



Imperial Turn: Challenges, Problems and Questions

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1 Reasons and Motivations for Newer and Younger Discourses on the Topic of Empire

Discussions on empires has significantly gained momentum since the late 1980s with Paul Kennedy's "The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers".¹ It has experienced a noticeable boom both in public discourse and within scholarship, and it is present on many levels. It is encountered in feature articles, in the everyday political processing of world events, and in an abundance of scientific publications. The reasons for this astonishing development are widely varied, but they can be defined rather clearly. Essentially, several components can be named which carry the discussion and provide for both the increased scholarly interest and for the greater everyday political attention.

A decisive role is played by current political situations as well as by contemporary history backgrounds. These are diverse and change the view both of the present and of history. Key events that may be indicated are the end of the Cold War in Europe (1989–1990) and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact,² which were subsequently followed

¹ Kennedy (1987).

² Mastny and Byrne (2005, p. 682f).

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by the implosion of the Soviet Union (1991).³ The supposed ascent of the USA out of the Cold War as the sole remaining superpower (1991–2001) and NATO’s Eastern enlargement (1999–2004)⁴ starting from the end of the 1990s were formative events which, however, were immediately accompanied by supposed “crisis symptoms”. These symptoms were thought of in “imperial” categories, with the term “imperial overstretch” being introduced as a central instrument of analysis.

These overreaches and overstrains of the remaining world power, the USA, in conflicts in Afghanistan, the Persian Gulf, and elsewhere in the Middle East with the Third Gulf War from 2003 onwards, which manifested themselves above all else during the administration of American president George W. Bush (in office 2000 to 2008),⁵ the leap in quality of the European Union from a customs- and free trade-based union to a currency union (2002) and its enlargement by ten new member states and then three more, primarily in the central, eastern, and southeastern part of the continent (2004, 2007, and 2013),⁶ and the return of the Russian position as a great power in the last decade under Vladimir Putin⁷ have all been sufficient causes and motivations to begin an intense treatment of empires and research into the formation of empires, the positions of hegemonic power, and the signs of the decay of empires as the subject matter of increased studies within the areas of political science and historical analysis.

In addition to the “structures”, the gaze has been increasingly directed at the protagonists of the events. The fact that within that context it was above all else men (and only recently also women) who would make history, was still evaluated in the German-language historiography of the 1980s and 1990s as anachronistic and absurd, while in the contemporaneous process of the history of the present, there was the impression that this was indeed the case. Dominant political figures of global events such as Mikhail Gorbachev, Ronald Reagan, and then later the aforementioned Bush junior seemed to substantially determine and shape world history, but this was also true for their “opponents” and “challengers” who resisted the demands of imperial orders and aggressively called them into question. These included Ayatollah Khomeini and Saddam Hussein as well as Osama bin Laden.

On another level, central political figures and decision-makers became responsible for the expansion of associations of states, such as the President of the European Commission Jacques Delors,⁸ Germany’s Chancellor Helmut Kohl,⁹ or the French State President

³Rühl (1992, p. 533ff.), Lozo (2014).

⁴Sloan (2005, pp. 89ff., 145ff., 181ff.), Staack (2018, pp. 15ff., 22ff).

⁵Ferguson (2004, pp. 169ff., 200ff.), Schwabe (2006), Schröder (2014).

⁶Gehler (2018b), Patel (2018), Schmale (2018).

⁷Mueller (2012, p. 226ff., 2014), Nolte (2017, p. 369ff).

⁸Ludlow (2015, p. 173ff).

⁹Schwarz (2012, pp. 619–716).

François Mitterrand¹⁰ for the European Union, while others became responsible for their dissolution, such as Slobodan Milošević for Yugoslavia.¹¹ Empires and superpowers seemed to be present like never before. It was possible to observe their ascent to global players. At the same time, it was evident that the claim to power that accompanied this development was called into question, and thus the danger of an erosion or even a collapse of these empires was put forward as a demanding question to be addressed.¹² It became also evident that empires constantly have to take into account challenges and dangers, especially on the peripheries. On both sides of the events, there were apparently political leaders who pulled the strings and who were made responsible for the rapid succession of development in world history.

The debate about “empire” served as background for all of these patterns of explanations,¹³ the ascent of which was observed with interest, but the condition of which was at the same time considered to be fragile and the future of which was deemed to be “open”. This addresses the current daily political events that turn out to be an important motivating force for the discussion of empires, hegemonic and world powers. Thus a relationship of causality exists between the recent, intensified preoccupation with empires and the debate that has begun since the end of the Cold War in the face of the supposedly sole remaining world power of the USA (1991-2001).¹⁴ Since the twenty-first century and as a result of the re-establishment and formation of new trade blocs and economies as well as the rise of regional powers such as the BRIC states Brazil, India, China, or EU Europe, this discussion has taken on dynamics. Established orders appear to dissolve, and the view into the future is accompanied by uncertainties and imponderables. These uncertainties led to an increased interest in historical imperial forerunners, with the duration, success, and failure of hegemonic and world powers being rediscovered as leading questions.

These components of contemporary history also had an effect upon the formulation of questions by the guild of historians, where new orientations and tendencies were in the offing. Thus in the historiographies, a certain weariness set in with those topics that in recent decades had been accompanied by an intense focusing first of all upon societal history (“structural history”) and then upon the history of everyday life (the history “from below”). To be recognized in parallel to this was a trend of fading away from the postmodern tendencies which, under the leading term of “anything goes”, underwent a paradigm shift which interestingly enough was first played out in US historiography. In the vacuum that then came about as a result of this, *new diplomatic and political history* as well as neo-realistic approaches spread that concerned both the study of history and political

¹⁰ Schabert (2002), Bozo (2005), Lappenküper (2011).

¹¹ Sundhaussen (1993, 2012).

¹² Parsons (2010, p. 423ff).

¹³ Osterhammel (2004, p. 157ff., 2006a, p. 4ff, b, p. 56ff.).

¹⁴ Schröder (2018, p. 404ff).

science. The history of policy and the history of events, *res gestae*, war, and international relations experienced a renaissance in the research and gained significantly in popularity. It may not be overlooked within this context that there was a large and lengthy scholarly culture of writings on the history of empires and on universal history with regard to the great powers,¹⁵ the empires, and their chief participants, if one thinks of Leopold von Ranke (*Weltgeschichte*)¹⁶ in the nineteenth century or Paul Kennedy (*The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*)¹⁷ in the twentieth century, and thus these traditions and the corresponding models may be carried on.

2 **Something Other than a Nation-State? Factors of Integration and Legitimation for Empires**

One essential aspect in the recent debates surrounding the phenomenon of empires is represented by the strategies of interpretation and legitimation¹⁸ that have been pursued within this context. Along those lines, the question is raised as to whether empires substantiate their historicity differently than nations and nation-states do in order to foster their integration (internal) by rulers and the elite and to secure their legitimation (both internal and external).¹⁹ While extensive historical research is available on nation-states, the question is raised as to whether we can already take knowledge about empires for granted to a sufficient degree in a manner that is not only specific to one era but also crosses over a plurality of them, that is, in a way that is extensive and covers world history, in order to effect a systematic comparative analysis at the same levels.

It may not be overlooked that there is a special pressure of expectations that challenges empires, because in the way that they view themselves, they are called upon not only for peacemaking, but also for ensuring wellbeing, which goes hand in hand with their mission and, as a rule, is defined as a central goal of the state.²⁰ These tendencies are already completely prominent with ancient empires and can also be observed with modern empires

¹⁵ Concerning the European Powers in Modern European History see the contribution of Suppan in this volume.

¹⁶ Ranke (1881–1888/1938).

¹⁷ Kennedy (1987, pp. 438ff., 447ff., 458ff., 471ff., 488ff., 514ff.); 2nd edition 1991, 3rd edition 2003.

¹⁸ For the legitimation of empires by tradition cf. the contributions of Paul, Hoffmann, and Harding in this volume. But cf. also the contributions of Frasch, Hoo and Wiesehöfer, and Rezakhani.

¹⁹ Of course, there is much more than the simple dichotomy between ‘nation-state’ and ‘empire’, although its juxtaposition is useful for historical analysis. Cf. also in general Scheidel (2013). See, however, also the contributions of Frasch, Pöhl, Connah, Sonderegger, Harding, and Hoo and Wiesehöfer in this volume, all of them developing nuanced conceptions on what ‘empire’ is supposed to be.

²⁰ Münkler (2005, p. 127ff).

such as the USA. They follow a guiding principle and profess possessing the “true” view of things in the world as well as being solely and exclusively in the position to guarantee growth and prosperity and to create law and order.²¹ The dichotomy between “truth” and “lies”, which can be translated as the comparison between a legitimate and an illegitimate claim to power, plays a substantial role in the legitimation of power in Near Eastern empires,²² but it can also be observed with its essential features with most of the empires of the subsequent eras.

With the clarification of such problems, it is worthwhile to establish precise criteria and, within that context, to not just ask which criteria are to be regarded as necessary and which are to be considered superfluous for an attempt at a definition.²³ For an empire, the nation-state argument of a firmly outlined territory *firstly* does not apply with regard to integration and legitimation. The means that are elementary for a nation with a united front of calling upon the “holiness of the borders” as well as the emphasis on the indivisibility of the state’s territory as a whole also do not apply. This does not have to mean that empires did not have, at least in some contested areas,²⁴ linearly fixed borders, but, and this is the important point, this is not a general phenomenon.²⁵

Secondly, the continuity of rulers—be it dynasties, family units, or oligarchies of political elites—appears to be of significance with regard to both integration and legitimation,²⁶ which does not, however, exclude “charismatic rule” (Max Weber) or the personalization of imperial policy.²⁷ An analogue situation, although in a somewhat diluted form, is also found in the model of the nation-state. *Thirdly*, as a result of the (long-term) strategy that initially was not present, with an empire neither having a revolutionary founding act (in the form of a sort of birth certificate) nor a creation event (myth), fixed to a very specific day and single occurrence that is wrapped in legend seem to be compulsorily necessary as the fabric for integration and legitimation, as can be found all

²¹ Maier (2006, p. 26f).

²² Pongratz-Leisten (2002).

²³ Concerning definitions and notions of the empire discourse see the contributions of Suppan, Fräsch, and Rezakhani in this volume.

²⁴ Cf., e.g., Richardson (2020) for the Neo-Assyrian Empire and its border with Babylonia in the trans-Tigris area. For empires and wall-building cf. the various contributions in Nickel and Rollinger (2022).

²⁵ Cf. the contributions of Paul, Hoffmann, Dybaś, Pohl, Ziemann, Kurella, and Rezakhani in this volume. See also Hämäläinen (2008, 2013) and his concept of a ‘kinetic empire’ as exemplified by the highly mobile Comanches.

²⁶ Cf. the contributions of Hoffmann, Externbrink, Waters, Kurella, and Rezakhani in this volume.

²⁷ For a comparative analysis of different case studies where this continuity could not be established, see now the various contributions in Rollinger et al. (2022). Concerning the specific conceptions as related to a given ruler’s appearance and ability see Lanfranchi and Rollinger (2016).

too frequently with nation-building and the founding of states. Again, this does not have to mean that the ‘birth’ of empires is not related, at least from retrospective, with founding ‘heroes’ and conqueror kings,²⁸ although in many of these cases these “empires” appear to have been short-termed.²⁹

We have thus arrived at the limits and the possibilities of the term “empire”. Forming “one world” (as Hans-Heinrich Nolte put it³⁰)—that is, first just bringing one such construct together and then also keeping it together—means the highest degree of the fulfillment of the requirements for integration and legitimation. What follows from this?

Firstly, peacekeeping, the guarantee of security, and promises of welfare enjoy an important role³¹ which, as a result of their size and diversity, requires far greater expenditures and far more energy of empires than it does of nation-states,³² at least seen through the lens of their ongoing expansion agenda combined with the claim to rule the “world”.³³ In contrast to the latter, they have to find a much greater degree of both willingness to negotiate and capability to mediate within, since the target public is characterized specifically by its heterogeneity. On the other hand, this public is only to be viewed to a very restricted degree as “the people”. It is rather the elite who is to be considered as the essential contact zone of imperial communication and, on their part, take over (or should take over) crucial services of mediation and transfer.³⁴ In addition, these communication services in an empire play a more significant and greater role within than it is the case toward the outside. But the “rest of the world” does not remain out of consideration, since empires endeavor to attain an inner consolidation which, in the end, causes external acceptance and inviolability.

Secondly, empires that are defined in this way constantly have to be measured against the claims that they themselves have raised, as well as against the achievements that have succeeded with preceding empires, in order to not be regarded as “weak empires of the second and third order”³⁵ and to not fade away. This also includes the assertion and the

²⁸ This can even be combined with the establishment of an era that signals the introduction of a new epoch, which, within one single king’s reign, was initialized for the first time in world history with Rim-Sîn of Larsa (Charpin 2004), and in a much larger and much more effective way with the Seleucid era (for the enormous effects of this ‘invention’ on the conception of time and history, see now Kosmin (2018)). However, it is very telling that for some of these eras, like the one of the Kushanas, modern scholarship is unable to connect its starting point with a specific event and thus to establish a firm chronology. See Rezakhani, in this volume.

²⁹ Rollinger, Degen and Gehler (2022), and for Alexander III (“the Great”) Bichler (2014).

³⁰ Nolte (2008a, b, pp. 9–10).

³¹ See Neumann (2014), Paulus (2014), Ruffing (2014a), Rollinger (2014a, 2017).

³² In the time of Augustus the Roman Empire spent about three fourth of its tax income for military matters: Woolf (2012). Already in 1936 over a third of Nazi Germany’s expenditure went towards rearmament and it was further increasing (Suppan 2020).

³³ Cf. Roger (2018).

³⁴ Cf. Rollinger (2016b) for the Achaemenid empire.

³⁵ Nolte (2008a, b, p. 5ff).

capability for accomplishment with respect to competing imperial power factors. The question is therefore raised, and not completely without good reason, whether two or three power constructs that exist simultaneously and that are in direct opposition with each other are still to be designated as “empires”.³⁶

Can one empire exist next to another one? In other words, with regard to the competing Near Eastern empires of the Amarna period,³⁷ Urartu and Assyria³⁸; the Achaemenid Empire³⁹ and the maritime alliance led by Athens; the Imperium Romanum⁴⁰ and the Parthian or Sasanian Empire⁴¹; Byzantium⁴² and the Caliphate⁴³; the Islamic empires of Central Asia,⁴⁴ the Ottoman Empire,⁴⁵ the Habsburg Empire,⁴⁶ and the Russian Tsar Empire,⁴⁷ along with their competitors in East and West: were they empires or rather hegemonic powers in their specific spheres of influence and neighborhood regions? This continues to be, as always, a question of criteria and perspectives which modern scholarship cultivates. It is also possible to speak of *global empires* (such as the British Empire⁴⁸) and *regional hegemonic powers* (such as the Habsburg Empire), although the two categories need not be mutually exclusive: China is perceived to be a regional hegemonic power in East Asia,⁴⁹ while at the same time it is to be seen as a global economic and trade empire and therefore a growing military and political world power.⁵⁰ The change of one and the same power construct from one “state” to the other is to be ascertained: if the EEC and the EC were still regional powers with hegemonic traits in Western Europe during the Cold War, then the European Union of today on the entire continent is a global hegemonic power on the path toward being an economic, currency and trade world power with imperial or neo-imperial traits.⁵¹

³⁶ Cf. the contributions of Paul, Hoffmann, Dybaś, Externbrink, Waters, Ziemann, and Rezakhani in this volume.

³⁷ Paulus (2014).

³⁸ Salvini (2014), Radner (2014).

³⁹ Rollinger (2014a, 2017).

⁴⁰ Ruffing (2014a).

⁴¹ Wiesehöfer (2014).

⁴² Schneider (2014).

⁴³ Hämeen-Anttila (2014).

⁴⁴ Cf. the contributions of Paul, and Hoffmann in this volume.

⁴⁵ Cf. the contribution of Uluisik in this volume.

⁴⁶ Judson (2017).

⁴⁷ Nolte (2008a, b).

⁴⁸ Brendon (2008).

⁴⁹ Klein (2009, p. 345ff.), Gu (2014).

⁵⁰ Gu (2018, p. 435ff).

⁵¹ Gehler (2016, 2018b, pp. 614–637, 632), also see Zielonka (2006), Kühnhardt (2008b).

Thirdly, an empire's sheer "size" is of particular relevance,⁵² but *fourthly* also its "permanence" or, to put it better, its "infinity".⁵³ A guarantee of continuity and the care and maintaining of traditions are crucial for integration for "genuine empires".⁵⁴ Nations, on the other hand, are historical phenomena that are very young, relatively contestable, and prone to crises. Like their cities and internal regions and peripheries, though, empires are considerably older.

Starting from the idea that empires do not possess any firmly defined or precisely delimited territorial status, it is necessary to return to Nolte's argument on expansion⁵⁵: empires are always in motion and develop dynamics which have to do with material accumulation or territorial adjustment, i.e. stabilization and adaptations of political power, and directly related to the steady "increase of the empire", exploitation of the available resources (men and kind), fluent socioeconomic developments and processes of social integration, as well as the permanent service of clientele relationships and the provision for the 'needs' of subjects, i.e. elites at first hand, but also non-elites. With such ambitious objectives and the never-ending challenges to be faced, the limits of feasibility and the time factor are constantly to be taken into account, to which we shall return below.

Fifthly, another relevant integration factor for empires is not only a central administration, but above all else a bureaucratic system that is based upon apparatuses.⁵⁶ This administration, in spite of a prominent bureaucracy, allows for a considerable degree of maneuvering room for domestic and foreign policy action and possibilities for development in order to possess the corresponding acceptance therein and to ensure loyalty.

The use and the instrumentalization of religion (in particular, monotheistic exclusive religions like Christianity and Islam, and dogmatic economic ideologies like communism and capitalism) for the integration and legitimation of empires appears to find less attention in the research against the background of an alleged secularized, agnostic spirit of the times. And yet the "holiness of rule" and the sacred aura of power as well as the divinity of empire and the aura and charisma of its leader were additional essential reasons that were given for its justification and its cohesion.

Eva Marlene Hausteiner⁵⁷ is to be agreed with that historicity was an important resource, if it did not even play a central role in the way an empire views itself or else the way the imperial elites view themselves.⁵⁸ With ideas of imperial history and rule, reference was made to claims such as exclusivity, uniqueness, originality, and

⁵² Although it is an important element indeed: Gießauf (2014).

⁵³ Cf. Rollinger (2014a, b, 2017).

⁵⁴ Cf. Neumann (2014), and see the contributions of Paul, and Hoffmann in this volume.

⁵⁵ Nolte (2008a, b, p. 5ff).

⁵⁶ Cf. the contributions of Palme, Waters, Uluisik and Kurella in this volume.

⁵⁷ For this and what follows: Hausteiner (2015, pp. 15–33, especially, pp. 16–25).

⁵⁸ Cf., e.g., the focus of ancient Near Eastern empires and would-be empires of the second and first millennium BC on the precocious third millennium kings of Agade like Sargon and Naram-Sin; see Neumann (2014), Rollinger (2013), Richardson (2020), Van de Mieroop (2020). For the idea of a succession of empires see Wiesehöfer (2003a), Rollinger (2011). See also Pongratz-Leisten (2018)

incomparability.⁵⁹ Yet the question is raised as to whether assertions and presumptions of that sort cannot also be established with nations, where their formation and development of identity likewise played a role. So what differentiates the imperial *raison d'être* from its national counterpart?

Hausteiner understands imperial self-reflection to be a stronger linking of history, the present, and future than it is the case with nations, above all else as far as the capability for the establishment of progress is concerned. This mainly involves the profile of the elites that carry on the imperial discourses as the agents. Hausteiner raises the question as to whether national discourses on ideas and legitimation are likewise correspondingly shaped, borne, and structured by national elites. Nation-states have to communicate “ideology” but have to do so substantially more broadly. Further comparative research has to be achieved here that will also have to focus on the “historiographers” of the empires, examining how and in which way they wrote their works, and above all else to what extent they differ from other historians and/or “historiographic” agents dealing with nations and their discourses.

Also to be placed within these contexts are the modern universities, the origins of which are closely linked with the birth of the nation-state. The scientific disciplines as they have been established especially in the nineteenth century did not originate out of nothing but were part of specific contemporary agendas, perceptions, and frameworks. This also relates to the general decision which epochs are supposed to be of major and of less importance in history. All this is not only about gaining and establishing knowledge but also about exploiting approaches and entrenching specific world views and perceptions.⁶⁰ Schools, other educational institutions, and curricula are a multiplier of this development and considerably affected by this.⁶¹

Hausteiner's remarks suggest that empires were more artificial with respect to their historical foundation and historicity and therefore also rather a sort of more fabricated and thus more ‘unnatural’ than nations. Are nations a “natural form” and empires pure products of artifice? This appears to be a problematic assumption and it is more appropriate to use different construction models.⁶²

The transfer of imperial power for example from Rome through the Frankish Empire to the Holy Roman Empire,⁶³ or from Rome to Byzantium⁶⁴ and on to Moscow⁶⁵ opens up

for a sophisticated treatment of the categories of tradition, discourse and ideology in the ancient Near East. For the transformation of identities: Canepa (2018).

⁵⁹ With empires, these terms depend not upon the people, but rather upon other factors: mission, ruler/dynasty, God/religion, “location” (such as Assur, Babylon, and Rome).

⁶⁰ Wiesehöfer (2002, 2003b, 2010).

⁶¹ Cf, e.g., Marchand (1996, 2010).

⁶² Hausteiner (2015).

⁶³ Steinacher and Winckler (2014), Ruffing (2014a).

⁶⁴ Preiser-Kapeller (2018).

⁶⁵ Nolte (2017).

the question in this specific case as to what happened with competing claims of historicity of imperial rule and its legitimation.⁶⁶

Furthermore, the question is raised regarding to what degree national and imperial legitimations of history can be connected or confounded, in that way becoming inseparable and causing something new to arise. The status of France as an *état nation* passed through its rank that had been elevated as a first empire (1794/1795–1815) followed by a second empire (1831–1858) and would thus be rather compatible with this.⁶⁷ From this backdrop, the special case of the empire of the Modern Era has to be addressed.

To sharpen the inquiry: can a selective dissociation between nation-states and empires, along with their histories that are told and their historicities that are imagined be maintained at all for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries? Hausteiner takes this circumstance into account and points at the close linking of both imperial and nation-state historical references. Examples of this may be found: Italian Fascism (1922–1943/1945) was a product of a delayed formation of the nation-state (1861–1871) and the starting point for the “*Mare Nostrum*” empire, even if it was a short-lived one (1935–1945).⁶⁸ The “Third Reich” (1933–1945) also emerged from a delayed founding of a nation-state (1867–1871) and, along with the “Greater German Empire” (1939–1943), formed an aggressive short-term wartime and robber empire which, although it was larger in terms of area, was even shorter-lived than that of the Fascism of Italy.⁶⁹ Here we can observe that nation-states and empires interplay and overlap.

The discourses on the “American nation” and its “empire”, that were carried on by the imperial elite within the context of the rise of a world power after the First World War (1918–1941) and a superpower after the Second World War (1945–2001) did not exclude, but rather thoroughly allow for linking with each other with a certain decline after 9/11.

With the tracking down of imperial benchmarks, the question is raised as to whether these observations do not also imply a calling into question of an empire’s claim for exceptionality. Is the conscious renunciation of measuring against previous imperial examples therefore not also a strategy for negotiating deficits in integration and legitimation? At least, Hausteiner postulates that empires are supposed to be under greater pressure concerning the establishment of integration and the obligation for legitimation than constructs of rule that covered less territory and were more manageable, such as nations and their states. This is true, but what appears also to be correct is that dealing with the pressure for legitimation is expressed differently, depending upon the different agents involved in these processes.

⁶⁶For making use of a power vacuum as well as the establishments of ideals and claims of imperial rule cf. the contribution of Paul in this volume.

⁶⁷See also in the ‘long’ history of Germany the ideas revolving around a First, Second, and Third ‘Empire’ (‘Reich’): Nolte (2008a, b). Cf. also Dybaś in this volume and the transformation processes in the course of Polish-Lithuanian history.

⁶⁸See Moos (2022).

⁶⁹See Suppan (2020).

In any case, the empires' need for self-explanation was tremendously and considerably greater than it was for nation-states and grew even further with increasing expansion—the European Union with its deficits in communicating integration and producing legitimation after the growth of crisis of the so-called “Eastern Enlargement” of 2004 and 2007 is a good example of this⁷⁰—whereby the additional question is raised as to whether the historic capital for this ongoing process can still gain momentum in the future and is even at all sufficiently available for this sort of endeavor.

This draws attention to another form of overstretch. It is not the traditional one that is related to economic, political, and military exhaustion, but one that is related to discourse strategies that become more and more ineffective and futile. With the case study of the British Empire for “instrumentally analogizing appropriations of history”,⁷¹ the question is likewise raised as to why it is that, at least in the last 1500 years, the Imperium Romanum repeatedly served as a benchmark for ‘empire’ and what can really be made of its capacity as a model and paradigmatic example.⁷² Was it its particular mission, the “Pax Romana” as a paradigm for the “Pax Britannica” and in a second step for the “Pax Americana” in future times also for a “Pax Europea”, or was it just a highly welcome and well-known pretext for a super-power intending to control its “world” (as it is still a welcome excuse for modern historians to avoid embedding their conceptions of ‘empire’ in larger contexts)?

Specifically with focused and rather exclusive comparison between the Imperium Romanum and the British Empire, there is a methodological objection: Taken as they are, both are supposed to be unique and therefore absolutely exceptional representations of ‘empire’. But every empire is “unique” and this leads to the methodologically relevant question as to what it is comparable and what should be compared: the Imperium Romanum is still thought to stand for an expansion that was broadly self-contained but also thoroughly transcontinental,⁷³ while the British Empire represents a (truly) global reach with territory under rule and points of support distributed throughout the entire world.

It is enormously difficult and requires constant struggling to ascribe a single definition to empires that extends across several historical periods, and there is in fact far too much material in concentrated form that is complex in terms of history and reception history which can no longer be managed by a single researcher.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Gehler (2018b, pp. 473–493).

⁷¹ Hausteiner (2015).

⁷² Ruffing (2014a), Huhnholz (2014, pp. 277ff., 319ff., 339ff).

⁷³ However, it has to be said that this somehow traditional view of the Roman Empire is about to change considerably in the last decades, due to the importance of the empire's trading activities in the Indian Ocean and the enormous gains from these endeavors. It is important to note that the agents of these transcontinental and truly ‘global’ activities were by far not only ‘Romans’ but an ‘international’ community. See, e.g., Strauch (2012), Ruffing (2014b), De Romanis and Maiuro (2015), Cobb (2015, 2019), Seland (2016), Speidel (2016a, b, c), Andrade (2017), cf. also Speidel and Kolb (2017).

⁷⁴ See MacKenzie et al. (2016).

The factors of space (extent, pressure for expansion, size and range, and open borders), power (center, centralism, concentration, decline,⁷⁵ the relationship of the elite to underlings and of the center to the peripheries, and border areas, ideologies of universalism,⁷⁶ and competition or lack thereof), and time (duration, era, myth, and lasting effect) offer starting points for plenty of comparisons, which can only be truly achieved by trans-disciplinary collaboration.

Writing imperial history does not just mean a return to universal history, but rather an entangled and interconnected history with global perspectives which also implies a renaissance of the history of the great powers. Combined with the new, newer, and newest approaches in historical research including social and cultural sciences, but also different branches of science,⁷⁷ it will be enriched even further.

3 Pre-Modern, Modern and Post-Modern Empires? Why Perspective Matters

Period-crossing comparisons of empire still tend to especially highlight the last 500 years of history, i.e. the time from the Late Middle Ages/Early Modern Era up to contemporary history.⁷⁸ This specific form of myopia claims a substantial differentiation between pre-modern, modern, and postmodern empires. Similar concepts attempt to operate with a division between pre-modern “tributary empires” and empires of the immediate present.⁷⁹ However, upon closer consideration, these differentiations admittedly turn out to be problematic, particularly since criteria for integration and legitimation as well as the corresponding structural differences appear to be much less substantial than generally assumed. Against this backdrop, it would in fact be possible to designate the Holy Roman Empire as a pre-modern empire, the United States of America as a modern one, and the European Union as a postmodern one.⁸⁰ But then this immediately raises the question as to the general classification of the ancient empires, as well as to the actual workability of this differentiation.⁸¹ This implies the crucial problem of a purported structural borderline between pre-modern and modern epochs and the hard facts for this sort of an alleged and qualified differentiation. It is true that historical processes and developments constantly increase, become more and more dynamic, complex and

⁷⁵ For the decline of empire cf. in general Gehler et al. (2022). See also the contributions of Ziemann, Paul, Kurella, and Demandt in this volume.

⁷⁶ In order to claim for a “*Monarchia universalis*”, cf. the contribution of Externbrink in this volume.

⁷⁷ Cf. Rollinger and Stadler (2019).

⁷⁸ Kennedy (1987), Münkler (2005), Maier (2006), Osterhammel (2006a, b).

⁷⁹ Bang and Bayly (2011), Boilley and Marès (2012).

⁸⁰ Gehler (2018b, pp. 614–637), also see Kühnhardt (2008a).

⁸¹ See Bichler (2010).

interrelated in the last 500 years, but this somehow simplistic assessment would also justify cutting history in a pre- and post-Second World War narrative. Much to the contrary, it is the long-term developments and universals that bring to the fore historical phenomena, their adaptations and adoptions, the dynamics and changes involved, as well as the ups and downs of history.⁸² More than often, the supposed hard frontier-line between pre-modern and modern history appears just to be an excuse and pretext to ignore the tremendous richness of much older and extra-European histories and epochs.⁸³

Let us return to the striking problem regarding the differentiation of national and imperial strategies for integration and legitimation. An interesting and very informative perspective has been developed by Benedikt Stuchtey and his view of British history.⁸⁴ He deals with the question as to what the British nation was, and astonishingly referred to the British Empire that was thought to present an answer. The result of his argumentation is staggering as well. By referring to the empire a greater tendency towards a primacy of domestic policy emerges, and this appears more than true seen through the lens of the so-called Brexit. The British nation found answers with the empire and with imperialism, whereby nationalism could experience the challenge of globalization. Thus, at the latest in the Late Modern Era, the concept of nation and empire appear to go hand in hand. Two mixed forms manifested themselves as consequences of imperialism which served as a connecting medium: nationalized empires and imperial nationalism.

As an interim conclusion, it may be stated that imperial strategies for legitimation had to be more flexible than their national counterparts. Within that context, democratic and liberal as well as moral concepts were not incompatible with the logic of imperial patterns of action and justification. Having clarified this, we may now shortly review some truisms concerning empire that are nevertheless important to be highlighted.⁸⁵

The nation-state has a clearly defined territory available with a larger ethnic homogeneity (sometimes tending to ethnocentrism) and it has developed a much greater reliance on founding myths. Empires, on the other hand, have a territory that is, at least theoretically, capable of never-ending expansion, they possess flexible movable and open external borders, and they have multi-confessional, multi-religious and multiethnic structures (“a multinational empire”). Nations often come into existence out of territories that have been ceded after defeats and losses, while empires come into existence through gains and growth. They grow, they hurry from campaign/‘military operation’ to campaign/‘military operation’ (in secret and in public and generally sold as success and victory), and they cope with major defeats more easily, even if they just decide to ‘ignore’ them. Defeat is out of

⁸²Cf., e.g., Chew (2015, pp. 28–32). See also Frank and Gills (1993), Kardulias (1999), Gills (2003), Hodos (2017).

⁸³The postulation of the existence of a “Middle Millennium (scil. 500 n.–1500 n. Chr.)” does also not help to solve this problem: Olstein (2015).

⁸⁴Stuchtey (2012, p. 94ff).

⁸⁵For what follows see also Gehler and Rollinger (2014a), as well as the various contributions in Gehler and Rollinger (2014b).

any empire's discourse whereas nation-states can even build up their identities on devastating losses.⁸⁶ Nations are partial worlds, empires are entire worlds; nations are younger, empires are older; nations have direct access to their inhabitants, empires have more direct access to the elite and less to their 'subjects' (those who are remote from rule). These structural, and not chronological, juxtapositions demonstrate the deficits of an alleged distinction between modern and pre-modern empires.

The arbitrariness of this chronological differentiation becomes especially apparent if empires are viewed as a whole including their structure, features, and characteristics. Within that context, the deficits of selection become immediately clear. It is highly problematic if historical analysis is mainly concentrated on forms of state of the so-called Modern Era without comprehensible arguments leaving previous periods nearly completely aside.⁸⁷ However, in many cases selection does not simply move along the lines of modern and pre-modern. If pre-modern empires nevertheless make it into the field of view, then in addition to the Imperium Romanum the attention is for the most part focused on ancient China without explicitly explaining why that is the case.⁸⁸ The objection may be made here that research into empires owes a substantial part of its terminology to the Imperium Romanum, but upon closer examination, this is only true in part, since individual terms such as those of the empire itself were provided by modern research with completely different connotations of meaning than it was the case for them in ancient contexts.⁸⁹ This fact demands critical reflection, and it is hard to explain why, apart from the Roman and Chinese empires, numerous other empires, contemporary and competing ones like the Parthian or Sasanian Empires are simply ignored as are former empires of the Near East and later empires in Central Asia, Africa,⁹⁰ and the Americas.

There is, however, another deficit related to this kind of approach and it is of a methodological nature. It concerns the question at heart which features and characteristics are to be considered to be fundamental in order to characterize a state as an "empire". Obviously, it is problematic to label certain states as "empires" from the very start in order to then define what an "empire" actually is by using an analysis of the structures of, in fact, those very states. The risk of circular reasoning is obvious. The fact that with a method of

⁸⁶For the enormous significance of the battle of Kosovo (1389) concerning the creation of a Serbian identity see Ćirković (1999), Hafner (1999), Mihaljčić (1999), and in general Schmitt (2019). For the rich reception of the battle of Thermopylae (480 BCE) see Albertz (2006, pp. 250–260), Trundle (2018). For Hermann Göring's propagandistic radio address to the German soldiers encircled by the Red Army at Stalingrad referring to the ideal of Thermopylae and the Spartans' 'heroic stand' see Albertz (2006, pp. 293–308), and Rebenich (2002). For the complex reception history of the 'Persian Wars' narrative during the Roman Empire cf. now Rollinger (2019).

⁸⁷Münkler (2005), Nolte (2008a, b).

⁸⁸Scheidel (2009).

⁸⁹Ruffing (2014a).

⁹⁰Concerning the slavery issue and the question of stereotyping empire in Africa cf. the contribution of Sonderegger in this volume.

consideration that is restricted in that way, the larger historical background of the origin, the lines of development, the continuities, and the relations with power factors of third parties remain outside of regard is not surprising. This is the main reason why this volume takes a universal view on empires and avoids the distinction between pre-modern and modern representations of the phenomenon.

4 Previous and Ongoing Attempts at Definition

Taking into consideration the results of this and the previous volume on empire, the following ‘universals’ in the history of empire may be highlighted.⁹¹

4.1 Development/Genesis

Empires do not come into existence. Rather, they develop themselves. This occurs without deliberate planning. When viewed in this way, neither a grand design nor a master plan exists for any empire, apart from the general idea to rule the world (see below). A formal act of founding such as with nation-states is alien to them or else it is hardly, if not never, common. Generally speaking what all empires have in common is unrestricted expansion, a *penetration* of the area to be ruled *in terms of power policy*, and an exertion of influence through trade, culture, and economy. *Power policy* has a wide range of meanings. It starts from claiming acceptance of an empire’s dominance, including the sheer demonstration that a specific region is simply within an empire’s reach, practically and theoretically, and goes as far as the establishment of direct rule. All this is part of dynamic processes that exhibit changes and transformations in a long-term perspective (without being planned as such from the very beginning). Therefore, *territorial expansion*, *belligerent conquest*, and *the application of military force*⁹² are crucial instruments of power that are applied within this context. An essential role is played in this regard by deportations and the targeted deployments of larger groups of populations.

4.2 An Improvising and Dynamic Arrangement of the World and the Geographical Dimension

Empires are distinguished if they contribute lastingly and over a long period of time to the structuring of their larger power and network. They substantially arrange this “world of

⁹¹For what follows see, besides the contributions in this volume, also Gehler and Rollinger (2014b). Cf., moreover, Rollinger et al. (2022).

⁹²On military man power, cf. the contribution of Paul in this volume.

theirs” according to their ideas on order and their canon of values. Empires stand out through sheer size and “endless” breadth and thus break through the common dimensions of area that are typical to the times. Although this qualifies their achievements according to the standards of time, this is an important assessment, not least for reasons of comparability. Their external borders are not determined, but rather they are stretchable, dynamic, and fluid. Out of this “borderless” territorial extent grows a *trans-ethnic* and *trans-territorial claim to power* which can theoretically encompass the entire existing “world” in time.⁹³ “Empires” that have been conceived in this way have different faces as far as the use of their instruments of power is concerned. If early Near Eastern Empires are still constituted to a large extent as land empires, then at the latest with the Teispid-Achaemenid Empire, the rule of the sea also represented a substantial factor of power.⁹⁴ Above all else in the period following antiquity, a series of maritime empires came into existence, whereby in many cases it is difficult to strictly differentiate between a land empire and a sea empire.⁹⁵ Rather, some of these constructs can be described as “amphibious empires”.

4.3 Range

Even though the concept of the “continent” does not represent any *sui generis* size, but rather owes its existence to the creation of an idea on the ordering of the world that started out from Greek thinkers of the sixth and fifth centuries BCE,⁹⁶ the term has been most closely linked from the very beginning onward to the *range* of empires. Thus it was the aforementioned Greek thinkers such as Hecataeus, Aeschylus, and Herodotus who equated the area that was ruled by the Persian Empire with the range of Asia and called for a border between Europe and Asia that was apparently natural and sanctioned by the gods, one which was also conceived as a political border, at least ideally.⁹⁷ In spite of that, the range of empires is not restricted to one continent, but rather empires can extend across several of them. The Persian Empire already controlled parts of both Europe and Africa. A similar situation holds true for the Imperium Romanum as well as for numerous empires after antiquity.

⁹³ Leitner (2011, pp. 23ff., 115ff.), Nolte (2017, p. 41ff.), cf. Bichler and Rollinger (2017).

⁹⁴ There are, however, antecedents of this development. See Schaudig (2008), Rollinger (2013, 2016a), Strootman et al. (2020).

⁹⁵ On early empires and especially on land and sea empires cf. the contribution of Demandt in this volume.

⁹⁶ See Schultz (1999), Cobet (1996), Demandt (1998).

⁹⁷ Bichler (2000, p. 15ff.), Bichler and Rollinger (2011, p. 27ff.).

4.4 Heterogeneity

In addition, empires distinguish themselves through their *multiethnic* (multinational) composition and by exhibiting *multidenominational* (multi-confessional and multi-religious) contexts. The toleration of confessional and religious diversity is consequently an essential characteristic that is typical of numerous empires. If this requirement is disregarded, then empires get into crisis situations and phases of instability emerge. An analogous situation holds true for mastering the diverse, multinational challenges, especially as the *integration of heterogeneous ethnic groups* is concerned. With the successful managing of these “tasks”, a lasting empire is recognizable, although with the “Third Reich” or the Soviet Union negative examples can also be cited which perverted this requirement profile for empires and thus failed immediately or in the long run.

4.5 Plurality of Forms of State

Within this context, the determination appears to be important that empires are not tied to certain forms of state, but rather a particular diversity of rules and different political system possibilities of development can be observed in this regard. Empires therefore develop and unfold independently of forms of rule and government, which can be different and which can alternate or change throughout their history. This is already demonstrated in fifth century BCE Greece, and therefore in that era in which our modern typology of forms of state came into existence. In a model text of these theoretically oriented conceptions, Herodotus, in his fictitious “Constitutional Debate” which is set in the Persian Empire, has a series of leading Persians discuss how they are to be ruled in the future (*Histories* 3,80–82).⁹⁸ Within that context, the pros and cons of monarchy, democracy, and aristocracy are debated. Even though at the end, monarchy wins out and Darius I ascends to the throne,⁹⁹ it was at least theoretically conceivable that a different form of state could also have been realized, since completely different conditions of constitution also existed within the Persian Empire under the rule (*archē*) of the Persians. Thus, for instance, according to Herodotus, the Persians under their commander Mardonius were successful to establish the first democracies in the Hellenic cities (*Histories* 6,43).

⁹⁸Bichler (2000, p. 281ff.), Bichler and Rollinger (2011, p. 93ff.), Sieberer (2017).

⁹⁹Cf. now also Rollinger (2018).

4.6 Various Elites/Agents in Continuity

Empires are therefore not determined by a constitution¹⁰⁰ and they also do not necessarily rely upon a *single ruler* or several successive *charismatic leadership personalities*, but rather they may have a *continuous leadership class of ruling elite*. It is these leadership classes that are tied together by a common ideology and communicate on a variety of levels, both direct and indirect, with the central leadership. These elites represent a central factor of mobilization for every empire. In this way, empires possess the power and the means to raise large militaries (land and naval forces) in a short period of time and to use them operationally in targeted campaigns. They deploy these military potentials both against enemies abroad and with respect to competitors in the struggle for power and hegemony.¹⁰¹

4.7 The Ability to Wage War and the Military

For non-peaceful (that is, violent) extension and expansion, empires require corresponding capabilities to wage war, that is, to operate constantly with strong military structures that act with new, young and fresh forces, that are correspondingly capable of regeneration, and that are also able to handle setbacks well. With amphibious empires, the great advantage is added of having both land forces and naval forces available¹⁰² (such as the Achaemenid Empire,¹⁰³ the Roman Empire,¹⁰⁴ the British Empire,¹⁰⁵ the Ottoman Empire,¹⁰⁶ and the United States of America¹⁰⁷).

Empires in the Late Modern Era and in contemporary history furthermore draw attention to the transition from armies of the elite to armies of the masses and the escalation from cabinet wars (*Kabinettskriege*) to peoples' wars (*levée en masse*) up to wars of extermination. In spite of that, sight should not be lost of the fundamental common ground with the predecessors of antiquity.

¹⁰⁰Concerning constitutional questions and reforms of an empire, cf. the contribution of Dybaś in this volume.

¹⁰¹Cf. the contributions of Paul, Hoffmann, Externbrink, and Kurella in this volume.

¹⁰²Strootman et al. (2020).

¹⁰³Rollinger (2014a).

¹⁰⁴Ruffing (2014a).

¹⁰⁵Brendon (2008).

¹⁰⁶Cf. the contribution of Uluisik in this volume.

¹⁰⁷Maier (2006).

4.8 Administration, Bureaucracy and Memory

Empires control a large amount of people, regions, and resources. This has to be managed by the development of bureaucratic tools and mnemotechnic devices. Writing is the most developed instrument for coping with such kind of challenges, but also mnemotechnic proto-forms like the Quipu of the Incas, i.e. talking knots, testify to the need to collect various data, keep records, monitor taxes, and maintain any other kind of information. Thus, managing bureaucracies either simple or complex and advanced ones, is *a condition sine qua non* for any empire.¹⁰⁸ Only by means of this ability an imperial apparatus is able to establish its effect and reach and to develop its organizational power-machine. Ancient Near Eastern empires offer excellent illustrative material for this. They are able to track down if not each official all over the empire (as the Neo-Assyrian loyalty oaths of Esarhaddon demonstrate¹⁰⁹) but also each individual inhabitant (as the certificates of pagan sacrifices from the Decian persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire exhibit¹¹⁰).

However, there is more about writing capacities and its relationship to imperial efficacy. Writing is an essential, though not the only, tool for an empire concerning its ability of establishing memory and the claim for durability. It may be regarded to represent an indispensable precondition for the formulation of imperial structures.¹¹¹

4.9 Strong Center (?)

Both ancient and modern empires make us aware that empires do not necessarily have *a strong political center*, but many times they indeed do. As a consequence of this, on the one hand political-economic and regionally diversified dependencies result from this, combined with processes of colonization, imbalance in power, and tension with regard to peripheries and border zones. But on the other hand shifts of the center and a distinctive polycentricism may also exist.

As far as peripheries are concerned it is salient to note that these, at first hand, relate to those areas of the empire that lie at some distance from the center(s) and are under direct control of the empire's bureaucratic machinery. There is, however, a periphery beyond the periphery that, for a better understanding, should be distinguished from the first one and might be labeled more appropriately as border zone. This area is still within the empire's reach (and, usually, under the empire's claim to exercise control) and happens to face the appearance of imperial armies from time to time. Its populations, societies and economies

¹⁰⁸ Cf. the contribution of Palme in this volume.

¹⁰⁹ Lauinger (2012), Fales (2012).

¹¹⁰ Cf. the contribution of Palme in this volume.

¹¹¹ Cf. Rollinger (2016b).

are heavily interconnected with the empire and its permanent need for products, people and resources of any kind. This is an area where an empire's "influence" is ubiquitous, much more in an indirect than in a direct way; for it is much more than "influence" that takes momentum in that zone. The empire and its demand for resources of all sorts is triggering, releasing and provoking complex processes of adaption and adoption, resistance and integration, emulation and opposition, all of it at the very same time, that frequently end up in the formation of larger political entities challenging the empire by the establishment of new power groups in exactly these border zones.¹¹²

4.10 Control and Competition: The Relationship to Third-Party Power Factors

The relationship of empires to other power factors has likewise to be brought into perspective. Empires have to develop strategies towards their 'outer world'. They not only have to decide whether to rule or eliminate a particular opponent, but also to define the frameworks within which this has to be accomplished and defined. Competing empires accelerate this process, even if within the ideologically shaped perception of the "world", these competitors either remain cut out of the view or are presented as "less minded" and "less privileged" or even "uncivilized barbarians".

4.11 Ideology, Mission, and Religiousness in Imperial Policy

It is a characteristic identifying feature that all empires nearly inevitably cultivate their own view of the world. This perception is embedded in a world view that is to be designated as an *ideology* (or a *Weltanschauung*) which at times may even be designated as messianic and missionary. More than often, imperial policy is combined with specific forms of religiousness, in other cases more 'secular' issues are highlighted like mission of peace,¹¹³ culture, and civilization or a guarantee of security and prosperity. These forms of "messianism" go hand in hand with the ideas of a sort of *pax* ("Pax Achaemenidica", "Pax Romana", "Pax Mongolica", "Pax Britannica", "Pax Americana", "Pax Sovietica" and "Pax Europea"—with more or less success). This *sense of mission* is essential for the safeguarding, communication, and legitimation of rule of empires both domestically and externally (references to gods, the doctrine of divine right, religion and values). The lack of a "pax" concept may lead to the loss of legitimation and the decline of an empire.

¹¹²Rollinger (2019, 2022).

¹¹³Concerning the law of the "Great Peace", see the contribution of Pöhl in this volume.

4.12 Protection and Solicitude

Since empires are used to collect *levies and taxes*, this need for resources has to be justified to a certain extent, even if it is only or mainly on an ideological level. The idea of the emperor/ruler acting like a shepherd taking care of his people can be encountered at times. This concept can even develop into a kind of expected “duty” of the ruler towards the ruled. In this way, those in power and the subjects ideally seal a divinely sanctioned pact which distributes rights and responsibilities and also defines protection and taxes as well as order and obedience as the central fields of the communication of rule. These areas of obligation are directed not only internally, but also externally. Thus unlimited and unrestricted power of the ruler like “absolutism” or “despotism” is much more a myth than reality. ‘Emperors’ have to observe and respect the socially defined frameworks of their rule if they want to stay in charge.

4.13 From Crisis to Resilience

Empires have to both successfully ward off external threats (aggression from opponents and challenges from rivals¹¹⁴) and to combat internal challenges (rebellions, unrest, turmoil through dynasty conflicts and succession disputes¹¹⁵ etc.) in a commanding manner. Within that context, they demonstrate the capability of coping with military defeats and political setbacks, of compensating quickly, and of managing political crises and economic instability and of successfully mastering the processes of societal transformation that are perceived as phenomena of decline and fall.¹¹⁶ In this way, they can often last for centuries, such as the Imperium Romanum between the late Republic and Late Antiquity (and far beyond), and the Ottoman Empire¹¹⁷ on the whole but especially between 1718 and 1918.

The explanatory model of the “Augustan threshold” (Michael Doyle), which is directed at a singular event, all too often turns out within this context to be too simple, since the processes of transformation in question are substantially more complex and varied. In the penetration of rule, empires can definitely be differentiated from nation-states. Thus, ruling the territory of the state does not always have to be complete in the sense of a nation-state. The permanent smoldering of unrest in certain (fringe) areas even appears to have been rather a sort of normal condition. That is not to be viewed as a sign of weakness, however, but rather one of strength, since the persistence of the overall state was as a rule not affected by this.

¹¹⁴Cf. the contribution of Externbrink in this volume.

¹¹⁵Cf. the contributions of Hoffmann, Dybaś, and Pohl in this volume.

¹¹⁶Concerning decline, revival and fall of an empire, cf. the contribution of Ziemann in this volume.

¹¹⁷Cf. the contribution of Uluisik in this volume.

4.14 Transformation Processes

As it has just been mentioned the model of an “Augustan threshold” might be instructive and plausible at first glance but on a long-term perspective it is too simplistic and does not adequately describe the complex developments empires are facing and managing. This *caveat* somehow also affects two other scholarly very well established key events any empire is supposed to witness, i.e. “birth” and “collapse”. Although it is still perfectly justifiable to examine these crucial events of an empire’s history,¹¹⁸ this approach does not always offer appropriate answers. The reason for this is that empires do not only experience complex developments of ups and downs, but also intricate processes of reshaping, restructuring and transformation.¹¹⁹ This can imply the selective acquisition and takeover of specific traditions by ignoring others at the same time, fragmentation and waning political and military dominance but simultaneously the maintenance of imperial claims, social and economic reorientation but concurrently survival of the relevant classes of the elite, as well as the acquisition of imperial frameworks from outside without becoming a “real empire”.¹²⁰

These developments appear to be more often the rule than the exception and it is a true challenge to describe this kind of “new” and transformed states by an adequate terminology. With a view on developments in South-East Asia, Hermann Kulke has described such states in interim stages as “imperial kingdoms”.¹²¹ This appears to be a Solomonic solution and may help to differentiate states like Axum,¹²² Greek Bactria,¹²³ the Byzantine ‘Empire’ after the middle of the seventh century¹²⁴ and many others from unambiguous empires like Assyria, Achaemenid Persia, the early caliphate, and the Ottoman Empire.¹²⁵ However, what is important here is to highlight the relevant processes of transformation that many empires appear to experience, much more than simply decline, collapse or face destruction.¹²⁶ This may even be regarded as a very specific form of an empire’s resilience.¹²⁷

¹¹⁸Cf. Fowles (2016), Harper (2017), Middleton (2017), Weiss (2017), Eisenberg (2018) and the various contributions in Gehler and Rollinger (2014b). For the more and more important topics of climate changes, plagues and disease see Gatto and Zerboni (2015), Haldon et al. (2018a, b, c), Scheidel (2018).

¹¹⁹Canepa (2018).

¹²⁰See also the contribution of Pöhl in this volume.

¹²¹Kulke (1986). See also the various contributions in Lanfranchi and Rollinger (2010), and cf. the contribution of Fräsch in this volume.

¹²²Lusini (2022).

¹²³Cf. the contribution of Hoo and Wiesehöfer in this volume.

¹²⁴Cf. Haldon (2016).

¹²⁵Cf. the contribution of Uluisik in this volume.

¹²⁶This important aspect of empire history needs much more research in the near future. Up to now see Heather (2005), Haldon (2013), Wood (2013), Robinson (2013), Steinacher and Winckler (2014), Canepa (2018), Preiser-Kapeller (2018).

¹²⁷Schwartz and Nichols (2010), Faulseit (2016).

4.15 Retrograde Consciousness of Tradition: Historical Heritage and Empire Historians

In many cases, empires are ideologically embedded within larger contexts. They can refer to *traditions and predecessors*, but they not necessarily have to do so, as in the case, for example, of the EU, which does this in the best case in very mild attempts by making modest efforts at a somewhat diffuse idea of “Europe” and tracing this back to antiquity.¹²⁸

Empires in any case rely upon the creation of *historical heritage* and a *cultural legacy*. In order to be and remain empires, they have to call posterity to mind. If they are not present in the collective and cultural memory,¹²⁹ they have forfeited their imperial claim, myth, and aura. Not only do they therefore have to provide an outstanding power factor in real history, they also require an influential culture of reception that manifests itself in the continued existence of architecture and “culture” or a lasting and prominent historiography.¹³⁰ These aspects represent an element of continuity that spans multiple historical periods. It also affects the general phenomenon of transformation processes of empire.

5 Discontinuities Between Earlier and More Contemporary Empires

Discontinuities exist in the *different types of systems of rule* (aristocracies, tyrannies, oligarchies, dynasties, kingdoms, sultanates, tsardoms, dictatorships, and single party rules, or other autocratic and democratic presidential systems) and, in a very remarkable way, in the *duration*, i.e. existence over a longer period of time. As a result of longer-lived structures, it was possible for ancient empires (such as the Imperium Romanum), medieval empires (such as the Holy Roman Empire), and Modern Era empires (such as the Ottoman Empire) to successfully exist over centuries, while empires of the Late Modern Era and contemporary history turned out to be either short-termed wartime empires (the French Empire of Napoléon, the fascist “*Mare Nostrum*” of Mussolini’s Italy, and the Nazi “Greater German Reich” of Hitler) or medium-term expansion empires that were overtaxed through intensified overextension (the USSR through the Afghanistan campaign of 1979–1989), that is, they had only several years or a few decades of duration of rule and ended through an relatively abrupt collapse or else a more or less quick crash.

Generally speaking, differences might also be recognized in *geographical dimension* and *range*. However, having a closer look, it becomes impossible to distinguish between early and more contemporary empires along these lines, as all too often occurs rashly (on ‘pre-modern’ vs. ‘modern’, see above, Chap. “Anspruch und Wirklichkeit. Imperiale

¹²⁸Funke (2002), Gehler (2016, 2018b, pp. 626–630).

¹²⁹Cf. the contribution of Pöhl in this volume.

¹³⁰Canepa (2018).

Ambitionen der Bourbonen im Ancien Régime”). It is indeed the case that as a rule, medieval empires ranged over a single continent, but this is not true for neither ancient empires nor those of the Modern Era. Those frequently encompassed a plurality of continents and included several parts of the world, ranging beyond individual countries, in their area of rule. That is true, for example, for the Achaemenid-Persian Empire and the Imperium Romanum, as well as for the Ottoman Empire, the British Empire, the Soviet Union, and the United States of America. If differences can at all be made out in this respect between more contemporary¹³¹ and earlier empires, then it is the fact that borders of more contemporary empires were by far more fixed (and controlled) than it was ever the case with their more ancient predecessors. But more contemporary empires have also gained in efficiency and striking power via modernization through industrialization, innovation, and mechanization.¹³² Yet, they were weakened in turn concerning their legitimation by the effects of the age of enlightenment, the secularization or de-secularization of their rulers, democratization, the separation of powers, and the universalization of fundamental and human rights. Moreover, they became more open to attack and consequently more insecure and far more threatened in their exercise of power, e.g. via Internet, mass protest movements and the so-called social media.

One observation certainly ought to be taken into consideration in a comprehensive and period-spanning attempt of definition of empires, and the numerous contributions of this volume demonstrate this more than clearly: diverging bodies of source material as well as historical and methodological idiosyncrasies and specifics of individual periods result in certain limits of comparison, as a result of which different horizons of understanding of empires emerge. Such lacks of clarity also come into existence through the use of apparently generically related and similar terminologies such as “hegemonies”, “regional powers”,¹³³ and “world empires”. Thus, it may in fact be emphasized that hegemonic powers may also exist next to one another, while this is not necessarily correct for empires, and thus the applicability of such artificial dichotomies sets narrow limits. This becomes significant, for instance, through the assertion that a hegemonic power may be an empire but does not have to be one. Beyond all doubt, these conceptualizations run the risk of falling victim to a linguistic seduction of thought, since merely the existence of the term suggests that behind it, a corresponding entity must also necessarily be hidden.¹³⁴ This problem admittedly also applies specifically for the term of “empire”, with just a brief view being instructive in its inflationary use in the modern media and in professional publications.

¹³¹ Cf. the contribution of Externbrink in this volume.

¹³² However, the power of innovation and competitiveness are important aspects of empires all through world history: Jennings (2011), von Reden (2015), Sangaralingam (2018).

¹³³ Cf. the contribution of Pöhl in this volume.

¹³⁴ Kainz (1972).

Against this background, an empire may be everything and nothing. Within this context, the elasticity of the term appears to have no bounds. Along those lines, the risk definitely exists that the term completely loses its analytical acuity. Therefore, this publication represents a multidisciplinary attempt to steer against the current of this development by means of a purposeful historical approach. The fact that the end of the path has not been reached here by far is self-evident.

6 Basic Results

Nevertheless, we want to conclude these observations with some general remarks on the topic of empire that move beyond the ‘simple’ question of definition, but try to develop a broader perspective including approach and future research.

1. Empire studies have to develop broader perspectives. This implies extensive diachronic but also synchronic comparisons and the collection of a broad set of data. A reduced view on one ‘single empire’, or a handful of empires within a certain period has considerable shortcomings if the results are not set against larger frameworks.
2. The strict distinction between ‘modern’ and ‘pre-modern’ empire is highly problematic and near-sighted.
3. An approach that follows the traditional lines of historical epochs and periods without considering the problems involved with such classifications runs into danger of Eurocentrism.
4. A transcontinental, transregional, and comparative approach that moves beyond the traditional diachronic classifications has the potential to develop new perspectives and to yield completely new results that become part of a global and truly universal perception of history. However, this must not mean to neglect specific developments within each empire. To a certain extent, these have to be perceived as worlds of their own, whose specifics, as well as their communalities, yet become only visible within larger frameworks.
5. A universal but nevertheless restricted approach of comparison is inductive and helpful, however remains unsatisfactory if it stays isolated (e.g. comparisons between the Roman Empire and China; Roman Empire and EU; Holy Roman Empire and EU).
6. A truly universal approach that takes into account reciprocal links, interdependence and interrelationship, connectivity and entanglement of empires across time and space appears to be the only way to grasp the complexities, specifics and communalities of empire in a reasonably satisfactory manner. Such a productive comparison in the context of up-to-date empire studies highlights the need for inter- and transdisciplinary research on an international level.
7. Any comparative research on empire has to face the problem of defining distinctive criteria. To a certain extent, empires across time and space remain individual phenomena with their specifics and incomparable peculiarities. From this perspective

comparison is a challenge and runs the risk to arbitrarily single out just tiny parts of a giant puzzle. Therefore, criteria for comparison have to be developed and the elements of comparison have to be checked according to the principles of concentration and frequency. It is important to keep in mind that this implies to draw from the multi-layered dimension of comparison, i.e. comparison in order to differentiate and specify as opposed to level down what has been compared. It is bundling and combining the elements of comparison and their careful evaluation that allows to recognize and substantiate transregional and diachronic contexts and relationships.

8. Key principle for any research in comparative empire studies has to be a source related approach. This observation once more highlights the already mentioned principles of inter- and multidisciplinary and international cooperation.
9. A global history of empires has to take into account transregional and interimperial communication channels. It has to examine the ways and processes of communication, inter- and transcultural influence and transfer. Entangled history and connectivity are the key terms to guide any future research. If these principles are neglected, any approach runs the risk to become a simplistic and additive presentation of world history.
10. An individual characterisation of each empire is as much desirable as adequate. This is, however, only possible without losing sight of the larger framework and has to be discussed in detail. Terms of comparison that gain momentum in this context could be: amphibious empires, imitative empires, trade empires, land empires, satellite and shadow empires, shores' empires, oasis empires, oligarchs' empires, tribal empires, steppe empires, sea empires, currency empires and economic empires. Of course, these are just some succinct examples and there can and should be said much more about this.

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