INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS AN (ANCIENT) EMPIRE?

If historians eschew theory of how societies operate, they imprison themselves in the commonsense notions of their own society.

– Michael Mann, *Sources of Social Power*[1]

SOMETIME BETWEEN 520 AND 510 B.C., during the reign of King Darius I, the "Great King, King of Kings, King of Persia, King of Countries," a native Egyptian noble named Udjahorresne erected a statue of himself (Fig. I.1). Formerly a naval commander under the Egyptian kings Amasis and Psamtik III, he had fought against the encroaching Persian Empire. Udjahorresne had witnessed the Persian invasion and seizure of Egypt under Cambyses, the direct predecessor to Darius I, in 525 B.C. In the aftermath of the invasion, Udjahorresne had cooperated with the Persians so effectively that he was given an important honorific position in the administration of Persian Egypt. In the long self-glorifying inscription carved directly onto his statue, Udjahorresne waxed eloquent on the wonderful acts he had performed for the Persians. He praised the Persian ruler for taking his advice and thereby making the transition to Persian rule over Egypt smooth and efficient.

Udjahorresne could easily be dismissed as a nasty traitor and a hide-saving collaborator – a sycophant to his new Persian masters. Yet his self-congratulatory story offers some valuable glimpses into the workings of ancient empires:

> When the great King of all lands, Cambyses, came to Egypt, the people of all (foreign) lands were with him. He exercised sovereignty in the land in its entire extent; they settled down in it, he being the great King of Egypt, the mighty Sovereign of this country. His majesty conferred upon me the dignity of Chief San, and granted that I should be by

I.1. Udjahorresne statue.

him as Smer and Provost of the temple. He assumed the official title of Mestu-Ra. I made known to His majesty the grandeur of Sais, as being the abode of Neith, the Great Mother, who gave birth to the Sun-god Ra, the First-born, when as yet no birth had been, together with the doctrine of the grandeur of the house of Neith, as being a Heaven in its whole plan. . . . I made supplication to the King Cambyses against the people who had taken up their abode in this temple of Neith, that they should be dislodged from it in order that the temple of Neith should be restored to all its splendours as formerly. . . . His Majesty did this because I had instructed him as to the grandeur of Sais, as being the city of all the gods who dwell upon their thrones within it forevermore. . . . I was pious towards my father and did the will of my mother; kindhearted towards my brethren. I established for them what His Majesty had ordered, giving to them splendid lands for an everlasting duration. . . . I shielded the weak against the strong, I protected him who honoured me, and was to him his best portion. I did all good things for them when time

> came to do them. . . . I was devoted to all the masters that I had, and they bestowed upon me decorations of gold and gave me all glory. . . . A royal table of offerings grant Osiris Hemaka, abundance of bread, beer, beeves, geese, and all good and pure things to the image of Chief San, Ut'a-Horesnet, pious toward the gods of Sais.[2]

Most ancient inscriptions are more or less self-glorifying, and thousands of them survive – often the only written material we have – that proclaim the formation and strengthening of empires. One of the central problems confronting the ancient historian is how to analyze such documents to construct a general picture (i.e., the "story" in the history). What can this inscription and others like it tell us about the formation and maintenance of ancient empires? Note that the specific acts of the Persians and Udjahorresne fall into some basic categories: some are political, some ideological or, more specifically, religious, and a few are economic. The political message is right up front: Cambyses the Persian "exercised sovereignty in the land in its entire extent." He is now clearly the ruler of Egypt. However, the ideological message is probably the most pronounced: Egyptian temples have been restored, and the traditional religious system has been reinstated. The weak are protected from the strong; justice is maintained. Finally, it is clear that material goods are part of the motivation and reward for those who uphold the new order in the land. Udjahorresne and his family are publicly and richly rewarded for their efforts and for their loyalty to the foreign masters as elite collaborators. A combination of political, ideological, and economic factors helps keep the new empire in place. The fortunate survival of this statue and inscription provides a few of the pieces we need to put together the story of the Persian Empire.

DEFINITION OF EMPIRE

The most interesting aspects of history often are not the issues about which everyone agrees (those are rather rare and not very exciting anyway) but those about which historians differ. Let us start with our central term – "empire." The word itself is ultimately derived from the Latin term *imperium*, which denotes command, order, mastery, power, and sovereignty. It originally described the powers of rule and conquest granted to a Roman consul. Gradually, it came to denote a territory, closer to what we now would think of when we speak, for example, of the sun never setting on the British Empire. We often think of empire as an expanding or expansive territory that can be traced on a map. The Romans were usually more inclined, at least early in their history,

to see a sphere of command or control, something like the modern terms "hegemony" or "sovereignty." When we employ the term empire in studies of the distant past, then, we often invoke more modern sensibilities. For these and other reasons, some scholars agree with historian Sir Keith Hancock that "imperialism is no word for scholars."[3] Others are not sure it can be so easily disposed of:

> To suggest, for example, that we should abandon "empire" as a category in Greek history and speak only of "hegemony" does not seem to me helpful or useful. It would have been small consolation to the Melians, as the Athenian soldiers and sailors fell upon them, to be informed that they were about to become the victims of a hegemonial, not an imperial, measure.[4]

One of the most helpful current definitions of the term *empire* comes from Columbia University's International Relations scholar M. W. Doyle:

> A system of interaction between two political entities, one of which, the dominant metropole, exerts political control over the internal and external policy – the effective sovereignty – of the other, the subordinate periphery.[5]

As with most technical definitions, that might seem be a bit heavy at first, so let us take it apart a bit, "unpack" it, as academics like to say. It is important for us to do this, because Doyle's definition of empire is our basis throughout this text.

Note first that empire assumes a relationship, an interaction between a dominant group and a subordinate and necessarily foreign group. One group rules over another, incorporating their people, land, temples, and so on into its own holdings. What goes without saying in Doyle's definition is that an empire is territorially extensive. Persia in the late sixth century B.C., for example, would be the "dominant metropole," and Egypt would be the "subordinate periphery." Yet the story of the Persian takeover of Egypt is not a simple matter of making a wasteland out of the conquered, killing and/or enslaving their inhabitants, and dashing their infants' heads against the stones. There is a foreign entity, the Persian Empire, now ruling Egypt, and yet Udjahorresne, a subordinate Egyptian, maintains a high social position within it; he is part of the "system of interaction" Doyle mentions. Udjahorresne takes great pride in the fact that, at his supposed suggestion, many things continue in Egypt "as they had been before." There is much continuity in terms of social power from the days before Persia's arrival. Yet the Persians are now calling the

shots. Much of Udjahorresne's inscription reveals the means through which the Persians initially maintained their dominant position.

How, exactly, did the Persian – or any other ancient – empire manage to hold that dominant position? How did it lose its power? One of the ways that historians can balance broad surveys and meaningful analyses of such huge questions involving long periods of time is to keep focused on a central theme. Here we use a theoretical model, borrowed from the discipline of sociology, to help define our central theme. Such theoretical models aid in the challenging task of turning material from fragmentary sources, never intended for the critical eye of the modern historian, into a comprehensible story.

Michael Mann, a sociologist at the University of California–Los Angeles, proposed an influential model of power that many historians find useful. Mann's model will help us focus on a manageable problem – the question of how ancient humans exercised power over social and geographic space. Many other approaches to ancient history are possible and productive, but this approach is intriguing because it raises questions that are on the minds of many people today. According to Mann's model, societies are organized as power networks with four overlapping sources of social power: ideology, economics, military, and politics (hereafter abbreviated as IEMP). We have already encountered almost all of these in Udjahorresne's inscription. Empires are built on these "sources of social power," as Mann terms them; strong empires are evidence of all four sources working together effectively. The discussions raised by the IEMP model, as we call it from now on, are relevant to any period of history.

These four sources of social power must work together; generally speaking, none of them can be demonstrated as primary or more important than the others. Take the example that Michael Mann uses from a much later historical context: the Swiss pikemen of late medieval Europe. It is a basic military fact of history that, in the fourteenth century A.D., the famous armored mounted knights were defeated by armies of infantry pikemen. Much flowed from this defeat, including the decline of what is sometimes called classical feudalism and the rise of modern centralized states. The historical question of "why?" *seems* easily answered here: "changes in the technology of military relations lead to changes in political and economic power relations. With this model, we have an apparent case of military determinism." On the surface, then, military power was the ultimate cause of this important shift in human history. Such an explanation would be attractive and concise, but many relevant and significant factors would be ignored if we stopped there (as some history professors and History Channel specials tend to do). Central to the victors

I.2. Chigi vase. Detail of hoplites, oenochoe (wine pitcher) from Corinth.

was a "form of morale" a "confidence in the pikemen to the right and to the left and at one's back." This, in turn, was shaped by the "relatively egalitarian, communal life of Flemish burghers, Swiss burghers, and yeomen farmers."[6] Thus, the answer to the historical "why?" question actually lies deeper and is more complicated than it first appears, involving all four of our sources (IEMP).

We could apply this same type of analysis to the Greek phalanx, a highly effective form of military organization about which we will learn in Chapter Five (Fig. I.2). Did the Greeks defeat the Persian Empire simply because of their tight military formations? What made that military technology so appealing to the Greeks as well as so effective in their famous wars against Persia? The phalanx itself arose within a certain type of social arrangement among some Greek city-states, one built on ideals of wide political participation and visions of equality, and therefore came about because of other social forces – some ideological, some political, and some, no doubt, economic. Military power "requires morale and economic surpluses – that is, ideological and economic supports – as well as drawing upon more narrowly military traditions and development. *All* are necessary factors to the exercise of military power."[7] The bottom line is that all of these sources of social power, working together, are important and necessary for the expression of dominance and

the formation of empire (as well as for the resistance to it). With these sources of social power working together in the ancient world, empires were not only formed but could also be effectively resisted or overthrown.

We also argue throughout this text that religious ideology is much more than just a crass cover for materialist or military agendas (contrary to what many recent surveys and studies assume). For example, Udjahorresne emphasizes his religious acts far more than the tangible rewards he and his family receive. How do we read this? Are the material rewards, barely mentioned in the inscription, his real motivation here, even if not explicitly stated as such? Many people today would certainly think so, but what do we do with the ancient source that seems to emphasize religion above all else? Analysis and interpretation force us to ask such questions of our sources as we put together the "big picture."

Some parts of our text might seem to overemphasize the ideological dimensions of empire, of which religion was a significant part. Think of this as a corrective rather than as an attempt to present ideology or religion as the most important or ultimate source of social power. One of many useful aspects of making theory explicit in historical study is that it invites the reader to discuss it, debate it, affirm it, challenge it. We aim to communicate a vision of the ancient world that prompts a nuanced and historically informed understanding of social power, especially as it relates to discussions of cosmos (order), justice, and freedom. Our discussions of empire begin with the third millennium B.C., although the book itself focuses most on the period between the eighth century B.C. and the eighth century A.D., a period that witnessed an unbroken succession of empires, which we call the Age of Ancient Empires.

EMPIRE, RESPONSE, AND RESISTANCE

A key feature of this IEMP approach is that it allows us to explore both the formation and bases of ancient empires as well as the significant responses to them. Sometimes people seem to appreciate being folded into a growing empire, even if that inclusion challenges or even undermines age-old ways of life. The importance of such people was long ago appreciated by a Roman consul and conqueror, who claimed that "an empire remains powerful so long as its subjects rejoice in it."[8]

At other times, not surprisingly, groups at the "subordinate periphery" do not always appreciate being dominated by a foreign power, even if that foreign power claims to or actually does benefit them in some basic ways. As will be seen, some of the world's most enduring and still-influential ideas, value systems, and institutions, interestingly, were formulated, not by the

great empires of the ancient world but rather by the peoples resisting them. The theme of resistance is, therefore, a major focus here alongside the more traditional study of "the rise and fall of empires."

Even a brief study of the Age of Ancient Empires reveals that many of the peoples who respond to empires will, in time, build (or aspire to build) empires themselves: Urartians, Greeks, Indians, "barbarians," Arabs. The variety of ways through which they do so is one of the avenues of exploration here. Resistance also utilizes IEMP, for a coherent system of resistance often integrates these sources of social power into an empire in its own right. And so the cycle continues.

EMPIRES, ANCIENT AND MODERN

Although ancient historians explore the distant past, they, like all historians, usually have at least one eye on the present and the not-so-distant past. It might surprise some students to learn that, up until World War I, the majority of the world's population still lived in self-described empires. The Ancient World, of course, does not have a corner on empire; it simply saw its creation.

After World War I, itself caused in part by the nineteenth-century Age of High Imperialism, calling your own political entity an empire became passé and even dangerous. "Imperialism," a handy term meaning the drive to build and maintain an empire, fell on hard times. Historians such as Niall Ferguson continue to debate whether age-old dynamics of empire actually disappeared at that time. Exploring the foundations of empire during the Age of Ancient Empires can allow us to think about the larger and arguably enduring issues involved in this power dynamic. The terms used throughout this study are therefore also relevant to discuss the current world political situation, and the theoretical model employed in this text can just as easily be applied to the discussions of World Wars I and II, the Cold War, the First Gulf War, and so on.

Is imperialism just a basic instinct built into human societies? The famous Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter explored the "purely instinctual inclination towards war and conquest" that he claimed characterized the premodern world.[9] Is it forever true that, as ancient Athenians once argued, "the strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must"?[10] Scholars continue to debate this age-old question. Many claim that we, in the modern world, have moved beyond the desire or need for empire. Such scholars say that liberal and democratic institutions have taken the place of empires. Others are not so sure, pointing out that the dynamics of empire continue to flourish in our contemporary world, whether we use the term empire or not.

We raise such questions as we analyze the great Age of Ancient Empires in this book.

QUESTIONS, QUESTIONS, QUESTIONS

We begin here with a set of large questions, not all of which will be answerable yet. Each subsequent chapter begins with a correlated set of specific questions. Keeping both sets of questions in mind as one reads the individual chapters will help focus and sharpen one's analysis and critical thinking about what we have written, as well as about any additional sources, ancient and modern, which may be relevant. These questions do not necessarily have straightforward "right" answers, as will be seen. Scholars often disagree strongly on exactly how to answer them. However, these questions should also help to organize thoughts about global social and political issues through time, right up to the current day, as well as to provoke discussions and help the reader gain a better understanding of the fascinating complexity of the human past.

* How can one define "**ancient**"?
* How do **theories** shape the telling of ancient history?
* How do ancient historians define and use **evidence**?
* What is an **empire**? Why did ancient humans consistently create them? How did they maintain them?
* How do the four sources – **IEMP** – interact to produce an empire? How do these sources of social power, individually and collectively, fuel resistance to empires?
* To what extent did ancient groups define and maintain **cosmos/order** and **justice** in similar ways? To what extent in different ways?

CHAPTER ONE

PRELUDE TO THE AGE OF ANCIENT EMPIRES

With axes of bronze I conquered.

"The Legend of Sargon of Akkad"

* How were ideology, economics, military, and politics (what we will refer to in this text as IEMP) related in the emergence of urbanism and city-states?
* What trade, diplomatic, and political relationships among the various types and stages of integration and consolidation existed beyond the level of the city-state?
* How did history's first empires emerge?

THE AGE OF ANCIENT EMPIRES, that largely unbroken succession of empires stretching from the eighth century B.C. into the eighth century A.D., did not emerge ex nihilo, out of nothing. By the time the age began, a long history of city-states, kingdoms, and even a few empires had already run its course – a rich history about twice as long as the Age of Ancient Empires itself. Before that was an indefinite and many times longer span of "prehistoric" human settlement. The Age of Ancient Empires was built on very old foundations.

A series of significant changes, beginning around 4000 B.C., ushered in a new era in human history. Settlement patterns changed, as city-states – politically independent cities and their surrounding hinterlands – became important centers of dense populations and unprecedented creative accomplishments. By approximately 3000 B.C., those changes produced what scholars call the Bronze Age, stretching to just after 1200 B.C. Trade and diplomatic connections began to emerge over distances, forming fairly stable networks and