

Preface for *Lessons from Early Empires*

I have been fascinated by early empires since I studied history as an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin more than half a century ago. I was determined that I would become an historian and understand the machinations of early empires throughout the ancient world. But after graduation, my life took an unexpected turn. I went to Nigeria in 1961 to serve with the first wave of Peace Corps Volunteers and taught African history and geography. I became appalled by widespread poverty and intrigued by the challenges of economic development facing poor countries. I was overcome with a youthful, idealistic desire to be relevant and do something useful.

I decided to study economics as a way to understand underdevelopment and contribute to poverty alleviation. Thereafter, I embarked on a career of academic teaching and overseas research and advising on food and agriculture policies in developing countries, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia. I worked very contentedly at that trade for over 30 years.

Nearly two decades ago and thirteen academic books later, I took early retirement from the Food Research Institute at Stanford University and reoriented my life. I asked myself how I might best return to my quest to understand the rise and fall of early empires. Going to the library to read would be easy. But visiting the foreign sites and museums would prove more challenging to a retired academic on a limited budget. Soon I found a satisfying answer.

I began to lecture on travel/study trips that went to the sites of the early empires (and to many other exotic places). This opportunity – to follow what some say is the best retirement avocation in the world – was ideal in two respects. It forced me to review and synthesize the literature on the political, economic, and cultural history of early empires, and it gave me the chance to visit a wide range of historical sites with informative fellow lecturers, stimulating local experts, and inquisitive travel-group participants. In the process, I discovered that many of the techniques and insights that I had employed to investigate the problems of agricultural development and international trade in contemporary

developing countries translated directly to my study of historical empires. My striving for hands-on relevance turned out, quite by chance, to be excellent training for understanding the creation of wealth and power in early societies.

On travel/study trips in recent years, I have had the good fortune to prepare lectures on and to visit the key sites of numerous early empires. Travelers, politicians, and scholars ponder why empires worked and how one differed from another. With this essay, I provide comparative insights into the rise and fall of key early empires from the viewpoint of an economist turned historian. From those insights, I draw lessons for contemporary powers.