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Introduction: Ancient Economies and Global Connections

The purpose of this three-volume handbook is twofold. First, it aims to provide a tool for interdisciplinary research on ancient economies during the imperial period of the third century BCE to the third century CE. Second, it aims to suggest ways of approaching the connectivity of the Afro-Eurasian region from a new economic perspective. It is widely acknowledged that the expansion of relationships between the Afro-Eurasian empires in antiquity was accompanied by the movement of large amounts of goods: fine textiles, leather items, pearls, ivory, dyes, spices, drugs, unguents, animals, and much more. The visibility of such items in places far away from their origin leaves no doubt. Yet the mechanisms by which these goods were mobilized in their areas of production or extraction, and the exchange systems through which they spread into distant locations, are far less certain. We argue that the notion of Silk Road trade based on nineteenth-century perceptions of caravan trade, national economies, and markets is ill-suited to analyzing the nature and dynamics of the connectivity of ancient empires.¹ The chapters of this handbook aim to globalize ancient history without presuming a context that make ancient inter-imperial economic connections a precursor of modern globalization.²

Over the last 15 years, scholarship has seen a proliferation of comparative research on ancient empires.³ The question of connections across Eurasia, in contrast, has suffered relative neglect or has been locked within the flawed notion of the Silk Road. This handbook attempts to shift the problem of connections into a framework that has been developed in world history and world systems theory. It starts from the uncontroversial fact that while ancient imperial courts and historiographers invented empires as ‘one’ and universal, they were neither culturally homogenous nor fully self-sufficient.⁴ The complicated levels of interdependence of imperial and local economies, as well as the diversity of social and ecological landscapes within which exchanges took place, make it hard to approach empires as socio-political ‘containers’ engaging with other such containers via international trade. The concept of inter-imperiality, in contrast, brings into focus local economic and ecological heterogeneity, peripheries, as well as imperial coevolution and global (inter)depen

¹ Christian 2000; Rhezakani 2010; Chin 2013. Hansen 2012, 7–8 and Galli 2017 for the commercial background of the nineteenth-century Silk Road concept.

² Osterhammel 2011; Jennings 2011 for different approaches to globalization in historical perspective.

³ Morris and Scheidel 2009; Scheidel 2009; 2015; Bang and Bayly 2011; Gehler and Rollinger 2014; Monson and Scheidel 2015.

⁴ Barkey 2008; Burbank and Cooper 2010; Düring and Stek 2018.

gency structures.⁵ It focuses attention on regions and landscapes at the edges and in between empires as nodes of exchange and interaction.⁶ Much recent historical and archaeological research has established ancient imperial peripheries and frontier zones as distinct regions of economic activity and connectivity.⁷ Frontier zones are strongly affected by, and affect, imperial development and the fiscal-military politics of nearby or overarching empires. At the same time, frontier zone economies have their own logics, develop special economic opportunities as a result of their location, and in turn have important effects on imperial consolidation.⁸ In the context of inter-imperial exchange, they are not peripheral but central. The focus on frontier zone processes allows us to analyze long-distance trade within the Afro-Eurasian inhabited world, giving due recognition to the fact that this trade was mediated and often shaped by local or at most regional exchange networks with profound imperial impact.

The chronological frame we have chosen for the handbook aims to slice out a historically meaningful period in ancient world history.⁹ The centuries between 300 BCE and 300 CE form a distinct period of dynamic empire formation and transformation in the Afro-Eurasian zone.¹⁰ The Hellenistic Empires forming in the aftermath of the conquests of Alexander the Great at the end of the fourth century BCE for the first time created imperial connections between the Greek mainland, Egypt, the Red Sea, and western and Central Asia as far as northern India and the Pamir mountains. At roughly the same time, the Qin and Han dynasties formed the first multiethnic empire in East Asia, while the Mauryans developed what might be called imperial corridors through the Indian subcontinent. In a process of imperial coevolution, the Xiongnu in the Inner Asian steppe promoted greater degrees of political cohesion alongside the Qin and Han, while the Arsakids (Parthians) emerged as a new imperial power independent of the Seleukids, spreading from the Central Asian steppe into western Asia in the course of the third century BCE. The end of the period is marked by significant imperial transformation across Afro-Eurasia, which profoundly affected the nature of connectivity. Explicit textual references to long-distance commercial trade along overland routes reaching from China via Sogdiana into Central Asia to markets in northern Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean increase in the fourth century CE.¹¹ Before that time, similarly explicit evidence concentrates on the maritime routes between India, the Arabian Peninsula and Egypt, and between the Persian Gulf and Syria via the Euphrates and Palmyra.¹²

⁵ L. Doyle 2014a; 2014b; see also Turchin 2009.

⁶ Sahadeo 2011.

⁷ Cherry 2007; Düring and Stek 2018, 3–6 with further bibliography.

⁸ Rodseth and Parker 2005; Reger 2017; Boozer 2018.

⁹ Bentley 1996; McKeon 2012; Brosseder 2015, 200–203.

¹⁰ Turchin 2009 within a different argument.

¹¹ Hansen 2012, 19–21; Kolb and Speidel 2017.

¹² Young 2001; Evers 2016; Cobb 2018.

This discrepancy is not accidental, we argue, but the consequence of geopolitical, imperial, and religious change. From the time of the fourth century CE onward, the Roman Empire and the integration of its frontier zones changed significantly. By the fifth and sixth centuries, the imperial world of the Mediterranean and western Asia had transformed into what has been called a “commonwealth of kingdoms,” or “empires of faith.”¹³ They marked the beginning of new social and religious orders, a greater mobility of people, and new forms of identity emerging from religious rather than imperial ideologies of belonging.¹⁴ In East, South, and Central Asia, the imperial context changed likewise, though in different ways, with the fall of the Han dynasty, the decline of the Kushan Empire, and the subsequent fragmentation of Central Asia. Yet, the mobility of religious groups and Buddhist forms of ritual expression and art drove new common identities, exchange, and interaction between Indian, Central Asian, and Chinese communities.¹⁵ The imperial world of the previous period was conducive to global connections, too, but in very different ways.

Imperial formations strongly influence local economies and the flow of resources and agrarian surplus. Empires are defined as multiethnic political entities, usually created by conquest, held together by a fiscal-tributary regime, and dominated by a political center that exerts some form of power over its constituencies and far distant peripheries.¹⁶ Despite their relatively loose control over regions and local populations, empires create – like more tightly integrated states – a certain degree of institutional stability through administrative and material infrastructures, protection, access to adjudication, and sometimes common coinages.¹⁷ However, being less well integrated than modern nation-states, imperial polities are better approached in terms of overlapping local, regional, and trans-regional exchange networks rather than as national market economies governed by effective state policy, regulation of coinage, and cohesive structures of contractual law.¹⁸ At the same time, the ability of hegemonic emperors to concentrate resources through oppressive fiscal-military regimes leads to the growth of nodes of consumption in the form of spectacular imperial courts and royal cities, large imperial armies, and a gradual increase of administrative institutionalization as a result of tribute extraction and

13 Fowden 1993; Sarris 2011.

14 Beautifully described by Brown 2018.

15 Neelis 2010; 2012.

16 Classically formulated by M. Doyle 1986, and comparative studies in, e.g., Alcock et al. 2001; Burbank and Cooper 2010; Cline and Graham 2011; Bang and Bayly 2011; Hurllet 2008; Gehler and Rollinger 2014; Stek and Düring 2018.

17 Allsen 2011.

18 Ristvet 2018 for the term network empire. The development of more integrated market economies in the course of empire consolidation and greater degrees of state integration has been discussed intensely in connection with the Roman Empire and its long-term development from the second century BCE to the third century CE; see, e.g., Eich and Eich 2005; Scheidel 2015.

imperial governance. Effective extraction of tribute, as Shmuel Eisenstadt has famously argued, mobilizes resources and agricultural surplus that otherwise are locked into the claims and consumption regimes of local aristocracies, religious institutions, and other rural or urban hierarchies.¹⁹ In many imperial formations, the disposable economic surplus may not increase through increased productivity and technological change, but through the mobilization of local resources and their subsequent entry into larger circuits of exchange. It has been suggested therefore that the organizing principles of the economies of tributary empires are likely to have differed from the political economies of nation-states.²⁰ Production regimes were influenced by fiscal extraction and imperial consumption rather than by market forces. And capital accumulation was not achieved by capital investment and productive credit, but by what Subrahanjaman and Bayly have called “portfolio capitalism”: entrepreneurial strategies of making agricultural surplus disposable through market institutions, which were mobilized by fiscal demand.²¹

The emphasis on particular principles of imperial economies does not dispute the potential of ancient empires to increase productivity, to stimulate market exchange, credit, and private economic initiative, leading to better economic performance. It does not dispute the interest of local governments and private economic agents in improving management structures, technology, and institutional infrastructures. But it calls for the need to understand such developments as processes demanding explanation, rather than simply being taken for granted in a grand narrative of market development and global commercial trade. It is our contention that frontier zone development had important feedback effects on the empires in the Afro-Eurasian region, that it stimulated inter-imperial connectivity, as well as local, regional, and imperial economic development.

This handbook proceeds in three steps in order to develop these various lines of thought in the framework of interdisciplinary research. In the first volume we discuss historical, evidentiary, and historiographic contexts that are indispensable for understanding trans-imperial connectivity. These contexts provide an introduction to historical discussions and a foundation for comparative analyses. Moreover, they develop transparent and reflexive lines of inquiry about how evidentiary and historiographic discrepancies have affected historical understanding, particularly in a trans-regional and interdisciplinary setting. One of the big challenges of interdisciplinary work is the question of how to cut across disciplinary boundaries. Collaborative volumes tend to produce parallel demonstrations with little dialog between individual contributions. Single-author publications, by contrast, have a basis in one field combined with limited expertise in others. In order to overcome some of these obstacles, the chapters of this volume have been written by an inter-

19 Eisenstadt (1963) 2010, xvi, 33–68.

20 Bang 2007; 2008.

21 Bang 2007, 25; Subrahanjaman and Bayly 1988.

disciplinary team that has collaborated on a daily basis. By providing in-depth analyses, each of which being targeted at readers who are external to that particular field, we aim to provide a foundation for more informed interdisciplinary dialog.

The first section of the volume provides contextual information about the Afro-Eurasian world zone in the form of historical overviews. The pioneering studies of ancient global trade, still resonating in more recent work, attributed to particular empires specific functions in the movement of goods from East to West: China and India, with their wealth in precious resources consumed as luxuries elsewhere, were the suppliers; the elites of the Hellenistic and Roman Empires were the consumers; and the poorly documented polities and mobile pastoralist spaces of Inner and Central Asia were attributed the sad role of having been mere transit zones.²² With our discussions of these empires, we aim to open the debate about their functions by outlining each empire as a heterogeneous socio-political space that filled multiple roles in exchange circuits of various kinds and scales.

Ancient empires, moreover, are known to us through very uneven sorts and volumes of evidence. The second context presented in this volume is, therefore, a series of chapters that discuss the different types of evidence and the methodologies of interpretation that have been brought to bear on economic history across the region. Discrepancies between the evidentiary bodies lie behind many of the false assumptions that underpin modern accounts of ancient Afro-Eurasian connectivity. Working with this material requires bringing together very separate textual traditions and archaeologies in order to overcome imbalances in the data, a process that requires great care. The final part of the first volume situates ancient economic histories and Silk Road studies within a third context: that of particular historiographical and disciplinary traditions. Not only have different scientific communities approached economic history differently, but these histories have played different roles in processes of national identity formation and the national self-positioning in local or imperial pasts. Tracing several discourses concerning the study of Afro-Eurasian economic history helps to explain the divergent nature of contemporary conversations about this space, while also contextualizing the work of previous generations of scholars and increasing its legibility and reconsideration within our own frameworks.

In the second volume we identify economic structures and developments that allowed resources, goods, and capital to concentrate as well as to spread into frontier zones. Over the last generations, economic history, archaeology, and anthropology have seen a large amount of theoretical work which has increased our understanding of economic development in vastly different social and ecological settings. We will use these insights in order to develop models of explanation and

²² Chase-Dunn and Hall 1977, 149–187; Cameron and Neal 1986, 20–43. Examples of more recent work include Fitzpatrick 2011 and many studies on Indo-Roman trade; Chakravarti 2015 for discussion.

methods of analysis that are suitable for comparative research at a global scale. We start from nodes of acquisition and consumption that are visible in the archaeological and textual records in the form of households, temples, cities, and capitals, as well as armies that were stationed in some cases permanently in imperial frontier zones. Taking into consideration the diversity of social systems, ecologies, and evidence across the ancient Afro-Eurasian world region, our investigation will be divided into “actors” and “tools” that stimulated extraction, concentration, and circulation. As actors we define administrative systems, social groups, and individuals as much as institutions and landscapes. These actors deployed or acted upon certain tools of extraction, concentration and circulation: money, markets, technology, legal systems, and physical infrastructures. Through these broad categories of analysis we hope to compare and explain different kinds and scales of economic development across the Afro-Eurasian empires without underprivileging regions that have left notoriously difficult evidence.

In the third volume, we will analyze frontier zones and borderlands as sites of social and imperial encounters as well as network formation.²³ Much recent work has been devoted to analyzing frontiers and borderlands as distinct spaces. They are recognized as specific sites of imperial encounter and interaction in the form of negotiation and appropriation, but also resistance and violence.²⁴ Combining recent research foci and the expertise of the researchers collaborating on this handbook, the volume will focus on a particular selection of frontier zones, such as the Egyptian Eastern Desert, Syria, the Ponto-Caspian zone, the Hindu Kush, forested Central India, and the Hexi corridor. While the second volume considers forms of economic development in frontier zones, the chapters of the third volume take a more complex approach to borderland processes. Borderlands and frontiers often form along and across open boundaries between agrarian, pastoral, and coastal communities, as well as along and across different ecologies that require different economic and social strategies.²⁵ Such dividing lines suggest, both theoretically and empirically, more complicated scenarios for the movements of goods than is captured by the idea of trade from empire to empire. The second part of this volume will thus turn to the nature of exchange networks within and across imperial frontiers, and their connections to local, regional, and imperial hinterlands. Although, given the structure of available datasets, formal network approaches are only occasionally applicable, we nevertheless favor network perspectives as they are less loaded with economic presumptions than market concepts.²⁶ Networks and markets are two spatial

23 Boozer 2018, 209–214 for a discussion of the concepts of frontier zone and borderland, often used interchangeably. Brosseder 2015 for the different anthropological models and network theories that have been applied to long-distance exchange in recent archaeological and anthropological research.

24 Ristvet 2018.

25 Stek and Düring 2018, 357–358.

26 Brosseder 2015, 209–210.

expressions of exchange that relate small intensive and large extensive circuits of exchange together, often under particular local social, military, religious, and administrative circumstances.²⁷ There is no doubt that much exchange in frontier zones took the form of trade via marketplaces, as markets provide a unique degree of condensation of interaction, as well as great opportunities for institutional and fiscal control. Yet the concept of the market – so closely related to the debates over national economies – underrepresents the social dimensions of exchange, the heterogeneity of its motivations, and its social complexity.²⁸ The profound importance of inter-imperial exchange for empire formation and transformation will emerge against the backdrop of these complications in a combination of micro-perspectives and their relevance to understanding larger circuits of exchange connecting vast geographical distances.

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²⁷ See the contributions in Knappett 2013; Leidwanger and Knappett 2018.

²⁸ Classically, Granovetter 1985; also Bang 2008.

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