

BOOK REVIEW

State Power in Ancient China & Rome. Edited by WALTER SCHEIDEL. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. Pp. xviii + 303. Paper, \$74.00. ISBN 978-0-19-020224-8.

With the growth of world history and its thematic approach to traditional narratives, the broader conceptual topic of “empire” has gained greater attention. This particular volume serves as something of a spiritual sequel to Scheidel’s 2009 *Rome and China: Comparative Perspectives on Ancient World Empires* (Oxford). This recent volume thus seeks to build off of the framework and justifications for comparison presented in the 2009 volume, in particular by analyzing the role, function, and nature of government, authority, and elite status in both the Qin/Han and Roman empires, and analyzing how these two empires developed similar and dissimilar methods of dealing with many of the same obstacles and developments.

The volume is itself divided between 8 chapters. Chapter 1, by Peter Fibiger Bang and Karen Turner, traces the parallel development of centralized monarchy in both empires with the elevation of Augustus and Huangdi and the creation of an imperial court and imperial culture among the elite in both empires, focusing on the similarities in the emergence of a centralized monarchy. Chapter 2, by T. Cory Brennan, examines in abstract the way that both empires functioned in an administrative and decision-making capacity, focusing on the differences in tradition and ethics in both empires and how each differing group justified the authority of those in power to make important decisions.

Chapters 3 and 4 serve as the central points from which much of the discussion in the volume is to be understood, with Chapter 3, by Dingxin Zhao, discussing the origin, nature, and development of the Han bureaucracy, and Chapter 4, by Peter Eich, doing much of the same for the late Roman Imperial bureaucracy. Chapter 5, by Walter Scheidel himself, examines the topic of revenue in both empires, discussing the means by which both empires raised and spent revenue, and the meaning these differing priorities convey as regards how each empire viewed itself and its role. Chapters 6 and 7, by Carlos F. Noreña and Mark Lewis, respectively, examine the extension of imperial control into local

areas, urban centers, and public spaces, and how the differing ideologies of each empire affected the urban and public landscape for the local elite and commons throughout the imperial domains. Finally, Chapter 8, by Michael Puett, concludes by presenting the grounds for a religious comparison between the two empires and the rituals surrounding the semi-divine monarchs.

Approaching the topic as a Roman historian, I found myself frequently frustrated by the volume's presentation of aspects of Roman society and elite culture as either too broad or lacking in what I might have considered important details. At the same time, I found the sections on Qin/Han China and the comparisons with Rome to be fascinating, in particular Zhao's chapter on the Han bureaucracy. I can easily imagine that for a Chinese scholar approaching the same volume, the opposite would likely be the case. In fact, Bang and Turner confront this directly in Chapter 1, acknowledging that they are, for now, teasing out broad points of comparison and seeking "common patterns and shared developments" (38).

The volume's attempts at broad categorization will likely confound the specialist, yet the comparative element allows for greater discussion and development on the central theme of "empire" rather than "Rome and China". Scheidel's and Puett's respective chapters are the most effective at exploring this thematic element. Scheidel's analysis of the conceptualization of wealth in both empires, as well as how these empires prioritized their spending, allows for a further discussion of types and methods of control, ideological over practical considerations, and a full range of differing strategies that both empires tried and tested when faced by similar trials. Puett's discussion of religion in China quickly becomes a discussion of differing groups and societies reacting to death and the organization of rituals of interaction and status among differing elites.

It is in the broader, thematic approach that the work absolutely excels and should be considered a valuable contribution to Roman, Chinese, and World history. In particular, the volume can serve as a valuable introduction for specialized scholars moving into the realm of thematic history, while likewise inspiring valuable discussion on both the necessity and shortcomings of focusing in a single field or topic. As Scheidel states in the Introduction, these comparative approaches allow us as historians to raise further questions, to raise our view beyond the "local" and place historical narratives within a broader context and frame (3-4). Ultimately, understanding China and Rome in the broader thematic framework and why these two empires set off on their differing trajectories,

despite the similarities established in the 2009 volume, allows us as historians to better understand the specifics of these two empires in a greater depth.

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