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978-1-107-02267-6 - Universal Empire: A Comparative Approach to Imperial Culture and Representation in Eurasian History

Edited by Peter Fibiger Bang and Dariusz Kołodziejczyk

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CHAPTER I

*'Elephant of India': universal empire through time
and across cultures**Peter Fibiger Bang with Dariusz Kołodziejczyk*

The Imperial Assemblage is over, and Her Majesty has been duly proclaimed Empress of India... The roads to the plain presented a strange and animated spectacle... Gaudily-trapped elephants and camels, the many-coloured dresses of the crowd, quaint vehicles, and dust such as has never been seen in England, formed purely Oriental features... Soon after 11 most of the officials and Chiefs had taken their seats... each could be identified by the banner presented to him last week... These banners were of satin, and were shaped like those in the pictures of Roman triumphs.

The Times, 2 January 1877 (p. 5)

On 1 January 1877, it was officially announced in Delhi by Lord Lytton, the British Viceroy, that Queen Victoria had assumed the title of 'Empress of India'. Readers of the *Times of London* would have found this dispatch, telegraphed from Delhi via Teheran, reporting the events in the paper of the following day. The wonder of modern technology brought metropolitan society in close and immediate contact with its imperial possessions, literally thousands of miles away. There was a mastery of distant colonial theatres never achieved before by any legendary conqueror or grand potentate in history. Operating at the level of daily routine, this is an emblematic example of the new-found powers to gather information, systematise knowledge and put in taxonomic order subject societies enjoyed by states and ruling elites during the age of colonialism. Yet this triumph of modern streamlined, even electrified, imperial power cultivated a self-consciously archaic image. The imperial proclamation of Victoria was organised as a grand historicist extravaganza – a timeless medley of Roman, feudal and Indian symbolism.¹ Royal pomp and circumstance were mobilised in a

¹ The fundamental analysis of the assumption of the imperial title by Victoria, the politics involved and the accompanying imperial ceremony, pageantry and symbolism is by Cohn (1983) and further Cannadine (1983 and 2001: 44–57) with a vivid sense of the Victorian era penchant for historicist extravaganza displays. References to ancient Greek and Latin texts below are given by author name, and where necessary by title and the standard conventional book and chapter numbering.

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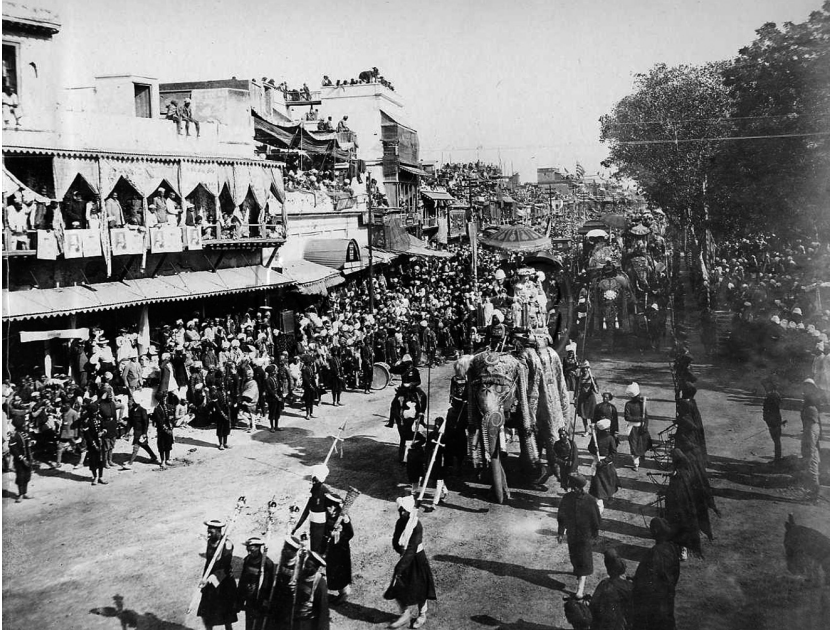
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Fig. 1.1 Elephants photographed in procession through the streets of Delhi during the Coronation Durbar in 1903 for which the 1877 celebration of Victoria's imperial title had set the model.

display of might on a scale to match and better any standards set by previous generations. A great throng of Indian chiefs and rulers had been invited to Delhi with their vast retinues to pay homage to their imperial overlord and confirm their commitment to British rule. The staged ritual took great care to muster all the standard metaphors and trappings in the repertoire of universal lordship. Victoria was presented not as a mere monarch, among others, but as a ruler superior to everyone else; she was the supreme lord to whose throne the royalty of India flocked in loyal service. Typical of such occasions, the diversity of subjects put on parade was used to reflect the wide reach and unsurpassed sway of the monarch. Arranged to emphasise variety in dress, colour and equipment, the spectacles showed 'that mixture of splendour and squalor so characteristic of the East', as the correspondent put it.²

² *The Times*, 1 January, 5. Roberts (1897: 331–5), an eye witness account by one of the central participants in the organisation of the event, gives a good impression of how the British authorities wished the Durbar to appear.

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This last observation is significant. In the public *imaginaire* of Britain, the well-established grammar of imperial grandeur was now intimately linked with prevailing notions of the exotic and the strange, exhilarating, but also dangerous (fig. 1.1). The parliamentary debates preceding the decision that Victoria should be invested with an imperial title were not a little acrimonious. Disraeli, the prime minister whose idea this had been, encountered tough opposition in both the Commons and the Lords.³ This was, he insisted, 'a step which will give great satisfaction not merely to the Princes, but to the nations of India. They look forward to some Act of this kind with intense interest, and by various modes they have conveyed to us their desire that such a policy should be pursued.'⁴ Since the deposition of the Great Mughal after the Sepoy mutiny in 1857, a symbolic void had been left in India which it was now time to fill. Moreover, proclaiming Victoria Empress was not only congenial to Indian sentiment, it was also a strong demonstration of the firm commitment of Britain to hold on to her South Asian possession. The imperial title would serve to solidify the foundations of British rule. Neither of these arguments cut much ice with the opposition. To the first, Gladstone and other Liberals objected that they seriously doubted that the Indians liked to have subjection rubbed in their faces. They saw little indication that the government proposal echoed the wishes of the Indian population. British rule ought to be progressive rather than oppressive. Creating a special imperial title for the Queen was likely to breed hostility and resentment in India.⁵ If the first part met with serious criticism, the second part of Disraeli's argument earned him little but ridicule. The whole idea of an emperor as a supreme monarch was simply risible. Worse still, to think that an imperial title would help to shore up British rule against competition from other powers, Russia in particular, was a claim 'impossible to treat . . . seriously', the earl of Rosebery scornfully remarked; 'it reminded him of the warlike proceedings of the Chinese [i.e. under the Opium wars] – also, by-the-by, governed by an Emperor – who put their chief trust in wooden swords, and shields painted with ugly faces'.⁶

³ The Royal Titles bill was presented to the House of Commons on 17 February 1876. Debates in both chambers of the British parliament took place from February till April (the three readings in the Commons: 17 February, 9 March, 23 March 1876).

⁴ *Hansard Parliamentary Papers* (House of Commons, 17 February 1876), vol. 227 c. 410.

⁵ *Hansard Parliamentary Papers* (House of Commons, 17 February 1876), vol. 227 cc. 410–14; (House of Commons, 9 March 1876), vol. 227 cc. 1735–39; (House of Commons, 23 March 1876), vol. 228 cc. 480–2, 486–92 and 512–13.

⁶ *Hansard Parliamentary Papers* (House of Lords, 3 April), vol. 228 c. 1084.

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Enfeebled relic or romanticist desire, the notion of an Emperor provoked very different responses in political life, but about one thing opinions converged. Both sides of parliament were united in the belief that the title was, predominantly, a foreign thing and unsuitable for Britain itself. To be sure, there were nuances. In some respects the critics played this card the hardest. Next to the concerns that the imperial title might prove offensive to Indians, because of the blatant inequality implied by its rejection for England, they did at the same time not shy away from appealing to anti-Semitic prejudice in satirical cartoons mocking Disraeli's fascination with the 'foreign' trappings of empire and rank. He, on the other hand, also pointed to some aspects of the English cultural heritage which seemed compatible with the imperial title.⁷ Nevertheless, the government did not find it difficult to sooth concerns that English freedom was being corrupted by a foreign import. Victoria would rule as Empress in India, but in British affairs she would remain Queen, the government repeatedly reassured its critics.⁸ As Sir George Bowyer observed during the debates, the title was derived from Roman models and the idea was Oriental.⁹ The easy, almost unconscious, relegation of the Roman imperial monarchy to the cultural sphere of the East may strike us as curious. But this figure of thinking was common currency at the time. The history of the Roman emperors was widely received as a story of their gradual descent and decline into an Oriental despotism. Supreme monarch, ruler of the world, such claims were increasingly relocated on the European mental map to the exotic confines of Asia. The whole arrangement was, in short, a textbook example of *Orientalism*, albeit of a much more embattled, contested and frayed

⁷ See Taylor 2004 and more generally on the Liberals and Disraeli's imperialism, Wohl 1995 and Durrans 1982. Racism or ethnic stereotyping, thus, was not only on the government side, the impression given by Cohn (1983: 184), nor did it dominate the formation of opinions completely. On both sides, it entered as only one strand in a complex set of views. While the Liberals objected to the application of a different set of values to India, their resistance to the imperial title was nevertheless firmly grounded in nationalist resistance to foreign influence and oriental corruption, cf. the speech made in a Lords committee by the Earl Shaftesbury dismissing 'Emperor' as connected with 'Mahomedan' misrule and decline. The English should not revive the loathed memories of the Mughals, but guide India to freedom by example and 'imbue them with British feeling . . . teach them that . . . the noblest expression of a genuine Briton is to fear God and honour the King' (*Hansard Parliamentary Papers* 3 April 1876, vol. 228 cc. 1039–47). The Conservative position, on the other hand, was more ready to contemplate the use of 'Emperor/Empress' in English culture, both historically, and for the present. As Disraeli reminded the Commons, according to Edward Gibbon it was under the Roman Antonine emperors that mankind had been most happy. *Hansard Parliamentary Papers* (House of Commons, 9 March 1876), vol. 227 c. 1721.

⁸ Also after the bill had been passed, cf. the exchange in the House of Lords between Lord Selborne and the then Chancellor of the Exchequer: *Hansard Parliamentary Papers* (House of Lords, 2 May 1876), vol. 228 cc. 1953–81).

⁹ *Hansard Parliamentary Papers* (House of Commons, 17 February 1876), vol. 227 c. 419.

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kind than Said was generally willing to acknowledge.¹⁰ It is characteristic of these debates that the title under discussion was at all times the English 'Empress'. When a proclamation was first issued from the court on 28 April 1876, making the assumption of the new title official, only two versions were included: 'Imperatrix Indiae' or alternatively 'Empress of India'.¹¹

But what would be the Indian equivalent of these Latinate (Western) forms, a couple of critics asked without first receiving an answer. By the time of the Delhi Durbar, the British government had settled on the grandiose 'Kaiser-i-Hind'. This caused disagreement to flare up again briefly, in parliament and in the newspapers. 'Kaiser' was a German title – in fresh memory as it had just been assumed by the ruler of the recently united nation – Sir George Campbell noted with dismay. But here the government gleefully, and not without condescension, countered with the backing of confident Orientalist scholarship; 'Kaiser' was also current in Persian – a language which owing to the Mughals was widespread in India. The term could already be found in the classic epic of Firdausi and was generally the name under which people in the Orient, including India, would refer to the Ottoman sultan.¹² To this, one of the protagonists in the newspaper debate added the further observation that 'Kaiser', as was well known, derived from the Roman Caesar. According to one (spurious) legend, this name had entered the Julian family during the wars with Carthage and meant elephant in Punic: 'Elephant of India, then, is not so bad a style and title after all, for it smacks of poetry, heraldry and predominance.' That might all well be, Campbell answered, but at the end of the day no amount of learning or classical lore could hide the fact that, in an Indian cultural context, the title was 'as new to the "ordinary native" as an English title', and, to add insult to injury, even put in a clumsy masculine format.¹³ The titles current in Indian usage such as *padishah*, on the other hand, were felt by the European experts to have lost force, damned by their connection to the moribund regimes of the past. And yet, when hard pressed by the opposition to provide evidence that there was any wish in India to have Victoria invested with a new imperial title, the government representatives had referred to a few isolated episodes where groups of Indians had used

¹⁰ Said 1978. ¹¹ *The Times*, 29 April 1876, p. 10.

¹² *Hansard Parliamentary Papers* (House of Commons, 1 March 1877), vol. 232 cc. 1211–12; *The Times*, 2 March 1877 (W. Nassau Lees), p. 4.

¹³ *The Times*, 5 March 1877, p. 8. During the parliamentary debates of the previous year, Campbell had already made the point that the Indian/Mughal political traditions deserved more respect than generally accorded to them and that, in relation to India, there was little reason to change in the European-style titulature of Victoria as Queen, see *Hansard Parliamentary Papers* (9 March 1876), vol. 227, cc. 1730–1.

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precisely titles of this sort in flattering addresses to the Queen.¹⁴ Instead of following such precedents, however, the government had chosen to invent a new convention which could claim some foundation in Indo-Persian culture; but more importantly, it was within the purview of the English cultural horizon and could be used to match and mirror the contemporary claims to grandeur posed by other European great powers subscribing to the same Roman tradition, be it the German Kaiser or the Russian Tsar.¹⁵ Under the pretext of an alleged Oriental craving for inflated titles and distinctions, the government set about ‘reinventing’ the British monarchy. For, as Disraeli remarked, ‘It is only by the amplification of titles that you can often touch and satisfy the imagination of nations.’¹⁶

Controversial and in between, Roman as well as Oriental, European and Asian, endlessly emulated and historically loaded: the contributions to this volume roam widely to cut through these conventional oppositions and explore the notion of a universal emperor and empire, charting its career through time and across cultures in Eurasia, from antiquity till the dawn of colonialism. The following chapters combine perspectives ranging from the history of diplomacy to art history, to illuminate the many facets of this phenomenon. Together they represent a new foray into world history that joins recent attempts to pioneer comparison and stimulate much needed dialogue among students of vast pre-industrial empires, East and West.¹⁷ Below we establish the basic comparative framework for this exercise and offer a synthesis that seeks to pull the many different threads together in a shared analytical model, sketch a common historical chronology and identify a set of thematic keys under which to study our topic.

UNIVERSAL EMPIRE: THE DYNAMICS OF HEGEMONIC PRE-EMINENCE

Victoria’s imperial investiture had become an instrument in the tool box of invented traditions which the builders of modern ‘imagined communities’ employed to stir the emotions of mass publics; it was basically a piece of theatricality, still powerful and evocative, but perhaps not quite in keeping

¹⁴ *Hansard Parliamentary Papers* (House of Commons, 9 March 1876), vol. 222 cc. 1750–1: ‘Sháhán-sháh-i-Hind Zil-i-Subhání’, according to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and he added, the envoy of the Persian government should also have recognised that the Queen ought to be styled as *pādsháh*.

¹⁵ Cohn 1983: 201 with further analysis of the scholarship proposing the Kaiser-i-Hind title.

¹⁶ *Hansard Parliamentary Papers* (House of Commons, 9 March 1876), vol. 227 c. 1724; Oriental desire for elaborate titles, c. 1750 (on which Cohn 1983: 184). On the reinvention of the British monarchy in more imperial fashion, see Cannadine 2001, ch. 8.

¹⁷ Bang 2008; Scheidel 2009; Mutschler and Mittag 2008; Morris and Scheidel 2009; Bang and Bayly 2003 and 2011; Alcock *et al.* 2001.

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with the modern age. Increasingly, the notion of emperors and universal empire was felt to be a thing of the past, a relic of more romantic ages that progress had left behind or relegated to the more exotic margins of history. In his private journal of the embassy to the Chinese court led by Macartney in 1793, his audience with the Qianlong emperor provoked this telling observation: "Thus I have seen "King Solomon in all his glory." I use the expression, as the scene recalled perfectly in my memory a puppet show of that name which I recollect to have seen in my childhood, and made so strong an impression of my mind that I thought it a true representation of the highest pitch of human greatness and felicity."¹⁸ The connection between universalist emperors and a child-like universe was one frequently made during those days and crops up left, right and centre. Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher, explained the fascination with wonders and curiosities, often prized as signs of imperial might, as the expression of a child's psychology. Nero, the Roman emperor, he commented, possessed everything in abundance and was bored with it, yet might momentarily draw satisfaction and amusement from the most insignificant surprises, mere trifles, like the joy of a child over toys and trinkets.¹⁹

This was the result of developments long in train. From the sixteenth century, a powerful discourse had emerged in Europe fiercely critical of aspirations to universal monarchy. In *Lords of All the World* Antony Pagden has tracked how these opinions grew out of opposition mainly to the Habsburg bid for mastery in Europe. The British parliamentary debates on Victoria's imperial title echoed much of this literature; that she would remain only a queen in Britain was for instance basically a repetition of an argument already advanced by the school of Salamanca in the sixteenth century. Dealing with Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor, Francisco Vitoria had maintained that in his Spanish possessions Charles held the right not of an emperor, but merely of a king. The claim to universal empire was impossible. Such ideas were patently absurd, 'a silly notion', Hugo Grotius added scornfully, writing as he did from the renegade Dutch republics in the early seventeenth century.²⁰ These views found vindication

¹⁸ The passage is quoted from the analysis of Hevia 1995: 107–8.

¹⁹ S. Kierkegaard, *Enten Eller* (9th edn, Copenhagen, 1994), vol. II, 176 (*Either Or*, from *Part 2, the papers of B, second part*).

²⁰ Vitoria [Victoria], *De Indis* 2.1 (ed. J. B. Scott, Washington, DC, 1917; also the English translation in his *Political Writings* ed. A. Pagden and J. Lawrance in 1991) and Hugo Grotius, *De iure belli ac pacis*, lib. II, cap. XII, §13 (ed. J. B. Scott, Washington, DC, 1913; a recent translation by Richard Tuck was published in 2005) with Pagden 1995: ch. 2. The reading of Vitoria in Anghie 2005: ch. 1 is too inquisitorial: as a defence of colonialism Vitoria's thought was at least ambiguous and also concerned to rein in claims to universal monarchy in Europe.

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on the battlefield. The Reformation and the Thirty Years War broke the back of the universal ambitions of the Habsburgs.²¹ Europe remained split up between a number of regional, jealously competitive monarchies. Without effective power and intellectually discredited, universal empire was put to rest. As Henry VIII had asserted when severing the English church from the Catholic, his kingdom was fully an empire in its own right, not subject to the authority of any other power, be it pope or (Holy Roman) emperor.²² History and in time progress seemed to favour the development of a plurality of independent states (and empires), sovereign, equal and geographically bounded; it was on these principles that the mainstream constructed modern doctrines of statehood and international relations – discussed by Haldén in Chapter 12 below.²³ Still, the idea of a universal unifying empire retained more of its allure than is often supposed. After all, in professing their sovereignty, in Latin often simply *imperium* or *summum imperium*,²⁴ European monarchs had arrogated to themselves many of the prerogatives and trappings of universal empire. Depictions of early modern European kings in Roman emperor costume are without number. While the new (proto) national polities took shape, they drew heavily on the imagery and ideology of universal empire, as may be seen from the quotation from Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* which serves as epigraph to this book.²⁵ None other than Napoleon, surging out of a revolutionary France experimenting with nationalism, attempted to breathe fresh life into the idea by proclaiming a new empire to order his Europe.²⁶ Universal empire died hard; its demise was hardly a foregone conclusion.

If we raise our perspective from Europe and the Atlantic to the global level, this impression is confirmed. Far from being the era which experienced the end of moribund universal empire, the early modern period saw imperial universalism vigorous and flourishing. At the dawn of the age, the new Ming dynasty in China had proclaimed its universal sway

²¹ Kennedy 1987: ch. 2. ²² Muldoon 1999: 128, and more generally ch. 6.

²³ Creveld (1999: 41) reflects well in mainstream thinking the element of incomprehension with regard to universal empire: 'to the extent these and similar claims did not correspond to reality they could sometimes lead to comic results'. See his ch. 3 for an excellent account of the evolution of the modern state, complemented by Watson 1992: chs. 17–18.

²⁴ E.g. in the writings of the seventeenth-century lawyer and leading exponent of modern international law, Samuel Pufendorf, cf. his *De jure naturae et gentium* (ed. Frank Böhling, Berlin, 1998), book VII, cap. 3–4.

²⁵ Yates 1975: 29–87 on the use of imperial imagery in the public construction of the English and French monarchies in the second half of the sixteenth century.

²⁶ Huet 1999 and Nouvel-Kammerer 2007 for Napoleon's use of Roman symbolism. Further Forrest and Wilson 2008.

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by launching a series of grand, unprecedented naval expeditions into the Indian Ocean between 1405 and 1433. Built to impress, these gigantic fleets were to bring home rare objects and awe foreign princes to accept the 'son of heaven' as their tributary overlord.²⁷ A few decades later, in 1453, the conquest of Constantinople by Sultan Mehmed II sparked Ottoman and Muscovite/Russian claims to the succession of Rome.²⁸ As Constantinople had for centuries been capital of the ancient Mediterranean empire, geography favoured the Ottoman adoption of the title of *Kayser i-Rum*. But since the city had been founded by the first Christian emperor, religion could justify the ambitions of the Tsar through a postulated transfer inside the Orthodox family. The sixteenth century witnessed the further expansion of Ottoman territories until the new Muslim realm rivalled the extent of the Eastern Roman empire at the height of its powers during the reign of Justinian. It was not merely fanciful posturing when in 1623 Sultan Mustafa, addressing the Polish king Sigismund, boastfully referred to his own court as 'the refuge of sultans and the seat of felicity which feeds the lips of the Caesars of the epoch and is thronged by the mouths of the Khusravs of the age'. Royalty and artists alike gravitated to the throne of the Ottoman Caesars (see Kołodziejczyk, Chapter 7 below).²⁹ Meanwhile, a new Muslim dynasty was establishing itself in India. Under Akbar (r. 1556–1605) the Mughals rose to real prominence. Donning regnal names such as 'World Seizer/Jahangir' or 'King of the World/Shahjahan', the Mughal emperors made little secret of their confidence and pretensions to universal monarchy. Their enormous wealth and vast subject populations placed them as the only credible rival to the Ottomans for pre-eminence within the world of Islam.³⁰ Finally, the conquests in the new world made it seem as if the Habsburg domains were now surpassing all previous empires in recorded history. 'Plus ultra' or 'further beyond', their power had broken through the confines of the old world. Under Philip (r. 1556–98), the son of Charles V, the writ of the Spanish branch of the Habsburg dynasty literally circled the globe.³¹

These developments were the upshot of a much longer history, with roots stretching far back in Eurasian time. The claim to universal empire was already one trumpeted by rulers during antiquity. There we also find the

²⁷ Dreyer 2007. ²⁸ Grala 1996.

²⁹ Quotation from Kołodziejczyk 2000: 388–401; the quoted fragment is on 390 (Turkish Ottoman text) and 396 (English translation). On 'Roman' Constantinople as capital of the Ottoman empire and its court as centre of artistic patronage, briefly Goffman 2002: 51–64 and 105–9, even of an Italian renaissance painter, cf. Jardine and Brotton 2000: 8.

³⁰ Farooqi 1989.

³¹ For a comparison, see Subrahmanyam 2009. Rosenthal 1971 on the Habsburg motto.

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idea that history could be organised as a succession of dominant empires. Most famous is the prophecy in the Old Testament Book of Daniel describing the Neo-Babylonian empire of Nebuchadnezzar as a giant on feet of clay, soon to be overtaken by a succession of powers before the establishment of an eternal kingdom of God over all the earth.³² Rulers inscribed and measured themselves in and against such genealogies of imperial power (see Angelov and Herrin, Chapter 6 below). Rome, who liked to see herself as governing the *orbis terrarum*, became a well-established standard to emulate for later empire-builders, and, as we have seen, not just within Christianity. Alexander the Great, the Macedonian conqueror of the Persian world empire, had even wider geographical purchase.³³ A late antique Greek fairytale history, the so-called *Alexander Romance*, travelled far and wide across much of Eurasia and received countless translations and retellings. Alexander and the people in his ambience provided substance for literary and philosophical discourse within the Christian and Muslim worlds, an example of which is excavated by Garth Fowden (Chapter 5 below). In this league of imperial models can also be found famed and notorious Central Asian and Mongol conquerors like Genghis Khan and Timur Lenk.³⁴ The rather misty figure of Aśoka, ruler of the Indian Maurya empire, earned a place within Buddhist traditions. Mythologised, he came to typify the ideal Buddhist universal ruler, the wheel-turning/cakravartin lord; and, through a complex genealogy, he still featured as a model for the Qing emperors, roughly two millennia later.³⁵

The notion of world rule connected with these models has posed an awkward challenge to students of empire. Since our general points of reference have been shaped by modern theories of statehood, ‘universal empire’ has seemed foreign and mysterious, and sometimes stubbornly to fly in the face of reality. No empire, after all, has ever actually held universal sway. Apart from dismissal, a common response therefore has been to treat it as the product of an ‘other’ civilisation and see it as an expression of a particular foreign culture. Much can be achieved in this way. The late C. R. Whittaker’s *The Frontiers of the Roman Empire* (1994) is a particularly successful attempt to explain the Roman claim to universal power with reference to the specific cultural horizon and geographical mindset of Greco-Roman civilisation. Yet, as we saw above, the risk of succumbing to exoticism or ethnic stereotyping and essentialist arguments is never far off.

³² Book of Daniel 2. ³³ Ray and Potts 2007.

³⁴ The Timurid aspect of Mughal imperial ideology is well illustrated in Beach, Koch and Thackston 1997: 25–7. For a broad survey of Timur’s legacy, see Manz 2002.

³⁵ Crossley 1992: 1482–3 and, in more detail, 1999: ch. 5.