

*The Dynamics of Ancient Empires*. Edited by IAN MORRIS and WALTER SCHEIDEL. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. Pp. xii + 381 + 7 maps. Cloth, \$85.00. ISBN 978-0-19-537158-1.

A book that presents the Roman or Athenian empire in the context of others in the ancient world seems like an eminently good idea, with the potential for real or unusual insights. This volume offers some of these, but because its contents are extremely disparate, it hardly provides the material for a general understanding.

A highly theoretical introduction by Jack Goldstone and John Haldon sets the tone for a work evidently designed for a scholarly rather than a popular audience. The introduction first deals with states, which it sees as defined regions with a central authority capable of exercising coercive power. Successful states have administrative structures and an ideology, and are acceptable not only to their own elites but to the general population. Relations between rulers and elites, however, are always crucial. This leads to a definition of empire as a territory ruled from a distinct organizational center with ideological and political sway over elites who in turn exercise power over populations whose majority has neither access to nor influence over political power (p. 18). This definition seems both broad and incomplete, for it could describe virtually any stratified society and could as well refer to a state as an empire. Some might prefer Michael Doyle's succinct definition in the opening sentence of his *Empires* (1986): "Empires are relationships of political control imposed by some political societies over the effective sovereignty of other political societies."

The first subject of discussion is the Neo-Assyrian Empire (not, for some reason, the earliest empires—the Sumerian, Babylonian or Egyptian), which lasted from the 9<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> centuries BC and had considerable influence. Peter Bedford reviews the problems of the sources and provides a clear historical outline and a useful appendix of texts. He explains the dual administrative system, with provinces ruled by an Assyrian elite and client states under their local rulers, and shows how ever more territory was incorporated into Assyria. The king represented the will of the god Assur, who demanded conquest and had to be recognized as supreme by all. Below the king were the elites, both Assyrians and foreigners who subscribed to the imperial ideology. Assyria's important innovation was to create an ideology that integrated subject populations into the Assyrian world view. Since conquered territories became part of Assyria, it was legitimate to move their populations around to exploit new lands. In the proc-

## BOOK REVIEW

ess, the state broke regional and ethnic identities, turning its varied population into Assyrians. This is a clear and stimulating essay.

Josef Wiesehofer's discussion of the Achaemenid empire offers something similar. The Persians were a small minority ruling over the vastest empire of the ancient Near East. They succeeded through flexibility and compromise. Instead of forcing their subjects to become Persians or subordinating local gods to Ahura Mazda, the Persians allowed their subjects to follow local traditions and left local elites in power as long as they were loyal to Persia. The king ruled through governors (satraps) and garrison troops, so that he could exercise coercive authority as needed, although he rarely had to until the empire began to decline. Central power was strengthened by grants of land to members of the royal family and the new administrative elite. Persia reached its height under Darius, who as a usurper needed to create a false genealogy relating him to the royal house and who mobilized the empire's resources to build a symbol of imperial splendor in Persepolis. Unfortunately, this chapter gives short shrift to the long decline and ultimate collapse of the empire.

Problems begin with the exceedingly long and heavily documented study (78 pages with 390 notes) of the "Greater Athenian State" by Ian Morris, who points out that the Athenian domain was tiny in size, population and resources compared to others, and that it had a homogenous population. He believes that it was not an empire at all. Why, then, include it here? Because, it seems, it was an example of state formation, in which the Athenians tried to develop an Ionian Greek territorial state with Athens as its capital. For Morris, an empire must have a large territory and be hierarchical and multiethnic, with a strong sense of foreignness between rulers and ruled. He supports his argument with a comprehensive survey of the environment, political systems and economic, social and cultural bases of classical Greece states. Although there is much of value in his argument, it seems to me that the central point is seriously flawed. First, well-placed people in 5<sup>th</sup>-century Athens believed that they were involved with an empire: "your empire (*arche*) is a tyranny exercised over subjects who do not like it" (Cleon in Th. 3.37). Second, why is foreignness such an essential element in defining an empire? Surely it would not apply to the Chinese or to the British who in the 18<sup>th</sup> century ruled over North Americans just as British as they were. And was the Athenian domain really so homogenous? For Morris it seems all Ionian; but in the islands and Asia Minor Athens ruled large Aeolian and Dorian populations, who were fully conscious of their relationship to Thebes or Sparta (see, e.g. Th. 7.57 on the com-

## BOOK REVIEW

position of the force Athens sent against Syracuse and the compulsion exercised upon its non-Ionian contingents). For the moment, it probably remains best to see an Athenian empire.

The sketch of the political economy of the Roman empire was unfortunately cut short by the death of its author, Keith Hopkins. Nevertheless, it explains the relation of the state and its ruling elites, who formed an aristocracy predicated upon service rather than heredity and who in the period of expansion were rewarded with the profits of conquest. The empire did its best to control the aristocracy, whose agricultural wealth often made it difficult to extract full potential tax revenues. The long life of this empire reflects the effective destruction of previous political systems and the subordination of existing cults, all behind a facade of autonomy. Hopkins deals also with the economy and money supply, but the essay ends in mid-stream.

John Haldon's long essay on the Byzantine Empire also focuses on central power and elites, and is particularly concerned with who exploited whom in social and political terms. The chapter will be hard going for anyone not already acquainted with Byzantine history. It deals primarily with the medieval state, not the East Roman realm of late antiquity (4<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> centuries), and thus falls outside the ostensible scope of the volume. Byzantium had the advantage of an elaborate system of precedence and an all-encompassing fiscal administration, which enabled the center to keep the upper hand during most periods until the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Byzantium also had an unshakable sense of its own superiority derived from its classical tradition and Christian orthodoxy. Haldon presents the Islamic state of the 7<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> centuries as a kind of alternative, seeing a three-cornered struggle between the center, local interests and provincial rulers. Certainly, centrifugal tendencies were always strong and eventually led to collapse. But all this needs to be seen in a clearer context. The early Islamic state, unlike Byzantium, was ruled by a tiny military elite of Muslim Arabs who controlled vast Roman and Persian populations. It had the power of a new religion and also of a complex inherited administrative apparatus. This section (which also demands previous knowledge of history) is really too short to exploit its subject satisfactorily.

The volume ends on an odd note, with a lengthy essay (70 pages with 389 notes) by Walter Scheidel on "Sex and Empire." Drawing on anthropology and sociology, he asks why there are empires at all and why they have power. He finds a strong correlation between status, power and male reproductive success and asks whether an-

## BOOK REVIEW

cient empires conform to a model of competition for females and other resources. Unsurprisingly, he finds that in the ancient Near East the rich and powerful wound up with a disproportionate share of women and resources. Interestingly, though, polygyny has been the most desired mating pattern in history, with the monogamy of the classical (not Homeric) Greeks and Romans an unusual phenomenon. Monogamy seems designed to force the appearance of equality and encourage cooperation more than competition. Yet, Scheidel finds, it is a bit of a fraud, since the men at the top have greater sexual opportunities from owning slaves, supporting *hetairai* or belonging to a conquering or colonizing force that can appropriate local women. In those cases, empire brings sexual rewards that reflect superiority over the subjected populations. The phrase “sexual exploitation” frequently occurs here, but there were also benefits for women. Surely one reason for polygyny was that many young men were killed off in wars, leaving women without support—and one might wonder whether a woman was better off digging in the fields or lolling in a harem. This is a provocative essay, though that it is more relevant to empires than other societies is not obvious.

In sum, this volume is less than the sum of its parts. Some individual chapters have merit and at least show the need to understand the role of dominant elites as well as supreme rulers. But they are all so different that it is hard to draw general conclusions or to come away from the book with a clearer idea about ancient empires than one had upon opening it.

CLIVE FOSS

*Georgetown University*