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Introduction

1. Worldviews in the Roman and Han empires

Some chronicler, speaking of Asia, asserted that one man ruled as much land as the sun passed, and his statement was not true because he placed all Africa and Europe outside the limits where the sun rises in the East and sets in the West. It has now however turned out to be true. Your possession is equal to what the sun can pass, and the sun passes over your land. Neither the Chelidonean nor the Cyanean promontories limit your empire, nor does the distance from which a horseman can reach the sea in one day, nor do you reign within fixed boundaries, nor does another dictate to what point your control reaches; but the sea is drawn as a belt without distinction through the middle of the inhabited world and your empire.¹

Aristides, *Or.*10

In AD 144 Aelius Aristides (117-181) delivered a panegyric in the city of Rome. In his speech he extolled the grandeur which Rome had achieved under imperial rule. He claimed that the Mediterranean Sea occupied the center of the inhabited and civilized world, and that the Roman emperor ruled an empire without limits. Many centuries later Edward Gibbon referred to the first and second centuries AD as a period of peace, prosperity and order, when Rome achieved universal domination.² The optimistic message broadcasted by Aristides echoes the Virgilian notion of the *imperium sine fine*, which stresses the universal character the *imperium Romanum*.

On the other end of the Eurasian landmass, Ban Gu (AD 21-92), a senior official who lived during the early decades of Eastern Han dynasty, formulated a worldview which looks similar to that of Virgil and Aristides. In a fictional dispute between a spokesman from the western capital Chang'an and a speaker originating from the eastern capital Luoyang, the latter supports his claim that Luoyang is the better city by offering the following arguments:

*Moreover, to dwell in a remote area bordering the Western Rong,
Block by steep barriers in all directions,
And maintain "defense and resistance,"
How can this compare with dwelling in the center of the country,*

¹ The translation is based on Oliver (1953) 896.

² Woolf (1993) 185.

*Which is level and flat, open and accessible,
Where a myriad places converge like the spokes of a wheel?
...
You know only the Qin Epang Palace that reaches to the heavens,
And are unaware that the Capital Luo conforms to set regulations.
You recognize that Han valley may serve as a protective pass,
But you do not realize that the true King sets no external boundaries.³*

Eastern Capital Rhapsody 311-16; 334-37

Can Ban Gu's representation of the world ruled by the Han emperors really be compared to that of Aristides, or are the similarities between the two passages superficial? In other words, did most, or some intellectuals of the Han empire subscribe to a truly universalistic worldview or was the Roman ideology of unbounded empire based on cultural assumptions which have no counterparts in Chinese political ideology?

2. Structure and content

The principal aim of this dissertation is to bring Roman and early Han worldviews and imperial ideologies into sharper focus by carrying out a series comparative studies focusing on the complex connections between worldviews, military policies and cultural ideas regarding the responsibilities and duties of imperial rulers. Chapters 1 and 2 deal with the formation and development of worldviews in the pre-imperial societies of Roman Italy and China. Two main questions are raised. How did Romans of the republican period and various intellectuals in pre-Qin China perceive the world, and what is the relationship between pre-imperial perceptions and representations of the world and those worldviews which we find in early-imperial Rome and in Qin and Han China? In the sections of these chapters I will focus on the representations of imperial rules which we find in Augustus' *Res Gestae* and in the stele inscriptions erected by Qin Shi Huang, the first emperor of the unified Qin empire.

In chapters 3 and 4 I move on to the frontier policies which were pursued by the Roman emperors of the first to early third centuries AD and by the Qin and Han emperors of the late third to late first centuries BC. One of my questions will be whether any differences between the military policies of Roman and Chinese emperors can be perceived. In studying this topic I will pay

³ The translation is based on Knechtges (1982) 171.

attention to various factors and considerations which are likely to have shaped imperial policies and to the objectives which individual emperors, or emperors of various sub-periods, were trying to achieve. Finally, I will try to shed some light on the complex interplay between worldviews and actual frontier policies, paying special attention to the question if, or to what extent, long-term changes in frontier policies stimulated the formulation of alternative worldviews or *vice versa*.

Chapter 5 and chapter 6 will focus on the roles which the Roman emperors of the Principate and the Chinese emperors of the Qin and Western Han dynasties were expected to play. What were the relationships between Roman emperors and the army, and to what extent did the search for military glory and prestige continued to stimulate territorial expansion in the period between Augustus' death and that of Septimius Severus? Did Chinese emperors and intellectuals of the Qin and Han periods cultivate close relationships with the army, did Chinese emperors pursue military successes with the aim of bolstering their prestige, or were Chinese ideas about the way in which emperors were supposed to rule, and the images of imperial rule which the Qin and Han emperors were trying to broadcast, differ from what we find in the Roman world of the first two centuries AD?

The ultimate aim of these comparative enquiries is to offer some new insights into the natures of the two empires which were home to almost fifty per cent of the world's population at the beginning of the first millennium AD.⁴

3. Methodologies and problems

The six chapters of this book deal alternately with Rome and China. In this respect I followed the model used by Mutschler and Mittag's *Conceiving Empire, China and Rome Compared* rather than the integrated approach of Scheidel's *Rome and China, Comparative Perspectives on Ancient World Empires*.⁵ An important advantage of organizing a comparative study of Rome and China in parallel chapters is that it allows a focused, detailed and sustained discussion of clearly

⁴ For the challenges of comparative studies of various aspects of the Greco-Roman world and China, see Scheidel (2013) 1-12; (2015) 5-6.

⁵ Mutschler and Mittag (2008); Scheidel (2009). Vasunia in a review article about the two books also notices the differences in approach, see Vasunia (2011) 224, also Scheidel (2015) 6.

defined topics. A potential drawback of this method is that it might result in a book in which similarities and differences are highlighted through juxtaposition rather than analyzed. In order to avoid this outcome chapters 2, 4 and 6 end with a section in which similarities and differences in worldviews, imperial ideologies, frontier policies and the various roles played by Roman and Chinese emperors are directly compared.

One of the prices which comparative historians have to pay, particularly if they are trying to answer big questions, is that at least some topics can be dealt with only superficially. To give just one example, while Chapter 3 of this dissertation aims to give a general impression of the Roman frontier policies and of some important changes which took place during the first to early third centuries AD, it is not based on a detailed inspection of the situation which existed in each frontier zone at different moments in time, for the obvious reason that such an approach would have been too time-consuming and would therefore have been incompatible with my aim to compare Roman and Chinese frontier policies in a large number of frontier zones and during a period of almost 250 years. Although there can be no doubt that a more detailed examination of the literary, epigraphic and archaeological evidence for each frontier would have resulted in a deeper understanding of regional particularities, I derive some consolation from Scheidel's reminder that "a crucial benefit of comparative study lies in its capacity to recognize broad patterns obscured by a preoccupation with "local" details and to identify significant differences between particular cases."⁶ Only by taking a wide perspective can crucial differences which existed within and between empires be brought to light.

In my comparative investigations differences will receive more attention than similarities. In recent article Peter Bang has urged comparative historians not to ignore similarities. While this reminder is both timely and useful, however, I have deliberately chose to highlight differences in Roman and Chinese worldviews, military policies and ideas regarding the roles and duties of rulers, for the simple reason that I started my investigations with the aims of highlighting some of the distinctive features of the Roman and Qin-Han empires.⁷ Of course, similarities are also important, if only because there would

⁶ Scheidel (2015) 7. For a long-term comparative assessment on social development in eastern and western Eurasia, see Morris (2009); Scheidel (2015) 5, no. 17.

⁷ See Bang (2015) 37-38: "In putting the emphasis on similarities, we have been going against the inclination of much humanist research, which has tended to stress the

no point in carrying out a comparative study of two societies which were totally different. However, as Scheidel has pointed out in a recent book, the emphasis on critical differences between two cultures helps us to “identify variables that were critical to particular historical process and outcomes, and allows us to assess the nature of any given ancient state or society within the wider context of pre-modern world history”.⁸

In this book I will sometimes use various “big terms”, such as “Roman”, “Chinese” and “Confucianism”. I am keenly aware that these terms as well as many other generalizing concepts have rich but ambiguous meanings. Since completely avoiding them was not a feasible option, I can only hope that the intended meanings, which are often not very specific, will be clarified by the contexts in which they appear.

4. Evidence

For the purposes of this study the literary sources are more important than any other kind of evidence. The main reason for this is because these sources offer the best information on most of the topics which are examined in this dissertation. This is particularly true of worldviews and ideas regarding the various roles which Roman and Chinese emperors were expected to play. Needless to say, the reliability and utility of the surviving literary sources are often in doubt, but that is a problem with which almost all historians have to deal in some way or another.⁹ Because this dissertation covers huge spaces and long periods, special attention will be given to the problem of distortions created by anachronistic perceptions. As a general rule I have tried to rely on contemporary literary works rather than on sources which were composed long after the events which they describe.

In addition to the literary sources, some inscriptions also play an important part in this thesis. As has already been explained, a comparative study of the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* and the Stele Inscriptions of Qin Shi Huang will

unique features of societies and therefore privilege the culturally specific or what Clifford Geertz dubbed local knowledge... In short, there is a real risk that nominalism will crowd out analysis here in the desire to emphasize, even celebrate difference and complexity. The scholar may simply end up stating the obvious, in this particular case that Latin was not Chinese and vice versa”.

⁸ Scheidel (2009) 5.

⁹ For a general discussion of literary sources and historical writings in early China, see Lewis (1999). For Rome, see Bispham (2006) 29-50; Damon (2006) 23-35.

be undertaken in the final parts of the first and second chapters. In chapters 3 and 5 other inscriptions will be used as supplementary sources of information. In my discussions of the roles and duties of Roman and Chinese emperors and of the images which they tried to broadcast I will occasionally draw on various types of material evidence, such as coins, sculptures, reliefs and paintings, but these types of evidence have been used mainly to supplement or to correct the picture which emerges from the literary sources. A systematic study of all the evidence relating to all of the topics which will be examined in this dissertation would have expanded the scope of my investigations to unmanageable proportions.