is not doubted is that the Sasanians' major rivals, the Byzantine emperors, focused their concern on the protection or restoration of the territories of the "divinely protected Roman Empire" (Preiser-Kapeller, this volume). In the steppe, the idea of the unity of the "felt tents' dwellers" was strongly pronounced ever since the Xiongnu; it was reinforced by the Turks (Golden 1982), and became the cornerstone of the Mongol expansion. It was only the Mongols' unprecedented success that extended their universal aspirations even further to include both steppe and sown, namely the whole world (Biran, this volume).

It should be noticed that "restorationist" ideology could at time hinder rather than promote territorial expansion. The Byzantine Empire is a good example. Even when the situation was favorable for expansion beyond the areas of the Roman *imperium*, that is, into Russian territories after the Rus' had accepted Orthodox Christianity, such an attempt was not undertaken.[19] The post-Mongol empires from the Near East to India had also accepted, even if grudgingly, the territorial divisions among them dating back to earlier imperial formations in their respective realms (Dale, this volume). Nor did the Abbasid Caliphate endeavor to expand beyond the areas incorporated by its Umayyad predecessors (actually it lost control over considerable parts of the former Umayyad realm). Similarly, the Qing dynasty (which was robustly expanding to the west and to the north) was cautious not to commit itself to direct control over mainland Southeast Asia, because these areas remained outside the sphere of rule of its predecessor, the Ming (Mosca, this volume).

4.2 Religion

Speaking of ideologies that justified or mandated territorial expansion, we should address the religious factor. Most empires boasted divine support of their rulers – from Aššur and Ahura Mazda to Jupiter, to the Turco-Mongol Tengri, Chinese *tian* (Heaven), and beyond. But it would be a leap of faith to consider these claims as the initial reasons for imperial expansion. It is more plausible to consider the religious reasoning as coeval with actual expansion: military success can engender belief in divine support, which, after having been

[18] Whether or not early Sasanian kings sought to restore Achaemenid glory – as argued in some of the Roman sources – is contestable. See Yar-Shater 1971 vs. Shahbazi 2001. For the immense complexity of the alleged "Achaemenid revival" under the Sasanians and earlier under the Arsacids (rulers of Parthia), see Shayegan 2011.

[19] The Byzantine rulers' willingness to acquiesce to the existence of the parallel empire in the East (the Sasanians and then the Caliphate) derived from their military inability to subjugate eastern rivals, but the legitimacy of this ideology may have also derived from the fact that the Romans – even at the apex of their power – had never tried to expand to the east of Mesopotamia. See more in Preiser-Kapeller, this volume.

internalized, may push for further expansion, as, for instance, was the case of the Mongols (Biran, this volume). A more interesting case to consider in this regard is that of the major proselytizing religions of Eurasia: Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. Each experienced periods of endorsement by major empires, and Islam was actually the creator of one of the most illustrious imperial regimes worldwide. But what was the role of these religions in the expansion of their respective empires?

Somewhat counter-intuitively, the answer would be that religions were not the prime mover of imperial expansion even in the case of the most pious emperors. One good example would be that of Aśoka, the single most renowned Buddhist monarch. Aśoka's conversion to Buddhism was to a certain extent a rejection of his own violent past. He had famously proclaimed that conquering others should be done not by force but through the power of *dharma* (religious law), the promulgation of which worldwide was conceived as the emperor's mission. Yet, as noticed by Patrick Olivelle (2018), "the ideology of *dharma* that Aśoka was propagating had a different and broader intent than the propagation of the Buddhist religion." For Aśoka, maintaining domestic balance among the adherents of different creeds (Buddhists, Hindus, Jains) in the Indian subcontinent seems to have been by far more important than unilateral promotion of Buddhism.

Aśoka's reign did introduce the Indian idea of a universal king (*cakravartin*; Scharfe 1989, 51–5) into Buddhism (Strong 1983), but this notion did not evolve into a lasting pattern of proselytizing Buddhist empires. Powerful emperors, such as Emperor Wen of the Sui dynasty in China (r. 581–604) could borrow the *cakravartin* image, and gain the Buddhist clergy's support for their expansionist endeavor (Wright 1957: 93–104). However, these cases were rare and exceptional. The Buddhist establishment's occasional support of aggressive emperors did not evolve into a firm symbiosis (Lai 2010). The expansion of Buddhism throughout eastern Eurasia depended less on imperial backing and more on private initiatives by the missionaries.

This observation, *mutatis mutandis* is true for Christianity and Islam as well. Garth Fowden (1993) analyzed the emerging forms of "imperial monotheism," showing the paradoxical relations between proselytizing monotheistic religions and the imperial order ever since the conversion of Constantine the Great (r. 306–37) . Although the power of the new, revelation-based religion generated unprecedented expansive energies, the "one God – one empire – one emperor" schema promulgated by Constantine's biographer, Eusebius (260–339) (Fowden 1993, 94) did not work well. The persistent tensions between orthodoxy and heresy, intrinsic to monotheist religions, eventually weakened Roman imperial rule. The Christian Roman Empire was transformed into a commonwealth, or, more precisely, two commonwealths, the Byzantine-Orthodox (for which see also Preiser-Kapeller, this volume) and

the Latin. In both cases the decentralized commonwealth system proved more viable than the unified proselytizing empire.[20]

The case of Islam is the clearest example of convergence between the missionary monotheistic creed and the expansionist empire; yet once again the trajectory was much more complex than the "one God – one empire – one emperor" scheme would suggest. Actually, in the first decades of the caliphate a strong tension existed between the universal religion under the banners of which the caliphate was founded and the narrower ethnic Arab-centered nature of the imperial institution under both the righteous caliphs (632–660) and the Umayyads (660–750) (Robinson 2010; Cobb 2010; Peacock, this volume). Fowden suggests that the eventual acceleration of the pace of conversion, especially under the Abbasids, allowed the reassertion of suppressed local identities and created "an atmosphere in which the political disintegration of the Abbasid Empire seemed less unthinkable" (Fowden 1993, 163). Whether this explanation is correct or not cannot be dealt with here; what is undeniable is that the Muslim empire followed the same path as its Christian rivals, namely the dissolution into a "Muslim commonwealth," most of which first existed under nominal Abbasid superiority (see also Kennedy 2016). Eventually, preaching Islam became a personal mission (later institutionalized primarily through Sufi orders) rather than an undertaking initiated by a Muslim state or by a certain "church" leader. For sure, in both Christianity and Islam, aggression against infidels frequently received religious blessing, and members of religious communities could be at the forefront of territorial expansion. But in both cases, the ecumenical religion survived and developed without much need of an ecumenical empire.[21]

4.3 Natural Boundaries?

Moving from the ideological software of empires to the hardware factors that determined their spatial dimensions, we should start with the idea of "natural boundaries." The idea that boundaries between empires or states are determined (or at least should be determined) by natural features, such as waterways, mountains, and so forth, has a long pedigree (e.g., Finch 1844). Whereas this idea has been justifiably criticized both due to its factual inaccuracy and because it could be utilized to serve questionable political and ideological agendas (Fall 2010), it should not be dismissed outright. Terrain, climate, and ecological conditions do all have an impact on the imperial space.

[20] See also Hglin 1982 for the case of unsuccessful attempts to reunify the empire and the church in the Christian west. For the complex trajectory of the Byzantine case and the tensions between the empire and the church there, see Geanakoplos 1965; Dagron 2003; Preiser-Kapeller 2018.

[21] This statement certainly does not mean to deny the importance of religion's piggybacking on a powerful empire to facilitate its expansion: this was for instance the case for the Ottoman Empire, as well as for European colonial empires. This topic requires further study.

Of terrestrial features, oceans served as the clearest natural boundaries of Eurasian empires up until the onset of the maritime empires in the 15th and 16th centuries. Inland seas (such as the Mediterranean) and rivers were less important as boundaries, since more often than not they could serve as a means of communication rather than separation (e.g., Parker 2002, 373). In distinction, mountain ranges did play the role of natural barriers. For instance, the Himalaya or Pamir ranges posed such formidable obstacles to different armies as to make them almost impenetrable.[22] These ranges served as natural limits for the expansion of South and East Asian empires. Even lower mountain ranges could play a similar role. The Assyrians and Arabs' difficulty in crossing the Taurus Mountains in eastern Anatolia (Parker 2002, and Peacock, this volume); the Zagros Mountains serving as a protective barrier of the Iranian plateau in the face of invaders from the west, or the Sulaiman Mountains being a natural boundary between Iran and India-based empires (Dale, this volume) are the most notable examples.

That said, recall that logistical difficulties involved in crossing mountain ranges could be overcome by a committed imperial regime if ideological, strategic, or economic considerations prompted it to invest sufficient resources in surmounting natural barriers. Sichuan province in China provides a good example. Its agriculturally rich interior is conveniently surrounded by mountain ranges which make access to this territory from the north or the east (i.e., from China's heartland) notoriously difficult. The region's topography made it particularly suitable for establishing an independent regime, and such regimes indeed prospered there (most notably prior to the 4th century BCE, and in the 3rd, 4th, and 10th centuries CE). And yet Sichuan-based kingdoms and self-proclaimed empires were invariably overrun – often at great cost – by China's imperial unifiers, who would never tolerate the existence of an independent locus of power within the Chinese world (see Section 4.1). Mountain ranges could postpone the assault but not prevent it. Similarly, the Taurus, Zagros, Sulaiman and other mountain ranges were surmounted whenever powerful imperial leaders, committed to the task of further expansion, invested sufficient resources in the assault.

Mountain ranges aside, another major factor that determined the space configuration of most (but not all) empires, was ecology. In an insightful study, Turchin, Adams, and Hall noticed that empires mostly expand into regions of the same biomes (Turchin et al. 2006). A biome is a major type of ecological community such as grassland, desert, or temperate seasonal forest.

[22] Among rare instances of armies crossing these formidable ranges, one can mention the Tang dynasty's expedition under general Gao Xianzhi to Gilgit (modern Pakistan) in 747 CE to save the Tang protectorate there from the Tibetan aggression, or the successful Qing expedition into Katmandu valley (Nepal) in 1792 CE to protect Tibet from the Gurkha invasion. The very rarity of such expeditions buttresses their exceptionality.

Since biomes are determined primarily by similarities in climate and soil, they tend to extend along lines of latitude (i.e., along an East–West axis) rather than along lines of longitude (a North–South axis). The same pattern of East–West orientation characterizes major continental empires. Putting aside some quibbles concerning the data utilized by these scholars, there is no doubt that empirically they are right (as the maps – however problematic – employed in our volume, including the current chapter, testify).

In particular, ecology played a crucial role in distinguishing the steppe as a special imperial macro-region (see also below). It was the peculiarity of the steppes' soil and climate that protected the steppe empires from their sedentary neighbors. For the latter, incursions into the steppe were nightmarishly expensive and unsustainable in the long term, as had become obvious already under the Han dynasty in China (Pines, this volume). The steppe warriors actually faced a similar challenge once they tried to penetrate to the south of the ecological borders of the steppe, i.e., to the areas in which mounted archers lost their military advantage (Peacock and Biran, this volume). In these cases, ecology could become a major determinant of the empire's spatial configuration.

Military and administrative considerations alike encouraged most empires to stay within the familiar biome. Expanding into a different biome required an imperial army to accustom itself to war in a terrain that was unsuitable to its original modes of warfare. Even more challenging was the task of permanent incorporation of territories whose mode of production differed dramatically from that to which the empire-builders were used to at their homeland. And yet these difficulties aside, a powerful and resolute empire could overcome ecological constraints if the price was found worthwhile. The Mongol conquest of Southern Song, which required advance well into the areas of subtropical forests (Biran, this volume) is a good example. Several China-based empires are another notable exception. As noted by Turchin et al. (2006, 225), these empires were remarkably able to overcome the biome's constraints, advancing into the Mongolian steppe, into the alpine biome (Tibet), or into the tropical rain forest area of Vietnam. Owing to the successful incorporation of some of these areas (albeit not Vietnam), China became the most climatically heterogeneous continental empire worldwide (McNeill 1998). It should be noted, however, that the most robust expansion of "Chinese" empire was actually achieved under the dynasties that were either themselves established by nomads or semi-nomads (Yuan and Qing; Biran and Mosca, this volume), or at least were culturally close to the nomads (Tang; Chen Sanping 1996). The nomads' success in these cases derived from their remarkable ability to appropriate and mobilize not just the material but also the cultural resources of their sedentary neighbors. This adaptability stands behind the most successful

imperial enterprise which transcended the ecological constraints of expansion more than any other – the Mongol Empire (Biran, this volume).[23]

4.4 Military Factors

Military factors are among the most significant determinants of imperial space. To begin with, the very birth of most if not all empires started with robust military expansion. Yet once the "imperial threshold" (establishing clear hegemony in a given macro-region) was reached, the empires behaved differently. In some cases, aggressive expansion continued for generations, whereas in others empires shifted focus to the consolidation of their space, even if this required retrenchment. Among multiple factors that influenced both trajectories, military considerations occupy pride of place. Two points in particular should be considered in this context: first, is the degree of imperial elites' belligerence; and, second, are the strategic considerations behind expansion and retrenchment.

In the popular imagination, empires are depicted as intrinsically belligerent (being associated with predatory imperialism), and in many – albeit not all – cases this association is undoubtedly correct. Successful wars have bolstered a leadership's prestige throughout much of known human history. In certain political cultures, most notably the steppe, military success was essential for ensuring the legitimacy of the ruler and the ruling clan (Biran, this volume). In these cultures, military activism was a norm rather just a response to external circumstances. As revealed in the autobiography of the founder of the Mughal dynasty, Babur (1483–1530), "kingdom-seizing" was normative behavior for "any self-respecting descendant of Temür" (Timur or Tamerlane, 1336–1405) (Dale, this volume). This belligerence was not exceptional to the nomads. In Republican Rome, the "chiefly military system of values, which was not only binding for the elites but also for large parts of the Roman citizenry and therefore a key to success, formed the basis of massive Roman expansion" (Spickermann, this volume). Individual commanders' search for prestige associated with victorious campaigns bolstered the extraordinary expansion of the Umayyad space (Peacock, this volume). In some cases, belligerence could be even constructed into society from above. In the pre-imperial state of Qin, for instance, the system of ranks of merit that made success on the battlefield the primary channel of individual social, economic, and political advancement

[23] Speaking of ecology, one should mention the related issue of climate changes as a possible trigger of the empires' formation or disintegration. This topic, which became very popular recently (see, e.g., Ellenblum 2012; Brooke 2014; Li et al. 2019, q.v. for further references), is not addressed here because of two reasons. First, studies of the history of climate changes are still relatively new and climate-related explanations of the empires' dynamics are still much contested (see, e.g., Peacock and Biran, this volume). Second, and most importantly, climate changes are more relevant to the empires' temporal rather than spatial dimensions, and hence do not belong to the framework of the present volume.

brought about a profound militarization of the society and turned Qin, "the state organized for war" (Lewis 2007, 30), into a formidable expansionist machine (Pines, this volume).

Yet the elite's commitment to military aggrandizement, important as it was for imperial expansion, was not a permanent feature of the empire's life. In Rome, sociopolitical changes under the principate resulted in a less belligerent society and gradual cessation of expansionist zeal. In China, changes in the elite's composition under the Han dynasty brought about the sidelining of combative military-based elite members by others, who were more civilian-oriented and less prone to benefit from robust military action (Pines, this volume; cf. Tse 2018; for parallels with the Ming dynasty, see Robinson, this volume). This tendency is observable, albeit less clearly, even in the Mongol Empire, particularly in the Yuan dynasty in China, although the details of the process there still require better understanding.

Going back to the early empires or would-be empires, it is worth noticing that elite belligerence as such did not necessarily result in empire-building. For the nomads, in particular, successful raids were sufficient to demonstrate the leadership's charisma; permanent occupation of the enemy's territory was not their first choice. The same can be said of Roman magistrates or Qin generals, who strived for successful campaigns but were not necessarily committed toward full annexation of the enemy's territory. The latter option could be an outcome of peculiar power configurations on the ground. For instance, the conquest of a neighboring territory could be considered a preemptive measure against future aggression. The Roman case is a good demonstration of expansion as a means of self-preservation. Without accepting the Roman view that every war launched by Rome was *bellum iustum* (just war), one should admit that many of the Roman wars could be indeed justified as either defensive or preemptive strikes against equally predatory polities. In the Mongol case, a potential threat to Chinggis Khan's status as the sole leader of the Mongolian tribes stood behind many of the Mongols' early campaigns – such as their wars against the Jurchen Jin (1115–1234) or the Naiman leader, Güchülüg (d. 1218) (Biran 2007). Russian expansion into the steppes was also prompted by rivalry with the Kazan Khanate, which was a coequal player "in a larger game for control in the same space" (Burbank, this volume).

This brings us to the contentious issue of the role of strategic considerations behind imperial expansion or cessation thereof. These considerations were highlighted in an influential – and highly controversial – study by Edward Luttwak, who argued that the Romans' imperial space under the principate was shaped by the empire's "grand strategy." This strategy aimed "to provide security for the civilization without prejudicing the vitality of its economic base and without compromising the stability of an evolving political order" (Luttwak 1976, 1). Luttwak identifies consistent policies in different periods of

the principate's history, aimed at determining protectable borders and defending them in the least costly way. Whereas Luttwak's neat theoretical explanation was criticized by historians who noticed its empirical flaws (cf. Mattern 1999, 81–122; Kagan 2006), overall the idea of a "grand strategy" cannot be easily dismissed. Without doubt, major empires often had long-term strategic goals that determined their military actions. For instance, for Chinese empires from the Qin and Han to the Ming and Qing, the primary strategic goal was stabilizing the volatile northern frontier (Pines, Robinson, and Mosca, this volume). For the Mongols under Chinggis Khan and his immediate descendants, the need to prevent the emergence of a rival locus of power in the steppe and, later, annihilation of "competing rulers with universal claims, such as the Abbasid Caliph and the Jin and Song emperors" (Biran, this volume) was equally important. The question is: What was the impact of these strategic considerations on the shaping of the imperial space?

The answer to this question is not simple. Even when the "grand strategic" goals are easily discernible in an empire's policy, these goals more often than not could be realized in a variety of ways, the territorial impact of which differed dramatically. Take for instance the case of the Chinese empires. The common goal of securing the northern frontier could be achieved by highly divergent policies – from appeasing the nomads, to establishing client nomadic polities, instigating inter- and intra-tribal conflicts among the rivals (*yi yi zhi yi* [ruling the aliens through aliens], a Chinese variant of the Roman *divide et impera* [divide and rule] principle), launching preemptive attacks into the steppe, or, conversely, strengthening the defending line of the Great Wall and adopting purely defensive policy (Pines and Robinson, this volume). Policies fluctuated due to a variety of ever changing factors: shifts in the balance of power between China and its nomadic neighbors and among different factions in Chinese imperial courts, individual preferences of certain emperors, and sometimes sheer contingencies (such as succession crises in nomadic polities). Only exceptionally, most notably under the Qing, can we discern the empire's leaders' lasting commitment to absorbing the Mongol territories, in addition to the areas that were ideologically (Tibet) or economically (southern Xinjiang) important for the Mongols into "a carefully-regulated and constantly-monitored part of the realm" (Mosca, this volume). However, as Mosca shows, the ultimate annexation of these territories was still as much a result of contingencies and individual decisions by resolute emperors as it was a product of strategic imperatives (see also Dai Yingcong 2009; Perdue 2005; Millward 1998). In the final account, the evidence does not suggest a direct impact of the empire's strategic considerations on the contours of its space.

Strategic imperatives could not only prompt expansion but also cause its halt or even bring about territorial contraction. Logistical factors, for instance, were of crucial importance for limiting the scope of imperial military operations and

putting an end to expansion (Preiser-Kapeller, this volume). The strategic vulnerability of the outlying territories could cause their abandonment in the aftermath of successful conquest and even after a relatively lengthy period of control, especially when the empire was threatened on two or more fronts. China's imperial rulers, for instance, were ready to give up the outlying Western Regions (today's Xinjiang and at times even parts of Gansu) whenever domestic turmoil or external threat elsewhere weakened the empire's core and made these territories indefensible. This retrenchment happened in the 1st and 2nd centuries CE (Tse 2018), then in the mid-8th century CE, and almost recurred in the 19th century CE when one of the most powerful officials, Li Hongzhang (1823–1901), urged retreating from the Western Regions and focusing on coastal defense instead).[24] The Ottomans' abandonment of Tabriz (Dale, this volume) and the Romans' decision to give up expansion beyond the Rhine River may be attributed to the same logic.

4.5 Costs and Benefits of Expansion

Aside from ideological, ecological, and strategic factors, the contours of the imperial space were influenced by economic considerations. The very emergence of empires was often a by-product of predatory expansion, which was a common feature of powerful political entities from the beginning of recorded human history. For the Assyrians, Romans, Macedonians, the rulers of the pre-imperial state of Qin, as well as for countless other would-be imperial leaders, expansion meant first of all enrichment. Areas of high agricultural productivity, foci of major trade routes, territories rich in mineral and human resources – all were naturally attractive to the empire-builders. For instance, Egypt with its extraordinary fertility was a coveted prize for Near Eastern and European empires from the Achaemenids and Romans to the Ottomans, France, and Britain. The incorporation of such a rich area could easily offset the costs of its conquest.

The conquest itself was, however, a relatively cheap enterprise in comparison to the costs of permanent incorporation of the subjugated area into the empire. Even establishing a minimal level of control over the conquered space required considerable resources. Let us focus on the costs of just one essential necessity of any empire: maintaining a system of communication between the center and the outlying areas. This "nerve system" of any expansive polity came into existence, not incidentally, with the formation of the earliest major imperial entity, the Neo-Assyrian Empire of the mid-9th century BCE. Karen Radner notes that the Neo-Assyrian Empire "must be seen as a turning point in

[24] Chu 1966. Calls to discontinue the costly engagement in the southwestern part of Xinjiang (the Tarim basin) were made long before Li Hongzhang, in the 1820s, in the aftermath of local turmoil and the deterioration of the military situation in the region. See Millward 1998: 225–31.

the history of communications. It saw the creation and implementation of an innovative, and very expensive, long-distance high-speed information network designed for the exclusive needs of the state" (Radner 2014a, 6, with more in Radner 2014b). This system of communications was in turn inherited and expanded by the Achaemenids (Briant, this volume; Kuhrt 2014). Similar systems were employed by any major imperial regime elsewhere – from the Mauryas (Thapar 1961), to the Romans (Spickermann, this volume; Corcoran 2014), to Qin and Han (e.g., Barbieri-Low and Yates 2015, 729–37), to the Caliphate (Peacock, this volume; Silverstein 2007), to the Mongols (Biran, this volume; Allsen 2011), and so forth. A well-developed system of communications became the major means through which the empires tried to overcome the "tyranny of distance."

The effectiveness of the imperial postal systems astonished observers beginning with Herodotus and Xenophon (Radner 2014a, 1). In some cases, a good relay system could produce truly amazing results. Take for instance the Mongol Empire, in which authorized travelers were able to cover about 350–400 km a day (Biran, this volume). Even in the early Chinese empires the mandatory speed of a foot courier, who had to cover *c*.83 km in twenty-four hours (Barbieri-Low and Yates 2015, 740–41), is very impressive. The improved connectivity not only contributed to the empire's administrative cohesiveness but also brought about manifold economic and cultural benefits (Korolkov 2020, 428–555). But let us pause and think of the costs. An effective system of communications required construction and maintenance of roads, bridges, and waterways, establishment of relay stations and provision of lodgings for those on official duties. The empire had to manage an army of couriers, and to supply them with horses, camels, or mules, with chariots and boats. The costs of all these could become exorbitant (see examples in Radner 2014c).[25] When these investments were made in agriculturally productive and densely populated areas with abundant human resources, the benefits could eventually offset the costs. Yet once an empire expanded into sparsely populated areas with difficult terrain, maintenance of an effective communication system would become prohibitively expensive. Generally speaking, providing efficient control over these areas meant a permanent drain on the empire's resources, and the farther these areas were removed from the imperial center the more severe this drain became.

What was the impact of these "cost–benefit" calculations on shaping the imperial space? Can we discern instances of stopping territorial expansion (or even opting for territorial contraction) primarily for economic reasons? The

[25] Hou Xudong (2016) shows how even a minor item such as providing lodging for officials on duty in government-run hostels along the routes of communication could incur unbearable expenses.

answer is somewhat equivocal. On the one hand, it is clear that economic factors were secondary to ideological or strategic ones in determining imperial territorial extent. A powerful empire could opt to invest considerably in controlling (or trying to acquire) areas that were economically profitless, but were symbolically or politically important. For instance, the Romans held "with ferocious tenacity" Britain, which "was neither a military threat nor economically lucrative," because "as the ancient sources tell us, once conquered, it could not have been let go without disgrace" (Mattern 1999, 160–1). The Mughal attempt to reconquer Samarqand in 1645, more than a century after the city was lost forever to the Timurids, was likewise prompted neither by economic nor even by strategic considerations but primarily by the ongoing nostalgia for the "hereditary kingdom of [their] ancestors" (Dale, this volume). In distinction, Qing's incorporation of Xinjiang and particularly of Tibet, however costly and profitless, derived primarily from strategic considerations insofar as it was deemed helpful in solidifying the empire's control over its Mongolian subjects (Mosca, this volume). In these and myriad similar cases, the economic liabilities of the conquest were not a primary factor in determining the empire's expansion.

This said, thinking of the empires' longue durée, one can discover a latent tendency to confine expansion primarily to the economically profitable areas. Usually, having acquired rich territories, empires became less bellicose. The Roman case is a good example. Late Republican Rome was clearly a predatory polity. Military success was an important, at times the major source of enrichment for individual citizens and for Rome as a whole. Aside from immediate gains such as obtaining booty, slaves, land for colonization, lucrative positions for Roman tax farmers, and the like, one should consider the major benefit of empire-building for the city of Rome as a whole: creating a system of permanent exploitation of the provinces so as to allow a free supply of wheat to Rome's citizens (Spickermann, this volume; Hopkins 2009). However, having acquired the richest areas in the immediate reach of the Roman armies, Augustus (63 BCE–14 CE) himself reportedly called for restraint, reminding that further expansion would be as risky as "fishing with a golden hook, the loss of which, if it were carried off, could not be made good by any catch" (Suetonius, *Augustus*, 25).[26] A century after Augustus, writing shortly after Roman expansion peaked under Trajan (r. 98–117 CE), Appian (*c.*95–*c.*165 CE) opined:

> Possessing the best part of the earth and sea they [the Roman emperors] have, on the whole, aimed to preserve their empire by the exercise of prudence, rather than to extend their sway indefinitely over poverty-stricken and profitless tribes of barbarians. (Appian, *The Foreign Wars*, Preface, 7)

[26] Whether or not Augustus really planned to stop further expansion is a contentious issue; see Grüll 2017, 23–7 for further details.

This transition from predatory expansion toward self-restraint characterizes many other empires. Of these, China presents the best example. The founding Qin dynasty had absorbed most of the agriculturally productive territories in East Asia. Expanding beyond these territories (which are roughly coterminous with what is often dubbed "China proper") was less economically advantageous. This explains why this additional expansion caused considerable resentment within the educated elite already at its early stages under the Han dynasty (Pines, this volume), and why it was discontinued altogether under certain later dynasties, such as the Ming after the third generation of its emperors (Robinson, this volume). The same logic may explain the empire-building patterns in the Indian subcontinent as well. Having incorporated the economically most productive areas within their reach, the Maurya and their later emulators were prone to consider "the horizon" to which the royal power was to be extended as just "the horizon of subcontinental space" (Pollock 2006, 181; see more in Dale, this volume).

In marked distinction from China and India, steppe empires were located in an economically disadvantageous area. For them, the conquest of productive agricultural areas to the south of the steppe belt could be an attractive choice. Nonetheless, the nomads were not very keen on expanding southwards. Aside from the ecological difficulties of making war in hot and humid areas and aside from the perennial demographic disadvantage vis-à-vis sedentary polities, a reason that normally inhibited their conquest was the realization that the challenging task of running a sedentary empire and supervising an agricultural economy could offset the benefits of the conquest. Coffers could be more easily filled through the periodic plunder of sedentary areas. Moreover, military intimidation of sedentary neighbors could either ensure access to lucrative trade, or, better, solicit payments of tribute from agriculturalists to the steppe rulers (Barfield 1989; cf. Di Cosmo 2002). Normally, the nomads were pushed to permanent conquest of sedentary areas only due to political contingency. It was only with Chinggis Khan that this pattern was decisively discontinued and the idea of the world empire that combines both steppe and sown came into existence (Biran, this volume).

4.6 Integrating Imperial Space

A final factor that should be considered here in the context of shaping imperial spatial dimensions is the nature and degree of the control empires had over their space. In a nutshell, the more the empire expanded, the more difficult it was to maintain the imperial center's effective control over outlying territories. In due time, many empires succumbed to collapse under their own weight. The dissolution of the Roman Empire into Western and Eastern halves is probably the best known example, but it is not an exception. A similar trajectory

characterizes the Turkic Khaganate, which dissolved within a few decades into Western and Eastern Khaganates (Sinor 1990; Drompp 2018); the Abbasid Caliphate, in which outlying provinces became first autonomous and then de facto independent polities from the 9th century (Peacock, this volume); and the Mongol Empire, which dissolved after 1260 into four successor states (Biran this volume). Yet going beyond these initial observations can we discern a deeper impact of the ways by which the empire-builders and custodians tried to integrate their heterogeneous space on the empire's actual dimensions?

In the previous sub-section we mentioned that control over imperial space started with facilitating internal connectivity. Parallel to this, the imperial rulers had to place adequate military forces in the newly conquered territories to ensure domestic order and frontier security. In the next stage, most empires sought to establish a viable revenue-collection system, which required the introduction of at least a rudimentary administration staff to the new lands. Then, assertive leaders could move from ensuring "the trinity of security, finance, justice" (Whitby 2016) to a more substantial incorporation of their territories, including the social and cultural integration of at least a part of the empire's subjects alongside a variety of "civilizing projects" (e.g., Mosca, this volume). Each of these steps, if followed, could have far-reaching ramifications not only for the degree of the empire's control over the areas under its sway but more broadly for the configuration of the imperial space in general.

It is often assumed that empires were satisfied with a relatively low degree of control over their subjects. In a recent brief discussion of the contrasts between traditional empires and modern states, Clifford Ando summarized a widespread view according to which "modern states seek to extend metropolitan norms uniformly throughout their territory and down through their population," whereas empires acted along different parameters:

> Ancient empires largely conceived themselves as aggregates of subordinate populations and developed sophisticated normative resources by which to describe and explain themselves as internally heterogeneous. In modern judgment, the ambitions of rule among such states [i.e., empires] were narrowly extractive, and this could be accomplished by delivering local control into the hands of parties and institutions who were granted considerable autonomy. (Ando 2018, 175–6)

Ando shows in his article that the reality was more complex than this common perception. The indirect rule practiced by the Roman Republic during its quasi-imperial period and then by the Roman Empire under the principate actually allowed the Romans to penetrate "far more fully into the fabric of local social and economic conduct than they had heretofore been seen to do." The Romans succeeded in mobilizing local institutions in the subjugated areas "in the service of overall intensification of governmentality" (Ando 2018, 179). But let us put aside the Roman case and go back to Ando's depiction of the

supposedly normative conduct of "ancient empires." Is it true that the default choice of imperial leaders was exercising indirect rule over their subjects and confining themselves to "narrowly extractive" goals? And, if indirect rule was indeed the primary choice, what are the implications of this understanding on our perception of the imperial space?

The answer to the first of these questions is, again, equivocal. On the one hand, most of the empires discussed in our volume clearly preferred to employ indirect rule over some of their subjects, relegating considerable authority to local elites much in accord with Ando's depiction. On the other hand, there were some notable exceptions, of which the Qin Empire in China is the most remarkable. The reforms that propelled the pre-imperial state of Qin to a position of prominence in continental East Asia focused precisely on the elimination of autonomous loci of power and the formation of a powerful centralized bureaucratic state that penetrated society to its foundation, much like the modern European states. Once "All-under-Heaven" was unified, this model of the centralized territorial state was imposed – with varying degrees of success – on all the subjugated areas (Pines, this volume). Qin became arguably the most profoundly centralized and bureaucratized of all the early (and not just early) empires worldwide.[27] Yet Qin's trajectory exemplifies what Crooks and Parsons (2016b, 28) define as "the Goldilocks paradox": "You can't have an empire without a bureaucracy, but too much bureaucracy and you won't keep your empire for very long." The spiraling costs of maintaining a huge administrative apparatus aimed at full extraction of material and human resources from the populace backfired. Qin's hyperactive administrative machine contributed to the population's discontent and to the resultant popular rebellions that toppled the dynasty just fourteen years after its establishment (Shelach 2014; Pines, this volume).

Several other empires adopted an entirely different model of rule, which is much closer to the one presented by Ando. This model is represented most vividly in the case of the Achaemenid Empire. Briant (this volume) summarizes:

> Insofar as their decisions and activities did not oppose the requirements of the imperial power, various local authorities (kings of the Phoenician cities, heads of Egyptian and Babylonian sanctuaries, governments of Greek cities, etc.) preserved their sphere of influence. Influence would be preserved if obligations (e.g., taxes, supply of troops, ships, and so forth) remained fulfilled.

A similar system of indirect control was practiced, at least initially, by many other empires, most notably the Roman (Ando 2018; Spickermann, this

[27] The Maurya Empire in Thapar's (1961) account appears as no less bureaucratized than the Qin. The problem of this account, though, is Thapar's frequent resort to Kauṭilya's *Arthaśāstra* as reflective of the practices of the Mauryan Empire. Later research cast doubt on this connection: it is likely that the *Arthaśāstra* was penned much later than the Maurya age, i.e. not before *c*.50–125 CE (see Olivelle 2013).

volume). This system allowed considerable autonomy to local elites under the overall supervision of the imperial super-elite, such as the Persian dominant "ethno-class" (Briant, this volume), or the senatorial or equestrian classes in Rome. The super-elite – which could maintain its exceptional political role even once more direct control over localities was established – provided a core of satraps, governors, and tax farmers, who served as the glue for the empire's heterogeneous space. As the primary beneficiaries of the empire's existence, members of the imperial super-elite generally remained loyal to the empire's interests.

Indirect rule had the clear advantage of minimizing frictions between the imperial rulers and their subjects. It also permitted a significant degree of cultural flexibility, allowing subordinate groups to maintain "their culture, language, and religion as well as their elites" (Lavan et al. 2016b, 18). However, this policy had several distinct disadvantages. First, owing to lax supervision, it commonly allowed native elites to retain the lion's share of local revenues in their hands. Second, it could become politically dangerous. In territories with a relatively strong degree of domestic cohesiveness – such as Babylon under the Assyrians and the Achaemenids, Egypt under the Achaemenids, or Judea under the Romans – revolts and secession led by indigenous elites (or by counter-elites, as in the case of Judea) were a permanent threat. Third, whereas the imperial super-elite remained faithful to the empire as such, it was usually the major challenger of individual emperors, taking an active part in coups and counter-coups. All these explain why many empires preferred at a certain point to shift toward a more direct bureaucratic rule, which was more effective, reliable, and also diluted the power of the super-elite.

The trajectory of imperial bureaucratization differed considerably. In the Roman case, for instance, establishing direct rule over newly acquired territories was a very long process. The first provinces under Rome's direct control were established in the aftermath of the First Punic War (264–241 BCE), but for centuries thereafter, as mentioned above, Rome was satisfied with the maintenance of only superficial control over most of the subjugated population, delegating as much power as possible to native elites. The empire's shift toward comprehensive bureaucratization came in the aftermath of the 3rd-century CE crisis. The need to enhance local resource extraction in order to face a variety of military challenges, as well as the emperors' desire to weaken the once-powerful senatorial super-elite brought about profound overhaul of the empire's system of government, which became incomparably more bureaucratic than under the principate (Whitby 2016). In China, in distinction, in the aftermath of Qin's collapse the shift was toward a looser control. Putting aside the details of manifold cycles of decentralization and renewed centralization, we may summarize that Qin's excessive assertiveness remained an exception

rather than the rule. Although the Qin bureaucratic model was never discarded – at least in the territories of China proper – beneath the veneer of the fully bureaucratized empire much leeway was given to local elites.[28] In the meantime, on the outskirts of the empire different types of indirect rule were maintained, as will be discussed below.

Throughout their history most empires experimented with different combinations of direct and indirect control over their subjects. One of the most common solutions was establishing direct control over core territories (or territories of exceptional economic and military importance), while allowing more lax control in outlying or otherwise marginal areas. The division between the core and peripheral areas was not uniform (Qin and Russia [Burbank, this volume] are notable exceptions), but in most cases it became the default choice. This means that the imperial periphery was normally ruled less tightly than the core areas. Yet this observation allows us to move to the second question asked above: Should we treat the areas under loose (and often purely nominal or even entirely fictional) control of the imperial center as parts of the empire's space?

Think of the Ottoman example, for instance. Karen Barkey (2016) depicts the complexity of the empire's internal structure, which included areas under direct rule, outer areas under indirect control, where, however, the tendency was toward bureaucratization and assimilation of local elites as "genuine Ottoman provincial officials" (Barkey 2016, 119); and yet less assimilated areas at the empire's fringes. For instance, in the areas affected by the Saffavid–Ottoman struggle (on which see Dale, this volume), Ottoman rule was based on "intense negotiating, trading of incentives and threats of military intervention." As a result, local chieftains "felt the weight of Ottoman control only lightly and felt independent and empowered to maintain rivalry between states [i.e., between the Ottomans and the Safavids]" (Barkey 2016, 121). The question is: Should we consider the areas with such a low density of imperial rule as belonging to the empire at all? This is not an idly asked question. When the Ottoman Empire started disintegrating amid the crisis of the 18th and 19th centuries, its leaders tried to reassess the nature of its lax to non-existent control over nominal parts of the empire by employing the novel concept of "suzerainty" rather than "sovereignty." Some of the territories under the Ottoman "suzerainty" (and even some under its nominal "sovereignty") were already fully independent or subjugated by other imperialist powers (Fujinami 2019). When did the Ottoman control over them become a fiction? Or was it a fiction throughout?

To demonstrate the difficulty in providing an answer, let us turn once again to an example of Chinese Empire. The Han dynasty's expansion beyond the areas

[28] For the fluctuation of the empire's relations with these elites, see Pines 2012, 104–33. For tensions surrounding these relations (especially the struggle between the elites and the court over the distribution of revenues), see, e.g., Miller 2009.

of China proper prompted organization of the outlying space in a way that would preserve the fiction of the emperor's universal rule, without however, necessitating direct incorporation of distant lands. The result was the so-called "tribute system" (Pines, this volume). To maintain relations with the Han court, foreign leaders had to pose as the emperor's subjects and present a token tribute as a symbol of their subservient status. The problem was that whereas the Han did distinguish between "internal" and "external" subjects, the tribute obligations of the two groups (i.e., surviving internal princedoms and foreign polities) were often conceptualized along the same lines. This ideologically motivated lack of clear differentiation between the domestic and foreign realms remained characteristic of most Chinese imperial polities. Take, for instance, the Ming and Qing dynasties discussed by Robinson and Mosca in this volume. Their rulers often adopted similar means of interaction with a great variety of distinct political entities – from minor indigenous leaders of ethnic enclaves within China proper (the so-called *tusi*), to peripheral dependencies (like Tibet), to neighboring polities who formally acknowledged their nominal dependence (i.e., Vietnam and Korea), to completely independent outsiders unilaterally regarded as tributaries (i.e., European powers). Which of these should be considered part of China's imperial space?

This question is confusing not only for modern observers. It seems that for the imperial Chinese literati the issue of whether or not the outlying dependencies belonged to the empire's space was confusing as well. Take for instance, the official dynastic history of the Ming, composed almost a century after its fall, that is, in the heyday of the Qing reign. As is common in Chinese dynastic histories, the last chapters of the so-called "arrayed biographies" section are dedicated to non-Chinese political entities. The grouping of these entities into different chapters reflects the compilers' view of these entities' position within the Chinese world order. The Ming history divides these polities into three groups. The first are indigenous leaders within China proper (*tusi*). The second are "foreign states," which include both Ming dependencies (such as Korea and Vietnam) as well as all other known foreign states that maintained only minimal relations with the Ming (e.g., France and Holland). The third group is defined as "Western Regions" and it comprises polities in Tibet, Qinghai, and modern Xinjiang, as well as further west into modern Uzbekistan and even Iran. It seems that the compilers were not entirely sure how to treat these areas, some of which were controlled by the early Ming, then escaped the dynastic control, and later were in the process of absorption into the Qing (Robinson and Mosca, this volume). Unable to decide whether these territories are "internal" or "external" to the Chinese Empire, the authors opted for a neutral geographic category.

The difficulty of defining the precise contours of the imperial space is not peculiar to China, of course. Many, if not most, empires contained areas, the position of which within the imperial space was contestable. Briant (this

volume) discusses areas in the Zagros Mountains and Asia Minor that were nominally under the control of the Achaemenid "king of kings" or his satraps, but the position of which within or outside the imperial space depended "on a balance of power, which sometimes required expeditions at the conclusion of which the king or satrap reasserted his authority through official treaty." In the later Abbasid Caliphate, the gap between the caliph's nominal authority (i.e., his naming in the Friday sermon [*khutba*] and inscribing the coins with his names [*sikka*]) and his real power (i.e., to appoint and supervise local officials) could be huge (Kennedy 2016, 129ff., and more in Peacock, this volume). In this and hundreds of other instances, it is not always easy to determine with certainty which of the areas of the empire's nominal or symbolic control should be treated as part of the imperial space.

5 Summary: The Imperial Space – Image and Reality

The difficulty in distinguishing between the outer and internal realm, as demonstrated by the above examples, suffices to caution us against an attempt to simplify a history of the empires into a neat scheme that would explain the trajectories of their expansion and contraction. Such a scheme, as presented in the studies by Rein Taagepera (1978a; 1978b; 1979; 1997) is problematic not only because of Taagepera's countless historical flaws but primarily because the very method of calculating imperial space as if the empires were contiguous political entities on a par with modern states is fundamentally flawed. Whereas the maps presented in the atlases utilized by Taagepera, as well as the maps prepared for this volume, maintain the heuristic convenience of painting imperial territory in a uniform shade, it should be remembered that this is a convention rather than an accurate depiction of reality (Smith 2005). Tabulating the empires' size on the basis of these maps and then making far-reaching conclusions about their dimensions and long-term trajectories as advocated by Taagepera is untenable.

Our goal in this introduction and this volume is not to substitute Taagepera's scheme with another one-size-fits-all explanation of imperial spatial growth and its cessation. Instead, we wish to summarize our findings by revisiting major factors that influenced the expansion and contraction of imperial space surveyed above and by clarifying why, as historians, we feel that no neat explanation of the changing spatial dimensions will ever be attainable.

Expansionism can be considered the foundational feature of empires (a non-expansionist polity would never become an empire in the first place!). Expansionism was fueled by an avowed desire to attain "universal" rule (a desire that was often conceived as a realization of an empire's divine mission), even if in practice "universal rule" normally meant dominating the empire's macro-region only. In addition, conquest of new territories could bring about

a variety of social, political, and economic benefits for the imperial elites (and at times even for the lower strata as well), which further fueled the empire's expansionism. Besides, acquiring territories could be conceived of as a defensive measure aimed to secure the empire from its equally predatory neighbors or as strategic necessity. All these factors combined contributed decisively to the empires' spatial growth.

This growth, however, could not continue forever. Reaching inhibitive terrain (oceans, high mountain ranges) or mere ecological constraints could put an end to the expansion of most (albeit not all) empires. Logistical difficulties or vulnerability of outlying territories could cause cessation of expansionist campaigns and even abandonment of recently conquered territories. The exorbitant costs of maintaining control over expanding space and the related administrative difficulties could further constrain territorial expansion. Besides, once the imperial elites became less reliant on military success for social advancement and economic well-being, they started losing their belligerence and expansionist zeal. At a certain point the imperial leaders had to find ways to retain their symbolic quest for universal supremacy without veering into the direction of over-extension that would threaten domestic stability. Maintaining this delicate balance was a tough task.

The interaction between these multiple factors explains the huge divergence in imperial spatial trajectories. Add to these yet more factors that could influence the empires' dimensions – from the ever changing balance of power between the empire and its external enemies, to shifts in the composition of domestic elites, to the degree of local resistance to the imperial control, to the individual agency of emperors and leading statesmen. Clearly, no neat scheme would ever be able to take all these into account. The contours of the imperial space were shaped through a complex interaction between objective and subjective factors, were influenced by a variety of ideological, military, economic, political, and ecological considerations, and were at times determined by mere contingency. Therefore, whereas major continental empires faced a common set of problems and challenges and often employed similar means of dealing with these challenges, the outcomes differed too much to allow the drawing of a uniform bottom line.

It is against this backdrop that we can understand the complex nature of representing the imperial space. Imperial propaganda (directed at either foreign or domestic audiences), artistic and literary representations of an empire's dimensions, maps and travelogues, historical texts and administrative manuals, imperial pageantry and religious exegesis – these and many other means were utilized to reflect empires' real and imagined spaces. Some representations were descriptive and some prescriptive, some focused on the present, while other were more concerned with the past or the future. Yet behind this plethora of images, one can discern the persistent tension between the ideal and the real,

between lofty goals and the quotidian difficulties to attain these goals, between the commitment to *imperium sine fine* and the need to establish its *limes*.

The short dialogue from the brilliant cynical comedy by Friedrich Dürrenmatt with which we opened this introduction is a good expression of this tension between the presentation and actualization of an empire's space. The chapters in this volume focus on the latter as the necessary precondition for understanding the former. The successes and failures of the empires discussed, their remarkable territorial expansion and their inability to expand beyond a certain threshold, their difficulty in coming to terms with their own spatial limits, and their creative ways of overcoming these difficulties – all these open the door to understanding some of the core issues behind imperial political trajectories. Other aspects of imperial dynamics shall be addressed in future volumes.

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