

Peter Fibiger Bang and Dariusz Kolodziejczyk, eds., *Universal Empire. A Comparative Approach to Imperial Culture and Representation in Eurasian History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2102. ISBN 9781107022676. Pp. 398. 53 b/w illustrations and 6 maps. \$114.

As with a number of edited volumes, *Universal Empire* is based on a conference, or rather a series of conferences or meetings of a “European-based network” of scholars representing a variety of disciplines, which focus on the problem of “universal empire” in a global historical context “from antiquity till the dawn of modernity.” Strictly speaking, an essay on the Aztecs, in Part III (“Contrasting universalisms – old and new world”) takes the volume beyond the borders of “Eurasia.” The essays vary from broad delineations of “universal empire” to specific applications of universal imperial ideology and practice. Limitations of space will not permit a detailed analysis of each of the essays, although they are all well worth it. Overall, the essays travel over territories and present conclusions already familiar to the specialists of their respective fields. There are no groundbreaking theses put forward, at least in areas with which this reviewer is familiar. But, that is not the real purpose of this book. Rather, it admirably joins together in a single volume the generally accepted conclusions regarding conceptions of “universal empire” across an extended geographical and chronological framework. The authors have read each other’s papers and on occasion make reference to them. This is all to the good, as many “comparative” conferences and resultant volumes often give little indication that the participants have actually read each other’s contributions. The first chapter, co-authored by the editors, delineates the basic outlines of “universal empire.” It bears the wonderful title of “‘Elephant of India’: universal empire through time and across cultures.” The “elephant” is none other than Queen Victoria, (*pace* Gilbert and Sullivan) “the very model of a modern” universal ruler. Uncertain as to what to call the “Empress of India” in the local languages of the Subcontinent, it was suggested that the Persian title *Kaiser-i Rum*, rather than the more familiar, Mughal-associated *Pâdshâh* be used. *Kaiser*, i.e. *Qayşar*, an old borrowing into Arabic and thence Persian denoting the Roman/Byzantine emperors or simply a non-Muslim “emperor,” seemed suitable. When its closeness to the recently established Kaiser of Germany drew objections, one of its proponents defended it arguing that Kaiser/Caesar was (allegedly) a Punic name that the Julian *gens* had acquired during its participation in the wars with Carthage. *Caesar*, it was claimed, originally meant “elephant” in Punic and it smacked of “poetry, heraldry and predominance” (p.5). The debate (however shaky the etymology) highlights the importance of proper nomenclature for this new position. “Victoria’s imperial investiture,” the authors point out, “had become an instrument in the tool box of invented traditions” and “imagined communities.” It was “basically a piece of theatricality” (p.6), which played no small role in representing empire. Titles and the history they invoked were important.

The editors define universal empire as “a hierarchical conception of rulers and statehood,” usually associated with the “possession of extensive territories,” rule over a

diversity of peoples and claims of supremacy over numerous subject lords and a host of rivals. Subordination could vary in form from direct to indirect or at least acknowledgement of the universal sovereign's paramount status. Universal emperors, sublimely arrogant and pragmatically conciliatory when necessary (p.30), made extensive use of symbols of dominance in ceremonies, diplomatic exchanges, and in their self-representation as an expression of the cosmic order. Their rule was just, divinely bestowed and in accord with the proper order of things. Accompanying this was a "high literary culture" with universal claims (pp.27, 34). The volume's contents illustrate these points, often in considerable detail. Gojko Barjamovic's "Propaganda and practice in Assyrian and Persian imperial culture," contrasts the "complex relationship between universal ideology and real policy...power by divine sanction and birthright ... and the pragmatic management of policy through arbitration" (p.43). The rulers of both realms presented themselves as divinely ordained masters of "all lands and people" (p.45). Assyrian kings emphasized their violence, "invincible power and 'calculated frightfulness'," assimilated and incorporated subject peoples while the Persians underscored the "the unchanging political and social hierarchy and the cosmic centrality of the supreme ruler" (pp.46–47), restricting entry to the elite only to Iranians. An ideology underscoring collaboration and "brotherhood" under "a shared political superstructure, but by no means uniformity or equality" (p.47) integrated subject peoples. Assyrian and Persian monarchs were kings of kings. Palaces and parks stocked with animals from all over the empire were part of the display of imperial power. Peter Fibiger Bang's "Between Aśoka and Antiochos: an essay in world history on universal kingship and cosmopolitan culture in the Hellenistic ecumene" ranges from the Seleucid and other Mediterranean Hellenistic kingdoms to Aśoka (269/8–233/2 BCE), whose Mauryan Empire (321–185 BCE) had been founded by Chandragupta not long after Alexander had campaigned on the Indus. Alexander's Graeco-Macedonian elite, now a ruling minority in a diverse, Achaemenid-based realm, developed "new models of universal empire arising from the margins of the Achaemenid world...an axial moment," giving "rise to two new cultures of imperial rule" (p.63). Hellenistic and Maurya rulers would claim to be benefactors and saviors, a force for moral good, which, rather than naked force, would garner the loyalty of their subjects. (p.65). Alexander's successors created genealogies that stressed their divine origins and produced "grand and lavish spectacles," new capital cities and monuments in competition with their rivals to demonstrate their wealth and legitimacy as world rulers with respectful nods to the local religious and political traditions. Both Hellenistic and Indic rulers from Aśoka onward created or supported high literary cultures, each with its own literary canon, as part of the imperial, "cosmopolitan and trans-regional aristocratic culture," which united elites of different culturo-linguistic backgrounds (p.75). R.M. Schneider's "The making of Oriental Rome: shaping the Trojan legend" takes up Rome's claims of world rule, representations of its victories over non-Romans and the integration of "a wide range of different civilisations and ethnicities" (pp.80–81). Displays of Roman might against Asia were depicted in images of the surrender of bearded Parthians. At the same time, Rome's alleged and much promoted tale of Asian/Trojan descent (in particular, the

Julian-Augustan line, it was claimed, derived from Aeneas) was manifested in the images of beardless, handsome “Asian” youths, (pp.96–97), specifically associated with Troy. The East was both ancestral and subject. The Islamic world is represented by Garth Fowden’s “Pseudo-Aristotelian politics and theology in universal Islam” which highlights the contributions of Muslim philosophers versed in Aristotelianism and Pseudo-Aristotelianism to the “mirror for princes” literature. Illuminationism, deriving from Arabic versions of Plotinus (pseudo-Aristotelian) and expanded upon by al-Suhrawardi (d. 1191), profoundly influenced Safavîd Shî‘ism and ultimately Khomeini and “also fertilized universalist currents of thought” (p.145) at the Mughal court of Akbar (d.1605). Pseudo-Aristotelianism in its Arabo-Islamized form was also present in the circle around Ottoman rulers, such as Mehmet II, whose library contained more than a few such works.

Dimiter Angelov and Judith Herrin in “The Christian imperial tradition—Greek and Latin” trace the “linkage of Christianity with empire, imperialism and political universalism” in the medieval era and their “surprisingly symbiotic” interaction (p.149), concluding that Christianity and Church organization “served to consolidate medieval empires, more so in the East than in the West” (p.173). “Christianity itself fuelled ideas of empire and political universalism,” becoming “part of God’s scheme for human salvation.” Eschatological works prophesied that the last Roman emperor, having defeated his foes, would give his crown to God, prefacing the brief reign of the Antichrist” or the Second Coming (pp.171–172). Dariusz Kołodziejczyk’s “Khan, caliph, tsar and emperor: the multiple identities of the Ottoman sultan” presents the much-debated question of Ottoman state formation. Was it the result of warrior Islam (the *ghazi* thesis) or the product of a “predatory confederacy” —along with the various inflections of these opposing views? Kołodziejczyk admires the “pragmatism and tolerance of early Ottoman rulers” but also notes that a number of them evidenced strong religious feelings (p.176). This is an ongoing discussion in Ottoman Studies, and Kołodziejczyk quickly moves to his main themes. Mehmet II, the conqueror of Constantinople, took the title *kayser-i Rum* (“Caesar of Rome/Byzantium”), and some of his immediate successors made use of all of the titles and ideological traditions, steppe, Islamic, Romano-Byzantine, and pre-Islamic Near Eastern (i.e. Persian), that were available to them. European rulers, needless to say, were less willing to accept Ottoman claims of Roman imperial heritage (p. 191). The conquest of the Mamlûk state (1516–1517), which brought important elements of the Arabo-Islamic heartland under Ottoman control, together with warfare with Shî‘ite Safavid Iran, strengthened the Sunnî Islamic character of the state. Nonetheless, the regime continued to direct ideological pronouncements to the large Christian minority communities, as well as the Muslim majority. In time, with growing “Sunni Muslim religious rigidity and cultural exclusiveness,” appeals to non-Muslim subjects, as reflected in the use of non-Muslim titles, declined. Even had this pragmatic and tolerant approach continued it would not have saved “the Ottoman ‘state project’ in the era of ascending nationalism” (p.193). Ebba Koch’s “How the Mughal *pâdshâhs* referenced Iran in their visual construction of

universal rule,” underscores the sense of moral superiority that Mughal rulers, such as Akbar, expressed in communications with the Safavids of Iran, highlighting their tolerance towards their non-Muslim subjects and ultimately all of humankind, which rendered them “universal” monarchs (p. 195). Mughal art presented the Mughal *pādshâh* as a physically bigger and more imposing figure than the Safavid shah. Like the Ottomans, Mughal rulers struck situational poses, what Koch terms “a multiple identity” (p.198), determined by the particular Central Asian, Indian, Persian or European monarch they were addressing. Persianate in culture, the Mughals “appropriated the mythical Iranian past,” projecting themselves, rather than the Safavids, as the “true heirs of mythical ancient Persian kingship” (p.209), including the important (and ancient) Persian concept of *khwarena* “divinely illuminated rule” (p.199). It meshed well with Turko-Mongolian traditions, Islamic illuminationism (*ishrâq*) and Indic associations of kingship and the sun.

Velcheru Narayana Rao and Sanjay Subrahmanyam’s “Ideologies of state building in Vijayanagara and post-Vijayanagara south India: some reflections” calls into question the frequent north-south division of Indian historiography dealing with the period ca. 700–1700 (often based on the language competencies of historians). The Vijayanagara (or Karnataka) state, founded ca. mid-14th century in the Deccan, not unlike the Delhi Sultanate, was ruled by a “succession of different lineages” which presented themselves as maintaining “a continuity in rulership” (p.211). The authors suggest that responding to problems of centralization and decentralization, a series of ideological formulations were put forward as the size of the state changed from a bicoastal empire to “a set of compact regional kingdoms” (pp.215–216). Imperial ideology emphasized attendance at ritual performances. It also made use of “literary production,” in particular poetry especially in Telegu, very likely the majority language (inscriptions were also in “Sanskrit, Kannada, Tamil,” p.222–223), to broadcast the emperor’s divine ancestry, martial feats, munificence and “love of poetry.” In the latter half of the 16th century, with the advent of the Nayaka kings, the rulers hitherto collaborators of the god Vishnu, inflated their claims of divine descent, merging god and king and became defiantly spendthrift, engaging in “great public rituals of feeding.” They were depicted as heroes not of the battlefield but of the bedroom, enmeshed in commerce and the material world. As one poem notes, “if he has money, he is king” (pp.226–227). The apotheosis of the Nayaka kings remains problematic and the authors “have no simple answer.” Evelyn S. Rawski in her “Sons of Heaven: the Qing appropriation of the Chinese model of universal empire” examines how the non-Han Jurchens (the Qing dynasty) adopted “the Confucian model of universal rule, based on the Mandate of Heaven,” an ideology with deep roots in China. Although Confucius did not specify Han ethnicity as a prerequisite for the “Mandate of Heaven,” later Confucians did. Rawski might have noted here that the Manchu/Qing were also heirs to the Turko-Mongolian concept of divinely appointed rulers who reigned by virtue of heavenly charisma. The Heavenly Mandate ideology aided the non-Han Jurchen/Qing in their conquest of China. The Qing became patrons of Confucianism and ultimately Sinicized their modes of

governance. Nonetheless, Jurchen/Qing rights to the Mandate of Heaven were challenged by Japan and Korea (Qing subjects), which considered them “barbarians” and envisioned themselves as the “legitimate heirs to the civilized world order” (pp.233, 247, 248). “The universalist aspect of Confucianism enabled conquerors who accepted its norms to win the acquiescence of the Confucian elite” (p.248).

Justyna Olko’s “Aztec universalism: ideology and status symbols in the service of empire-building” provides an excellent introduction for the uninitiated (including this reviewer) to key aspects of Aztec imperial culture. It highlights the occasionally “misunderstood and distorted” role of Aztec religious beliefs and rituals (e.g. human sacrifice, the extent of which is “difficult to estimate,” p.261), and explains the role of the “just war” in their ideology of empire-building. The empire consisting of a core and periphery was administered by “an extensive network connecting elites” bound by a “universalizing elite culture” cemented by economic and marital ties (p. 253). The relationship of the imperial center within the core and between the core and the “outer domains” was complex and varied. The nobility of the imperial core enjoyed a higher status and greater benefits than that of the periphery (p.273). The “Aztec empire” was based on the Triple Alliance (founded c. 1428–31) of Tenochtitlan, Tezcoco and Tlacopan, speakers of Nahuatl, who had constituted a number of polities with a “strong sense of microethnicity.” The *Nahuas*, a term more recently adopted in place of *Aztec* by specialists in Mesoamerican history, possessed a culture of some antiquity that spread beyond the borders of the Triple Alliance. The supreme ruler, the “great speaker,” (the ruler of Tenochtitlan) was associated with “divine fire” a notion “deeply rooted in the Nahua concept of nobility” (pp. 270–271). The “Aztecs” gathered up these polities by war, diplomacy, marital alliances, the integration of “cooperating elites” and “common participation in religious and political events,” (pp.259, 263–273). The result was an imperialistic, “hegemonic empire,” a “pan-regional power” hitherto unknown in the Mesoamerica (p.255).

Peter Haldén’s “From empire to commonwealth(s): orders in Europe 1300–1800” shifts the focus to Europe and the development of the “European order” and international political system (now not limited to Europe, but global in scale), particularly in the 16th-18th centuries (pp.280–281). The modern-day structure, which Haldén terms “universalistic-atomistic, combines ideas of society within and between as well as above bounded systems of power” and is an “heir of medieval universalism” and “early modern attempts to break with it” (p. 303).

John A. Hall provides a brief concluding summation: “Imperial universalism – further thoughts.” Europeans, after the collapse of Marxism, he suggests, are largely “bereft of great ideological ambition,” which has been replaced by consumerism. “Universal claims” seem to be a thing of the past. All the ethnically and culturally diverse empires discussed in this volume, lacking modern resources and means of control (e.g. a “professionalized bureaucracy”), relied on “the ritualistic and symbolic aspects of power” and its “performative aspects.” They sought to give the elites (core and coopted) a vested interest in the state (pp.305–306). Conspicuous displays of imperial wealth and

violence buttressed claims of rulership. Elite power was “horizontal” and in “constant interactions” with the “pretensions of the state” (p.307). Agrarian empires did not so much lord it over their subjects as engage them “in negotiation and compromise,” using a variety of media (monumental art, poetry, philosophy, p.307). The acceptance of a single belief system was expected of the elites, but other strata that were heterodox or of another faith entirely could be left to their own devices – providing they remained quiet. Where possible, composite ideologies drawn from a variety of traditions could be employed. “Pluralism and polyethnicity” were typical of these universal empires. In some states (the Mughal and Qing), ideology became a “tool box,” different elements used as needed both within and outside of their realms, even adopting multiple identities (cf. the Ottoman sultans) to suit their audiences. Universal empire rather than the nation-state (a modern arrival) has been the “default option of the historical record” (p.309).

Curiously absent from this volume are the great universal empires of the steppe, Turkic and Mongol. Perhaps those themes will be treated in future conferences. *Universal Empire* is highly readable and informative, an excellent overview of the theme.

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