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THIRTEEN

TOWARDS A PATCHWORK PERSPECTIVE ON ANCIENT EMPIRES

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In this short conclusion, we aim to reflect on what we perceive to be the most significant convergences that emerge from the case studies and comparative perspectives presented in this book. We will focus attention on the following issues: first of all, the basic observation that empires often had a clear impact on landscapes and societies. We recognise that recent studies in various disciplines over the last decades have questioned the impact of several ancient empires and have emphasised the diversity of landscapes, societies and economies found within empires instead. However, we oppose the suggestion that diversity can be equated with one-sided local agency or continuity; and more importantly, we do not think that diversity can be equated with weak imperial impact. Instead, we may observe that *both* the constitution and impact of empires are highly diverse and variable. This means that we need to shift away from classificatory approaches to ones that acknowledge the intrinsic heterogeneity and dynamic nature of empires, because this very nature is indispensable for their functioning. Last but not least, we suggest that despite the rich diversity of forms in which diverse empires unfold, clear parallels within their functioning on the ground can be found, also between empires that are remote from one another in space and time. This suggests that the category of empires is viable, and that there is considerable scope for comparative archaeological work that steers clear of top-down determinism, on one side, and postcolonial particularism, on the other.

MAPPING THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF EMPIRES IN PROVINCES AND PERIPHERIES

This book set out with the aim to investigate the ways in which empires transform landscapes, societies and economies in rural and peripheral regions. Evidently, the processes that occur in any particular region are the result of a complex interplay between different stakeholders and other factors. These include the agents of empire, who often have an interest in securing lasting control over conquered territories and societies, or, in the case of local elite cooptation, in maintaining their prominence in the new power balance. It also includes the resources and toolkits available to these agents of empire, and the resources and toolkits available to the subject populations and social groups. The latter, local, resettled or newly defined groups, did not necessarily subscribe to the imperial interests and agendas, and might engage in subversive behaviour or transform power structures for their own ends. The interplay also includes the strategic and economic affordances of a region, which are not intrinsically static values, but codependent on the new socioeconomic and geopolitical context. It is clear that, within this decidedly complex interplay of elements that make up imperial realities on the ground, bottom-up approaches have over the last decades greatly enhanced our understanding of various imperial and/or colonial situations from a local or regional perspective. In this volume, the contributors have also taken up the challenge to ask equally legitimate questions about what these regional studies may tell us about the agency of imperial agents and the place of these regions within the wider empire. Can our evidence inform us better about the objectives of imperial agents and how they changed over time? Does it show divergences between self-proclaimed imperial aspirations and empire in practice? How, if ever, did imperial agents succeed in achieving lasting domination in remote or decentralised areas? What repertoires of rule developed in imperial contexts in such rural and remote landscapes, and to what degree did imperial agents really achieve any kind of permanent power over such places – or are we instead dealing with isolated patches of control connected by fragile networks?

The Transformation of Rural Societies and Landscapes

In contrast to scholars who argue that empires are mainly military overlay organisations taxing local societies that are otherwise little affected (Tilly 1994: 7; Strootman 2013: 68), most of the empires discussed in this volume, as well as many other studies (Wells 1999; Smith 2003; Alconini 2005; Glatz 2009; Malpas and Alconini 2010), show that profound transformations often occurred in territories controlled by these empires. As argued by Sancisi-Weerdenburg (1990), the archaeological study of many empires has too often

been equated with the definition and study of artefacts, architecture or other objects of a certain imperial style, rather than with how empires affected rural societies, landscapes and economies. Colburn (this volume) demonstrates that the Achaemenid Empire, which has become the classic example of an archaeologically invisible empire, had in fact a clear impact on the landscapes and societies of the Egyptian Kharga Oasis, which was transformed by the introduction of new agricultural technologies (qanat structures), making agricultural production feasible and enabling new levels of population densities.

This type of landscape engineering, in which new agricultural technologies and/or crops are introduced in previously little cultivated landscapes, is a phenomenon that is mirrored in many of the case studies discussed in this volume: it occurs in the Assyrian Empire (Düring; Morandi Bonacossi, Parker); Achaemenid and Roman Egypt (Colburn; Boozer); Hellenistic Crimea (Attema); Urtu (Ristvet); and in the Wari and Inca empires (Parker). In many cases, this form of agricultural development involved substantial labour investments, for constructing canal systems or terrace walls, and there would have been a costly startup phase to the development, in which the new agricultural setup was not yet productive but large numbers of workers needed to be fed. Even within the relatively small current sample of agricultural developments of previously little-cultivated landscapes, a diversity of possible motives can be discerned. In some cases, an important aim seems to have been to produce cash crops for export within the now wider and better connected imperial structure, as in the cases of the Achaemenid Kargah Oasis (olives, castor beans), the Roman Kargah and Dakleh oases (cotton) and the Crimea (grain export). In other cases, the main aim of agricultural development seems to have been to boost the local or regional subsistence base, to feed its people or to facilitate higher population densities. The latter seems to have been particularly important in imperial core regions, such as the Pontine plain near Rome (Attema 1993). In some cases, such as that of Crimea, and possibly that of Assyria, agricultural development was undertaken in regions that were too marginal to create sustainable agriculture, and this possibly was a calculated risk. In these areas, the new imperial order, and the resources that could be mustered by it, made the development and exploitation of these areas feasible. As shown clearly in the Crimea, these enterprises could also come to an end abruptly with the abatement of imperial control (Attema, this volume, cf. more generally Horden and Purcell 2000). Elsewhere, regions might have been underpopulated and little exploited due to the ravages of war – as for example in the Assyrian Balikh, whose population seems to have been largely annihilated at the time of its colonisation (Düring, this volume) – and were developed for concerns of safety or for strategic reasons. Finally, Parker (this volume) has suggested that agricultural development might also have served to enhance

imperial control over agricultural resources and their producers, for example by forcing pastoralists to farm.

The agricultural development seen in many empires is, however, not the norm across imperial territories. There are large regions, often consisting of prime agricultural land, that see little imperial interference. In other cases, we can document more locally specific economic strategies geared towards the exploitation of existing resources. Means and opportunities may therefore play an important role, especially in the early phase of imperial expansion. Diversifying economic strategies and related settlement patterns should therefore be seen as part and parcel of imperial projects, rather than as failure (cf. Stek, this volume).

In many imperial studies, it has been assumed that empires can be characterised as a series of concentric zones in which imperial systems of domination operated in a more or less homogeneous manner, with, for example, a heartland surrounded by a provincialised zone, which is again surrounded by a ring of vassals. In contrast, we recognise in the contributions to this volume that a closer look at the situation on the ground shows a much more diverse picture, in which a large diversity of trajectories and developments can be documented in empires, and that zoning models unravel upon closer inspection. Unpacified mountainous or desert zones often occur close to imperial cores, and conversely, agricultural colonies may be implanted deep into alien territories and exist as islands of imperial control that are only tenuously connected to other parts of the empire. In many cases, agricultural development occurs at the interstices of existing agriculturally productive regions, for example in lands that can only be cultivated after substantial investments, such as terracing or canal building. In imperial cores regions, agricultural developments often occur in between already existing agriculturally productive zones (Parker; Morandi Bonacossi, this volume). Elsewhere, such as the Lower Habur and the Balikh in Assyria, or the Khargah Oasis in Achaemenid Egypt, agricultural development might have been a means of creating a reliable and loyal province, from which an adjacent rich and densely populated zone, which was more difficult to fully control, could be dominated more effectively. It could therefore be said that the creation of empires in many areas tipped the balance and made new socioeconomic approaches feasible or more intensified extraction of the same old resources viable.

The idea that empires consisted of a patchwork of differentially configured regions, and that colonies coexisted with regions in which preexisting communities were left largely to their own devices, suggests that the idea of imperial power as it is often understood might need to be modified. Studies of empire abound with narratives of military domination, in which policies of genocide, deportation and colonisation greatly transformed the size and composition of local societies and their amenability to the interests of the empire. These

types of policies can be documented in Assyria (Düring, Morandi Bonacossi, this volume), in Urartu (Ristvet, this volume) in Achaemenid Egypt (Colburn, this volume), in Hellenistic Crimea (Attema, this volume), in early Roman Italy (Stek, this volume) and in the empires of Inner Asia (Rogers, this volume). While such practices are seemingly widespread, it is equally important that they were far from homogeneously applied, with some landscapes/societies seeing much greater degrees of interference than others (Düring, Stek, Morandi Bonacossi, this volume), and we need to understand better what determined these variations in economic and demographic engineering. More importantly, however, we need to stress that in many cases we have evidence that imperial power, including military capabilities, was often relatively weak, and that even in cases where empires were military supreme, their true power rested in other places.

In the end, the capacity of imperial agents to persuade people from various cultural origins and various social positions to partake in the imperial project determined how successful empires were. As stated in the introduction, recent approaches to early empire and state formation have emphasised the importance of coalescent interests on behalf of selected social groups ('elites') from both imperial 'core' and conquered areas. It follows that the diversity of empires in terms of landscapes, peoples and socioeconomic modes depended to a large extent on the different rationales of these stakeholders in the imperial process.

For the communication and creation of opportunities shared languages, both in the literal and in the metaphorical sense, were necessary. One important aspect of this was of course the more blunt state propaganda, in which often ideological and/or religious motifs were utilised to legitimise the existence and reproduction of the imperial order. Examples range from the Assyrian reliefs showcasing the king's accomplishments to the *Res Gestae* that emperor Augustus had inscribed in monuments all over the Roman Empire.

Beyond such ideological means for integration, empires typically develop a specific idiom of practices, in which artefacts play a crucial role, that determine or, by its characteristics, nudge how one should dress, eat, live, interact and bury according to what we would call a *culture of empire*. These embodied and inculcated practices that are often normatively charged, representing the civilised way of being that is closely associated with the imperial order, and are manifested archaeologically by standardised repertoires of artefacts, cooking practices, particular arrangements of domestic spaces or particular burial practices. Such a culture of empire is visible in many case studies: one can see it, for example, in Assyria (Düring, Morandi Bonacossi, this volume), in the Achaemenid Empire (Khatchadourian 2016; Colburn, this volume), in Urartu and arguably in the so-called Capitoline kit for Roman colonies.

However, it has also become very clear in recent scholarship that there is often a considerable gap between imperial aspirations (sometimes amplified by modern colonialist sympathies) and empire on the ground. Typical in these ancient imperial aspirations is the emphasis on the literal cultivation and civilisation of empty, natural landscapes and the emphasis on uniformity of the new imperial culture. In reality, many colonial settlements were placed in or next to existing settlements, and local variation has been underestimated by focussing on uniform features only (e.g. for Urartu: Ristvet, this volume; e.g. Bispham 2006 and Sewell 2014 for Rome as model). Nevertheless, the growing interconnectedness of communities and societies surely sparked the necessity for a common language for communication, and to deny the cultural attraction of power altogether would go too far (e.g. Whittaker 1997; Sisani 2007).

Also, differentiated patterns can be recognised in the acceptance and reinterpretation or adaptation of new cultural elements. For instance, archaeological studies have demonstrated that imperial subjects might adhere to the culture of empire in public and prefer vernacular traditions in how they eat at home or get buried. Moreover, existing cultural symbols sometimes could be turned on their head to serve local purposes (e.g. Woolf 1998; Terrenato 2001; Smith 2003; Wallace-Hadrill 2008; Stek 2013; Wicke 2013; Düring, Visser and Akkermans 2015). In any case, the presence of a common vocabulary or *koine* can be seen as both prerequisite and effect of imperial expansion, and some of the key debates in ancient studies have revolved (and continue to revolve) around precisely this issue.

However, although essential for understanding empires and imperial ideologies, the huge amount of study of only the cultural aspect of empire does not seem proportional and indeed do no justice to their complexities. More worryingly, it also has led to a very unequal overall picture. As we already touched upon in the introduction, there are considerable differences in how different empires are approached by modern scholarship, with predominately ‘cultural’ approaches looming large in for instance in Roman studies, but not in many other ones. There are of course important modern preoccupations and biases at play, especially when supposedly Western values or roots are involved. Nonetheless, one could suspect that ideological and cultural expressions also in reality varied more from one empire to the next than the logistical and practical solutions that these empires employed on the ground did.

No doubt, a common basic element of imperial success concerns the degree to which empire facilitated collaborators to improve their own wealth and social position and to what degree such possibilities were open to newcomers. For example, it could be suspected that many of the peoples who were described as deportees in imperial propaganda were in fact people opting into an imperial scheme that rewarded their cooperation by providing material benefits in exchange for their labour and (partial) loyalty. Thus, rather than a

supposedly superior culture, a stronger explanation for Roman imperial success is its quite unique definition of citizenship, not based on birth but instead notionally open for those who coopted in the new order (e.g. Sherwin White 1973; Dench 2005; Eckstein 2006).

In all case studies, we have evidence for a complex interplay between imperial collaborators, those who opted into the imperial system, and others who were denied access or who actively resisted. Although we have much evidence for the brutality of early empires in specific cases, and some such as the Assyrian made concerted propaganda with violence against those who dared resist, all empires needed to ensure, first, that they could recruit enough collaborators to join their side; and second, that they reached some kind of equilibrium with their adversaries, at least for the short term. Resistance is amply documented in both historical and archaeological datasets, for example in destruction layers in the Crimea (Attema, this volume). Cultural resistance has been detected in various historical contexts as well (Ristvet, this volume). It remains important to consider from case to case, however, to what extent real choices were involved in such scenarios. Moreover, as remarked before, examples abound in which the dominant cultural language is inverted by subaltern social groups to actually advertise opposition to the associated imperial power (e.g. Pobjoy 2000; Pongratz-Leisten 2011).

The Transformation of Peripheral Societies and Landscapes

A second theme in this volume is what happened in the broad zone in which imperial control and authority was contested. It has long been clear that ancient frontiers seldom can be understood as the clear-cut borders of the nineteenth and twentieth century nation-states within which ancient empires were often first studied. Early Roman colonies were arguably not contiguous territories but rather networks of villages and their related resources, and both the Urartian and Byzantine empires are perhaps best conceived of as networks, rather than territories (Stek, Ristvet, Vroom in this volume). Interesting parallels exist, moreover, in the development of territorial notions only over time: the notion of a licence to power accorded to an imperial agent evolves only later into a geographically defined territory in both the case of the Roman *imperium* and *provincia* and that of the Byzantine *themata*. Also here, we are confronted with the contrast between aspiration and practice: as noted in the introduction, ideologically speaking, empires do not accept limits to their right to rule, and explicit declarations to such effect abound. Rather, empires merely limit their effort to control for practical or economic reasons, but always reserve their prerogative to interfere far beyond the regions within their domains.

That a frontier was (usually) fluid does not necessarily mean that it was also soft. It does, however, presuppose different mechanisms of social, economic

and cultural interaction. In fact, at the often dynamic interface of empire and beyond, whether the latter is 'barbaric' territory or another empire, complex and dynamic interactions can take place between imperial collaborators and their further removed adversaries. Empires thus often had a profound economic, political and social impact on neighbouring societies. The creation of secondary or even tertiary states and/or imperial constellations has been documented, for instance by nomad groups in Mongolia as a reaction to Chinese expansion (e.g. Barfield 2001, but see Rogers, this volume, for a very different perspective), and by Italic groups in Italy in opposition to Rome (Mouritsen 1998; Senatore 2006).

Similarly, one idea about the Urartian Empire is that it took shape as a reaction to the pressures of the Assyrian Empire (Ristvet, this volume). Ristvet argues that local societies at Oğlanqala were in turn appropriating elements of the Urartian cultural repertoires as part of their resistance strategies to that empire. Likewise, Boozer (this volume) describes a situation on the frontier of Roman Egypt that was only partly antagonistic, but that equally included an element of mutual collaboration to ensure that profitable trade flourished. Also De Jong and Palermo (this volume) show how trade was not really impacted by military conflicts between Rome and the Parthians/Sassanians and the changing balance of power in North Mesopotamia, and a similar case where objects defy presumed imperial borders is presented in Vroom's chapter (this volume). The targeting of resources beyond direct Roman control may have been a prime motivation for colonising a node of transhumance economy during Roman expansion into the Apennine mountains (Stek, this volume).

The presence of the military and their actions obviously mattered enormously to local societies in some frontier contexts. However, in North Mesopotamia, De Jong and Palermo show that despite significant military encounters and the construction of a large number of forts, the effects of the military presence on local societies was relatively limited. Their explanation is that the Roman occupation of the area did not develop beyond a short-term military domination due to various historical circumstances. Likewise, Boozer (this volume) argues that in Nubia, Rome did invest in military control, but did not pursue further development of the area, possibly because of its limited agricultural potential, whereas, by contrast, they did agriculturally develop the Dakhleh and Kharga oases. In the Byzantine Empire, it has often been postulated that its survival hinged on the relatively small fortified *kastra*. The thorough investigation of one of these at Butrint, Albania (Vroom, this volume), shows that the dominant idea of relatively small and impoverished fortified sites might be overdrawn, and that such places remained linked to international trade networks and were relatively prosperous.

Local and regional resources to tap into were thus important for the form that empires took at the fringes. These resources could be wide ranging, and

were surely not limited to natural resources. Cultural and human factors can offer important opportunities, whether in the sense of manpower, knowledge, craft, or technology. One recurring thread in many of the case studies marshalled in this volume is the creation or further development of cult sites or sanctuaries. These could represent ideological value, but also function as nodes in social, economic and political systems. The boosting of cult sites can be seen in the Achaemenid example (Colburn), in the Caucasus (Ristvet), early Rome (Stek) and the Dakhleh and Kharga oases (Boozer), but is not ubiquitous, as the Crimea example shows, where cult as far as is documented remained concentrated in the urban settlement (Attema).

Thus, imperial frontiers upon closer inspection are all different constellations of military, commercial and agricultural interests and are impacted by a complex power dynamic between those inside the empire and those beyond its control. Perhaps more surprising and important for our understanding of these empires is not so much the fact that objects and resources moved easily across political frontier areas, but the attempts at control by imperial agents that transpire from the evidence, from Byzantine stamped amphorae to the flocks of sheep of transhumant communities beyond direct Roman power influence. Yet, besides such attempts at top-down control, the permeability of frontiers also changed objects and resources moving through it from both sides. In fact, the new imperial complexities *required* standardisation of measures and values (coinage, weight, volume etc.), and this indirect effect was felt far beyond the formal limits of imperial control.

Comparing Repertoires of Rule in Rural and Peripheral Regions

Arguably the boldest section of this volume consists of two chapters in which Rogers and Parker investigate empires from a comparative perspective. Both authors formulate a range of repertoires of rule employed by empires through which they can be compared. Rogers focusses on demographic and political strategies of domination, including practices such as genocide, deportation and various strategies of indirect rule in the empires of Inner Asia and also discusses the archaeological correlates of various strategies. Interestingly, Rogers shows that empires need not centre on urbanism, or even agriculture, and that indirect strategies of rule can be highly effective. This is an important message given that all of our other case studies are urban, agriculturally based empires – or at least have been imagined so (cf. Stek, this volume on the Roman colonial example) – that gravitate towards direct rule and landscape and social engineering.

The comparative study by Parker, in which he counterbalances the Assyrian and Wari and Inca empires, complements that of Rogers. Here the focus is on landscapes: how settlement systems and agricultural practices are transformed.

He is able to demonstrate a number of striking parallels between the empires in the two regions. First, all three empires significantly impacted on preexisting settlement systems, through the truncation of previously existing regional centres and their replacement by imperial centres and the creation of small new unfortified rural settlements. Second, the three empires transformed agriculture in their provinces, by investing, for example, in terracing or irrigation and through the promotion of new crop production systems. Third, all these empires seem to have invested in the creation of densely populated and productive core regions. Finally, these empires all appear to have invested in the creation of infrastructure, with both practical and ideological effects, such as imperial road networks.

Overall, and as also borne out by the studies of Rogers and Parker, the many similarities in imperial transformation in provincial, peripheral and for that matter core regions documented in this volume is quite remarkable. We feel that these correspondences, while they should be problematised, do show the potential of a comparative approach to empires. This is not primarily so because imperial traditions are transferred from one empire to the next, although in many instances we can document reworking and reappropriation of imperial practices and ideologies, for example from Rome to Byzantium to the Ottomans (Burbank and Cooper 2010). Instead, we argue that empires simply faced very similar logistical and social challenges, and that the ways in which such challenges could successfully be coped with are relatively limited. Therefore, coupled with new technologies including the fast digitalization of archaeological datasets, there is serious potential for comparative archaeological analysis on a much more systematic and methodic scale. It is our hope that this book may stimulate further steps in this direction.

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