World views and military policies in the early Roman and Western Han empires

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Conclusions

In the introductory chapter of a recent volume containing a series of comparative papers on the Roman and Han empires, Walter Scheidel draws attention to the many similarities which existed between these two imperial states. As he puts it:

> *Two thousand years ago, perhaps half of the entire human species had come under the control of just two powers, the Roman and Han empires, at opposite ends of Eurasia. Both entities were broadly similar in terms of size. Both of them were run by god-like emperors residing in the largest cities the world had seen so far, were made up of some 1,500 to 2,000 administrative districts, and, at least at times, employed hundreds of thousands of soldiers. Both states laid claim to ruling the whole world,* orbis terrarum *and* tianxia*, while both encountered similar competition for surplus between central government and local elites and similar pressures generated by secondary state formation beyond their frontiers and subsequent "barbarian" infiltration. Both of them even ended in similar ways: one half, the original political core—the west in Europe, the north in China—was first weakened by warlordism and then taken over by "barbarian" successor states, whereas the other half was preserved by a traditionalist regime.*[1]

Scheidel states that an empire "usually involves the unequal relationship between a ruling center (core) and a ruled (peripheries)." As he points out, historical empires were often multi-ethnic and multi-lingual, with diverse communities linked to a central power via varied local elites.[2] In the particular cases of the Roman and Han empires, these consisted of vast territorial states containing various peoples which were ruled by monarchs. These similarities are the background to the comparative investigations which have been undertaken in this dissertation.

In Chapters 1 and 2, I have examined the formation of the idea of world domination in Pre-Imperial Rome and China. During the first centuries of the Republic, the political horizons of the Roman elite initially remained limited to Central-Western Italy and then to Peninsular and North Italy, Sicily and Sardinia. However, in the Greek-speaking East, Alexander's unprecedented conquests had stimulated the formulation of an ideology of world domination. As Rome conquered large parts of the Hellenistic world, Roman generals and

[1] Scheidel (2009) 11.
[2] Scheidel (2009b) 17-19.

intellectuals appropriated this ideology, which neatly summed up the logical outcome of the seemingly unstoppable process of centrifugal expansion which had taken place during the last two centuries BC. However, although the all-embracing worldview associated with this ideology is referred to in various sources dealing with Pompey's eastern campaigns, it did not become a dominant theme in Roman imperial ideology until the age of Augustus.

At the other end of the Eurasian continent, worldviews developed in a strikingly different way. In Pre-Imperial China the idea that the world consisted of a centre and four quarters existed but it shared the stage with another concept in which the world consisted of five concentric zones, of which the innermost represented the highest level of civilization. Interestingly, the latter theory reinforced the nascent construction of "Chinese-ness" during the late Spring and Autumn and the Warring States periods. At approximately the same time, the rise of pastoralist societies in the huge strip of land on the northern periphery of the Central Chinese Plains deepened the divide between the Chinese and non-Chinese worlds. In the long run, these processes would contribute to the emergence of a relatively closed and exclusive worldview.

A comparison between the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* and the Stele Inscriptions of Qin Shi Huang supports this analysis. While Augustus claimed to have established Roman domination throughout the *orbis terrarum*, the first Chinese emperor claimed to control the *tianxia*, "all under Heaven". Although superficially these two terms might seem to convey broadly the same meaning, a closer inspection reveals that the concept of *orbis terrarum* was closely linked to the imperial ideology of *imperium sine fine* ("power/empire without limits"), whereas in various passages of the Stele Inscriptions (though not in all of them) the Chinese term *tianxia* clearly refers to the Chinese world to the exclusion of the lands of the non-Chinese barbarians.

The central problem examined in Chapters 3 and 4 has to do with the extent to which the very different ideological conceptions of "world domination" in Early-Imperial Rome and in Qin and Han China corresponded to differences in actual military policies. During the early Principate, the military situation and military policies differed from region to region. None the less, indications provided in various literary sources as well as extensive archaeological evidence both support the idea that, before the third century AD, there was no fixed and clear-cut boundary which demarcated Roman from non-Roman territories. In this sense the Roman empire remained an *imperium sine fine*. On the other hand, the annexation of various neighbouring states as well as the

construction of increasingly complex military defence-works along major rivers and other natural boundaries, which commenced in the later years of the Flavian dynasty, gradually made the imperial frontier more cohesive and visible. This situation stimulated the formulation of a more closed worldview which made a sharper distinction between the civilized Roman world protected by the frontier defences and the barbarian world beyond. Importantly, it should be stressed that this alternative worldview never eliminated the all-encompassing worldview of the Augustan age and that, up to the final years of the reign of Septimius Severus, many emperors launched aggressive military campaigns beyond the Rhine, the Danube and the Euphrates.

During the first seventy years of the Han empire, Chinese military policies could have scarcely appeared more different to those encountered in the Early Roman empire. Compared to their Roman counterparts, the early Han rulers showed little interest in territorial expansion. It can be argued that the adoption of this non-expansionist policy was largely determined by the military weakness of the Han underlined by the threat posed by the Xiongnu empire of the northern steppes.

The situation did change in the early 120s BC when Emperor Wu's aggressive military campaigns resulted in an unprecedented territorial expansion of the Han empire, ultimately extending Han control as far as the Western Regions. Nevertheless, there are strong reasons to think that the primary goal of these military campaigns was to secure the heartland of the Han empire by expelling the Xiongnu. Likewise, the establishment of an elaborate system of fortification works along the Yellow River and in various other areas mainly served the purpose of improving security.

During the first and second centuries AD, the Roman empire also acquired an elaborate system of legionary camps and other military structures, such as walls, palisades, ramparts and ditches, which formed a more or less linear frontier along the major rivers and other strategic topographical boundaries. Indubitably, although these natural and artificial barriers played a role in defending the empire against hostile barbarian attacks, it is also certain that, throughout the period of the Principate, many of these military installations were used as bases for further conquest. During this period the uncontested military superiority of the Roman armies allowed Roman rulers to adopt an elastic policy. This elasticity explains why some emperors launched major campaigns of conquest, whereas others merely reacted to challenges posed by various barbarian peoples.

The final two chapters of this dissertation focus on the relationship between the Roman and Chinese emperors and their respective armies. More than thirty-five years ago, Fergus Millar wrote that "the emperor was what the emperor did."[3] Up to a point this observation remains valid. In both China and Rome, the emperor had to play multiple roles if he were to display his power and authority. The power of these rulers was not merely symbolic, although symbolic power can be very real.[4] For many decades Roman historians have disputed whether the emperor played an active role in administrative and military affairs or mainly confined his duties to responding to petitions submitted by his subjects.[5] Millar correctly pointed out that on account of the limitations of the geographical and ethnographical knowledge available to the emperor and his advisors, it was difficult for the former to obtain reliable information about any developments which might have been taking place on the periphery of the empire and subsequently to made a quick response. On the other hand, it would be a mistake to infer from this that emperors never developed any plans of their own. Max Weber's observation that the roles rulers had to play were shaped to a significant degree by the expectations of their subjects must be borne in mind.[6] During the Principate, all Roman emperors had to play the role of military *imperator*, whether they liked it or not. In other words, because of social and cultural expectations Roman emperors were under pressure to seek military honours, preferably by leading the army in person.

In stark contrast to their Roman counterparts, the emperors of the Qin and Han dynasties were not expected to play any military role after the decision to start a particular war had been taken. As early as the Warring States period, Chinese rulers had distanced themselves from military affairs. Although the Stele Inscriptions erected by the first Qin emperor, Shi Huangdi, do extol his successes in unifying the *tianxia* by his martial virtues (*wude* 武德), neither in the literary sources nor in any other works of art does he ever appear as a military general. In this respect Qin Shi Huang's self-representation was very different from that used by Augustus. Another pair of emperors who invite comparison are Trajan and Emperor Wu. These two emperors have been described as the most warlike emperors of the Roman and Han empires. Both took pride in the

[3] Millar (1977) xi.
[4] Noreña (2011) 318; Sumi (2013) 533.
[5] See Millar's work (1977).
[6] Weber (1980) 140-48; Wallace-Hadrill (1981) 298.

massive territorial gains which were the fruits of their aggressive military policies. However, although Trajan was keen to present himself as an active and effective military commander, Emperor Wu never commanded any army on the battlefield.

Both the Roman and Han empires were created by military successes won against competing rulers. Nevertheless, the authority of the Chinese emperor and the concomitant legitimacy of the Han dynasty were not primarily based on the military qualities of the emperor and his family. The legitimacy of the Han rulers rested largely on the superior moral qualities which were attributed to them and on the idea that their rule was sanctioned by Heaven. These concepts were elaborated on when Confucian principles achieved a dominant influence at the imperial court after the death of Emperor Wu. The Han literati asserted that the emperor could achieve the same moral qualities and superior intelligence as the wise kings of remote antiquity by studying the Classics. Should he achieve this goal, his virtues would be broadcast not only among the inhabitants of the civilized *tianxia* within the Seas *(hainei)*, but also throughout the barbarian realms; indeed even among the birds and animals inhabiting the sky and earth. Consequently universal rule in all areas under Heaven, the broader sense of *tianxia*, could be achieved. In terms of actual policies this doctrine entailed that, as soon as hegemonic power had been achieved by military intervention, the ruler should end all military campaigns and concentrate on moral self-cultivation within the *tianxia* and the "Four Seas".

The findings of this dissertation strongly support the conclusion that, in most texts which were produced during the Qin and Western Han dynasties, the idea of universal rule signified something completely different to the Roman concept of *imperium sine fine*. This contrast is paralleled by a striking difference in conceptions of imperial roles and virtues. While Roman emperors, as their Chinese counterparts were also expected to do, were supposed to display a wide range of virtues, such as *aequitas* and *liberalitas*, in Rome military *virtus* continued to be regarded as an important component in the package and military success was a crucial requirement for the legitimacy of the emperor's rule.[7]

[7] Of course there was some room for manoeuvre, with different virtues being highlighted during the reigns of particular emperors. See, for instance, Charlesworth (1937); Wallace-Hadrill (1981); Noreña (2001) and (2011).