

Editor's Introduction: Empires – Elements of Cohesion and Signs of Decay

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The first issue of *Medieval Worlds* (1/2015) has provided a broad overview of ›Approaches to Comparison‹ and of interdisciplinary projects being pursued in that context. This, the second issue, departs from a more focused thematic frame for comparison, the decay of empires. The comparison of empires has emerged as one of the most productive strands in today's comparative and global history. Mayke de Jong reminds us in her contribution to the present issue that this is a relatively recent research interest. It emerged as a key topic in the 1990s, after the swift fall of the Soviet Empire and at the moment when the US seemed to reach unchallenged worldwide hegemony. The focus was both on modern and on ancient empires, especially on Rome and China.¹ In medieval studies the topic was less prominent. That was not least because medieval European empires raised major problem of definition: when and to what degree were Byzantium and the Holy Roman Empire ›empires‹? And which of the European steppe ›empires‹, those of the Huns, Avars, Bulgars, Magyars, Chasars or the Golden Horde, could confidently be defined as such? However, the fates of numerous Asian empires provide ample opportunities for wide-ranging comparison.

What medieval Europe can add to the debate consists primarily of examples of self-styled ›empires‹ in a state of tension between imperial pretences and limited means, more often than not in a defensive mode – were these empires in decay? However, the notion of decay may to some extent be a modern projection, inspired by the implicit comparison with the much better means that modern empires had at their disposal. If we define ›empires‹ in terms of direct control of their populations and territories, pre-modern empires and states usually pose problems of definition, although they all have their moments of glory. Yet what modern scholars have often interpreted as signs of decay does not necessarily indicate ›failed empires‹. As Jürgen Osterhammel has argued, historical empires typically were rather weak states and left much of the direct rule to regional or ethnic units.² If we look at the social whole and the way in which empire is embedded in it, we can spot many ways in which ›society in the imperial mode‹ remained robust and creative although an expansive political dynamic had long stopped. Therefore, rather than imposing modernity-based definitions on pre-modern empires, it may be worthwhile to historicize our concepts and to measure the success of imperial ›visions of community‹ also by the standards of their own times.³

Some of the contributions assembled here address this problem head-on, for instance, in the cases of the Carolingian and the Safavid empires. Both Mayke de Jong's and Andrew New-

1 See, for instance, Morris and Scheidel, *Dynamics of Ancient Empires*; Scheidel, *Rome and China. Comparative Perspectives*; Burbank and Cooper, *Empires in World History*; Fibiger Bang and Kołodziejczyk, *Universal Empire*; Gehler and Rollinger, *Imperien und Reiche in der Weltgeschichte*.

2 Osterhammel, *China und die Weltgesellschaft*, 69-85.

3 Pohl, Introduction; cf. Pohl *et al.*, *Visions of Community*.

man's contributions challenge established notions that both empires experienced extended phases of decay, or indeed, little but decay. According to received opinion, the Carolingian empire had been in decline almost since Charlemagne was crowned emperor in Rome in 800 CE, and until the dynasty lost its last power bases and the imperial title was discontinued about a century later. However, as de Jong argues, this raises two fundamental questions: do we define empire by the imperial title, or by the imperial range of expansion and dominion that had started well before 800? And as to the topic of decay, by what standards do we measure the success or failure of empires? Signs of subsiding expansive dynamic and inner conflict may not be sufficient to diagnose pervasive decline. Andrew Newman forcefully proposes a very similar argument about Safavid Iran in the seventeenth century. One striking common feature in both cases is the increasing influence of – Christian/Shi'ite – clerics and a conspicuous wealth of religious texts. In modern historiography, that has quite naturally been taken as proof of decline, whereas the extension and impact of intellectual and cultural production in the Frankish ninth and the Iranian seventeenth centuries have hardly been acknowledged. In both worlds, a still momentous imperial framework facilitated the creation of fundamental features of medieval Latin Europe, and of the modern Iranian state. Already in the 1970s, Peter Brown and others made similar points about the later Roman Empire.⁴

Simon McLean supplements de Jong's argument with a study of marriage alliances in the post-imperial West in the early tenth century. Even though power politics had now assumed a much more regional flavour, the imperial past continued to provide important resources for those who were skilful enough to handle them. Carolingian memories could supply elements of political cohesion, as long as they were not used to bolster exaggerated pretensions that inevitably rouse adversity. Throughout the Western Middle Ages, imperial modes of representation remained a valuable symbolic asset and a familiar political idiom, which could inspire high hopes but rarely fulfill them. The Holy Roman Empire remained a grandiose construction, but its actual power hardly ever corresponded to modern definitions of empire. Thus, the modern European nations all carry their legacy of imperial ambitions and gestures, but at the same time the relatively stable national landscape of medieval Europe prevented the establishment of a powerful new empire.⁵

Other contributions in this volume explore a somewhat wider range of phenomena connected to elements of cohesion of states and empires. Jeroen Duindam offers a fascinatingly rich panorama of the workings of dynasty in late medieval and early modern Eurasia and Africa, showing, among other things, that dynastic rhythms do not necessarily coincide with the dynamics of empire. Dynastic rule allowed both for a concentration and a diffusion of power. It provided one way in which imperial conquest could be translated into continuity; however, the volatility of dynastic succession could hardly be controlled permanently, and attempts to harness it to the needs of the polity used a great variety of rules, discourses and institutional practices. Thus, dynasty did not pertain to one ›form of government‹, but was part of a more pervasive social practice.

Susan Reynolds sums up her extensive recent research on the medieval nation, which responds to a controversial debate on whether nations were a modern phenomenon, or whether

4 Brown, *World of Late Antiquity*.

5 See Hirschi, *Origins of Nationalism*.

they were primordial and could therefore also be medieval.⁶ She argues that a distinct feeling of attachment to a polity which is perceived as a natural given is what turns a state into a nation. Therefore, the debate between ›modernists‹ and ›primordialists‹ should not so much be about the workings and the efficacy of a national states, but about ›national‹ or ethnic notions and attitudes, which are certainly present in many cases in medieval Europe.

Glenn Bowman looks at holy places in and after the Ottoman Empire and at the ways in which they might in some circumstances be shared by different confessions. As he argues, the range of potential responses to the mixing of populations around holy sites poses the problem which forces operate to found, maintain or fracture that communality, and how they relate to the framework of empire. And Johannes Preiser-Kapeller then presents an overview of a cluster of comparative projects in Vienna that use the tools of digital network analysis. After giving a very useful general introduction into the uses and problems of network analysis, he presents the impressive results of several comparative studies of political networks and conflict, mainly in late medieval empires: in the Byzantine and the Holy Roman Empire, but also in several other Eurasian empires. Digital network analysis is a method that can, as long as the data are sufficient, add significantly to our understanding of the complexity, the internal workings, and the vulnerability of empires. Both Bowman's and Preiser-Kapeller's contributions raise issues of governance and the integration of heterogeneous populations with diverse interests.

What all these elements – dynasties, ethnic/national identities, holy places, networks – have in common is that they could serve as factors of integration for empires and large-scale polities; but they could also provide alternative nodes of cohesion. Smaller dynastic units reduced or replaced the empires of the Han, the Romans and the Abbasids, just as ethnic and national sentiments in medium-scale units repeatedly diverted loyalties from empires that, in the long run, failed to mobilize similarly intense feelings of belonging. Both dynastic and ethnic/national legitimacy could then be extended to imperial horizons. The same could be said about forms of religious cohesion such as those sketched in Bowman's contribution on Islamic holy places. Both the late Roman Empire and the early Caliphate at some point had been almost co-extensive with Christianity and Islam respectively. When the close link between political and religious loyalties dissolved, a loose religious frame came to unite an *oikoumenē* of smaller states. Both Christianity and Islam could successively be reconverted into imperial modes, and legitimize further empires. Carolingian, Ottoman or Safavid history can serve as examples. Finally, different forms of regional and supra-regional networks were indispensable for imperial dominion to take root among its elites. But these networks could also shift their focus and withdraw their support from imperial rulers, or could be re-configured around alternative centres of power.

This issue certainly does not offer any comprehensive overview of its topic, let alone definitive answers to the questions sketched above. Many of the contributions merit further discussion, and we will gladly come back to the points raised here, or to additional ones in future issues. The open issue *Medieval Worlds* 3⁷, due out in July 2016, offers a first opportunity to engage in these debates.

6 See, for instance, Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities*; Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State*; Hastings, *Construction of Nationhood*; Smith, *Nation in History*; Scales and Zimmer, *Power and the Nation*; Afanasiev and Matheou, *Ethnicity and Nationhood*.

7 See call for papers: <http://medieval.vlg.oeaw.ac.at/index.php/medievalworlds/announcement/view/5>.

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