

Explaining empire: models for ancient history

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Background

Fundamental questions about the emergence, functioning, and demise of ancient empires continue to attract scholarly attention: ongoing research on the development of the Roman empire is merely the most prominent example (e.g., Lendon 1997; Ando 2000; Ward-Perkins 2005; Wickham 2005; Heather 2006; Bang forthcoming a, b; and see more generally Alcock et al. 2001; Morris and Scheidel forthcoming). The proposed book aims to contribute to these debates by exploring key questions in novel ways, by focusing on social scientific methods that serve both to expand the scope of historical inquiry and to put it on a more solid footing. Despite the considerable potential of this approach, the explicit application of social science theory and testable models of causation remains rare in the study of ancient history. As a result, scholarship in this area continues to be permeated by impressionist or ad hoc explanations designed for the study of a particular subject (such as a single ancient society). This approach forestalls comparative assessments that would make it possible to distinguish common outcomes from rare or unique features and to identify variables that were critical to observed outcomes. It also makes it impossible to subject proposed explanations to formal testing, differentiate between proximate and ultimate causation, consider the potential for alternative outcomes, and evaluate the actual historical significance of features that happen to be conspicuous or rare in the record. Existing work that employs theoretical models or perspectives tends to privilege particular explanatory frameworks a priori instead of considering competing approaches in a balanced fashion and trying to assess their relative utility through comparison and tests of their explanatory capacities. These practices impede our understanding of causation beyond the informal weighing of competing explanatory narratives, and more generally curtail much-needed interaction between humanistic and social scientific strategies of historical analysis.

Purpose and structure

The proposed volume aims to demonstrate the potential of a more explicitly social scientific approach by presenting a series of interconnected case studies on a topic that has attracted a large amount of theorizing and modeling in the social sciences, i.e., large-scale state formation. Thematically, this work focuses on early empires in western Eurasia (i.e., the Mediterranean and the Near East), with particular emphasis on the Roman empire (which is currently the best documented of all ancient empires and, more importantly, represents a unique development in Mediterranean history) but also draws on other empires (in particular early China) as the argument requires. Methodologically, the approach is explicitly comparative and analytical, and driven by a set of key questions that are addressed through formal models and theoretical frameworks.

This project has three main objectives:

- (1) To introduce scholars and students of ancient history and related fields to pertinent theoretical approaches and to illustrate their benefits (and limitations) with the help of a series of historical case studies performed at various levels of spatial and temporal resolution.
- (2) To advance our understanding of the causal mechanisms underlying the formation and collapse of large imperial states in early western Eurasia.
- (3) To encourage further research that draws on the same models, modifies them, or introduces superior methods.

In the interest of length and accessibility, this volume is not meant to provide an exhaustive survey of all existing theoretical approaches, but deliberately focuses on recent work (mostly from the 1980s onward), aims to critique and adapt existing models, and develops additional original models. (This approach excludes older and much-discussed theories, such as Marxism, as well as postmodern perspectives that are not readily susceptible to falsification.)

The book consists of four main parts. The first part introduces the key questions and issues that require theoretical modeling. The second part presents a series of models that analyze ultimate and proximate causation in the emergence and decline of imperial states in western Eurasia. The third part shifts to the institutions of empires, by developing models of their formal structure and inner workings, moving from the general (a coercion/capital model) to the more specific (city-states and republicanism). The shorter final part does not present additional case studies per se but assesses the potential contribution of two very different established bodies of theory for the study of ancient empires. This section could be expanded to include further approaches, such as International Relations, but space constraints and the desire to concentrate on concrete case studies limit the scope of this section.

Contents

Part I: Context

Introduction: Why theory? (3,000 words)

A brief introduction explains the rationale and structure of this book.

Chapter 1: Patterns of empire in western Eurasia (7,000 words)

This introductory survey traces broad trends in state formation in western Eurasia (from the Atlantic to Iran/India, and from the fourth millennium BCE to the present) in terms of duration, territorial size, demography, and geographical and ecological patterns, and briefly evaluates them from a global world-historical perspective. This systematic overview is necessary to distinguish common from rare or unique developments, which in turn makes it possible to identify a set of key questions of historical causation that will be addressed in the following chapters.

Part II: Theories of rise and fall

Chapter 2: Metaethnic frontier theory, semiperipherality, and the rise and fall of ancient empires (10,000 words)

This chapter considers the significance of semiperipherality in processes of state formation. Marcher states that are close yet marginal to core cultures have long been associated with expansion through conquest (e.g., Mann 1986). Recent work in world-systems studies in particular has elaborated on this concept in attempts to define conditions of semiperipherality in order to establish its historical role in state formation (e.g., Chase-Dunn 1988; Hall 2000; La Lone 2000; Hall 2006). This chapter assesses the utility of this scholarship for the study of ancient empires and draws on a new theory that has advanced the debate by seeking to explain why large states arose in certain contexts but not in others, the so-called metaethnic frontier theory that links successful expansion to a clearly defined set of circumstances (Turchin 2003). Turchin established this correlation by coding significant variables for medieval Europe. This chapter tests this model by applying the same methodology to the ancient Mediterranean and Near East. In keeping with the underlying premise of the project, this chapter focuses on the practical application of testable theory.

Chapter 3: Positional theories and the emergence of the Roman empire (6,000 words)

Work in progress suggests that the formation of very large empires is strongly correlated with certain ecological conditions that did not obtain in the Mediterranean (Turchin in progress). This allows us to fine-tune Diamond's 1997 broader thesis regarding the ecological underpinnings of civilizational development, and is also consistent with the findings obtained in Chapter 1. The fact that the formation of a pan-Mediterranean empire in the Roman empire was a unique event in the history of that region suggests that one or more supplementary theories are required to explain this particular outcome. This chapter explores the positional model developed by Artzrouni & Komlos 1996, which presents computer simulations of European state formation mediated by the manipulation of key parameters. This model, originally developed for the period after 500 CE, can profitably be applied to the preceding millennium and helps account for the emergence of the Roman mega-state with reference to specific geographical and developmental conditions. This explanation can be tested through comparisons with later episodes of Mediterranean state formation that consistently produced different outcomes. Once again, this approach satisfies the key criteria of formal modeling and testability.

Chapter 4: Protection cost analysis and the rise and fall of the Roman empire (6,000 words)

This chapter further develops the line of inquiry in chapter 3 by seeking to identify additional variables that favored the unique creation of a pan-Mediterranean empire in antiquity. The focus is on protection costs and institutional features from 500 BCE to 700 CE. A simple model of long-term changes in relative protection costs is employed to approximate the relative competitiveness of the Roman state and link it to its imperial

development. This approach permits a re-consideration of the older theory of marginal returns on investment in complexity and its role in the collapse of empires (Tainter 1988).

Chapter 5: Marginal expansion, overstretch, and sunk cost fallacies in core-wide empires (8,000 words)

Scholars have long regarded military overstretch as an important cause of imperial or hegemonic decline (e.g., Kennedy 1987). This chapter argues that a more contextually specific model is required to explain similar features in ‘universal’ or ‘core-wide’ empires, i.e., states that have absorbed all or most other states within their political-military network, and are consequently at least initially uncommonly unconstrained in their foreign policy choices. A realistic model would need to explain why such states continue to expand beyond optimum levels and investigate the long-term consequences of this process. This chapter argues that following core unification, a combination of path dependence generated by an inflated war tradition and war machine, a comparatively weak periphery, and the domestic political goals of new regimes converge in sustaining expansion into developmentally marginal terrain. This process, which I propose to call ‘marginal expansion’, in the short term creates far-flung peripheries with open-ended costly commitments, in the medium term is conducive to secondary state formation and warlordism, and in the long term restricts empires’ responses to exogenous and/or endogenous change. Despite these problems, what is known as the ‘Concorde effect’ (e.g. Arkes & Ayton 1999) prevents states from abandoning their commitments in the periphery until they can no longer be sustained. This model, which is designed specifically for the very small sample of true ‘world empires’, is applied to the three available principal test cases, i.e., the Roman empire, Qin/Han China, and Tang China, and will also entail brief consideration of related cases such as the Achaemenid and Inka empires. This comparative approach checks the arbitrariness of the posited causal relationships and ensures at least a certain measure of testability.

Chapter 6: Cost surface analysis and the shape of empire (6,000 words)

Conventional maps fail to capture the reality of ancient empires in as much as they measure and represent space from a bird’s eye view but do not communicate actual communication costs are determined by medium (sea, river, land), climate (e.g., winds), terrain (e.g., elevation), and the technological system. This chapter draws on an ongoing separate project to re-map the Roman empire by expressing distance in terms of travel time depending on the object (information, troops, and cargo). This method is related to Cost Surface Analysis, which uses computer simulation to express distance in real terms. This chapter argues that this method has great potential beyond its current primarily archaeological applications (e.g., Wheatley & Gillings 2002), as it can be employed to explore the relative coherence and of early states and the internal distribution of their resources, and even to help explain their mature boundaries. Once again, this approach moves analysis toward testable models as an increasing amount of appropriately processed data becomes available. This chapter aims to encourage work in this area.

Chapter 7: Counterfactuals and the duration of ancient empires (8,000 words)

The fall of the Roman empire has spawned a vast number of explanations: Demandt 1984 lists 210 putative causes that have been suggested in print. Interest in this topic is

currently experiencing a resurgence (Ward-Perkins 2005; Heather 2006; Goffart forthcoming). This old question is now increasingly complemented by the perhaps more interesting question why the empire lasted as long as it did (e.g., Ando 2000). However, existing scholarship suffers from the usual shortcomings of arbitrary imputation of causality and lack of comparativist awareness. Explicit consideration of counterfactuals enables us to check claims about the relative significance of particular variables. This method has long been advocated in the social sciences (e.g., Fearon 1991; Hawthorn 1991; Tetlock & Belkin 1996; Ferguson 1997; Lebow 2000) but is not normally employed by ancient historians (Morris 2005 is the sole exception) beyond the sphere of informal or ludic speculation (e.g., Brodersen 2000). This chapter provides a case study in the explanatory uses of counterfactuals by assessing alternative outcomes with respect to Roman state stability at different points in time, focusing on key variables such as foreign threats, domestic resistance, and intra-elite conflict. This analysis is expanded to include various Mesopotamian and Iranian empires to create a comparative framework.

Chapter 8: Demographic-structural theory and the fall of ancient empires (8,000 words)

Turchin 2003, 2006 and Turchin and Nefedov forthcoming draw on demographic-structural models of state stability (e.g., Goldstone 1991) to develop a model of secular cycles that are endogenously driven by population growth, elite production, and the capacity for collective action. Their work includes an analysis of Roman history from the seventh century BCE to the third century CE. This chapter will critique this account by advancing a modified model for their Roman Republican cycle, extend their analysis by including late antiquity, and explore whether this model can fruitfully be applied to other ancient empires. Their work provides a ready-made comparative framework that invites the incorporation of additional case studies which can help to verify the cross-cultural utility of their model.

Part III: Institutions and structures

Chapter 9: Configurations of coercion and capital in ancient empire formation (8,000 words)

Tilly 1992 provides an analytical framework for the study of state formation in Europe since 1000 CE that focuses on the relationship between coercive capabilities and capital endowments to explain observed outcomes. In keeping with other accounts by historical sociologists and political scientists (e.g., Brewer 1988; Porter 1994; Glete 2001), war-making occupies a central position in this view of state-making. This widely debated perspective has never been formally applied to ancient Mediterranean states. While a detailed reconsideration of ancient history along these lines would require a book-length study, this chapter aims to offer no more than a preliminary discussion of how this analytical framework can be employed by ancient historians and how conditions in ancient states both resembled and differed from later ones: the role of city-states in early imperial state formation is perhaps the best example for these differences. The ancient reversal of the later European sequence of different forms of military organization will also be considered and related to modes of state formation. This chapter seeks to establish

to what extent a theory that was specifically developed for a different period can be generalized to account for processes of state formation in western antiquity. This, in turn, entails an explicitly comparative approach.

Chapter 10: The institutional structuring of city-state-centered empires (8,000 words)

This chapter explores a feature already addressed in the preceding chapter, namely the fact that unlike in later periods, some of the principal empires of the ancient world were created by city-states. It develops a formal model of how expansionist city-states create institutions that allow them to retain traditional practices at the core, how state-society bargaining processes unfold under these circumstances, and how these polities manage expansion. The analysis focuses on city-states with a strong concept of citizenship, i.e., Athens, Carthage and Rome, with brief consideration of Genoa and Venice. The key argument is that such city-state empires develop intricately layered structures of control that shape mechanisms of bargaining and may interfere with successful state formation. Shared features allow explicit comparison and a limited amount of testing of generalized premises.

Chapter 11: Self-enforcing and self-reinforcing institutions and the political regime of the Roman empire (5,000 words)

This chapter elaborates on a theme of the preceding chapter by looking at the interdependence of Roman state formation and political regime. Republics were rare in premodern history, and republican empires were rarer still: Rome and Venice are the principal examples. This chapter draws on recent work on the political fortunes of Venice and Genoa that is driven by neo-institutional theory and focuses in particular on the significance of self-enforcing and self-reinforcing institutions (Greif & Laitin 2004; Greif 2006). Comparative application of these concepts to the Roman state shows that the Roman Republic occupied an intermediate position between Venice and Genoa with regard to political stability, and that this stability was mediated by the same factors of external threat and wealth levels as it was in later Italian history. By combining endogenous and exogenous factors, this model allows us to account both for the duration and the demise of Rome's republican regime. This model provides an alternative to the secular cycle model proposed by Turchin and Nefedov forthcoming and critiqued in Chapter 8, and distinguishes between political stability and state stability per se. Due to the tiny sample of pertinent historical instances, comparative analysis in this chapter is necessarily quite limited in scope.

Part IV: Global(izing) theories

Chapter 12: World-systems theory and ancient empires (6,000 words)

Over the last few decades, Wallerstein's theory of a modern world-system (Wallerstein 1974) has been both extended backwards in time to cover previous millennia (in the most extreme way by Frank 1993; Frank & Thompson 2005) and more commonly supplemented by the identification of multiple smaller world-systems (e.g., Blanton et al. 1992; Peregrine & Feinman 1996; Denmark et al. 2000; Beaujard 2005; Chase-Dunn &

Anderson 2005; Gills & Thompson 2006). The most promising approaches focus on interconnectedness within state systems that experienced significant interaction beyond commercial exchange, i.e., political-military networks (PMNs) (Chase-Dunn & Hall 1997), or on networks such as the expanding ‘central system’ (Wilkinson 1987, 2004). This chapter surveys the benefits of these related approaches for our understanding of ancient empires. While Ancient Near Eastern Studies have been more sympathetic to world-systems approaches (e.g., Algaze 1993; Stein 1999), historians of the classical Mediterranean have only rarely adopted this perspective (e.g., Hedeager 1987; Woolf 1990). The key problem is to what extent empire formation is influenced by network effects rather than by endogenous features that are specific to a single polity or by generalized exogenous forces such as climate change.

Chapter 13: Evolutionary theory and the drive for empire (8,000 words)

The final chapter takes a look at a mature body of scientific theory that is fairly remote from the conventional practice of ancient history, namely evolutionary psychology, a field that centers on innate universal behavioral propensities and their expression in interaction with environmental influences (Buss 2005). Evolutionary psychology is commonly employed in the study of both hunter-gatherers as well as current societies, but largely neglected when it comes to traditional agrarian systems (for exceptions, see Betzig 1986, 1993). Revisiting the argument in Scheidel forthcoming, this chapter focuses on the relationship between the allocation of reproductive resources and state formation.

Conclusion: Towards synthetic models (3,000 words)

Many of these theories raise the question of how to weigh the relative impact of exogenous and endogenous factors and of how to accommodate and reconcile them in synthetic models. This chapter explores the potential for unifying theories and challenges future researchers to concentrate on this objective.

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