

### **Chapter Three, “Sources of Wealth,” for *Lessons from Early Empires***

In the nearly five millennia before the industrial revolution, early empires had three main sources of wealth – agriculture, foreign trade, and foreign conquest. Successful imperial rulers found ways to promote and tax their farmers and merchants, and they conquered to control the agriculture and trade of tributary regions. In the introductory chapter, I explained how early empires generated wealth and then transferred part of it to the center in government revenues. Wealth underpinned power. Dynasts needed revenue to fund their military forces, government bureaucracies, and religious monuments.

In this chapter, I investigate how early empires generated wealth, and in the following one I will examine modes of imperial control, including taxation. In the explanation of the agriculture-trade-conquest trilogy of imperial wealth, I illustrate each source of wealth with two case studies of early empires or kingdoms.

Because the sources of wealth often are interrelated, after each

illustration I provide a summary of all three wealth-generating mechanisms to show the linkages between the primary and supplemental sources of wealth. I wrap up this chapter with a comparison of wealth generation in our twelve early empires and kingdoms.

### **Agriculture as a Source of Wealth**

It is hard to imagine how agriculture could have been the primary source of wealth for almost all early empires. Most people farmed. But how could rulers promote the productivity of their farmers and then tax away the agricultural surplus and use it to provide most government revenues? In short, how could rice build temples?

The elite sometimes owned the farmland and controlled the farm laborers. But more often, small-scale farmers paid most agricultural taxes. Astute officials invested in infrastructure to support agriculture (such as farm-to-market roads, canals, and irrigation systems) and tried to help farmers use better methods to increase agricultural production. Imperial rulers created effective

bureaucracies, backed by force, to make sure that farmers paid their taxes. I illustrate how it was that rice built temples by looking in depth at agricultural development in two of our early empires – the Gupta Kingdom of India and the Kingdom of Pagan in Burma.

**Agriculture in the Gupta Kingdom of India.** Agriculture in the Indo-Gangetic plain and foreign trade (with Southeast Asia, China, and the Mediterranean) provided substantial wealth in the Gupta Kingdom of India (320-550 CE).<sup>1</sup> The Guptan kings owned key productive assets (crown land, salt and metal mines, the royal mint, gold and silver workshops, munitions factories, and textile plants to cloth the military and the royal family).<sup>2 3</sup> During Chandragupta II's reign (375-415), the royal foundry produced the

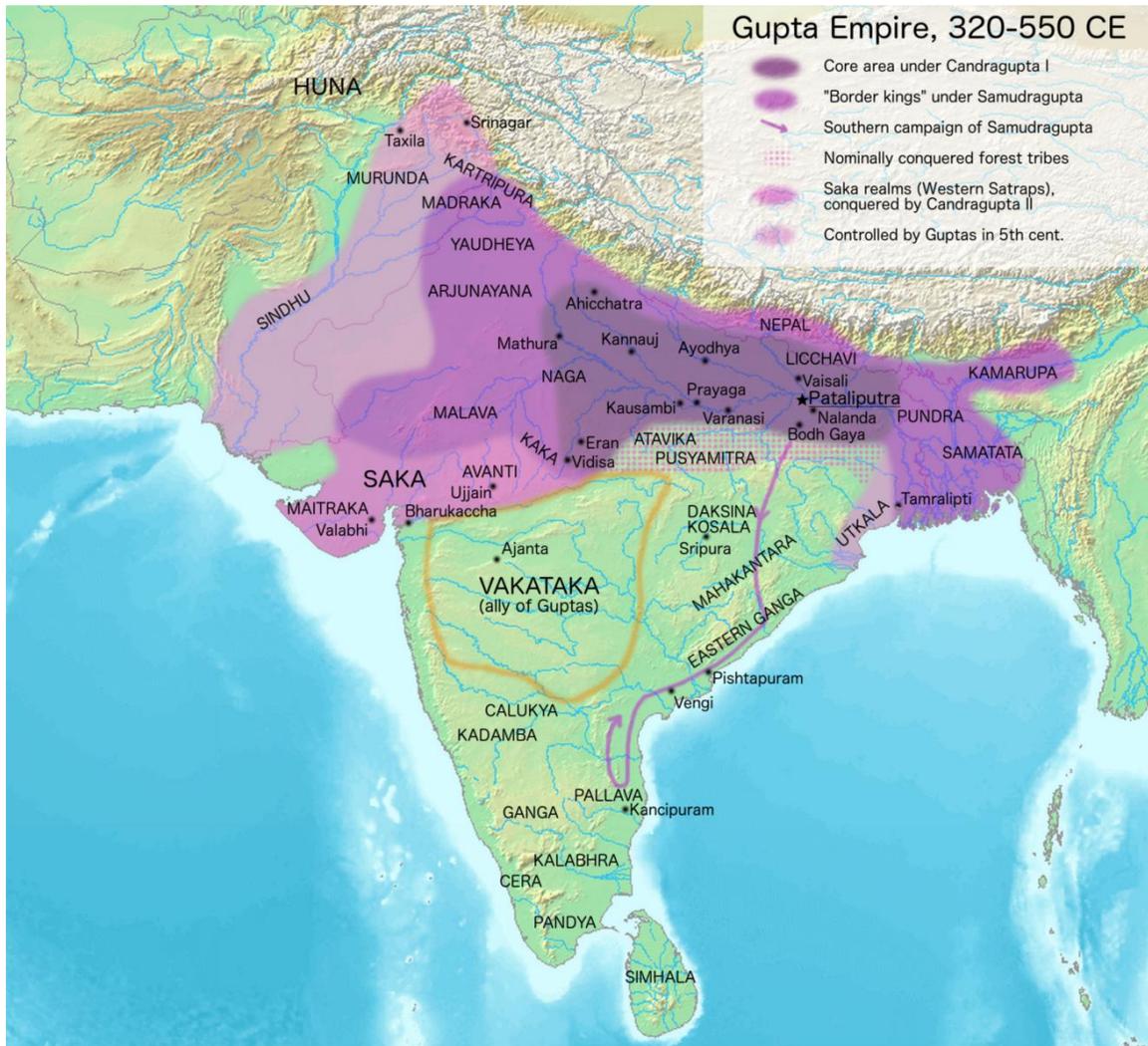
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<sup>1</sup> Gordon Johnson, *Cultural Atlas of India*, Abingdon, England: Andromeda Oxford Limited, 1996, pp. 75-79.

<sup>2</sup> Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal, *Modern South Asia, History, Culture, Political Economy*, London: Routledge, 1998, pp. 19-20.

<sup>3</sup> Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 93-94.

magnificent Meharauli iron pillar, observable in Delhi today – a single piece of pure iron that is 23 feet high and 16 inches in diameter and weighs 6 tons.<sup>4</sup>



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gupta\\_Empire,\\_320-550\\_CE.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gupta_Empire,_320-550_CE.png)

*Gupta Kingdom (320-550 CE, Purple Area))*

<sup>4</sup> Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 88-89.

But the Guptans gained most of their wealth by taxing small-scale farmers. Most farms in Guptan India were small (less than five acres) and cultivated by owner-operators or tenants. Indian agriculture prospered, although tax rates were very high – one-fourth of cereal harvests (rice, wheat, and barley), one day per month of corvée labor service to the state (to maintain roads and irrigations systems), one-fiftieth of cattle and gold, water taxes on irrigated land, and one-sixth of cash crop produce. The primary staple foods were rice in the eastern Gangetic plain and central Indian river valleys and wheat in the northwest. Cash crops included cotton, sugar cane, mustard, ginger, honey, mangos, melons, coconuts, pears, plums, peaches, apricots, grapes, pomegranates, and oranges.



*Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at*  
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Indo-Gangetic\\_Plain.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Indo-Gangetic_Plain.png)>

### *The Indo-Gangetic Plain in North India – Guptan Heartland*

There is no evidence of important innovations in agricultural production during the Guptan period. Although there was a boom in iron metallurgy, no new agricultural implements or techniques of production were introduced. India's farmers continued to use wrought iron tools (plow blades, sickles, hoes, spades, axes, and knives) in agricultural production and processing, teams of oxen for plowing, animal manure for soil fertility, water wheels for

irrigation, and bullock carts for transportation. The government and farmers jointly promoted irrigated agriculture by investing in dams, dikes, canals, tanks, and wells.<sup>5</sup>



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at  
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mature\\_Rice\\_\(India\)\\_by\\_Augustus\\_Binu.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mature_Rice_(India)_by_Augustus_Binu.jpg)>

### *Rice Production in the Indo-Gangetic Plain in North India*

Most farmers raised a few cattle for milk, manure, plowing, and transport, and cows became sacred because they were believed

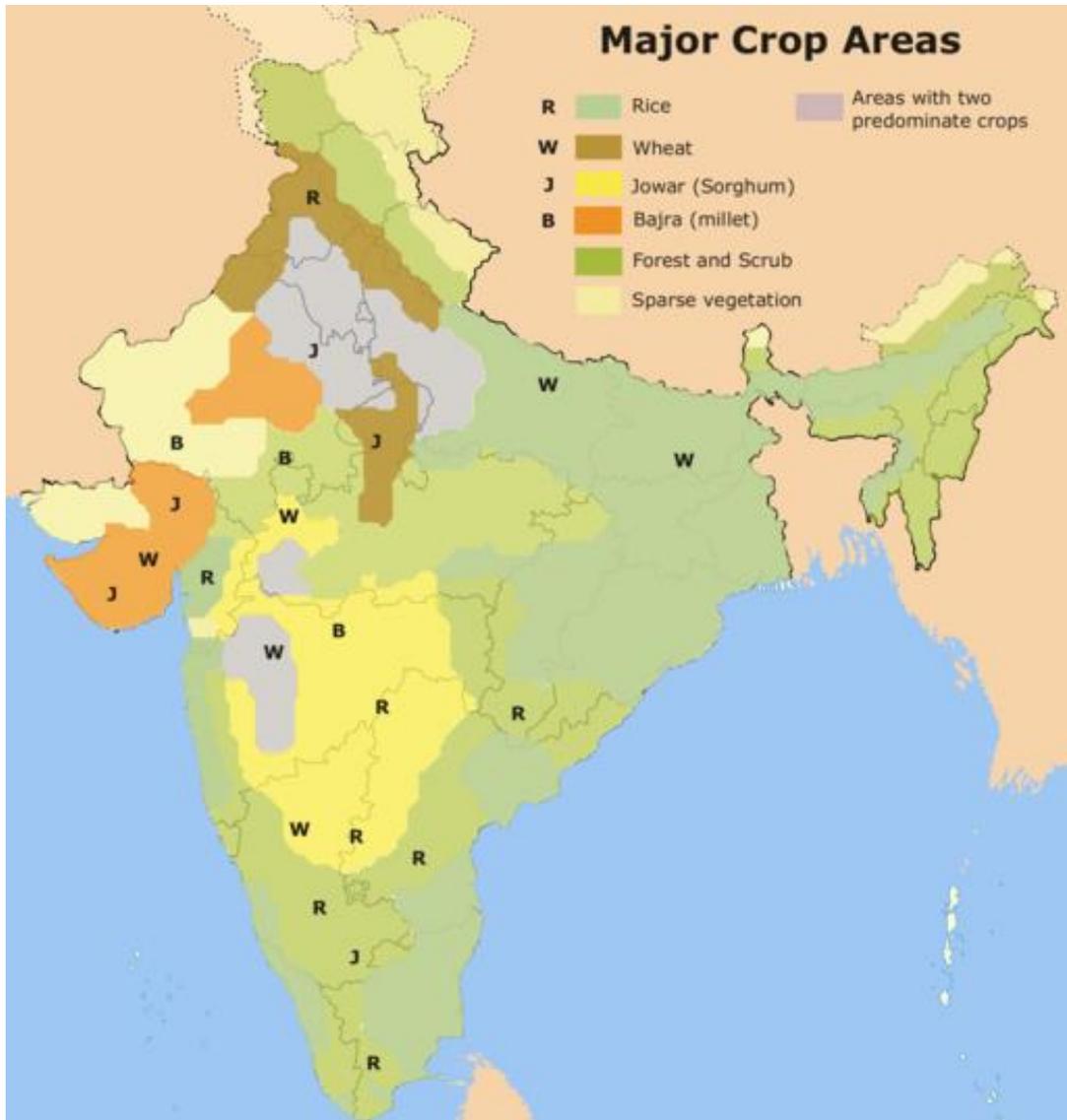
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<sup>5</sup> Hugh Tinker, *South Asia: A Short History*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990, p. 28.

to represent human fertility (as a source of milk) and be the gift of high-status nobles (*brahmins*). Slavery was unimportant in agriculture, although many domestic servants and personal attendants were the slaves of rich Indian nobles.<sup>6</sup> The use of hired labor in agriculture was widespread, and farm workers were compensated both in cash and in kind. Farmers were productive – and the state heavily taxed their productivity – because Guptan rule resulted in political stability and thus provided a predictable economic environment. In addition, new agricultural areas were opened up in the eastern Gangetic Plain, especially in Bengal. Farmed area thus increased even though farm yields (the amounts produced per land unit) did not.

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<sup>6</sup> Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 80-83.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Major\\_crop\\_areas\\_India.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Major_crop_areas_India.png)

### *Agricultural Cropping Zones in India*

Guptan kings exercised ultimate land ownership in principle, which justified the taxation of privately-held land.<sup>7</sup> They retained

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<sup>7</sup> Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 94-95.

ownership of some arable land, but other land was owned privately or by religious orders. The kings granted portions of the royal land with tenants to nobles (*brahmans*) in return for services rendered to the state. On noble estates, a typical sharing of agricultural produce was one-half to the tenant, one-third to the estate-owner, and one-sixth to the state as tax.<sup>8</sup> But many nobles were able to avoid paying taxes, thereby undercutting central authority. In addition, the Buddhist and Jain religious orders (*sanghas*) gradually accumulated tax-free agricultural estates from which they took one-sixth of the produce from tenants to support temples and monasteries.

The king donated royal lands to the religious orders, and nobles purchased land to give to the church groups to earn religious merit. Those permanent land grants were recorded on copper plates or on stone tablets, which served as legal documents.

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<sup>8</sup> Hugh Tinker, *South Asia: A Short History*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990, p. 53.

Despite the decline of the tax base, agriculture and the taxing of small-scale producers – freeholders and tenants – was the principal source of wealth for the Guptan state.<sup>9</sup> To assist tax collection, government departments carried out regular land surveys of villages and farm plots and kept detailed records of land transactions and land tax revenues.<sup>10</sup>

**Summary of Agricultural and Supplemental Wealth in Guptan India.** The taxation of crop agriculture was the main source of wealth in India's Gupta Kingdom. Agriculture prospered because of political stability, improved roads, and increases in areas farmed rather than new techniques that gave higher crop yields. Guptan administrators taxed their agriculture at high rates – one-fourth of cereal harvests and one-sixth of cash crop produce.

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<sup>9</sup> Stanley Wolpert, *India*, Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2009, pp. 37-38.

<sup>10</sup> Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 94.

The taxation of foreign trade provided a secondary source of wealth for the Gupta Kingdom. Merchants engaged in long-distance international trade with Europe and China and in inter-regional maritime trade with Southeast Asia and land-based trade with Central Asia. The government did not establish state trading monopolies and preferred instead to tax private merchants.

The Gupta kings re-unified north-central India through military conquest and gained control over the rich agricultural resources of the Indo-Gangetic Plain. After its initial expansion within northern and central India, the Gupta Kingdom did not extract significant wealth through conquest. Gupta conquest was limited to the Indian subcontinent because the state lacked an effective navy and faced powerful competitors in China and Persia to the north.

**Agriculture in the Pagan Kingdom of Burma.** There is no evidence of agriculture arising independently in Southeast Asia. Rice agriculture spread into Burma at least 2,500 years ago from its initial point of origin in the coastal regions of southern China.

Thereafter, the production of rice was the key source of wealth in all of the major kingdoms in Burma for more than two millennia until British colonization in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The early Pyu kingdoms (through the 9<sup>th</sup> century) and the Burman kingdoms (from the 10<sup>th</sup> through the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries), starting with Pagan (9<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries), were built on the backs of rice farmers.

The heartland of those kingdoms was upper Burma in the rich floodplain of the Irrawaddy River and its tributaries.<sup>11</sup> The capitals of the Burman kingdoms, however, were located in dry zones that would not support rainfed rice agriculture.<sup>12</sup> The Burmans thus learned irrigation techniques from the Pyus, diverted water from the perennial rivers to their rice paddies, and produced more than twice the amount of rice that needed for subsistence.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> D. R. SarDesai, *Southeast Asia, Past and Present*, Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1994, pp. 31-33.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Aung-Thwin and Maitrii Aung-Thwin, *A History of Myanmar since Ancient Times, Traditions and Transformations*, London: Reaktion books, 2012, p. 40.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at  
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pagan\\_Empire -- Sithu II.PNG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pagan_Empire_-_Sithu_II.PNG)>

*Pagan At Its Largest Territorial Extent, c. 1200*

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<sup>13</sup> Michael Aung-Thwin, *Pagan, The Origins of Modern Burma*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985, pp. 22-23.

Rice agriculture was the major source of wealth in the Kingdom of Pagan. The Burman officials expanded rice output by increasing productivity and by extending the area cultivated.<sup>14</sup> They improved irrigation networks to support flood retreat farming – the use of small dams to divert river water after the annual floods. Most rice planted in the Pagan era was of *Japonica* varieties, until higher yielding *Indica* varieties were introduced from India. Two crops of rice were grown annually in the irrigated perimeters, and the best-watered areas could support three crops of rice per year. The crown initially owned most of the rice land, but mounting land grants to the Buddhist temple societies (*sanghas*) resulted in church control of about two-thirds of the nearly 600,000 acres under rice production in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century (the end of the Pagan era).<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Nicholas Tarling (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia, Volume One, Part One, From Early Times To c. 1500*, Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 164.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at  
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rijstvelden\\_Myanmar\\_2006.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rijstvelden_Myanmar_2006.jpg)>

*Harvesting Rice Manually in Burma –  
Technique Unchanged Since Pagan Era*

Pagan kings made impressive increases in irrigated rice area.  
The sophisticated irrigation networks consisted of dams on the  
larger rivers, major and minor canals from those rivers, weirs to

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<sup>15</sup> Nicholas Tarling (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia, Volume One, Part One, From Early Times To c. 1500*, Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 240-241.

divert water and tanks to store it, distribution channels, and sluices within the watercourses in the farming areas.<sup>16</sup> Labor was scarce and was bonded but paid (usually in rice or silver), not enslaved. Laborers were bonded to individual land-owners, the church, or the state.<sup>17</sup> Farmers paid a tax of 10 percent of their agricultural produce to the state and an additional head tax, but were not forced to provide labor services to the state (corvée).<sup>18</sup>

To expand rice output on temple land grants, the *sanghas* provided bonded labor, finance from donations, and technical advice. The state built and stocked granaries to help prevent famine during years of drought, floods, or pestilence.<sup>19</sup> The

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<sup>16</sup> Michael Aung-Thwin, *Irrigation in the Heartland of Burma*, Dekalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University, 1990, pp. 13-20, 22-26.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Aung-Thwin, *Pagan, The Origins of Modern Burma*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985, pp. 74-79.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Aung-Thwin, *Irrigation in the Heartland of Burma*, Dekalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University, 1990, pp. 42-44.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Aung-Thwin, *Pagan, The Origins of Modern Burma*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985, pp. 114-115.

system of individual-, state-, and church-owned land, bonded but paid labor, and state-sponsored irrigation development produced sufficiently large rice surpluses to underpin the wealth of Pagan, an inland agrarian polity.<sup>20</sup>



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at  
<<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:ShanFields.jpg>>

*Transporting Rice in Shan District, Burma*

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<sup>20</sup> Michael Aung-Thwin, *Irrigation in the Heartland of Burma*, Dekalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University, 1990, pp. 54-58.

## **Summary of Agricultural and Supplemental Wealth in**

**Pagan.** Wet-rice agriculture was the principal source of wealth in the Kingdom of Pagan. The Burman officials expanded rice output by increasing productivity and extending the area cultivated. Two crops of rice were grown annually in the irrigated perimeters, and the best-watered areas could support three crops of rice per year. Officials improved irrigation networks to support flood retreat farming – the use of small dams to divert river water after the annual floods. Pagan kings increased irrigated rice area and had nearly 600,000 acres under production in the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century. Farmers paid a tax of 10 percent of their agricultural produce to the state.

Trade taxes provided a supplemental source of wealth for Pagan's kings. The standard rate of taxation on international trade transactions was 10 percent. Before Pagan expanded southward to the coast in the mid-11<sup>th</sup> century, it was an inward-looking, land-locked kingdom. The conquest of lower Burma permitted the Pagan rulers to gain agricultural labor and land and to expand

foreign trade through access to Indian Ocean seaports. The added labor allowed Pagan to expand rice production. Pagan benefited when the commercial route linking India with China shifted northward in the late 11<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Foreign Trade as a Source of Wealth**

Both buyers and sellers benefited from foreign trade. The trick for imperial powers was to appropriate most of the gains from trade by taxing private merchants, controlling commerce directly, or rigging prices to their advantage. Most early empires obtained the lion's share of their revenues from taxes on agriculture. But trade taxes – tariffs on imports and duties on exports – typically supplied an important secondary source of government revenue. Some imperial governments established state monopolies, especially for the production and trade of armaments, to try to maximize the gains from international trade. Other strong governments tried to rig commodity prices, suppressing the costs of imports into their countries or inflating the values of their exports.

In only two of our twelve early empires – the Axum Kingdom of Ethiopia and the Mali-Songhai Kingdoms of West Africa – was foreign trade the principal source of wealth. But agriculture was an important complement to trade, even in those African states. Here I tell the stories of how wealth from foreign trade underpinned both Axum and Mali-Songhai.

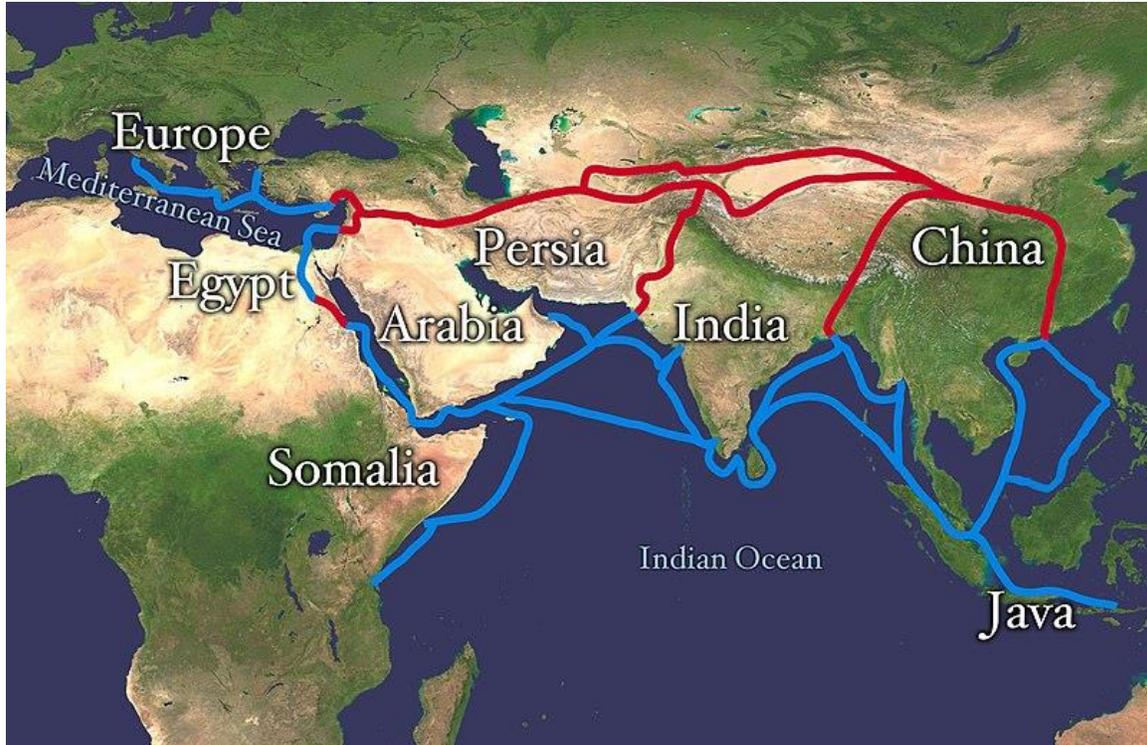
**Foreign Trade in the Axum Kingdom of Ethiopia.** The Axum Kingdom in Ethiopia (2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE-7<sup>th</sup> century CE) is an exception in our study of early empires. Its principal means of generating wealth and power was foreign trade, not agriculture.<sup>21</sup> The Axumites carved out a trading niche in the early centuries of the Christian era by controlling the Red Sea link between the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean.<sup>22</sup> Agriculture was

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<sup>21</sup> Richard Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians, A History*, Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1998, p. 22, 33-34.

<sup>22</sup> Stuart Munro-Hay, *Aksum, An African Civilisation of Late Antiquity*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991, pp. 33-34.

important in Axum mainly to provide food supplies to merchants in Axum city and the Red Sea port of Adulis.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at  
< [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Silk\\_route.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Silk_route.jpg) >

### *Europe-Africa-Asia Trade Routes in the Axumite Era*

Axum's wealth from trade was not derived principally from local agricultural or artisanal exports. Instead, the kingdom created a network of profitable trade routes, centered on the city of Axum, and by the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century Axum controlled trade on

the Red Sea.<sup>23</sup> The Axumites' principal trade route linked the upper Nile River valley – providing access to Nubia and upper Egypt – with the Red Sea – giving access to southern Arabia, Persia, and western India.<sup>24</sup> Following land and river routes, the Axumite traders could journey from Axum city to the Cataracts (Aswan in southern Egypt) and back in 30 days. Adulis, on the Red Sea, was the main port of Axum, where the kingdom operated a large merchant fleet.<sup>25</sup> Ptolemy III Euergetes, a Hellenistic pharaoh of Ptolemaic Egypt, had founded Adulis in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE to improve Ptolemaic access to Chinese silks and Indian

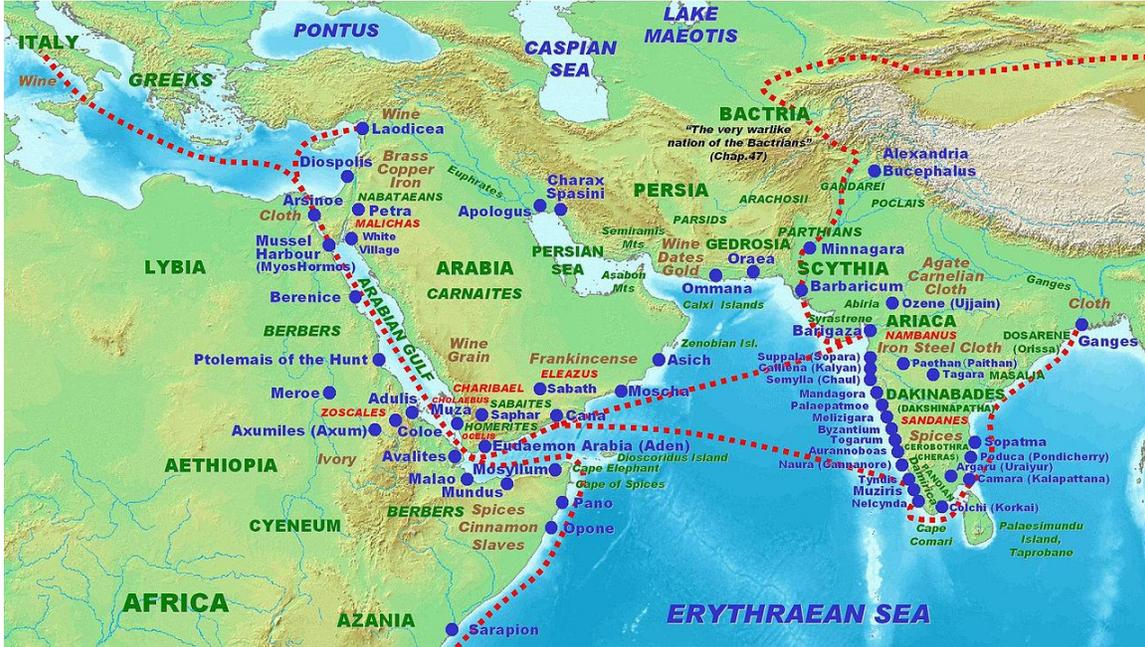
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<sup>23</sup> Yuri M. Kobishchanov, *Axum*, University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1979, pp. 176-177.

<sup>24</sup> Roland Oliver and Brian M. Fagan, *Africa in the Iron Age, c. 500 B.C. to A.D. 1400*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1975, p. 33.

<sup>25</sup> Harold G. Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia*, Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1994, p. 5.

spices.<sup>26</sup> In light of the difficult terrain and lack of roads, the journey from Axum city to the port of Adulis took eight days.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at  
 < [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Indo-Roman\\_trade.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Indo-Roman_trade.jpg) >

*Trade Routes of the Kingdom of Axum – 2<sup>nd</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> centuries CE*

Despite the long distances and high costs of transportation, the remotely-located capital city of Axum developed into a wealth-generating trading entrepôt. Successful Axumite merchants built ships on the Red Sea coast at Adulis, and their ships sailed as far as

<sup>26</sup> Roland Oliver and Brian M. Fagan, *Africa in the Iron Age, c. 500 B.C. to A.D. 1400*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1975, pp/ 35-36.

western India and Sri Lanka in a regular trading pattern.<sup>27</sup> In the process, Ethiopian Axum was linked commercially with traders professing most of the world's leading religions – Hellenism, Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and, from the 7<sup>th</sup> century, Islam.<sup>28</sup>

Lacking local exports other than elephant ivory, the Axumite leaders developed secondary trade routes to bring export products to Axum city. They sent caravans to the Danakil depression (only 100 miles distant) to buy locally-produced salt and then traded that salt to the Agau people in the Blue Nile basin for gold produced there.<sup>29</sup> Using some of the gold, they went to the Somali coast to

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<sup>27</sup> Richard Pankhurst, *An Introduction to the Economic History of Ethiopia*, London: Lalibela House, 1961, p. 23.

<sup>28</sup> Richard Pankhurst, *An Introduction to the Economic History of Ethiopia*, London: Lalibela House, 1961, p. 389.

<sup>29</sup> Stuart Munro-Hay, *Aksum, An African Civilisation of Late Antiquity*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991, pp. 172-175.

obtain valuable incense – frankincense and myrrh.<sup>30</sup> Axum also obtained slaves from raids and wars with surrounding states. Some slaves were kept as domestic servants for the nobility, but most were exported.

With their exports of local elephant ivory and their re-exports of imported gold, incense, slaves, and hides, the Axumites imported cloth, metals, tools, jewelry, and glassware from Egypt, the Mediterranean, Persia, and India. The key to wealth and power in Axum thus was to maintain control of the Nile Valley-Red Sea trade route and of the subsidiary routes that supplied the products that Axum exported through Adulis.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Nigel Groom, *Frankincense and Myrrh, A Study of the Arabian Incense Trade*, London: Longman, 1981, pp. 229-232 .

<sup>31</sup> Harold G. Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia*, Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1994, p. 11.



*Source: Wikimedia Commons available at*  
< [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Stelenpark\\_in\\_Axum\\_2010.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Stelenpark_in_Axum_2010.JPG) >

*Obelisks (Stellae) in Axum –  
Constructed in the Axumite Era with Trading Profits*

**Summary of Foreign Trade and Supplemental Wealth in Axum.** In Ethiopia's Axum Kingdom, the principal sources of wealth were the gains from international trade supplemented by agricultural surpluses. Only limited mining was done, and artisans produced crafts mostly for local consumption. Axum had to trade to grow. The kingdom had a self-sufficient agricultural base, but had little left over for export. Agriculture buttressed Axum's

success as a trading center by providing ample food supplies for transient merchants and caravan workers.

The kingdom created a network of profitable trade routes, centered on the city of Axum. The entrepreneurial Axumites began by dominating regional trade – procuring locally available elephant ivory, moving east to buy Danakil salt, venturing south to buy Blue Nile gold, and going southeast to purchase frankincense and myrrh on the Somali coast. The expanding kingdom then promoted trade routes that linked the rich upper Nile Valley (Nubia and southern Egypt) with its port on the Red Sea, Adulis. The Axumite royalty constructed a fleet of ships to ply the Red Sea and Indian Ocean trade, and by the 3<sup>rd</sup> century their merchant marine regularly visited India and Sri Lanka.

**Foreign Trade in the Kingdoms of Mali and Songhai in West Africa.** Four historical phases mark the more than two millennia of trans-Saharan trade, the primary source of wealth for

both Mali and Songhai.<sup>32</sup> The earliest evidence of trans-Saharan commerce dates to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE when Carthaginians (Phoenicians from Carthage in modern Tunisia) engaged in a small amount of horse-drawn, wheeled trade with West Africans. That first phase was of minor importance, and trade did not increase much in the period of Roman rule in North Africa (2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE-5<sup>th</sup> century CE). The Romans introduced the dromedary (one-humped) camel into the Sahara Desert from Arabia in the 4<sup>th</sup> century and greatly improved the prospects for trans-Saharan trade.

During the second phase of trans-Saharan trade, between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries, the desert caravans were camel-based and no longer used wheeled vehicles.<sup>33</sup> Although commerce increased in that period, its value was moderate, reflecting the lack of large states on both ends of the trade routes.<sup>34</sup> The third phase, between

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<sup>32</sup> Ralph A. Austen, *Trans-Saharan Africa in World History*, Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2010, pp. 36-37.

<sup>33</sup> Paul Bohannon and Philip Curtin, *Africa and Africans*, Prospect Heights, Illinois: Waveland Press, 1995, p. 148.

the 10<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, was the highpoint of trans-Saharan commerce, and powerful trade-based kingdoms or empires arose on both sides of the Sahara Desert.<sup>35</sup> Thereafter, in the final phase, during the 17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the major trade routes shifted from land to sea. Trans-Saharan trade – still camel-based – declined steadily before ending in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>34</sup> Harry A. Gailey Jr., *History of Africa, Volume I: From Earliest Times to 1800*, New York: Robert E. Krieger Publishing Company, 1981, pp. 58-59.

<sup>35</sup> Basil Davidson, *The Lost Cities of Africa*, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1987, p. 82.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at  
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Niger\\_saharan\\_medieval\\_trade\\_routes.PNG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Niger_saharan_medieval_trade_routes.PNG)>

### *Trans-Saharan Trade Routes, c. 1400*

At the peak of trans-Saharan commerce in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, perhaps 70,000 camels in six major caravans annually crossed the Sahara Desert. Trans-Saharan trade then formed the basis of the Berber empires in North Africa and the Sudanic Kingdoms of Mali and Songhai in West Africa. Berber and Arab merchants imported gold – along with slaves, kola nuts, ivory, ebony, and leather – from West Africa and re-exported much of those commodities to

Europe.<sup>36</sup> West African merchants imported salt and dates from the Sahara, textiles, ironware, and other manufactures from Europe or North Africa, and spices and cowrie shells from Asia – all brought across the Sahara in camel caravans by Berber or Arab traders.<sup>37</sup> Some of those goods then were re-exported to forest peoples in West Africa. Intermediary trade thus was the key for large state-building on both sides of the Sahara Desert.

The creation of the Sudanic Kingdoms of Mali and Songhai was linked integrally to trans-Saharan trade. Little that moved in trans-Saharan trade was produced within the main cities of the kingdoms.<sup>38</sup> Trade of transshipped goods produced wealth, and trade taxes transferred some of that wealth to the ruling classes.

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<sup>36</sup> Edward W. Bovill, *The Golden Trade of the Moors*, Princeton, NJ: Markus Weiner Publishers, 1995, pp. 106-109.

<sup>37</sup> Edward W. Bovill, *The Golden Trade of the Moors*, Princeton, NJ: Markus Weiner Publishers, 1995, pp. 161-164.

<sup>38</sup> Philip Curtin, Steven Feierman, Leonard Thompson, and Jan Vansina, *African History*, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1978, pp. 108-110.

Rulers levied substantial taxes (usually one-fifth of the goods traded) on both foreign and local merchants. In return for the tax revenues, the rulers provided security, provisions, and route maintenance to the merchants. The small number of trans-Saharan trade routes limited smuggling, making trade taxes easy to collect. The key to successful taxation of trans-Saharan trade was the control of Sahelian towns where exchange took place.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Trans-Saharan\\_routes\\_early.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Trans-Saharan_routes_early.svg)

*Location of Trans-Saharan Trade Routes and Sources of Gold in West Africa (Bambuk, Boure, Lobi, and Ashanti) – c. 1500*

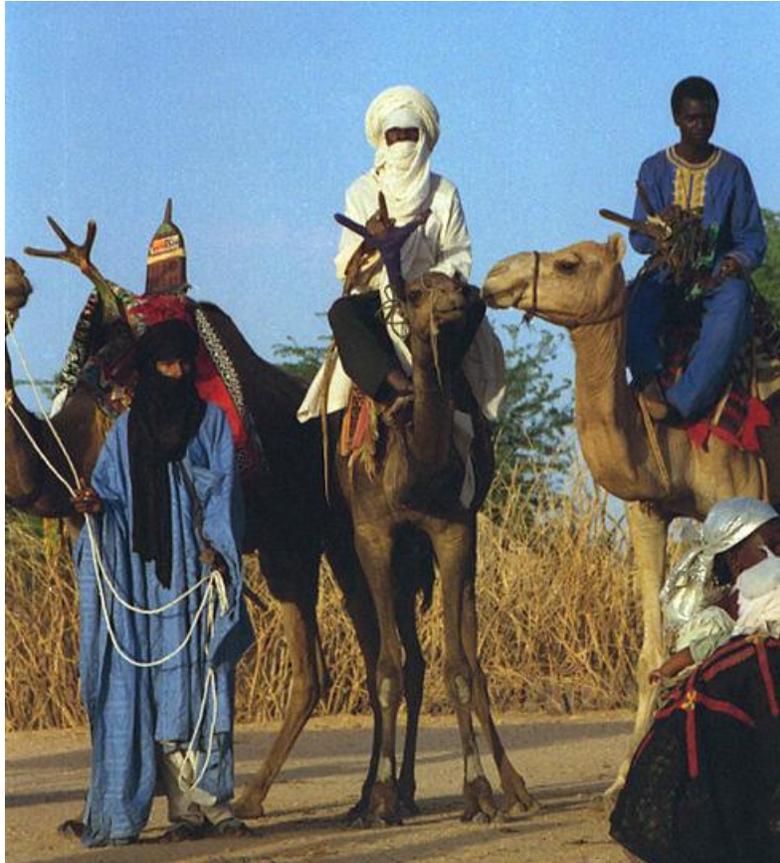
North African merchants, Berbers and Arabs, ran most of the camel caravans across the Sahara Desert. The exchange of

Saharan salt and other North African goods for gold and other West African goods took place in the Sahelian entrepôts, such as Timbuktu and Gao. The principal taxes were levied at that point of exchange.<sup>39</sup> North African merchants then took gold back north across the Sahara. Sudanic traders distributed the salt and northern goods in the savannah and forest regions of West Africa and purchased gold along with slaves, kola nuts, and ebony to re-sell later to trans-Saharan merchants. The Sudanic kingdoms did not create state monopolies to carry out trade and instead encouraged private enterprise. The bases of trade evolved over time – from barter, to commodity currencies (principally salt), to cowrie shells from India, and eventually to gold – first gold dust (*tibar*, measured in *mithqals*, about 4.5 grams) and later gold coins (*dinars*).<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Nehemia Levtzion, *Ancient Ghana and Mali*, New York: Africana Publishing Company, 1980, pp. 115, 123.

<sup>40</sup> Roland Oliver, *The Cambridge History of Africa, Volume 3: from c. 1050 to c. 1600*, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1977, p. 388.

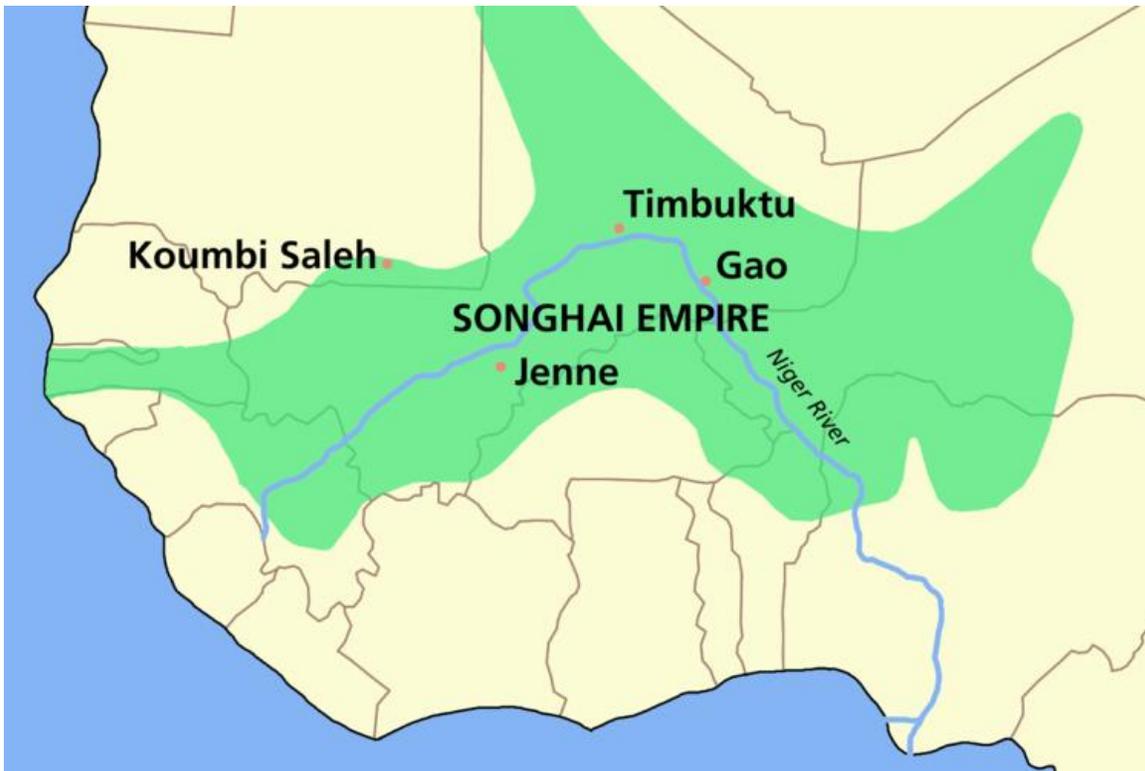


Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at  
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1997\\_277-31A\\_Tuareg.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1997_277-31A_Tuareg.jpg)>

### *Tuareg Camel Caravan Drivers – Timbuktu, Mali*

The Sudanic kingdoms, Mali and Songhai, were located in the Sahel, the southern fringe of the Sahara Desert. The Sudanic states did not produce gold or salt, the two main staples of the north-south trade. It thus proved most profitable for the Sudanic kingdoms to manage the trade rather than the production of salt

and gold.<sup>41</sup> Forest peoples living in stateless societies in West Africa carried out the production of the alluvial gold by hand. The Sudanic states prevented the North African merchants from having access to the gold-producing areas.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at  
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:SONGHAI\\_empire\\_map.PNG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:SONGHAI_empire_map.PNG)>

*The Songhai Kingdom At Its Greatest Territorial Extent, c. 1540*

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<sup>41</sup> Edward W. Bovill, *The Golden Trade of the Moors*, Princeton, NJ: Markus Weiner Publishers, 1995, pp. 88-90.

Salt was the critical commodity moving southward on the trans-Saharan trade routes. Taghaza was the leading producer of salt in the western Sahara region. Arab or Berber merchants brought the salt from the Sahara to Timbuktu and Gao. Merchants from the Sudanic kingdoms moved the salt from the entrepôt cities to the gold-producing regions.

**Summary of Foreign Trade and Supplemental Wealth in Mali and Songhai.** The trans-Saharan trade, from which the Kingdoms of Mali and Songhai drew most of their wealth, primarily involved the exchange of salt for gold. Berber and Arab merchants from Morocco produced the salt in the Saharan Desert and traded it for gold from West Africa. The Sudanic kingdoms did not create state monopolies to carry out trade and instead encouraged private enterprise. Sudanic rulers levied substantial taxes – typically one-fifth of the goods traded – on both foreign and local merchants. In return, the rulers provided security, provisions, and route maintenance to the merchants.

The key to generating and taxing wealth was to control the Sahelian entrepôt cities and to tax trade there. Both Mali and Songhai spread their control across the southern edge of the Sahara Desert from the Atlantic Ocean to the northern bend of the upper Niger River so that they could monopolize trans-Saharan trade.

Agriculture was a critical supplement to trade wealth, mainly because the Sudanic kingdoms required a food surplus to transfer to the cities and feed the nobility, soldiers, craftsmen, and itinerant merchants. Foreign conquest provided supplemental wealth for Mali and Songhai when they incorporated conquered areas into their regular domains of taxation. Conquest also buttressed trade by ensuring control over the key trans-Saharan trade routes.

### **Foreign Conquest as a Source of Wealth**

All twelve of our early empires conquered neighboring regions and peoples. Some rulers conquered for short-term gain – to steal booty or demand tribute. Other imperialists saw conquest as a long-term investment. They sent soldiers, settlers, and tax-collectors into the conquered regions and extracted agricultural and

trade taxes from them. In effect, they developed and then appropriated the gains from agriculture and foreign trade in the conquered regions. Three of our early empires – Dynastic Egypt, Achaemenid Persia, and the Roman Empire – used foreign conquest to generate significant wealth, as I demonstrate in the succeeding discussion. For Egypt and Persia, wealth from conquest complemented agricultural wealth. But Rome built its empire by conquering, developing, and taxing fertile agricultural regions, especially in the western Mediterranean region.

Conquering powers had to be very careful. If they showed military weakness, the subsidiary regions would rebel, stop paying taxes, and declare their independence. Imperial states, therefore, were compelled to spend significant resources to maintain political control over their tributary regions and thus be able to extract tax revenues from them. Occasionally, empires made the mistake of expanding into areas that were not profitable (because the costs of controlling them exceeded the tax revenues that could be taken from them). Unprofitable conquest was a key cause of imperial

weakness in the decline of some early empires, as we shall see in Chapter Five.

### **Foreign Conquest in the New Kingdom of Dynastic**

**Egypt.** During the New Kingdom era (16<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE), Dynastic Egypt became a commercial giant linking northeast Africa with southwest Asia. Foreign trade was a significant generator of wealth as Egypt exploited its geographical location to become an entrepôt – a center for the assembly, storage, and re-export of other regions' produce. The Egyptian state first gained control over the African trading networks to its south.<sup>42</sup> Egypt then sought, with intermittent success, to control – or at least to have free access to – an even more important trading network in southwestern Asia.<sup>43</sup> By the 16<sup>th</sup> century BCE, that network was centered in the ports of Syria-Palestine (the region now known as

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<sup>42</sup> Stephen Quirke and Jeffrey Spencer (ed.), *The British Museum Book of Ancient Egypt*, New York: Thames and Hudson, Inc., 1999, p. 202.

<sup>43</sup> A. Bernard Knapp, *The History and Culture of Ancient Western Asia and Egypt*, Chicago: The Dorsey Press, 1988, p. 136.

the Levant) – principally Byblos, but including also Tyre, Beirut, Ugarit, and Sumur. That crucial trading network to the northeast connected Egypt with Mesopotamia, Anatolia, Cyprus, and the Aegean islands – the principal trading centers of the world, outside of East and South Asia.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Egypt\\_NK\\_edit.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Egypt_NK_edit.svg)

*Dynastic Egypt at Its Peak –  
The New Kingdom, 16<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> c. BCE, Linked Kush with the Levant*

Egypt's plan was to re-export African goods, notably gold, to the Levant along with its own exports of grain, linen textiles, leather, and papyrus.<sup>44</sup> In return, Egypt imported from the Levant its critically needed timber and resin (from Lebanon) plus silver (Aegean islands), copper (Cyprus), olive oil and wine (Syria), pottery (Palestine), and lapis lazuli (Afghanistan via Syria-Palestine).<sup>45</sup> There is scattered archaeological evidence that Egypt might have traded with Minoan Crete and Mycenaean Greece, but it is doubtful that those trading links were important.

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<sup>44</sup> Stephen Quirke and Jeffrey Spencer (ed.), *The British Museum Book of Ancient Egypt*, New York: Thames and Hudson, Inc., 1999, pp. 207-208.

<sup>45</sup> Bill Manley, *The Penguin Historical Atlas of Ancient Egypt*, London: Penguin Books, 1996, pp. 64-65.

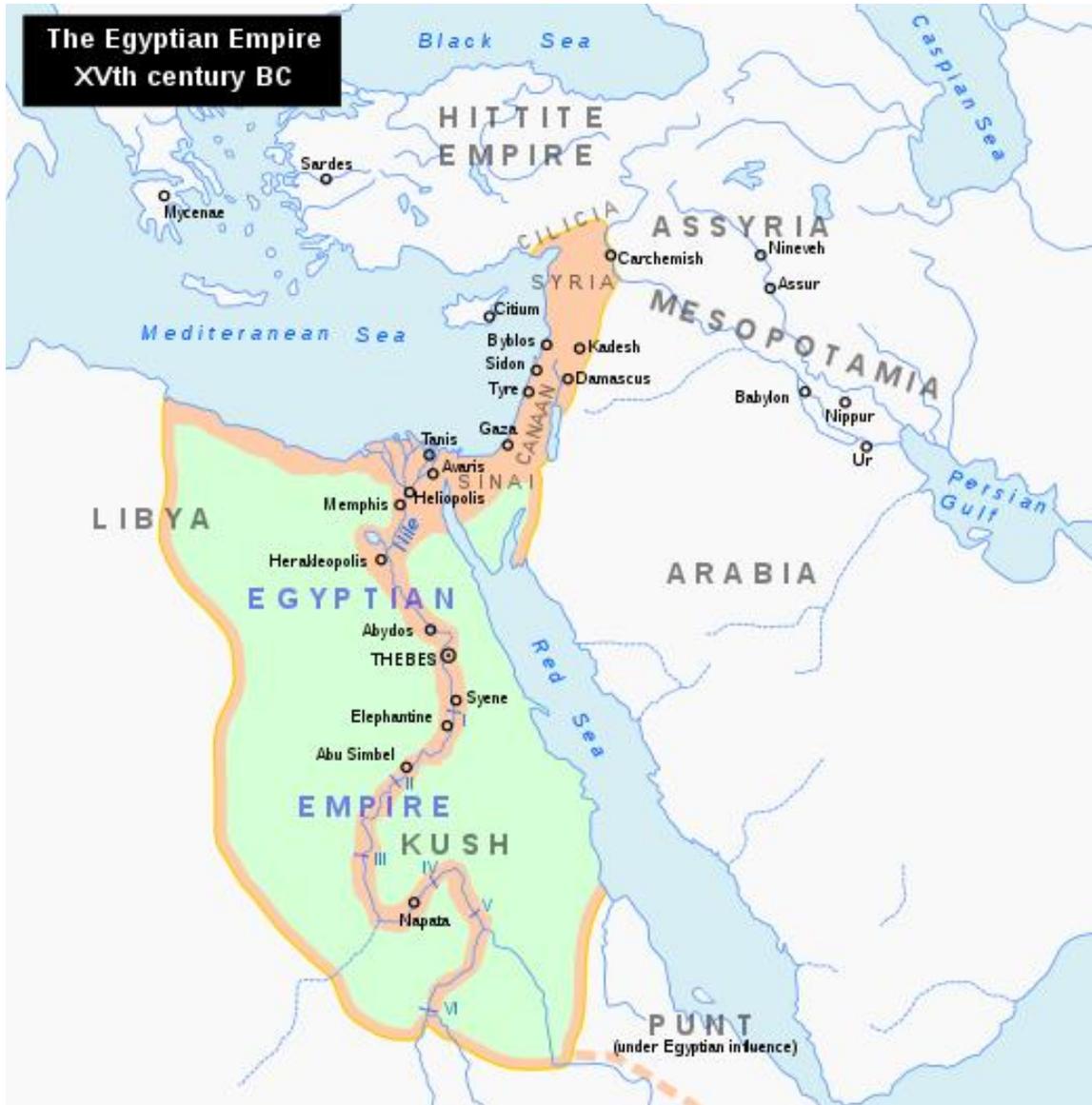


Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at  
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:West Asiantribute bearers tomb of Sobekhotep 18th Dynasty Thebes.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:West_Asian_tribute_bearers_tomb_of_Sobekhotep_18th_Dynasty_Thebes.jpg)>

*Southwestern Asiatic Goods for Pharaoh –  
Tomb of Sobekhotep, Luxor, 1400 BCE*

Trade wealth in Egypt's New Kingdom was dependent on the conquest of foreign territory. But pharaonic Egypt had differing objectives in carrying out its aggressive military incursions into Africa and Asia. In Nubia, the New Kingdom pharaohs gradually expanded their area under control until Thutmose III reached the

Fourth Cataract in the 15<sup>th</sup> century BCE and established a fortified trading center, Napata.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Egypt\\_1450\\_BC.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Egypt_1450_BC.svg)

*New Kingdom Egypt Conquered Nubia –  
Gold Mining and African Trade*

The central aim of that foreign conquest was to establish long-term rule over Nubia – not to extract booty from actual raids, tribute from threatened raids, or taxation by an imposed government.<sup>46</sup>

Nubia offered Egypt access to mineral deposits and control of the African trade network.<sup>47</sup> There was little else for the Egyptians to appropriate or tax.

In the Levant (Syria-Palestine), however, Egypt had a different objective. Its military raids were intended primarily to ensure privileged access to the Levantine trading network within southwest Asia and the eastern Mediterranean. Egyptian kings never attempted to install a permanent colonial government in the Levant. Instead, they raided for booty, forced the city-states to pay tribute to forestall retribution, and collected taxes, often by timing their raids to occur during the harvest. In the Levant, Egyptian

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<sup>46</sup> Ian Shaw (ed.), *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 239-243.

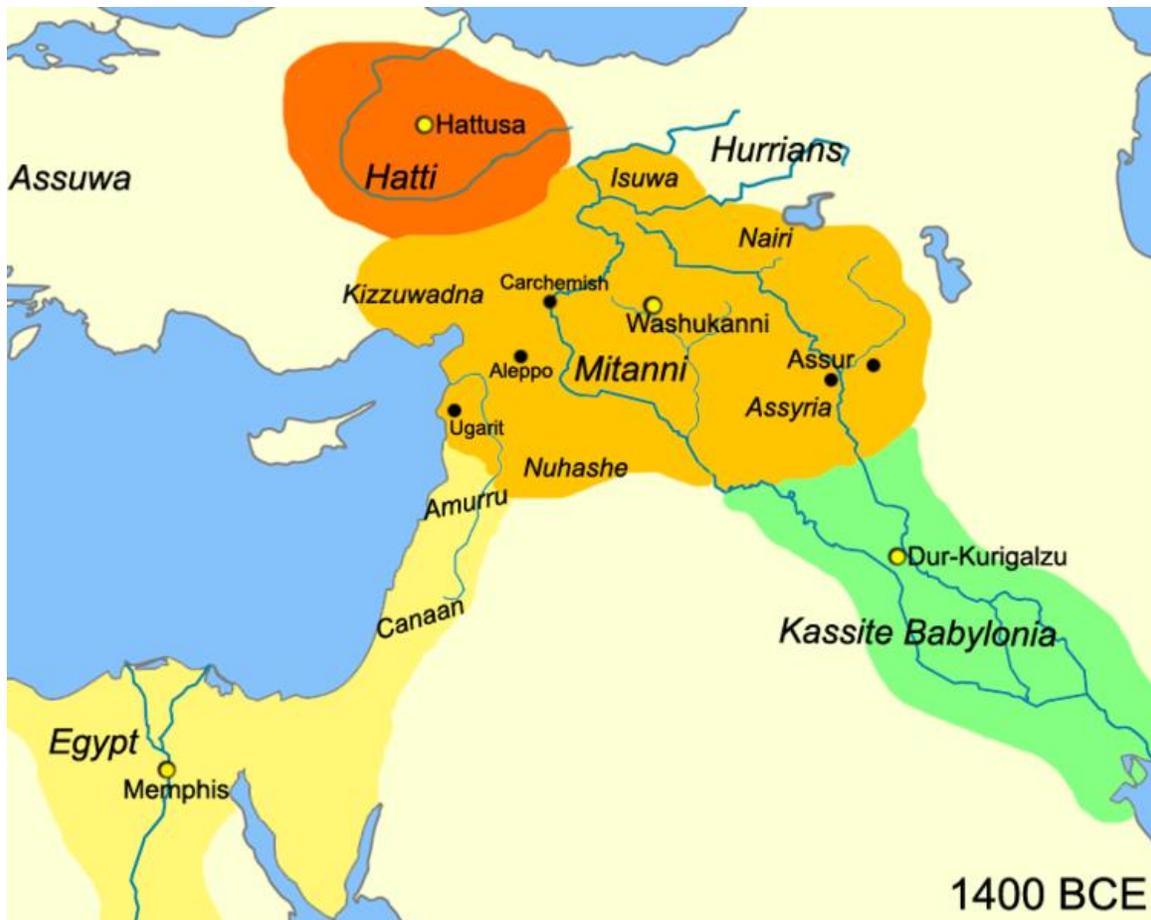
<sup>47</sup> Bill Manley, *The Penguin Historical Atlas of Ancient Egypt*, London: Penguin Books, 1996, p. 68.

policy was to establish protectorates, not colonies. That imperial approach was lucrative, because it transferred wood, metals (gold, silver, copper, and lead), and olive oil to Egypt.

There were two major series of Egyptian incursions into the Levant. Two Indo-European-speaking migrants from Central Asia, the Hurrians (in Mittani, northern Syria) and the Hittites (in Anatolia, modern Turkey) fought Egypt for hegemony in the Levant. Thutmose III personally led 17 campaigns in 21 years during the 15<sup>th</sup> century BCE, pursued the Hurrians through Syria and across the Euphrates River (after dragging his ships 250 miles overland from Byblos to the Euphrates), defeated the Hurrians at the Battle of Megiddo (c. 1457 BCE), and transferred enormous wealth to Egypt.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Joyce Tyldesley, *Hatchepsut, The Female Pharaoh*, London: Penguin Books, 1996, pp. 214-215.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at  
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Near\\_East\\_1400\\_BCE.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Near_East_1400_BCE.png)>

*Thutmose III's Conquest of Syria-Palestine –  
Egypt Defeated Mittani at Megiddo, c. 1418 BCE*

Two centuries later, Ramesses II confronted the Hittites at the Battle of Kadesh (c. 1275 BCE) and made damaging tactical errors. He was very fortunate to escape with his life and battle to

an inconclusive draw.<sup>49</sup> The Egyptians and the Hittites concluded a peace treaty that divided the Levantine trade routes between the two powers. Both sides honored that pact, which created political stability on Egypt's northern front, for 200 years until the New Kingdom ended.<sup>50</sup> In consequence, international trade flourished because Egypt had open trading access to the Levant, the Euphrates River, and the eastern Mediterranean, Aegean, and Black Seas.

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<sup>49</sup> Ian Shaw (ed.), *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 297-299.

<sup>50</sup> Bill Manley, *The Penguin Historical Atlas of Ancient Egypt*, London: Penguin Books, 1996, p. 92.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at  
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hitt\\_Egypt\\_Perseus.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hitt_Egypt_Perseus.png)>

*Ramesses II's Incursions in Syria-Palestine, c. 1275 –  
Egypt Stalemated by Hittites at Kadesh*

Pharaonic wealth in dynastic Egypt peaked during the New Kingdom. A number of related factors underpinned Egypt's success in generating prodigious wealth at a time when most other contemporary states were near a subsistence level. Much of

Egypt's wealth came from the taxation of cereal and animal production. Agricultural taxation generated revenues to support the state apparatus – the pharaoh, his court, and the state bureaucracy. Egypt's adroit foreign policy linked the African and Asian trade networks, and Egypt served as an entrepôt for both sides. Because the king controlled all foreign trade, he benefited most from the gains from trade. Those gains were offset partly by the military expenses incurred in subjugating Nubia. Foreign conquest buttressed Egypt's control of the foreign trade network, in both Nubia and the Levant.<sup>51</sup> But the booty and tribute from military campaigns in the Levant were offset by the costs of those expeditions so that net transfers to Egypt were modest.

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<sup>51</sup> Bill Manley, *The Penguin Historical Atlas of Ancient Egypt*, London: Penguin Books, 1996, pp. 58-60.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at  
<<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:CairoEgMuseumTaaMaskMostlyPhotographed.jpg>>

*Tutankhamun's Golden Mask –  
Egyptian Wealth from the Conquest of Nubia*

**Summary of Foreign Conquest and Supplemental Wealth in Dynastic Egypt.** Dynastic Egypt was built on Nile agriculture and Nubian gold. The average rise of the Nile River was 26 feet. The annual inundations of the Nile provided two essential contributions – water and silt – to the rich agriculture of Egypt's

Nile Valley and Delta. Egyptian farmers produced about three times the amount needed by their families for subsistence, so the potential for taxation was great. Between one-tenth and one-half of harvests were paid as in-kind taxes, usually in grain. During the New Kingdom (16<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE), Egypt became a commercial giant linking northeast Africa with southwest Asia. Foreign trade was a significant generator of supplemental wealth as Egypt exploited its geographical location to become an entrepôt.

Foreign conquest buttressed Egypt's control of the foreign trade network in both Nubia and the Levant. The pharaohs in the early New Kingdom conquered Nubia, mainly to gain access to its gold deposits. In the Levant, Egypt's military raids were intended to ensure privileged access to the Levantine trading network in southwest Asia and the eastern Mediterranean. Nile agriculture throughout was the main contributor of Egyptian wealth, but New Kingdom pharaohs also created a trade-based African-Asian empire. Through conquest, Egypt became the center of a rich

African-Asian trading network. Later empires conquered to farm, but Dynastic Egypt conquered to trade.

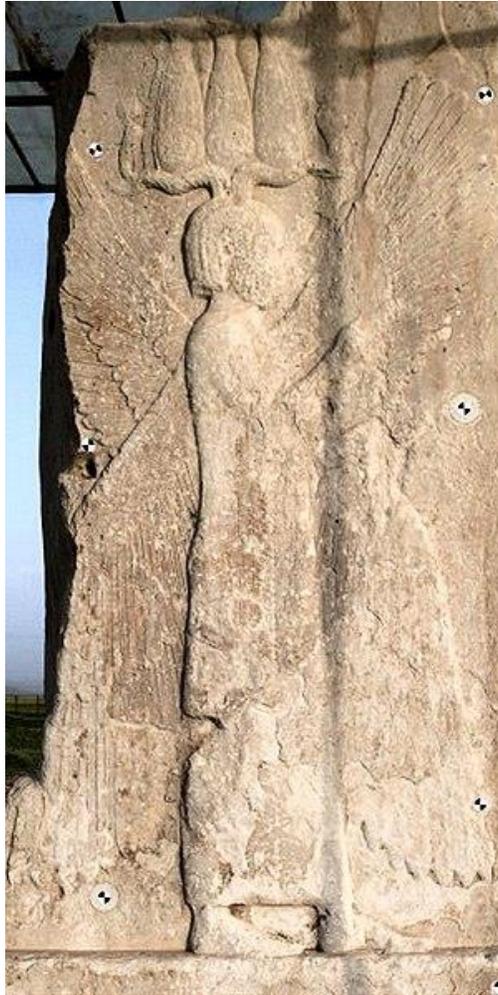
### **Foreign Conquest in the Achaemenid Persian Empire.**

Cyrus II (The Great, ruled 550-530 BCE) was the founder-king of the Achaemenid Persian Empire.<sup>52</sup> Cyrus was a charismatic leader and a brilliant military tactician. In 546, he conquered gold-rich Lydia in Anatolia, after its king, Croesus, foolishly attacked the Persians. That conquest changed the balance of power in the Near East. Wealthy Babylonia fell next, in 539, when its populace welcomed Cyrus the Great as a liberator from their unpopular king, Nabonidus. As a result, Syria, Phoenicia, Israel, and Palestine – former vassals of Babylonia – entered the expanding Achaemenid Persian Empire.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> A. Bernard Knapp, *The History and Culture of Ancient Western Asia and Egypt*, Chicago: The Dorsey Press, 1988, pp. 256-260.

<sup>53</sup> Michael Axworthy, *Empire of the Mind, A History of Iran*, London: Hurst & Company, 2007, pp. 11-12.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at  
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cyrus\\_stele\\_in\\_Pasagardae.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cyrus_stele_in_Pasagardae.jpg)>

*“I Am Cyrus, The Achaemenid” –  
Inscription on Bas-relief, Pasargadae*

    Cambyses (530-522 BCE), Cyrus’s son and successor,  
conquered vulnerable Egypt in 525 and had himself named  
Pharaoh of the 27<sup>th</sup> Egyptian Dynasty.<sup>54</sup> The Persians governed

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<sup>54</sup> Kaveh Farrokh, *Shadows in the Desert, Ancient Persia at War*,  
New York: Osprey Publishing, 2007, pp. 50-51.

benevolently and embraced local cultures. The Achaemenids established twenty governing units (*satrapies*), each led by a Persian noble (*satrap*) in charge of tax collection and military recruitment.

Following the death of Cambyses, the empire faced a succession crisis. Darius, a minor noble, won the struggle through brilliance, organization, and guile. After reuniting the empire, Darius conquered the Punjab and the Sind (in India) in 518, and he took control of Thrace and Macedonia (in southeastern Europe) in 513. Darius was an administrative genius. He codified the diverse legal systems of all imperial regions.<sup>55</sup> Achaemenid Persia's cultural identity was anchored in Persepolis. Annually during the Persian New Year (*No-Ruz*) at the Spring equinox, representatives of all thirty of Persia's subjugated ethnic groups would pay homage to the king by bringing gifts to the *Apadana* (throne hall)

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<sup>55</sup> Maria Brosius, *The Persians, An Introduction*, Abingdon, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2006, pp. 18-22.

in Persepolis.<sup>56</sup> Darius continued Cyrus's policy of religious tolerance and the absence of theocratic government.<sup>57</sup>



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at  
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Takhteh\\_Jamshid.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Takhteh_Jamshid.jpg)>

*Apadana, Persepolis –  
Processions of Conquered Nobles with Tribute for the King*

The Achaemenid leaders created their empire through foreign conquest to control subject peoples and transfer wealth to the

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<sup>56</sup> Lindsay Allen, *The Persian Empire*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005, pp. 72-80.

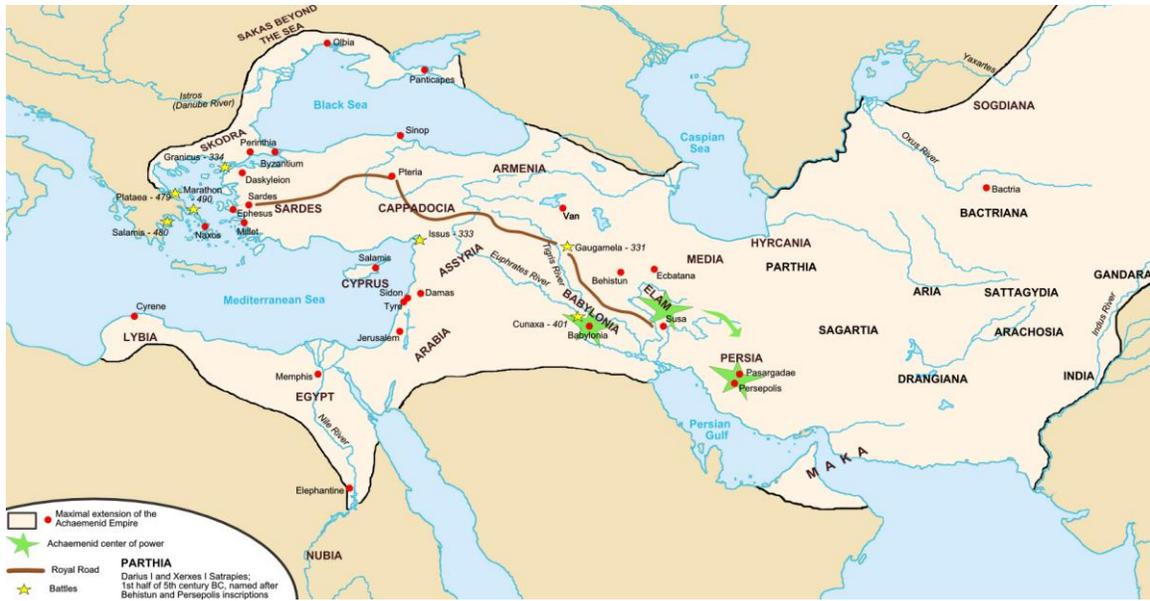
<sup>57</sup> A. Bernard Knapp, *The History and Culture of Ancient Western Asia and Egypt*, Chicago: The Dorsey Press, 1988, pp. 260-265.

Persian center. With an army no larger than 80,000 soldiers, they conquered the major wealth-producing states in the Near East – Babylonia, Egypt, Lydia, and Phoenicia.<sup>58</sup> Imperial wealth transfers went through three stages – booty (upon initial conquest), tribute (from vassal states), and taxation (of directly-controlled satrapies).<sup>59</sup> The Persians also transferred technicians from conquered areas to the center. To compensate Iranian soldiers and expand their agricultural tax base, the Achaemenids created military settlements in fertile conquered regions. For two centuries, the Achaemenid Persians developed and exploited the agriculture and trade of their conquered regions.

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<sup>58</sup> Patrick Clawson and Michael Rubin, *Eternal Iran, Continuity and Chaos*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, pp. 13-14, 74-75.

<sup>59</sup> Richard N. Frye, *The History of Ancient Iran*, Munich, Germany: C. H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1984, pp. 109, 116-117, 130.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map\\_achaemenid\\_empire\\_en.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_achaemenid_empire_en.png)

### *Expansion of the Achaemenid Empire, 550-525 BCE*

Agriculture was the principal source of wealth in the fertile domestic and conquered regions of the Achaemenid Empire. Farming and herding provided food, and the government taxed land and agricultural production. The main Persian agricultural innovation was the introduction of *qanats*, underground aqueducts that moved water from mountain bases to alluvial plains and increased farmed area, crop choice, and yields. Most land was farmed by small-scale free-holders. The imperial government granted land to royals (men and women) and to nobles for large-

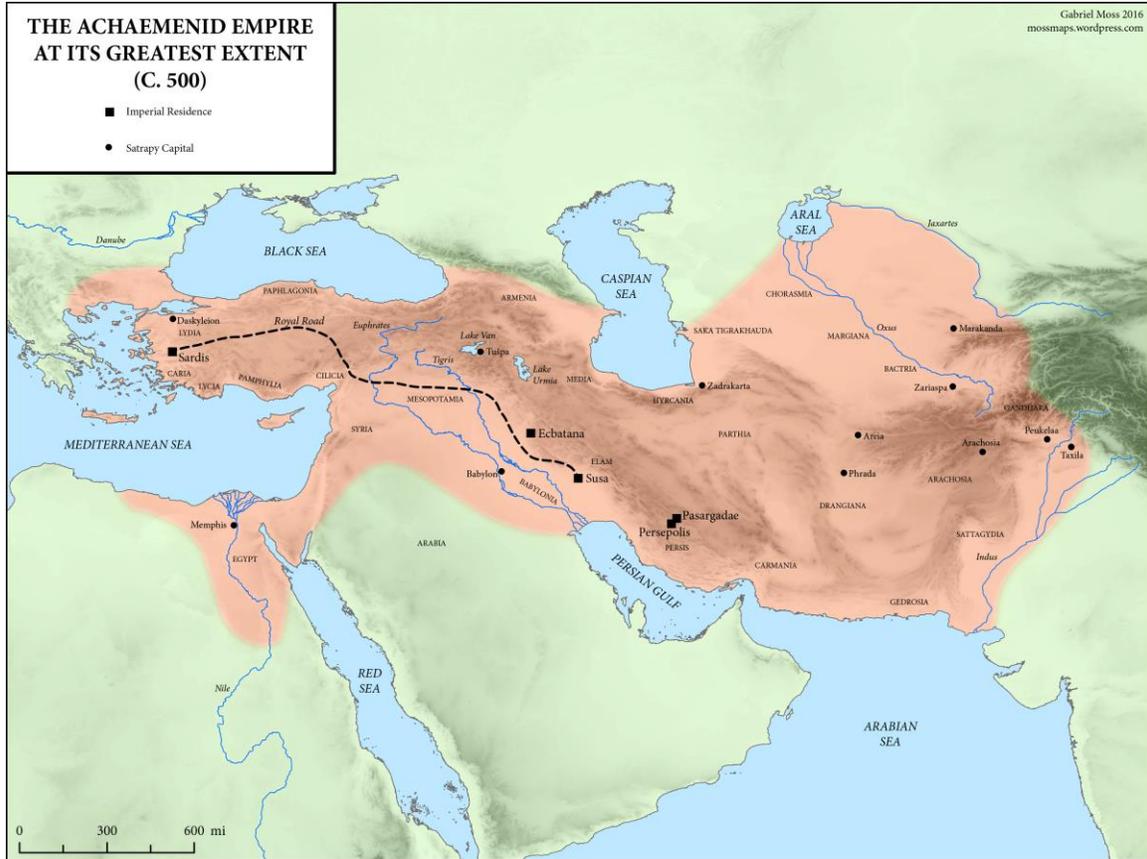
scale estates. Landholdings were registered and taxed extensively. Cyrus built the Royal Canal between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in Mesopotamia.

Foreign trade was a secondary source of Achaemenid wealth in both Persia and the conquered areas. The Persians imported raw materials and specie (gold and silver), exported artisanal manufactures, and taxed trade at borders. To enhance land-based trade, they constructed public infrastructure – a 1700-mile Royal Road (from Susa in southwestern Persia to Sardis in western Anatolia) with 100 caravanserais, a Pony Express-like postal system in service to the kings, a series of inns at 15-mile intervals, and a chain of fire towers for signaling.<sup>60</sup> To expand maritime trade, they utilized Phoenician ship-builders, built ports in key coastal sites, and completed a canal in Egypt to link the Red and

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<sup>60</sup> Maria Brosius, *The Persians, An Introduction*, Abingdon, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2006, pp. 53-57.

Mediterranean Seas. The principal traded goods were textiles, carpets, metal tools, gold, and silver.<sup>61</sup>



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The Achaemenid Empire at its Greatest E  
xtent.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Achaemenid_Empire_at_its_Greatest_Extent.jpg)

*The Royal Road in the Achaemenid Empire, c. 500 BCE*

**Summary of Foreign Conquest and Supplemental Wealth  
in Achaemenid Persia.** The Achaemenid Persian Empire based

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<sup>61</sup> Kaveh Farrokh, *Shadows in the Desert, Ancient Persia at War*, New York: Osprey Publishing, 2007, pp. 65-67.

its wealth and power on two pillars – purposeful conquests of rich neighbors and a fertile agricultural heartland. During its peak in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE, Achaemenid Persia became the world’s richest empire by controlling the key wealth-producing states in the Near East – Babylonia, Egypt, Lydia, and Phoenicia. Both Cyrus, the founder, and Darius, the consolidator and expansionist, practiced religious tolerance and ruled benevolently in their diverse empire of thirty tributary states in three continents (Asia, Africa, and Europe). The Achaemenids installed Persian governors (*satraps*) in the conquered areas to ensure stability, promote agriculture and trade, and collect taxes for the imperial center.

The Persian *satraps* increased agricultural productivity by introducing *qanats* (underground aqueducts) to expand irrigated acreage and raise crop yields. The expansion of *qanats* within Persia also increased the agricultural tax base at the imperial center. Achaemenid officials promoted and taxed foreign trade within the empire. The new Royal Road stretched for 1,700 miles

on an east-west axis across the empire to enhance land-based trade. The Achaemenids encouraged maritime trade by building ports on key trade routes and by constructing a canal in Egypt to connect the Red and Mediterranean Seas. Conquest was critical for Achaemenid Persia.

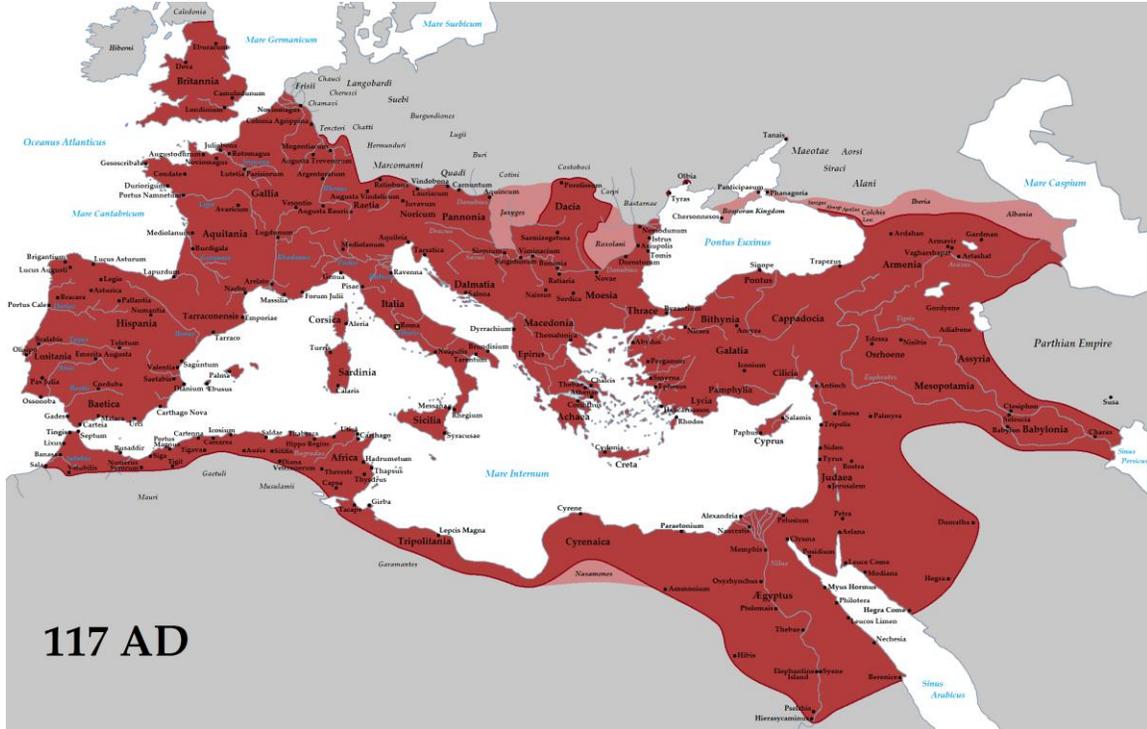
**Foreign Conquest in the Roman Empire.** The Roman Empire grew between the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE and the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE until the entire Mediterranean Sea became a Roman lake.<sup>62</sup> Initially, Rome expanded to defeat its foreign enemies and control its natural frontiers – the Euphrates River and Syrian Desert in the east, the Sahara Desert in the south, the Atlantic Ocean in the west, and the Rhine and Danube Rivers in the north.<sup>63</sup> Rome later settled former soldiers in provincial colonies to develop an

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<sup>62</sup> Tim Cornell and John Matthews, *Atlas of the Roman World*, New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1995, pp. 50-51.

<sup>63</sup> Chris Scarre, *The Penguin Historical Atlas of Ancient Rome*, London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1995, pp. 18-19, 41-42.

agricultural tax base. Julius Caesar founded 30 settler colonies in new Roman provinces and Augustus Caesar added 75 more.<sup>64</sup>



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Roman\\_Empire\\_Trajan\\_117AD.png](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Roman_Empire_Trajan_117AD.png)

### *The Roman Empire At Its Peak, 117 CE*

Political stability brought by the *Pax Romana* led to economic prosperity in the provinces but only modest population growth, because most of the new wealth was transferred to Rome. Throughout the empire, provincial cities collected taxes,

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<sup>64</sup> Tim Cornell and John Matthews, *Atlas of the Roman World*, New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1995, pp. 72-73.

maintained law and order, and recruited soldiers for Rome.<sup>65</sup> The city governments also paid, fed, clothed, and housed Roman legionnaires and provided them with transportation and equipment. The cities further maintained public buildings, baths, and aqueducts and put on religious festivals.<sup>66</sup>

Imperial Rome followed three different models in governing, developing, and taxing its new territories.<sup>67</sup> Each of the three models was tailored to the special political and economic conditions of the conquered regions. In the eastern Mediterranean, Rome sought to pacify the areas formerly ruled by Seleucid Hellenes, including the Levant.<sup>68</sup> Consequently, they preserved

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<sup>65</sup> Chris Scarre, *The Penguin Historical Atlas of Ancient Rome*, London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1995, pp. 42-43.

<sup>66</sup> Peter Garnsey and Richard Saller, *The Roman Empire, Economy, Society and Culture*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987, pp. 51-52.

<sup>67</sup> Peter Garnsey and Richard Saller, *The Roman Empire, Economy, Society and Culture*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987, pp. 20-21.

<sup>68</sup> Tim Cornell and John Matthews, *Atlas of the Roman World*, New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1995, p. 156.

the advanced Greek culture, ruled indirectly through existing local governments, and taxed enough to pay provincial expenses (including Roman troops) and to provide modest transfers to Rome.<sup>69</sup>



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at  
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Trajan%27s\\_market\\_Rome\\_\(14106226797\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Trajan%27s_market_Rome_(14106226797).jpg)>

*Trajan's Market, Rome –  
Built with Proceeds from the Conquest of Dacia, 106 CE*

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<sup>69</sup> Gary K. Young, *Rome's Eastern Trade, International Commerce and Imperial Policy, 31 BC – AD 305*, London: Routledge, 2001, pp. 214-220.

Roman occupation had little cultural impact in the east. Greek remained the language of government, the elite, and the cities, and local languages were spoken in the countryside.<sup>70</sup>

In the western Mediterranean and northern Africa (except Egypt), Rome's strategy was to settle Roman ex-soldiers, introduce Roman culture and direct Roman rule, invest in irrigation to expand agriculture, and tax agriculture heavily to provide food and revenues for Rome and peninsular Italy.<sup>71</sup> Roman governors in the western provinces developed an urban elite and introduced Roman culture, notably imperial ideology based on the capitoline triad of Roman gods – Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva. Near the end of the Roman era, the Iberian peninsula was one of the empire's most

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<sup>70</sup> Peter Garnsey and Richard Saller, *The Roman Empire, Economy, Society and Culture*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987, pp. 196-197.

<sup>71</sup> Peter Garnsey and Richard Saller, *The Roman Empire, Economy, Society and Culture*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987, pp. 55-57.

prosperous regions, producing wine, olive oil, and minerals (gold, silver, and copper).



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at  
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Trajan%27s\\_market\\_Rome\\_\(14106226797\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Trajan%27s_market_Rome_(14106226797).jpg)>

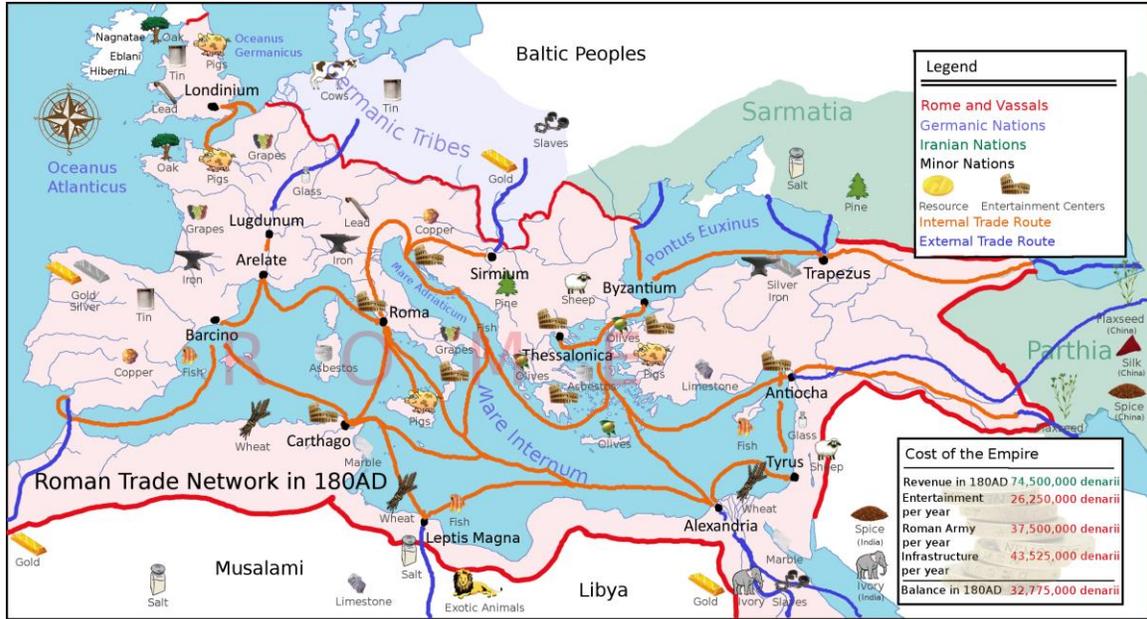
*Rome Developed the West –  
Pont du Gard, Roman Aqueduct in Provence*

In Egypt, Rome preserved the Egyptian culture, ruled the province as an imperial reserve, introduced improved water wheels and threshers to enhance agricultural productivity, and taxed Nile agriculture highly to transfer food to Rome.<sup>72</sup> The Roman officials in Egypt were primarily interested in transferring resources and

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<sup>72</sup> Ian Shaw (ed.), *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 426-427.

wheat to Rome, and they made little attempt to influence Egyptian culture other than to persecute Coptic Christianity.<sup>73</sup>



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Europe\\_180ad\\_roman\\_trade\\_map.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Europe_180ad_roman_trade_map.png)

### Roman Trade Routes, 180 CE

**Summary of Foreign Conquest and Supplemental Wealth in the Roman Empire.** The Roman Empire prospered by conquering, governing, developing, and taxing parts of the Mediterranean Basin and southern Europe. The primary basis of Roman wealth was the development and taxation of agriculture in

<sup>73</sup> Edith Flamarion, *Cleopatra, The Life and Death of a Pharaoh*, New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1997, pp. 110-111.

Egypt, northern Africa, Sicily, Iberia, and southern France. Roman legions conquered not to trade but to farm and transfer agricultural surpluses to Rome. Agriculture – producing cereals, olives, grapes, and animal products – was the main source of wealth in the Roman Empire. Agricultural profitability arose from intensification (greater labor use and shorter fallow periods) and specialization (the introduction of cash crops and better crop combinations). Most agricultural expansion occurred in the newly developed west and in Egypt, not in the Italian peninsula or the previously settled east. Agricultural taxation consisted of land taxes and head taxes that were paid in kind or in cash and amounted to one-tenth to one-fifth of the value of farm production.

Foreign conquest was an essential dimension of the Roman strategy to create imperial wealth. In the long-settled eastern part of the Roman Empire, Rome permitted local rulers to govern under the auspices of Roman jurisdiction and few resources were transferred to Rome. In the expanding western part of the empire, the Romans settled ex-soldiers on estates and created new

agricultural wealth that served as the backbone of the empire. The gains from foreign trade were only a minor source of wealth in the Roman Empire. Rome levied a 25 percent tariff on imports into the empire, mostly luxuries for the rich elite. But those trade taxes merely supplemented the agricultural revenues from Rome's conquered regions.

### **Comparison of Sources of Wealth in Early Empires and Kingdoms**

Some revealing patterns emerge from a comparison of the sources of wealth in our twelve early empires and kingdoms. Agriculture was the key in both the Ancient Era and the Middle Ages. It was by far the most important source of wealth and power in all seven of our multinational empires – Dynastic Egypt, Achaemenid Persia, Han China, Imperial Rome, Tang China, Mughal India, and Ottoman Turkey – and in three of our five regional kingdoms – India's Gupta, Cambodia's Khmer, and Burma's Pagan. We saw how wealth from rice production was generated, translated into government revenues, and used to build

Hindu temples in India's Gupta Kingdom and Buddhist pagodas in Burma's Pagan Kingdom. Most early empires were built on the harvests of small-scale farmers.

Foreign trade was the principal source of wealth in only two of our case studies, both regional kingdoms – Ethiopia's Axum and West Africa's Mali/Songhai. But even in those two exceptional states, agriculture was important. Both African kingdoms were self-sufficient in food production and generated enough agricultural surplus to provision the itinerant merchants in their trading centers. Each specialized in trade to take advantage of its location and special circumstances. Axum controlled trade through the Red Sea along the important trade route connecting North Africa and Europe with India and China. Mali/Songhai taxed the trans-Saharan trade in gold and salt by controlling the entrepôt cities at the southern edge of the Sahara Desert.

It is curious that foreign conquest enters our story mainly as a critical supporting actor. We might expect that powerful early empires would have conquered primarily to demand annual

payments of tribute from vassal states. Although tributary arrangements existed in all of the states that we studied, tribute was neither an important source of wealth nor a powerful motivation for foreign conquest. In most of our empires, conquest supported agriculture whereas in some others it buttressed trade. Foreign conquest served to create and protect trade monopolies in our two trade-based kingdoms, Axum and Mali/Songhai.

But the typical pattern was for the founder-king to unify his empire through military conquest and for his successors to develop and tax agriculture in the conquered areas. That scenario was played out in seven of the ten empires in which agricultural was key – Han China, Guptan India, Tang China, Cambodian Khmer, Burman Pagan, Mughal India, and Ottoman Turkey.

Dynastic Egypt, Achaemenid Persia, and the Roman Empire were the three exceptions. Foreign conquest for Egypt's New Kingdom involved the takeover of Nubia and the Levant to create an African-Asian trading network to supplement the empire's main wealth from Nile agriculture. Achaemenid Persia systematically

conquered the most fertile or mineral-rich parts of the Near East (Babylonia, Egypt, Lydia, and Phoenicia) and incorporated them into an integrated multinational empire by building the 1,700-mile-long Royal Road and several new seaports. Conquest was a critical dimension of the Roman Empire's wealth-creating strategy because Rome created its agricultural base in its conquered territories, not on the Italian Peninsula. Roman conquest foreshadowed its agricultural wealth. Foreign conquest thus supported the creation of agricultural or trade wealth, even in the Roman Empire.

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We now have the second piece of the imperial puzzle in place. No matter what the origin of early empires, they all had to create wealth and extract tax revenues to survive and wield power. We have seen that the creation of wealth was a three-legged stool – most wealth came from agriculture, supplements were generated through international trade, and some empires could conquer and steal the agricultural or trade wealth of their tributary regions.

Astute imperial rulers understood that they had to feed their goats before they could milk them, and they invested in irrigation and transportation to aid agricultural productivity and to promote trade. Most successful imperial rulers conquered neighboring regions to tax their farmers and merchants in hopes that the new revenues would exceed the costs of control.

As we look further into how it was that the rulers ran their early empires, often for several centuries, it will prove useful to keep the agriculture-trade-conquest trilogy at the forefront of our attention. In this chapter, we investigated how imperial wealth was generated. Now we have to consider how early dynasts gained political legitimacy and used it to collect taxes on agricultural and trade wealth within their heartlands and from conquered regions.