

Chapter One, “Introduction,” for *Lessons from Early Empires*

In the past five millennia, important empires rose, ruled, and fell in scattered locations around the world. The first empire to generate awe-inspiring wealth was Dynastic Egypt, starting about 2900 BCE.¹ How were the early Egyptians able to sustain imperial dynasties for more than 2500 years, and why did they eventually fade into historical oblivion? In 30 BCE, Augustus Caesar defeated Cleopatra and Mark Antony and claimed Hellenistic Egypt for Rome.² But how did the Roman Empire arise, command the resources to conquer Egypt, and later use the Nile Valley as a granary to help feed urban Rome? In short, how did early empires originate, how did they create wealth and transfer it to the elite, and why did they ultimately fall apart? The answers to these penetrating questions underpin our understanding of historical

¹ Ian Shaw (ed.), *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 45-47.

² Chris Scarre, *The Penguin Historical Atlas of Ancient Rome*, London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1995, pp. 34-35.

change. They also provide intriguing insights into current international problems.

An empire is a political creation in which one nation state or ethnic group controls other states or peoples through political power, economic sanction, religious persuasion, and military force. For several centuries, Italian people from Rome ruled the entire Mediterranean region and much of Europe, Southwest Asia, and North Africa through political force, military power, settlement of soldier/farmers, and the transfer of food and wealth from the provinces to Rome.³

To study the phenomenon of imperial rule, I decided that I needed an analytic framework that would help me understand how empires originated, expanded, and declined. The economist in me led me to seek a close link between power and wealth. Imperial power depended on economic wealth. But what were the principal

³ Peter Garnsey and Richard Saller, *The Roman Empire, Economy, Society and Culture*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987, pp 51-52.

sources of wealth in pre-industrial societies? After much searching through libraries and imperial ruins, I identified three main sources of wealth – agriculture (sometimes supplemented by mining or craftsmanship), foreign trade, and foreign conquest.

In early societies, most people farmed. But how could farming provide a primary source of wealth for empire builders? Astute rulers helped their farmers produce an agricultural surplus – crops and animal products in amounts above their families' own subsistence needs. They then taxed away some of that extra wealth and used the revenue to support government bureaucracies, military forces, religious monuments, and capital projects. The key for the elite rulers thus was to promote and tax agriculture. It was not necessary for the rulers to own the farmland or the farm laborers. Indeed, public land and slavery played only minor roles in agriculture in all of the empires examined in this essay. But the elite had to be able to tax away part of the agricultural produce to generate wealth for the state.

Successful imperial governments invested in infrastructure (farm-to-market roads, canals, and irrigation systems) and promoted better methods of farming to increase agricultural production and thus to enhance their tax bases. They then created effective political institutions – bureaucracies backed by force – to ensure that the farmers paid their taxes. Those same principles of public policy for imperial control were followed if the wealth was produced by mining or artisanship rather than by farming.

Imperial rulers could benefit from foreign trade by taxing private traders, controlling commerce, or rigging prices. International trade, the exchange of goods between two differing political entities, created gains that usually were shared by both sides in the bargain. Political leaders often chose to appropriate a part of those gains from trade by taxing commercial exports from or imports into their territories. Rulers in Han and Tang China permitted the private sector to carry out most of the country's

foreign trade, and then they taxed imports and exports to transfer part of the trading wealth to the state.⁴

Other governments set up state trading monopolies for key goods, such as imports of food or exports of military supplies, in hopes of claiming all of the gains from trade for the state. Imperial Rome established a trade monopoly on wheat imports from the provinces (most of Rome's wheat came from Carthage and Egypt).⁵ Strong imperial governments attempted to rig prices, holding down the costs of imports (ancient Egyptian governments suppressed the price of gold produced in Nubia and imported into Egypt) or inflating the value of exports (Han Chinese governments raised the price of silk produced exclusively in China and exported westward along the Silk Road to India, Persia, Central Asia, or Rome).

⁴ Valerie Hansen, *The Open Empire, A History of China to 1600*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000, pp. 203-210.

⁵ Peter Garnsey, *Famine and Food Supply in the Graeco-roman World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, pp.216-217.

Imperial states inevitably were conquerors. Foreign conquest could be economically beneficial if the imperial power controlled and taxed the agriculture and trade of profitable conquered territories. Successful imperial powers engaged in expansionary conquest in part for political prestige but mostly to create wealth for the state. Foreign conquest in itself did not produce any additional wealth. But it did offer the prospect of transferring much of the agricultural or trading wealth of other countries or regions to the conquering power. Conquerors, however, had to be careful. Few alien peoples enjoyed being ruled by others.

Most conquered peoples fervently resisted political control by outsiders. Imperial states, therefore, spent considerable sums on military and police forces and bureaucracies to control and tax their subjugated populations. When those costs of imperial control exceeded the amounts of wealth that could be taxed away to the center, foreign conquest became a losing economic proposition for the empire. Troubles at the center also were quickly translated into regional rebellions and imperial splintering, a common theme in

most early empires. In their periods of imperial decline, Dynastic Egypt lost Nubia and the Levant, Imperial Rome had to cede Iberia and North Africa, and the Ottoman Empire lost control of the Balkans and North Africa.⁶

I have titled this comparative essay, “Lessons from Early Empires.” In it, I am seeking to find recurring patterns among diverse empires by examining the agriculture-trade-conquest trilogy. My hypothesis is that by understanding the sources of wealth in early empires, a curious reader can also gain significant insights into how and why those empires rose, ruled, and fell. Those insights, in turn, provide intriguing lessons for later states, including contemporary powers.

To form an empire, a ruling class needed to do more than help its society create wealth. Rulers blended political organization, religious persuasion, economic controls, and military

⁶ Douglas A. Howard, *The History of Turkey*, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2001, pp. 67-78.

coercion to maintain imperial power and extract wealth. Empires were vulnerable political structures held together by delicate balances of power, tradition, compromise, and mutual exchange of favors. Many unraveled quickly when those political equilibria were upset. A key debilitating force often was the disloyalty of regional nobles who stopped paying taxes and supplying troops to the central government as imperial military power waned. Rajput noble leaders in northwestern India declared their independence from Mughal emperors in the 18th century, after the Mughal Empire had wasted resources on fruitless attempts to expand southward and on violent succession struggles over who would succeed to become emperor.⁷

To help explain why early empires fell apart, I examine two common forces – internal erosion and external incursions. Internal erosion is the gradual decline in the ability of the central

⁷ John F. Richards, *The Mughal Empire*, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 274-275.

government to provide security, collect taxes, and offer services.

Erosion was caused principally by four kinds of mistakes – succession crises, religious excesses, peasant rebellions, and fruitless expansions. Succession crises, disputes over who would become the next ruler, in the Gupta Kingdom of India created political instability, civil wars, and the loss of tax revenue.⁸

Religious excesses arose when tax-free religious societies gained control of substantial portions of an empire's agricultural land and labor force and impeded the government's ability to fund its military and bureaucracy. Buddhist temple societies in the rice-based Pagan Kingdom of Burma controlled two-thirds of the rice-producing land in the 13th century, when the kingdom disappeared.⁹

⁸ Gordon Johnson, *Cultural Atlas of India*, Abingdon, England: Andromeda Oxford Limited, 1996, pp. 75-79.

⁹ Michael Aung-Thwin, *Pagan, The Origins of Modern Burma*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985, p. 28.

Peasant rebellions contributed importantly to the downfall of both the Han and Tang Empires in China.¹⁰ Debilitating revolts occurred after corrupt bureaucracies permitted the widespread transfer of agricultural land from tax-paying, free-peasant farms to tax-avoiding, noble estates. Fruitless attempts to expand the territorial reach of the state wasted resources and brought military weakness. The Kingdom of Axum in Ethiopia was debilitated by a half century of rule in Yemen, which ended abruptly in the late 6th century when Persia threw Axum out, took over the key Red Sea trade route, and undercut Axum's main source of wealth.¹¹

All four types of internal erosion – succession crises, religious excesses, peasant rebellions, and fruitless expansions – weakened empires and made them vulnerable to foreign invasion. Some empires escaped foreign take-over, at least for a while. Han

¹⁰ John Fairbank and Merle Goldman, *China, A New History*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998, pp. 47-48, 86-87.

¹¹ Stuart Munro-Hay, *Aksum, An African Civilisation of Late Antiquity*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991, pp. 7-8.

and Tang China fell to internal coups not to foreign conquests, although all of China later succumbed to Mongol and Manchu invaders.¹² Other states were defeated by stronger foreign powers, continued to exist, but became vassals to stronger neighbors. After the once-great Khmer Kingdom of Cambodia was defeated by the Thai Kingdom of Ayudhya in the 15th century, Khmer lost much of its rice-producing land and later became a vassal of that new Thai power for two centuries.¹³

Foreign conquerors directly controlled other once-strong imperial states. Alexander the Great took over Dynastic Egypt in the 4th century BCE and initiated two millennia of foreign rule of Egypt,¹⁴ the Vandals, Goths, and Visigoths dismembered the Roman Empire in the 5th century CE and ruled the weakened

¹² Caroline Blunden and Mark Elvin, *Cultural Atlas of China*, Abingdon, England: Andromeda Oxford Limited, 1998, p. 98.

¹³ David Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 1998, pp. 78-80.

¹⁴ Bill Manley, *The Penguin Historical Atlas of Ancient Egypt*, London: Penguin Books, 1996, pp. 128-129.

pieces of that former Mediterranean giant,¹⁵ and Moroccan invaders destroyed the Kingdom of Songhai in the late 16th century CE and governed parts of the West African Sudan ineffectually for two centuries thereafter.¹⁶

Ultimately, I am interested in identifying lessons that contemporary powers might learn from the experiences of early empires. Following the industrial and information revolutions, modern nation states have different sources of wealth and power from those of pre-industrial empires. But contemporary leaders could gain tantalizing insights if they understood better why early empires succeeded and how they ultimately fell.

I divide my lessons into those affecting domestic economic policies, domestic political policies, and foreign policies. A key lesson from this comparative study is that early empires tended to

¹⁵ Chris Scarre, *The Penguin Historical Atlas of Ancient Rome*, London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1995, pp. 134-135.

¹⁶ Edward W. Bovill, *The Golden Trade of the Moors*, Princeton, NJ: Markus Weiner Publishers, 1995, pp. 193-195.

decline after they conquered foreign territories that did not pay – because the costs of controlling them exceeded the tax revenues that could be extracted from them. The consequent drain of resources weakened the military control of profitable conquered territories and domestic regions, leading to eventual splintering of the empire, domestic revolts, and foreign incursions. If states conquered primarily for reasons of nationalistic pride or religious fervor, they suffered negative consequences. Ethiopia’s Axum Kingdom fell after it conquered Yemen to support Christianity and soon lost Yemen along with wealth-producing trade routes in the Red Sea to invading Persians.¹⁷ The Mughal Empire in north-central India was debilitated after Emperor Aurangzeb fruitlessly fought endless wars to expand his empire and spread Islam into south India.¹⁸

¹⁷ 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. 46.

¹⁸ Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal, *Modern South Asia, History, Culture, Political Economy*, London: Routledge, 1998, pp. 48-51.

To summarize, I am seeking answers to five principal questions in my search for comparative lessons from early empires.

1. How did early empires originate?
2. What were their main sources of wealth and power – agriculture, foreign trade, and foreign conquest?
3. What forms of political organization, religious persuasion, economic sanction, and military coercion did they use to extract wealth for the elite and maintain imperial power?
4. What combinations of internal erosion – from succession crises, religious excesses, peasant rebellions, and fruitless expansions – and external incursions caused the early empires to decline and fall?
5. What lessons for contemporary powers can be drawn from the experiences of early empires?

I have tried to answer these probing questions for each individual empire selected for study, and then I have searched for patterns across all of the empires. I categorize the empires included in this volume according to two criteria. One is the time period – the Ancient Era (3rd millennium BCE-7th century CE) or the Middle Ages (7th-19th centuries CE). The other is size – multinational empires (ruling several nationalities and large

territories) or regional kingdoms (ruling few nationalities and small territories).

I have selected twelve pre-industrial empires – Egypt’s New Kingdom (16th-11th c. BCE), Iran’s Achaemenid Persian Empire (6th-4th c. BCE), China’s Han Dynasty (3rd c. BCE-3rd c. CE), Ethiopia’s Kingdom of Axum (2nd c. BCE -7th c. CE), Syria’s Eastern Roman Empire (1st c. BCE-7th c. CE), India’s Gupta Kingdom (4th-6th c.), China’s Tang Dynasty (7th-10th c.), Cambodia’s Khmer Kingdom (9th-15th c.), Burma’s Pagan Kingdom (11th-14th c.), Mali’s Kingdoms of Mali and Songhai (13th-16th c.), Turkey’s Ottoman Empire (14th-20th c.), and India’s Mughal Empire (16th-18th c.) – for inclusion in this comparative study.

In carrying out my research, I worked through case studies of these twelve early imperial states. In each case study, I focused principally on the periods of imperial power and wealth. But I began each story when the region first started to practice sedentary agriculture and thus became interesting institutionally, and I

carried each historical analysis through to the present to understand the aftermath of empire.

The organization of this comparative essay follows directly from my five principal questions, which I address using this categorization of empires. In each of the five thematic chapters, I focus on one of the key questions – origins of empire, sources of wealth, means of control, causes of decline, and lessons for today. In the final chapter, I identify fifteen lessons for contemporary powers that arise from the successes and failures of early empires.

I chose this set of empires to study on both substantive and opportunistic grounds. Although limited to Asia, Africa, and southern Europe, a comparative study of these twelve early states provides a broad coverage of different kinds of early empires in widely separated time periods. My academic career and subsequent travel/study avocation both have been focused principally (though not entirely) on these three parts of the world.

I believe that these ten area studies of twelve early states (two each in China and India) offer a splendid opportunity to test my

hypotheses about the rise, rule, and fall of early empires. They also present us with a chance to learn important lessons to apply in understanding hegemonic states that arose after the Industrial Revolution – the British Empire and the contemporary United States. My underlying motivation has been to try to understand better what early – and current – imperial powers need to do to stay on top. We will discover that creating and maintaining power and wealth has never been easy.