

State Power in Ancient China and Rome. Edited by WALTER SCHEIDEL. Oxford Studies in Early Empires. Oxford University Press, Oxford 2015. ISBN 978-0-19-02022-48. XVII, 303 pp. GBP 65.

We live in a post-imperial world, where the legacies of the great empires still dominate the political and social landscape. Our relationship to the concept of imperialism has changed dramatically in recent years, and where once empires were praised and admired, now nations are becoming distinctly embarrassed or uneasy with their own imperial heritage. Yet they have shaped our own modern political landscapes, as well as those of the ancient, medieval and early modern periods. The study of empire, and the structures that belong to it, are as essential now as they ever were. The historical past can be a dangerous thing when used by politicians of any political stance, and the word and image of empire needs to be examined in as many different ways as possible, not to glorify it, nor to demean it, but instead to recognise the historical realities that govern and guide imperial growth, maintenance and decline. There are many ways of doing this, but comparative history offers many advantages. In dissecting empires and divorcing them from individualistic study, it is possible to strip away meaningless impressions of 'good' or 'bad' and instead think about the complex political and social frameworks created and maintained within imperial structures. It is a door that has been opened by Walter Scheidel and others before, and this volume is a welcome addition to the field of comparative imperial history. Scheidel notes in the introduction '[t]he dramatic expansion of the scale of human cooperation has been the most important development in social evolution' (3), and this wide-ranging scope motivates much of the work.

The opening chapter by Peter Fibiger Bang and Karen Turner is one of the strongest in the volume ('Kingship and Elite Formation', 11–38). Here the two historians demonstrate not just how useful a blended writing process can be to undertake historical research, but also the many benefits looking at the two empires can bring to both sides of the equation. Although notably different in certain respects, the two empires both sought to place their own definitions of imperial rule in opposition to dictatorial or tyrannical power: '[b]oth the Han Dynasty and the Roman principate of Augustus were presented as alternatives to the rule of a self-serving despot' (11). The evidence drawn upon is discussed with great care and precision, and throughout the audience is reminded of just what can be achieved by thinking about the two empires in unison. T. Corey Brennan's chapter ('Toward a Comparative Understanding of the Executive Decision-Making Process in China and Rome', 56–89) follows on well, in looking at decision making, and demonstrating important structural parallels regarding debate, consensus and the role of the court. Again there are important differences but these two chapters present an excellent opening up of comparative analysis and reach entirely persuasive and careful conclusions.

The next two chapters are best read alongside one another, to gain a sense of similarity and difference between East and West. Dingxin Zhao ('The Han Bureaucracy: Its Origin, Nature, and Development', 56–89) provides a fascinating discussion of the Western Han Empire, demonstrating not just how the system created a sense of the past, but how it could alter and change in response to wider influences. The Han bureaucracy appears as a highly organised and sophisticated in parts but one with issues and concerns, certainly true of overlapping jurisdictional areas between the various bureaus (which Zhao notes may have been about checks and balances, 66). This is a very well-structured chapter, that works through rankings, recruitment and promotion, performance checks, Confucianism

as an ideology and the issues within the system. The comparisons with Rome are fleeting, but useful, such as when he writes: [w]hile a Roman emperor was above all a military leader and was expected to rule the state actively, the Han emperor was expected to act as a ritual head and to reign in a passive manner' (64) and '[i]t was the installation of Confucianism as an ethos of bureaucracy that set the imperial China bureaucracy apart from the Roman bureaucracy and patterned the dynamics of Chinese history' (75). The chapter by Peter Eich ('The Common Denominator: Late Roman Imperial Bureaucracy from a Comparative Perspective', 90–149) is much longer and more extensive. There is a little bit too much focus on Weber in the beginning, which distracts from what otherwise is an admirable and authoritative survey of Roman bureaucracy. Recognizing that Rome can appear non-bureaucratic, there still existed 'spheres of responsibility', hierarchy, and record keeping (94). The great strength to this chapter is how carefully Eich builds his argument, and how precise and astute the analysis offered, when looking to Egypt (118–128) and later Roman administration (133–140). The chapter by Walter Scheidel ('State Revenue and Expenditure in the Han and Roman Empires', 150–180) provides an excellent counterpoint to the perspectives of Zhao and Eich, by thinking about fiscal realities. Although recognising that some aspects of this may appear somewhat conjectural, the conclusions reached are compelling. Scheidel is able to demonstrate that both appear as 'low-tax regimes' (178), with substantial differences that illuminate the variances in imperial practice. The Roman Empire for instance appears to spend rather more on the military, and those at the top of the Roman career ladder earned considerably more than their equivalents in the Han government.

The final three chapters look to urban areas (Carlos F. Noreña, 'Urban Systems in the Han and Roman Empires: State Power and Social Control', 181–203; Mark Edward Lewis, 'Public Spaces in Cities in the Roman and Han Empires, 204–229) and religious practice (Michael Puett, 'Ghosts, Gods, and the Coming Apocalypse: Empire and Religion in Early China and Ancient Rome, 230–259). The chapter by Puett appears a touch out of place, and although the points made are promising regarding religious infrastructure, it would have benefitted either from being coupled with one or more other investigations into religion and empire; or more comparison within the chapter itself. Noreña tackles the extent to which cities were parts of Han and Roman power, and how they could serve as tools of domination. He argues that for the Han Empire 'state power was mostly direct and interventionist in its impact on urbanization' while in Rome it was the opposite, if 'still very intrusive' (183). By looking at Chang'an and the city of Rome he paints an excellent perspective on how the capital cities were so different, and this is born out too in the discussion of artificial cities. Lewis provides a convincing exploration of public space, exposing once again fundamental differences between Han and Roman Empires, reflecting differences in control of the space, as well as the dissimilar audiences and their expectations.

To close, this is a fascinating and persuasive depiction of two of the most important empires of the ancient world. In providing such a detailed analysis of both, this book allows not just for an implicit defence of comparative history but demands that we as scholars ask new questions about familiar topics and subjects. The different approaches to comparative history here, by scholars writing together, or leaning is important, but so too is the wider concern, that the language and practice of empire must be reclaimed by historians.

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