

## *Conclusions*

ANNA L. BOOZER AND BLEDA S. DÜRING

### **Introduction**

In this brief chapter, we integrate perspectives from our case studies, reflect on the relevance of a comparative agent-centered approach to ancient empires, and argue that our results contribute to the study of empires from all periods. We suggest that archaeologists have a key dataset for understanding empires, both ancient and modern, and that we need to start engaging in broader debates on imperialism. The contributions to this volume represent an initial step toward this eventual goal.

In our introduction, we identified significant issues with past studies of ancient empires. In particular, we suggested that the enduring focus on elites, courts, and imperial institutions has often excluded the more complex and dynamic aspects of imperialism that occur on the ground and involve agents of diverse cultural backgrounds and social statuses. The study of ancient empires, particularly of those in the old world, has maintained its predominant focus on the macro scale, portraying them as homogeneous and static systems of domination. In an effort to conform to these established models of imperialism, scholars have often flattened their datasets and ignored the increasingly rich data obtained in recent archaeological and historical research in which regional heterogeneity and dynamic changes are paramount.

Instead, this volume embraces a dynamic, bottom-up approach to the study of empires. While various scholars have used the bottom-up approach before (e.g., Schreiber 1987; Brumfield 1991; S. T. Smith 1995; Alconini 2004; Glatz 2009), this volume gathers global case studies together comparatively in order to take this approach in new directions. By bringing together these case studies into a single volume, it is possible to highlight how imperial on-the-ground realities

differ regionally and change dynamically over time. Moreover, our commitment to examining the complex bottom-up/top-down processes, trajectories, strategies, and responses to empires opens new directions to scholarship. Rather than ignoring such data on ancient empires as epiphenomenal, we argue that it is only by analyzing the incongruous and dynamic processes and instantiations of imperialism that we can start to understand how empires were realized and reproduced. Further, we argue that our bottom-up, multiscalar, diachronic approach to empires has potential for also revealing new insights into modern empires.

Our advocacy for a united study of imperial formations is new. Although the study of empires has become increasingly interdisciplinary in recent decades, among scholars of both ancient and recent empires the temporal divide has not been breached. The result is that ancient and modern empires have been explored in relative isolation from one another. We argue that we must draw ancient, colonial, and contemporary imperial formations together for a comprehensive understanding of empire. By combining advances across these temporal arenas, we escape the conceptual limits that we have placed upon ourselves by working in isolation. Archaeology is particularly well positioned to unite these disciplines because of its focus on diachronic change, its ability to recover developments ignored by textual sources, and its embrace of an inherently global perspective.

This concluding chapter thus recounts the current strengths and weaknesses in the study of ancient and recent imperial formations, delineating what we might gain from uniting these two perspectives. It further argues how archaeology, and the contributions in this volume in particular, can contribute to future dialogues on imperial states. Finally, we suggest a way forward for a future dialogue about empires that embraces all eras of imperial existence.

### **Agents and Empires**

We advocate for a bottom-up, agent-centered approach to ancient empires. In doing so, we follow in the footsteps of scholars working on colonial and post-medieval empires. In particular, scholars working in what has been labeled “the new imperial history” have embraced this approach for several decades. Likewise, various excellent archaeological studies in which empires are grounded in the agency and material realities of specific sites have been produced by scholars such as Stuart Tyson Smith, Claudia Glatz, and Sonia Alconini. What has been lacking so far, however, is a programmatic approach to empires both

ancient and modern. Instead, most studies have been inspired by postmodern ideas, and they therefore lack theoretical coherence.

Here we argue for an agent-centered approach in which imperial repertoires (e.g., agricultural intensification, export-oriented specialization, migration to a boom region) and imperial institutions (e.g., tax regimes, the army, temples) are reproduced by people going about their daily activities. We regard imperial repertoires as technologies and institutions that facilitate, inform, and constrain the formulation and expression of imperial programs. The claim that empires are (re)produced through ordinary chores is not intended to downplay the brutal nature of empires, which is evident in imperial histories of all periods, but to argue that we need a holistic perspective on other types of imperial encounters in order to understand empires fully. Studies of violence in antiquity have taken on a life of their own in recent decades (e.g., Bryen 2013; Campbell 2014). Our approach provides a counterbalance to the perspectives that explore empires mainly through the lens of violence and oppression.

The best illustration of how the actions of ordinary people may impact empires is provided in the work of James C. Scott (1985, 1998). Scott demonstrates that relatively minor subversive behavior—feet dragging, for example—can result in the collapse of mighty empires. From such examples, one can argue that the distinction between agency and micro histories on the one hand, and empires, on the other, is more superficial than real. Recent studies of colonial empires have generated increasingly nuanced and dynamic studies of empires through studies that include gender (Wilson 2011), race (Ballantyne 2010), sexuality (Levine 2003), and sovereignty (Dirks 2007), among other topics. These studies have demonstrated that as imperialism intertwines with everyday life, it is “simultaneously diffuse and tangible” (Stoler and McGranahan 2007, 26). Therefore, how empires are produced and reproduced through daily activities is of key relevance, and we need to investigate our case studies accordingly.

Scholars of the new imperial history have achieved their innovative results by focusing on archival records rather than historical texts (Wilson 2006). The recent influx of archival material into the study of colonial and postcolonial empires has generated a bottom-up approach that is analogous to the contribution of recent archaeological data to the study of ancient empires. These new archival sources “catch historical actors off guard” (Cañizares-Esguerra 2001, 1) and enable historians to undermine the predominant imperial narrative, which is often mired in the rhetoric of imperial self-representation.

While these new imperial history studies have opened research avenues of

monumental importance, there are three major caveats to this type of scholarship. First, it relies heavily on the availability of detailed archival datasets. Such data are, of course, only available for some empires. Many empires<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> ancient and modern<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> cannot be investigated through archival data. Second, as a result of the incredibly rich data contained in archival sources, studies of modern imperialism have become increasingly compartmentalized. The constricted focus on highly specific topics such as gender, race, honor, etc. has detracted from comprehensive synchronic studies of empires on the one hand and the investigation of enduring imperial histories, on the other. This has created a “forest for the trees” situation, in which we are sometimes at loss about the very nature of empires, including how they came to be, how they sustain themselves, and how they transform into subsequent formations.

This brings us to the third caveat for new imperial history studies. The focus has been on recent colonial empires, which has further strengthened false dichotomies found in scholarship on empires, such as between “the west and the rest” and “ancient and modern.” The exclusive focus on late nineteenth and early twentieth century European colonial empires became such a profound issue that a recent SAR volume, *Imperial Formations*, critiqued the limiting assumption that European colonial empires could be viewed as representative forms of imperialism (Stoler, McGranahan, and Perdue 2007). In order to embrace “the rest,” contributions to *Imperial Formations* included the Ottoman, Chinese, Japanese, Russian, and other often-ignored recent imperial formations (see also Burbank and Cooper 2010; Bang and Bayly 2011, 5–8). What *Imperial Formations* ignored, however, was the *longue durée* of imperialism. Ancient empires were the precursors to subsequent forms of empire, including all the imperial formations included in the 2007 SAR volume. Modern empires learned and adapted former imperial repertoires in a form of bricolage to create new imperial formations, some of which became empires (e.g., Britain, Spain) while others retained only a partial suite of the repertoires required to fit the definition (e.g., Russia). In other words, both “the west and the rest” dichotomy *and* the ancient/modern dichotomy could be resolved by simply exploring the *longue durée* of imperial development, a task that archaeology is particularly well-suited to tackle.

### Structures and Empires

The study of ancient empires has followed a remarkably different trajectory from that of modern colonial empires, in part because of the (perceived) lack

of similarly detailed data sources. For ancient empires, the focus has been very much on imperial structures and elites. The development of taxonomies, in which different types of imperial power were presented as coherent packages with clearly distinct profiles, has been prominent. Complementary to such totalizing perspectives has been an investigation of how elites and courts created imperial cultures that were perceived largely as an overlay upon preexisting societies. In recent years, these foci in the study of ancient empires have become increasingly problematic, but there have been some recent positive developments the study of ancient empires.

Scholars of ancient empires have not shied away from investigating empires in their totality and from investigating imperial histories or even imperial trajectories in which one empire took over elements from another. In this volume, Williams et al. and Overholtzer explore these trajectories most explicitly, but all our contributors address them to some extent. We maintain that imperial origins, genealogies, and transformations are crucial for the investigation of empires both ancient and modern. Indeed, many empires that have shaped the world in recent centuries have appropriated and reworked imperial repertoires that in some cases have roots that reach back through millennia of history. Perhaps the clearest example of this endurance is China, in which imperial formations have characterized a significant part of history over the past two millennia and in which earlier imperial repertoires and infrastructure are constantly being reworked and appropriated. Thus we argue that imperial structures and long-term histories are just as important as the reconstruction of how empires are grounded in daily activities, gender, race, and sex. Indeed, they are complementary.

In sum, we suggest that studies of ancient empires can contribute their holistic and diachronic take on empires. We contend that empire scholarship has become overly focused on one part of the spectrum—the elite—and this no doubt explains why the study of ancient empires has contributed little to the overarching study of empire. A good illustration of archaeology's absence from empire studies is that the most successful book on ancient empires, a collection of historical and archaeological studies of empires across the globe (Alcock et al. 2001), is not even mentioned in an important recent synthesis of empires across time and space by Burbank and Cooper (2010). We argue that archaeology can best serve the study of empire by addressing the structural and long-term dimensions of empires and investigate imperial production and reproduction through daily activities.

## The Archaeology of Empires

The game changer for empire studies more broadly, we argue, is ~~the~~ archaeology. While they have not been regarded as such, archaeological datasets have the potential to inform us on the same types of issues that scholars working on the archival evidence of colonial empires have been investigating. Through archaeological data, we can address imperial impacts on themes such as gender, agency, ethnic identification, and labor commoditization, among other matters. Moreover, the material remains of the past provide access to people who are often missing in text-based accounts, including archival records. This ability to access “the people without history” is a unique strength of archaeological research. For example, in recent years, archaeologists have begun to close this gap between historical and ancient empires by focusing upon themes such as materiality (Khatchadourian 2016), performance (Coben 2006), ethnicity (S. T. Smith 2003), and entanglement (S. T. Smith 2014).

Indeed, innovative archaeological studies dealing with agency in ancient empires and deconstructing the idea that these were homogeneous systems best understood from the elite and court perspective have been produced for some decades (Schreiber 1987; Parker 2001; S. T. Smith 2003; Alconini 2008; Glatz 2009). However, such studies were presented as isolated case studies and were published and read mainly by archaeological audiences. Only recently have comparative studies of empires from an archaeological perspective started to appear (Areshian 2013; Düring and Stek 2018). To date, none of these studies has explicitly sought to connect to the burgeoning field of studies on modern empires.

### A New Path

Our advocacy for a united study of imperial formations is surprisingly novel. Although the study of empires has become increasingly interdisciplinary in recent decades, the temporal divide between ancient and more recent imperial formations has not been breached. The result is that ancient and modern empires have been explored in relative isolation from one another. We argue that we must draw ancient, colonial, and modern imperial formations together for a comprehensive understanding of empire. This volume takes a first step toward intertwining ancient and modern empires by demonstrating that ancient imperial formations, like modern ones, are variable and messy. The

contributors to this volume demonstrate that it is important to examine agency among all imperial agents: top, bottom, and in-between (Alconini, Boozer, Düring, Smith, Yao, this volume). We further argue that empires have deep and complex histories that scholars must pay attention to in order to understand them (Williams et al., Overholtzer, this volume).

What remains to be done is to unify ancient and modern imperial studies. We believe that by combining advances in both ancient and modern formations, we escape the conceptual limits that we have placed upon ourselves by working in isolation. Archaeology is particularly well positioned to breach the temporal divide because of its focus on diachronic change, its ability to recover developments and peoples ignored by textual sources, and its embrace of an inherently global perspective.

We thus propose that the study of empires, ancient and modern, needs to be integrated in future scholarship. The new imperial history has undoubtedly paved the way for investigating how ordinary people were affected by and constituted empire. Archaeological data of empires both ancient and modern can substantially augment our access to people who are not represented or only marginally included in written sources but who are clearly crucial to empire. Here, for example, one can think about the considerable success archaeologists have had reconstructing recent conditions of slavery in the Americas (e.g., Orser 2004).

We also suggest that it is time to resurrect big questions about empires. What are they? How do they originate? Why are they so pervasive in history?; How do they use repertoires to control territories and people? In what ways are people induced to uphold imperial interests through their labor?

The contributors to this volume further these agendas by suggesting that archaeologists draw out more complex narratives from their data and remain attentive of the various agents involved in imperialism. They also demonstrate how imperial aims are achieved in daily encounters over a long period of time. This approach has been influenced to some extent by scholarship upon recent empires, but the contributions in this volume go even further.

For example, recent scholarship usually casts imperial agents as disruptive and aggressive, with conquered peoples portrayed as hapless victims. By contrast, our analyses suggest that empires can only succeed if they manage to incentivize a sufficient proportion of people to participate in the imperial project. Yao, along with other contributors to this volume (e.g., Düring, Boozer), argues that marginal people with poor prospects in life are offered the chance

to better their economic and social standing in society by partaking in imperial programs, such as the agricultural colonization of new frontiers. Beyond manipulating self-interests, empires typically rely on new types of subjects, who embrace the imperial project and identify with it. Confusingly, these mutually beneficial practices usually coincide with brutal policies of plunder and even the genocide of other people often living nearby. Thus, while we do not romanticize imperialism, we do suggest that it is important to further explore participation as a key ingredient to imperial creation and reproduction. Conquered people should also be understood as fully actualized agents who are capable of forging their own pathways to success within imperial formations and contributing to the imperial project.

### Outlook

We conclude by suggesting a new path forward for the study of empire. This path includes ancient and modern empires and colonial and tributary formations by historians and archaeologists, and it should address the following three goals.

First, we need to map out the intricate relationships between the “people without history” and the empire as a whole. While studies on modern empires have demonstrated how empires have impacted people in myriad ways, reshaping their corporalities, sexualities, and ethnicities, the reverse—how these people in turn shape or undo imperial economies and power—has been less researched. The papers in this volume demonstrate that empires look very different on the ground than when analyzed at the macro scale. In imperial provinces and peripheries, realities are highly varied and imperial predominance is often precarious. In order to explain these seemingly incongruous and dynamic imperial realities, we need to map out the various categories of agents and how they operate in particular historical, cultural, and geographical contexts, and how sufficient people were incentivized to align their activities with the interests of the empire. Boozer, Düring, Smith, and Yao, among other contributors, provide examples of the type of research that furthers our understanding of the various agents involved in the imperial project.

Second, we suggest that imperial repertoires have great longevity and are constantly appropriated and reworked over centuries or even millennia. As we explained in the introduction, we define imperial repertoires as the building blocks of imperialism, borrowing from foundational theories on the “sources



of social power” (Mann 1986) and the “repertoires of rule” (Burbank and Cooper 2010). Pre-imperial, imperial, and post-imperial states develop various repertoires that may or may not belong to an empire per se but can be adopted in an imperial project, and they may end up in post-imperial contexts which continue to be shaped by imperial antecedents. Imperial repertoires are constantly transformed and recombined in new arrangements, sometimes after long periods of political fragmentation, in order to suit the needs of changing circumstances. To map out such transformations and genealogies, we need a *longue durée* investigation of imperial developments. An added advantage of this *longue durée* approach to empires is that it draws modern studies of colonial empires out of a predominantly Eurocentric view of empires. Europeans developed their own imperial repertoires and agendas using a bricolage of past imperial formations that were based, at their deepest origins, upon non-European empires. Williams and Overholtzer, among other contributors, explore this long *durée* process of imperial formations, providing a blueprint of how it can be done for other empires.

Third, we suggest that a dialogue needs to take place between those studying ancient empires and those studying modern ones. To date, scholars from both sides of the imperial divide have been unduly fixated on concepts of imperial exceptionalism, to the detriment of a thorough understanding of imperialism. Edward Said once argued that each empire claims to be unlike all others and that this discourse of exceptionalism is part of their discursive apparatus (Said 1979, xxi). We as scholars have fallen into the trap that these empires have set for us, carrying the banner of exceptionalism into our own scholarship to the detriment of empire studies more broadly. Recent empires are not an entirely different creation than ancient ones, although industrialism and capitalism have profoundly transformed the reach and nature of modern imperial repertoires. Instead of continuing to assert that ancient and recent empires are exceptional and distinct from one another, we should come to accept that imperial formations carry broad similarities across time and space. As the studies in this volume demonstrate, not only do subsequent imperial formations learn from former ones, they also appropriate and reconfigure past imperial formations and infrastructures. The studies in this volume ask more from scholars of recent empires while also drawing from advances in recent studies.

In sum, we argue that archaeology is crucial for understanding how empires could arise in the first place, why some empires were more successful than others, and, as this volume demonstrates, how empires were constituted

through the daily activities of people living across their dominions. That is not to say that historical and political approaches are irrelevant; we also require those perspectives to tell the full story of empire. But we argue that we must break apart the idea of monolithic empires spreading across territories. Instead, we must understand that empires are heterogenous and dynamic patchworks of imperial configurations resulting from synergies between the empire and local agents that enabled empires to come into existence, thrive, falter, and transform into something new. We end this volume with a call to unite studies of ancient and modern imperial formations in future studies so that we can more fully trace out these imperial lives and afterlives.