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Vinolen John
MPhil in World History,
Empires in Comparative
Perspective, Faculty of
History, University of
Cambridge, Cambridge, United
Kingdom

Have empires been the typical form of large-scale societal organization over the past two millennia?

Vinolen John

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Abstract

This paper offers a critical examination of empire as a dominant form of large-scale societal organization over the past two millennia. Beginning with the conceptual and etymological evolution of the term *empire*, particularly its Roman roots in *imperium*, the study explores the ambiguity and historical variability of the concept across cultures and time periods. It situates the Roman Empire as a central case study, analyzing the administrative institutions, military structures, economic foundations, and cultural strategies that enabled its durability and expansive reach. The discussion further compares imperial formations in China, the Islamic world, and medieval Europe, highlighting how religion, sovereignty, and universalist ideologies shaped imperial governance. In addition to examining tributary empires, the paper considers alternative societal organizations such as city-states, tribal confederations, feudal systems, and imperial commonwealths, emphasizing the fluid and evolving nature of political structures. Finally, the study reflects on the enduring legacies of empire in the modern world, arguing that imperial logics continue to influence contemporary global politics and institutions. Through a comparative and historical lens, this paper underscores the importance of understanding empire not merely as a historical phenomenon but as a continuing force in shaping world history.

Keywords: Empire, imperium, roman empire

Introduction

Throughout history, the impulse to collaborate and organize has been intrinsic to humans who have formed societal organizations and forms of collaboration from the earliest of times. The journey of humanity from scattered bands of hunter-gatherers to complex civilizations is a testament to the profound capacity for social cooperation that defines us. As Aristotle put it 'man is by nature a social animal', indeed we are and seem to have always been *zoon politikon*. There is naturally a significant amount of time in between the evolution from rudimentary groupings of early humans to the sophisticated structures of early civilizations. This essay is a critical examination of large-scale societal organizations of humans in the form of empires over the past two millennia. Of course, what is and what isn't an empire itself is a question which has been highly debated ever since the inception of the term itself, we will first delve into these discussions in order to establish a foundational understanding for the rest of the paper. Then I attempt to place these definitions into a historical context and look at the emergence of empires in world history - with particular focus on the Roman Empire - factors contributing to their growth, their characteristics and briefly touch upon their eventual decline in order to broaden the scope of understanding this dynamic phenomenon. This paper also considers arguments and proponents of alternative models of societal organization. Subsequently, we look at how 'empire' as a social formation has impacted human history and how its legacy and influence survives till date.

The rule of officials is over their fiefs. The rule of dukes and princes is over feudal states. But all under heaven belongs to the Emperor, and the Emperor is for the people ^[1].

In the vast and expansive history of human civilization, it is indeed a difficult task for a

Corresponding Author:
Vinolen John
MPhil in World History,
Empires in Comparative
Perspective, Faculty of
History, University of
Cambridge, Cambridge, United
Kingdom

¹ The Ancient Chinese concept of 'Tianxia' whereby all the warring states of Ancient China would be united under the 'Son of God', and all under heaven (the whole world) will be under his rule ushering in a period of harmony.

historian to pinpoint the time when the first empires emerged. Aside from the problem of the lack of historical and archaeological records (at least with regards to the earliest deemed to be 'empires'), one of the biggest stumbling blocks one may face is the ambiguity surrounding the term itself, and its interpretation in a historical context. How can one tackle the meaning of a term - or the concept behind it - which is almost as old as the construct itself which it attempts to elucidate, *let alone* one which continues to change with time? Yes indeed, the word 'empire' ever since its inception has meant different things to different people from different places at different periods of time and also very often meant different things to people from the same place at the same time and therefore has naturally been employed deliberately in different contexts to convey different ideas and meanings [2].

It is therefore imperative to understand what it implies when we use the term 'empire' before we actually begin looking at the earliest inceptions of these grand societal formations. Let us begin by looking at the etymology of the term itself, which traces its roots to Latin and to Rome, a name that is almost synonymous with all subsequent discussions regarding the concept of empire. The word 'empire' derives from the Latin word *imperium*, a term that was fundamental to the process of the expansion of Roman military and political power in the third and second centuries BC. It initially seems to have been used to refer to the power held by an official in Rome but eventually metamorphosed to acquire the meaning of a physical, geographical, and territorial space [3]. In due course of time, it was extended to mean Rome's right to control and command over the peoples it had subjugated, and some have argued that at this point of time, this concept was well defined and narrow enough to clearly demarcate the boundaries to the extent of what its use signifies [4]. This being said, it must be noted that it was not always part and parcel of a generally accepted concept, because right from the onset of the inception of this term, there have been debates and disagreements regarding its usage and what it signifies. For some it served as the 'bedrock of peace and posterity, the foundation of law and civilization', and thus a fundamental pillar for legal systems and societal progress in Roman Society, while there were others who viewed it as 'a source of slavery and oppression' with Cicero famously initiating such charges after launching a prosecution of a provincial governor for abuse of his powers [5].

However, in an attempt to embark on a study of conceptual history, one is bound to fall victim to certain limitations. In this regard, I agree with Peter Fibiger Bang who puts forward the argument that the study of conceptual history lacks the breadth to serve as the foundation for a comprehensive world history. Its scope is too narrow, confined to the literature and discussions of particular languages, making it difficult to transcend time periods, cultural boundaries, and certainly not entire civilizations. He

uses the example of a scholar specializing in the works of Hobbes stating that he prefers to stick with his works written in English due to the problems one faces when translations of the same work are read in another language leading to the creation of completely different meanings [6]. An example of this case in a rather more problematic context I would like to highlight would be the case of translation when it comes to religious texts like the translation of the Hebrew Bible into different languages both mainstream and vernacular and the problems of interpretation it causes [7]. This methodological problem certainly applies to the concept of empire as well, in the sense that many other cultures 'beyond the reach of the romance language community' lack concepts identical to that of empire although there are analogous ideas and concepts in existence in different parts of the world at around the same time - and some even before - the Roman Empire was at its peak. Almost 2 centuries before Augustus was proclaimed *imperium* or emperor of Rome, large parts of China had for the first time in history been united under an empire of the Qin Dynasty in 221 BC, this was the first imperial dynasty in China and its ruler Qin Shi Huang took the title *Huangdi* which was a combination of *Huang* (God-King) and *Di* (Sage-King) which was used for ancient mythological rulers and proclaimed himself what would be an equivalent of the Western Concept of 'Emperor' [8]. However, differences exist. Unlike the Romans, the Chinese identified empire not with a socio-political system established on the foundations of conquest and with the right to rule resting on the concept of sovereignty, but in terms of the person of the emperor, his activities, and his lineage, the legitimacy of the 'Son of Heaven' held paramount importance [9]. Therefore, it must be noted that for a historian it becomes important to diverge from the Roman-derived conception of empire. That being said, if we continue our quest for looking at worthy candidates to fit the generally accepted definition of what an empire is or should be, we find that even a hundred years before Imperial China, Chandragupta Maurya had completed a conquest of the Indo-Gangetic plains in 322 BC and founded what in many respects is the first pan-Indian empire and at around the same time Alexander the Great brought the boundaries of the Macedonian Empire beyond the Indus River. One could even go beyond that and mention other empires like those of the Persians, the Assyrians and the Babylonians, the list could go on - it is evident that imperialism and conquest were from the beginning a classic feature of empire building the world over. And interestingly all of these Ancient pre-Roman empires had ideological foundations which differed from the idea of the *Imperium Romanum* and indeed even from one another, and although these Ancient empires served as a model to the modern empires, they differed from these latter-day empires [10]. That being said, what is

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ See Thomas Brett, A Dissertation on the Ancient Versions of the Bible, (Printed for W. Owen, at Homers Head, Temple Bar).

⁸ Michael Loewe, 'China's First Empire', History Today, 57:9 (2007); Also see World and Its Peoples: Eastern and Southern Asia, (Marshall Cavendish Corporation, 2007), p.47.

⁹ Robin D.S. Yates, 'Cosmos, central authority, and communities in the early Chinese empire' in Empires: Perspectives from Archaeology and History, ed. Susan E Alcock, (Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.351-353.

¹⁰ Jonathan Hart, Empires and Colonies, (Polity Press, 2008), p.6.

² D. C. B. Lieven, Empire: The Russian Empire and its rivals, (London: John Murray Ltd, 2000), p.3.

³ John Richardson, The Language of Empire: Rome and the Idea of Empire from the Third Century BC to the Second Century AD, (Cambridge University Press, 2008), p.8-9.

⁴ Lieven, Empire, p.8-9.

⁵ Peter Fibiger Bang, 'Empire- A World History: Anatomy and Concept, Theory and Synthesis' in The Oxford World History of Empire, (Oxford University Press, 2020), p.12.

important to note is that in spite of their varied distinctions, one obvious implication was that these early empires acted as large scale state-formations, and completely transformed the nature of the largely agrarian pre-industrial human societies of that time ushering in urbanization and the development of comprehensive social structures. And each one of these entities continued to strain the notion of empire even more. However, I must at this moment point out that to go down this path would be to transcend beyond the scope of this paper and therefore the few empires discussed here would be limited to ones that emerged in the past 2 millennia.

Taking into consideration the evolutionary nature of the concept through various historical periods, cultural contexts, and linguistic shifts, the scholar Anthony Pagden highlights three essential understandings of the notion of empire with the third and final acquiring its modern meaning in the early eighteenth century ^[11]. Firstly he points out that the term invokes a basic sense of authority or rule and over centuries of discourses in the medieval period has revolved around 'sovereignty' as a basic feature. A second understanding of the term stems from its 'non-subordinate' characteristic, through which even states without significant external territorial control could refer to themselves as empires insofar as they remain sovereign and not subordinate to or dependent upon any other power. The third notion according to him is more or less the more familiar modern meaning understanding of the term, whereby an empire is seen as 'an expansive polity incorporating political and cultural unity created out of a diversity of different states widely separated in space'. He points out that this was realized as early as the first century CE by Roman Historian Sallust who coined the term *Imperium Romanum* to describe the geographical extent of Roman rule over different lands inhabited by different people, and the same notion can be seen employed by Edmund Burke in the late eighteenth century describing the Spanish and British Empires as 'extensive and detached empires' ^[12].

*Others, no doubt, will better mound the bronze, to the semblance of soft breathing,
draw out living countenance from the marble, plead their causes better,
With greater eloquence, learn to measure, better than we,
the pathways of the heavens, the risings of the stars;
remember, Roman,
To rule the people under law, to establish the way of peace,
To spare the conquered and to battle down the proud,
These are our arts, forever* ^[13].

This section is a quest for praxis, where I attempt to contextualize the concept of empire we have seen thus far and examine how they emerged as the typical form of large-scale societal organizations around which human life and activities revolved for the past two millennia. These empires according to most scholars shared a characteristic wherein they were primarily tributary in nature, rather than being

driven by commercial or colonial pursuits. Essentially, their foundations were rooted in the conquest of extensive agrarian territories and the imposition of taxes on the surplus agricultural production of peasants. Through their expansive reach, these empires managed to subsume many rival entities, relegating them to either tax-paying provinces or dependent client kingdoms. Their monarchs envisioned themselves as universal emperors, asserting their supremacy over all other sovereigns ^[14].

We have already mentioned the Roman Empire which is again important for our discussion. From the power of the Pope and the Roman Church to recurrent representations of the Colosseum and the Roman Legions in popular culture, Rome continues to hold a firm grip in the imaginations of the people 2000 years down the line. This city-state, right at the center of the Mediterranean, first emerged in the sixth century BC and gradually evolved from a monarchy to a republic. It continued to expand and came out on top in an environment of rivaling states forming in the region and united the greater Mediterranean under its first emperor Augustus at the turn of the first century CE - although it was an empire long before it had an 'emperor', reminding us that there is no incompatibility between empire and republican government, under which it acquired enormous amounts of territory ^[15]. However, as mentioned before, empires were not invented here, empires had come and gone in Mesopotamia, Africa, Egypt, India, and Asia for many hundreds of years. At the very moment when Romans were putting their small city-state into republican order, Alexander had already conquered as far east as Punjab, however, the Great Macedonian's empire depended on the presence of his army and perished not long after his death while Rome managed to sustain control over enormous territories for centuries. Why so? A curious question for any reader. The answers lay in its administrative institutions, their legitimizing strategies, and their relations with outsiders ^[16]. Through innovative political structures, Rome efficiently managed a vast military force, incentivized cooperation with the imperial center, and promoted a compelling culture centered around military strength, rule-based governance, divine authority, and civic virtues. The Roman political and cultural innovations including citizenship and their rule of law attracted both traditional and emerging elites to participate in governance and military service. Crucially it also absorbed cultural achievements of earlier empires into its civilization, accommodating local religions and laws, when a new land and its people were conquered, they became not the subjugated and the conquered but Roman citizens with access to the 'Roman ways' - Roman roads, Roman architecture, Roman writing, Roman festivals ^[17]. Yes Imperialism and conquest were key to the growth of the Roman Empire, but they seem to have found the perfect Machiavelian balance, as the Florentine statesman put it 'However strong your armies may be, you always need the

¹¹ Anthony Pagden, *Lords of All the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain and France C. 1500-c. 1800*, (Yale University Press, 1995), p.12.

¹² Ibid. p.13-14.

¹³ Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. C. Day Lewis, (OUP Oxford, 2008), p.847-53.

¹⁴ Peter Fibiger Bang, and C. A. Bayly, eds., *Tributary Empires in Global History*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p.6-7.

¹⁵ Peter Fidiberg Bang, *The Oxford World History of Empire*, p.56; Also see, Brennan, T. Corey, *The Praetorship in the Roman Republic: Origins to 122 BC*, vol. 1., (OUP USA, 2000), 39-40.

¹⁶ Jane Burbank, and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference*, (Princeton University Press, 2011), p.23.

¹⁷ Ibid. p.24.

backing of the local people to take over a province' ^[18]. As with all imperial powers its military was its most important direct asset and with a link between citizenship and military service, it ensured that forces could be put up in even newly acquired territories as the subjects became Roman citizens by serving for a specified period of time in the army and victorious generals were known to grant citizenship to individuals far away from Rome. This was in turn possible because Roman citizenship 'came to be desired by non-Romans' and was seen as a privilege due to their access to political participation, legal protection, and governance under Roman law thus gaining certain rights and economic opportunities ^[19]. Although women, children, and slaves were barred from most of these privileges, and of course those who were not Roman citizens and were considered 'outsiders'.

A discussion of any 'large-scale societal organization' would be incomplete without acknowledging one of the main components that fuel its success - its economy. The Romans were not very different from other forms of settled societies during their time in the sense that their system of wealth relied on agriculture, precious metals and other natural resources, and the trade and transport of these assets, however they established structures in place which facilitated the amplification of these processes - such as setting up of mechanisms to count, extract and distribute state revenue, complex system of census for tax collection - to a scale which was able to maintain a cohesiveness to a territorial entity like never seen before. A big chunk of the labor force was composed of slaves who served as a backbone for the Roman economy working in *latifundia* or landed estates, indeed owning of slaves was ingrained as an important characteristic of Roman society. The Roman Empire seems to have had everything in its repertoire - a centralized system of governance, military prowess facilitating imperial expansion, and strategies of cultural assimilation enabling it to maintain control over diverse populations and regions for such a long period of time until its eventual decline by the third century CE due to internal problems as well as external threats and constant invasions, however, the imperial system took hundreds of years to disintegrate due to the strong framework that served as its foundation until its eventual demise by 476 CE, but let us not forget that this date signified the end of only the Western Roman Empire, for this colossal institution that was the Roman Empire had by then split into two with its eastern half the Byzantine Empire continuing for another millennia ^[20].

By the time the Edict of Milan was proclaimed by Roman Emperor Constantine in 313 AD, we see what has been characterized as the beginning of the prominence of religion - Christianity in this case - with empire, a feature of empire and state-building which would take center stage for the next millennia or so ^[21]. Other than Byzantium in the Eastern Mediterranean and Anatolia, Christianity was to play a pivotal role in the post-Roman empires that rose in

the West most notably with the Franks, a phenomenon immortalized by a single event - the symbolic coronation of Charlemagne of the Carolingian Dynasty as the Holy Roman Emperor by the pope in 800 AD at Rome, signaling a close association between the papacy and the state ^[22]. These processes however were not unique to the West alone, in the Middle East another of the three Abrahamic faiths was taking a foothold and by the death of Prophet Muhammad in 632 AD, most of the Arabian peninsula had come under Islamic rule ^[23]. The Rashidun, the Umayyad, and the Abbasid are a few examples of powerful 'caliphates' that emerged with Islam predominantly serving as the creed of these strong imperial governments. The caliphate served as both the religious and political leadership of the Muslim community or the *ummah*. The caliph was considered the successor or *khalifa* to the Prophet Muhammad and held temporal and spiritual authority over the Islamic lands ^[24]. Empires on the lines of universalist and monotheist religion emerged in the Middle East that outgrew even the ancient Persians.

Empires do not last; they are just a phase in history ^[25].

In any sociological attempt to trace human societal development from the earliest of times the problem one is bound to stumble upon is one of conceptualizing alternatives to the homogenous and compact nation-state. Sociologists like Michael Mann have worked on alternate models of understanding states and societies as open-ended, constituting multiple overlapping and intersecting sociospatial networks of power, in relation to empires ^[26]. While we have discussed the prominent role played by empires as an agent of large-scale societal organizations, this does not mean that they are the sole form of political entities that played this role.

A great starting point for this endeavor is once again, Rome. For what was Rome before it became a vast multi-continental empire? A city-state. Of other such examples, the most famous would probably be the independent and self-governing urban centers of Ancient Greece in the form of the Greek city-states, notable ones being Athens, Sparta, Corinth, and Thebes amongst many others. Perhaps one could include in this list the ancient rival of Rome itself, Carthage. And just as large empires came and went, so did city-states, sometimes able to successfully retain their autonomy against humongous external entities such as empires while other times getting completely devoured, while others - like Rome - went on to become larger entities themselves through territorial conquest. But one thing is for certain, these societal organizations have definitely always been in existence throughout the past 2 millennia with the likes of Venice, Florence, Genoa, Milan, and Rome playing a central role during the Renaissance and a perfect contemporary example exists in the form of Singapore

¹⁸ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. N. H. Thompson, (Dover Publications, 1992), 5.

¹⁹ Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History*, p.29.

²⁰ Michael Grant, *History of Rome*, (Book Club Associates, 1978), 353-54.

²¹ W. H. C. Frend, *The Early Church: from the beginnings to 461*, (SCM Press, 2003), p.137.

²² Richard E Sullivan, ed., *The Coronation of Charlemagne: What Did It Signify?*, (Boston: D.C. Heath and Co., 1959), p.2.

²³ Amira K. Bennison, 'Empire and Religion' in *Tributary Empires in Global History*, Peter Bang Fibiiger, and C. A. Bayly, eds., (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p.318-41.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Quote by Bernard Lewis.

²⁶ Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power: Volume 1, A History of Power from the Beginning to AD 1760*, (Cambridge University Press, 1986), p.1.

which has emerged as a global financial, commercial and cultural hub ^[27].

Another fascinating societal system that has more or less always been present in the history of human sociology, is tribal societies. Unlike empires, which are characterized by centralized authority, extensive territorial control, and hierarchical structures, tribal societies are typically decentralized, egalitarian, and based on kinship ties. David Ronfeldt writes about tribal societies as a part of four types of societal structures in human history, set in a progression with tribal societies at the top, i.e. preceding the others, according to him, the progression occurs 'mainly because the attractiveness of each form lies in its capacity to enable people to address a core problem that a society is bound to face as it develops. In brief, the tribal form excelled and continues to excel today-at addressing the early problem of social identity and belonging' ^[28]. This is not to say that tribal communities do not have the characteristics to do what empires in the conventional sense were capable of, this was perfectly demonstrated by Chinggis Khan in the 13th Century after he successfully united the scattered nomadic tribes of the Eurasian steppes conceiving a powerful force of conquest forming the Mongol Empire. By the time of Chenggis Khan's grandson Kublai Khan, the Mongol Empire had become the largest contiguous land empire in history, spanning from Eastern Europe to the Korean Peninsula and from Siberia to the Persian Gulf.

We also turn to a term which any student of history would be familiar with - feudalism. The feudal system was characterized by a structure of decentralized rule based on a hierarchy of reciprocal relationships between lords, vassals, and serfs (similar to the term 'empire' itself, all these terms are not necessarily culture neutral, thus having similar but alternate variations in different cultures and should be viewed depending on the context) where social mobility was extremely limited. Europe is believed to have entered the feudal period after the decline of the Carolingian Empire in the 9th century where the monarch granted lands or fiefs to nobles in exchange for military service, loyalty, payment of revenue, and other obligations ^[29]. Further under them were the knights whose allegiance was to their nobles for which they received land from them - the samurai in feudal Japan is an example of a similar yet culturally different notion - and the ones at the bottom of this hierarchy were the peasants or serfs ^[30]. The Manorial system was the economic foundation of feudalism in Europe, similarly, the Zamindari system was practiced in feudal India.

Over the centuries we have also seen imperial commonwealths where the memories and cultural models of universal empire lingered while the position of the former hegemon was reduced mostly to symbolic status. In Europe, there remained a desire to establish a new universal monarchy, evident in entities like the Holy Roman Empire

and the Papacy. However, practical power was dispersed among several regional monarchies, each with its own ambitions for territorial expansion. A similar situation existed within the Muslim world, especially after the Umayyad Caliphate. While the caliphs in Baghdad retained symbolic and religious authority, effective control was fragmented among various monarchies, some of which had grown into significant empires themselves ^[31]. Garth Fowden describes this commonwealth as 'a group of politically discrete but related polities collectively distinguishable from other polities or commonwealths by a shared culture and history' ^[32]. Over time we begin to see other forms of confederations such as the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth while other such formations in the ancient world could be the confederation of the Greek-city states. An inquiry into these themes will inevitably lead one to the conclusion that no form of governance discussed is inherently permanent and is constantly in a state of flux, interacting, intermixing, and interchanging with one another over time.

Empires of the future are empires of the mind ^[33].

So we arrive at the question, what are empires to the people of the world today? These are political and territorial entities like any other that come and go throughout human history, but what happens when these imperial powers decline? Historical and archaeological evidence suggests that it is a story of both continuity and change, that although there is a gradual change in the geopolitical landscape aided by processes such as decolonization, globalization, multilateralism, the rise of nation states and change in power dynamics, institutions and logics of empire do not disappear entirely, they have left their mark on international structures and processes and on the institutions, cultures, politics and legal systems of peoples who inhabit the territories of their former cores and peripheries ^[34].

Empire is often misperceived as a historical form of political organization that gave way to nation-states. However, as we have seen, empire has been the prevailing model for much of human history, spanning thousands of years. Recent examples, including discussions about the United States, the Soviet Union, the European Union, as well as emerging powers like China and India, underscore that imperial dynamics persist in contemporary geopolitics ^[35]. What is important for a historian at this point is to question whether or not seeing the current order as constituted by legacies of empire illuminates dimensions and dynamics of the contemporary world that are obscured by national historiography and perspectives ^[36]. A perfect conclusion would be to use the words of John A. Hall, 'if we want to understand our world, we need to deepen our understanding of the changing character of empire' ^[37].

²⁷ Derek Thiam Soon Heng and Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied, eds., Singapore in Global History, (Amsterdam University Press, 2011), p.51.

²⁸ David Ronfeldt, In search of how societies work: Tribes - The first and forever form, (RAND Pardee Center), p.2-3.

²⁹ For more on Feudalism in Europe see François Louis Ganshof, 'Carolingian Feudalism' in Feudalism, (London: Longman Group Limited, 1964), p.13-61.

³⁰ Kallie Szczepanski, (February 2020), 'Feudalism in Japan and Europe', ThoughtCo.

³¹ Peter Fidiyerg Bang, The Oxford World History of Empire, p.62.

³² Lieven, Empire, p.12.

³³ Quote by Winston Churchill.

³⁴ Sandra Halperin, and Ronen Palan, eds., Legacies of Empire: Imperial Roots of the Contemporary Global Order, (Cambridge University Press, 2015), p.1.

³⁵ Jan Zielonka, Europe As Empire: The Nature of the Enlarged European Union, (Oxford University Press, 2006), p.1-22.

³⁶ Sandra Halperin, Legacies of Empire, p.3.

³⁷ Peter Fidiyerg Bang, The Oxford World History of Empire, p.539.

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