The claim by certain rulers to universal empire has a long history stretching as far back as the Assyrian and Achaemenid empires. This book traces its various manifestations in Near Eastern and classical antiquity, the Islamic world, Asia and Central America as well as considering seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European discussions of international order. As such it is an exercise in comparative world history combining a multiplicity of approaches, from ancient history, to literary and philosophical studies, to the history of art and international relations, and historical sociology. The notion of universal imperial rule is presented as an elusive and much-coveted prize among monarchs in history, around which developed forms of kingship and political culture. Different facets of the phenomenon are explored under three, broadly conceived, headings: symbolism, ceremony and diplomatic relations; universal or cosmopolitan literary high cultures; and, finally, the inclination to present universal imperial rule as an expression of cosmic order.

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UNIVERSAL EMPIRE

A Comparative Approach to Imperial Culture and Representation in Eurasian History

EDITED BY

PETER FIBIGER BANG
AND
DARIUSZ KOŁODZIEJCZYK
Cymbeline: Well, My Peace we will begin. And Caius Lucius, Although the victor, we submit to Caesar And to the Roman empire, promising To pay our wonted tribute, from the which We were dissuaded by our wicked Queen, Whom heavens in justice both on her and hers Have laid most heavy hand.

Soothsayer: The fingers from the powers above do tune The harmony of this peace. The vision Which I made known to Lucius ere the stroke Of this yet scarce-cold battle, at this instant Is full accomplished. For the Roman eagle, From south to west on wing soaring aloft, Lessened herself, and in the beams o’th’sun So vanished; which foreshowed our princely eagle, Th’Imperial Caesar, should again unite His favour with the radiant Cymbeline, Which shines here in the west.

William Shakespeare
Contents

List of figures
List of maps
Notes on the contributors
Preface

1 ‘Elephant of India’: universal empire through time and across cultures
   Peter Fibiger Bang with Dariusz Kołodziejczyk

PART I EURASIA – ANTIQUITY TILL EARLY MODERNITY

2 Propaganda and practice in Assyrian and Persian imperial culture
   Gojko Barjamovic

3 Between Asoka and Antiochos: an essay in world history on universal kingship and cosmopolitan culture in the Hellenistic ecumene
   Peter Fibiger Bang

4 The making of Oriental Rome: shaping the Trojan legend
   Rolf Michael Schneider

5 Pseudo-Aristotelian politics and theology in universal Islam
   Garth Fowden

6 The Christian imperial tradition – Greek and Latin
   Dimiter Angelov and Judith Herrin
## Contents

7 Khan, caliph, tsar and imperator: the multiple identities of the Ottoman sultan  
*Dariusz Kołodziejczyk*  
175

8 How the Mughal pādshāhs referenced Iran in their visual construction of universal rule  
*Ebba Koch*  
194

9 Ideologies of state building in Vijayanagara and post-Vijayanagara south India: some reflections  
*Velcheru Narayana Rao and Sanjay Subrahmanyam*  
210

10 Sons of Heaven: the Qing appropriation of the Chinese model of universal empire  
*Evelyn S. Rawski*  
233

### Part II Contrasting Universalisms – Old and New World

11 Aztec universalism: ideology and status symbols in the service of empire-building  
*Justyna Olko*  
253

12 From empire to commonwealth(s): orders in Europe 1500–1800  
*Peter Haldén*  
280

13 Imperial universalism – further thoughts  
*John A. Hall*  
304

*General bibliography*  
310

*Index*  
364
Figures

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. Bourne and Shepherd, *Coronation Durbar Delhi 1903*, www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/ooroutesdata/1800-1899/princes/bournephotos/curzons1903.jpg.


1.3 Kneeling barbarian in polychrome marble, i marmi colorati della roma imperiale s434, fig. 136.

1.4a The Chinese emperor depicted as a Tibetan, Buddhist monk. *Orientations*: July/August 1995: 31–2, fig. 6e in the article written by Wu Hung.

1.4b The Chinese emperor depicted as a hunter in European apparel. *Orientations*: July/August 1995: 31–2, fig. 6k in the article written by Wu Hung.

1.5a The throne in the Hall of Public Audience in the Red Fort of Delhi. Photo: Ebba Koch.

1.5b Orpheus playing to the animals, pietre dure plaque, detail from the wall decoration behind the throne. Photo: Ebba Koch.

2.1 Dynamic displays of torture and violence. Southwest Palace (Nineveh), Room 33. AN1029971001©Trustees of the British Museum.

2.2 Manifestation of universal order. Persepolis: jamb of Throne Hall. Photo by Gojko Barjamovic.
List of figures


4.1 Parthian chieftain wearing an Asian trouser-suit. Teheran, National Museum. 79

4.2 Cuirass of a statue of Augustus. Rome, Musei Vaticani, Braccio Nuovo 2290. 83

4.3 Parthian presenting a Roman military standard to a representative of Rome. 84

4.4 Archer in Asian dress. London, British Musuem, £ 135. 85

4.5 Mithras in Asian dress subdues the bull. 86

4.6 Servant in Asian dress holding a wine ladle. Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, 120403. 87

4.7 Cavern and artificial dining island of the stately villa at Sperlonga (reconstruction). 89

4.8 Statue of Ganymede in Asian dress held in the clutches of Jupiter’s eagle. Sperlonga, Museo Archeologico 90

4.9 Original setting of Ganymede at Sperlonga erected above the cavern’s entrance on a plinth specially fitted into the rock. 91

4.10 Cavern at Sperlonga with five marbles of the Augustan period. 92

4.11 Bust of a handsome youth in Asian dress. Copenhagen, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, i.n. 1906. 94

4.12 Bust of a handsome youth in Asian dress. Copenhagen, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, i.n. 1905. 95

4.13 Portrait of a handsome Roman male with a Nero-like coiffure and long locks. Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi, 1914-57. 97


4.15 Rome, Ara Pacis Augustae. 99

4.16 Aeneas, behind him Iulus Ascanius. 100

4.17 Rome, Forum Augustum (plan). 101

4.18 Romulus carrying a spear and military trophies. Roman Aureus of Antoninus Pius. London, British Museum, THO.1433. 102
### List of figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>Processional road of the imperial cult at Aphrodisias.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>Aeneas carrying his father Anchises and leading his son Iulus Ascanius by the hand. Aphrodisias, Museum.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.23</td>
<td>Pediment of the temple of Mars Ultor. Rome, Museo della Civiltà Romana.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>Divus Augustus and Iulus Ascanius in Asian dress (detail).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.26</td>
<td>Tabula Iliaca Capitolina showing selected portrayals and texts of the epic cycle. Rome, Museo Capitolino, 316.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>Rome, Forum Romanum.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.29</td>
<td>Head of a handsome Asian showing rich traces of original colouring. Rome, Antiquario Forense 3132.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>Handsome Asian from the Basilica Paulli shown in a pose as if supporting an architrave. Drawing by Alfons Neubauer, Munich.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.31</td>
<td>Handsome Asian shown in a pose as if supporting an architrave. Avenches.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>Temple of Mater Magna and temple of Victory on Mons Palatinus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>View on the Circus Maximus from the imperial palaces on Mons Palatinus. Roman Sestertius of Caracalla. Private Collection.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.34</td>
<td>Male child with non-Roman coiffure and in foreign dress. North frieze of the Ara Pacis Augustae.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.35</td>
<td>Male child with non-Roman coiffure and in foreign dress. South frieze of the Ara Pacis Augustae.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>Bichitr, Jahangir preferring a Sufi shaikh to the rulers of the world, c. 1625. Freer Gallery of Art, Washington DC 42.15.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of figures

8.2 Jahangir entertains Shah Abbas of Iran in an imaginary meeting, 1618–22. Freer Gallery of Art, Washington DC 42.16. 202
8.3 Abu’l Hasan, Jahangir’s dream of a visit of Shah Abbas of Iran, 1618–22. Freer Gallery of Art, Washington DC 45.9. 204
8.4 Abu’l Hasan, Jahangir standing on a terrestrial globe. Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, 7A.15 (Photo Ebba Koch). 206

11.1 Archaeological remains of the Great Temple of Tenochtitlan (© Justyna Olko). 262
11.2 Imperial sanctuary in Malinalco (© Justyna Olko). 263
11.3 Warning and punishment of a rebellious ruler; Codex Mendoza, fol. 66r, fragment (Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, MS. Arch. Selden. A. 1, drawing by Justyna Olko). 264
11.4 Mapa Quinatzin, fol. 3, fragment (Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Ms. Mex. 396, drawing by Justyna Olko). 266
11.5 The rulers of Tenochtitlan with their turquoise attributes, images from the sixteenth-century manuscript of the Primeros Memoriales compiled by Bernardino de Sahagún (fol. 51r, fragment, © Reproducción, Real Academia de la Historia, Madrid). 272
11.6 Imagery of the Codex Azoyú 2: Rain/Quiyauhtzin wearing the Mexica costume and facing Axayacatl, fol. 5, fragment (Biblioteca Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico, drawing by Justyna Olko). 275
11.7 Palimpsesto Veinte Mazorcas (Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Ms. Mex. 391, reproduced with permission). 278
Maps

1 The Arab caliphate in the so-called classical age and the
   Tang empire ........................................ page 15
2 Achaemenid Persia and the conquests of Alexander .... 17
3 The Mongol moment .................................... 19
4 Rome–Parthia–Han China .................................. 21
5 The early modern Eurasian empires ...................... 24
6 Roman imperial quarries supplying white and
   coloured marble ..................................... 121
7 Mesoamerica in the Late Postclassic with the extent of the
   Aztec empire (© Miłosz Giersz) .................. 256
8 Valley of Mexico (© Miłosz Giersz) .................... 257
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Preface

This collection of essays explores the notion of universal empire in Eurasian and world history from antiquity till the dawn of modernity. It is the result of a long journey and one of the main outcomes of a European-based network to compare tributary empires which we are grateful to acknowledge was boldly and generously financed by COST (www.tec.saxo.ku.dk). This brought historians together from a number of fields who had not usually had a great deal of contact with each other and enabled them to meet several times annually for an extended period. In this connection, we want to extend our thanks to all the many participants in this series of meetings and our hosts, as well as to the contributors to the present volume for all the enthusiasm and curiosity they have brought to this endeavour to promote comparative history. In relation to this volume, however, we thank in particular Adam Ziółkowski, who helped organise one of the meetings on which this volume builds, and C. A. Bayly, who acted as co-chair of the network for its entire duration and also commented on a first draft of our introduction. It is also a great pleasure to thank both Michael Sharp and his staff at Cambridge University Press for working hard on bringing our manuscript into print, as well as the two anonymous readers who offered much valuable advice. René Lindekrone Christensen, finally, provided much appreciated technical assistance with the images for this book.

For the past decade or so, imperialism, globalisation and world history have been high on the agenda both of the historical disciplines and of the public in general. Unsurprisingly, both discourses have been dominated by the experience of modernity and colonial empire. (Bayly 2004 is exemplary.) But as these debates are rapidly changing our image of the world, past and present, and are themselves responses to an ongoing seismic shift in the current world order, older forms of history can ill afford to ignore this development; they must find ways of addressing the concerns of the evolving more global perspective on the past or risk consigning themselves
to obscurity and irrelevance. Fortunately, there is a growing sense among
students of more ancient forms of history of the need not to study their
topics in isolation, but to reach out to neighbouring fields and allow their
enquiries to be informed and shaped by more general problems of world
history. This is what we have been aiming for in this volume; we radically
cut across both conventional chronology and cultural geography to illumi-
nate our theme on the broadest possible canvas. In doing so, we join ranks
with a small but accumulating number of studies and projects dedicated to
the comparative history of pre-modern empires (Alcock et al. 2001; Bang
and Bayly 2003 and 2011; Bang 2008; Hurlet 2008; Mutschler and Mittag
2008; Scheidel 2009; Morris and Scheidel 2009). It is a particular joy to
mention the project on Rome and Han China led by Walter Scheidel and
the network of ancient and modern imperialisms co-ordinated by Phiroze
Vasunia, both of whom were present at several of our meetings. Such ini-
tiatives are crucial to reinvigorate and renew fields that are both blessed and
burdened with a long tradition of scholarship. Perhaps, the most significant
and fruitful experience of the dialogue that emerged within our network
was to be confronted with the unfamiliar or little known, but not in the
broad anthropological sense of ‘meeting the other’ in general, important
as that may be. Rather, it was the engagement with a number of histori-
cal societies specifically selected for the general characteristics they had in
common, but not usually treated together, which helped us to broaden
our own horizons, inspire new questions and shake our firm beliefs, and
tempted us to step out of our accustomed mental and intellectual frame-
works to explore other vistas. If this volume offers a modest impression
of this experience and the excitement it brought, our efforts will not have
been in vain.

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