Imperial cities

GERARDO GUTIÉRREZ, NICOLA TERRENATO,
AND ADELHEID OTTO

Looking at cities that were at the center of empires necessarily involves paying particular attention to issues such as political structures, expansionism, state formation, economic interdependencies, ideological hegemonies, and much else. In other words, imperial cities necessarily represent intricate intersections of power, cultures, and landscapes, and can only be understood within their broader geopolitical and human context. The present chapter aims at doing precisely that by drawing primarily on the cases provided by great imperial cities in three different cultures: Rome, Tenochtitlan, and the various Assyrian capital cities. As is well known, empires have been far less clearly and explicitly theorized than states in comparative terms, but they are generally understood as resulting from the aggregation of existing states (with the possible addition of other simpler polities). As a result, it seems reasonable to treat cities in empires as a special case in the general relationship that cities have with states – an issue, however, which is still actively debated and remains somewhat controversial in different theoretical frameworks. While, in fact, in some areas and periods urbanization has been equated with the emergence of states, to the point of treating them as the same phenomenon (this is the case in much of the Mediterranean, for instance), most comparativists have tended to disassociate the two processes.[1] This was based on the observation that there are instances of states in which there are no recognizable cities[2] and of cities that do not belong to or precede early states.[3]

---

[1] See, for instance, Linda R. Manzanilla, "Early Urban Societies: Challenges and Perspectives," in Linda R. Manzanilla (ed.), *Emergence and Change in Early Urban Societies* (New York: Plenum Press, 1997), pp. 3–39.

[2] For instance, in some cases of sub-Saharan African states: Daryll Forde and Phyllis M. Kaberry (eds.), *West African Kingdoms in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967).

[3] A claim that has been made for some large Old World pre-Bronze Age sites such as Tell Brak or Hamoukar; see Mitchell S. Rothman, "The Local and the Regional," in Mitchell

While in theory empires may not necessarily involve cities, few states and even fewer, if any, empires have existed without the presence of large and powerful cities. Even the complex, nomadic conquering societies that emerged from the vast steppes of Central Asia ultimately appropriated large existing cities as the focus of their horse-driven empires (for example, Beijing and Baghdad), or created their own imperial cities (for example, Moscow). Therefore, it is on this basis that the category of imperial cities is analyzed here, with specific reference to the interactions between these entities and the human landscapes in their hinterlands and, more generally, with the empire that is controlled by them.

The empire in this perspective is a higher-order, "superlative" state formed by the aggregation, incorporation, or integration of other states, frequently but not exclusively by military means. In their historical development, empires display common traits, such as their frequently becoming the largest political organizations within their regions and time periods, with some of them reaching continental or sub-continental scale. When empires are considered comparatively, however, it appears clearly that there is a strong degree of variability among them. The expanding polity that incorporated other groups can end up being politically organized in a myriad of different forms, and this of course impacts the subordinate polities as well, as will be discussed below. There is also strong diversity in the role that technological or organizational superiority can have in affecting the balance of power within an empire. There have been cases of conquest driven by mobile or sedentary groups with lesser technologies and simpler forms of organization at the expense of more politically "advanced" state formations. At the other end of the spectrum, more sophisticated imperial cores have often exploited dominions characterized by lesser complexity.

Why these imperial societies have emerged and how they have managed to impose their domination over many different peoples and over vast extensions of the globe are fascinating problems that have caused much ink to be spilled from antiquity to the present. As a first step toward exploring the rich spectrum of empires across time and space, many scholars have tried to create typologies based on supposedly diagnostic traits. For instance, Edward Luttwak[4]

S. Rothman (ed.), *Uruk Mesopotamia and Its Neighbors* (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 2001), pp. 3–26.

[4] Edward N. Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire from the First Century A.D. to the Third* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976). See also Terence N. D'Altroy, *Provincial Power in the Inka Empire* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992).

proposed a few decades ago to distinguish between territorial and hegemonic empires. Territorial empires would focus their expansion and domination on the conquest of lands and the resources contained in those lands, imposing a tight administrative control. Hegemonic empires, on the other hand, would impose their dominance over other groups without taking over the administration of the conquered territories in a significant way, and would simply extract tribute and resources with the assistance of local elites. Along similar lines, Michael Doyle[5] characterized empires on the basis of their formal or informal forms of control.

Theories of this kind, with their polar oppositions, were clearly influenced by Cold War era attitudes and expectations, and have tended to be replaced by more context-sensitive approaches. In the practice of controlling subordinated states, ancient empires would have had to resort to more flexible and varied strategies in different areas and times of their domains than any simple dichotomy can depict. Indeed, in the last decade or two, innovative scholars of early modern European empires have tended to advocate for more sophisticated analyses that could do justice to the staggering variety of the different cultural and political circumstances.[6] In parallel, archaeologists have been moving in a similar direction in their work on ancient empires, emphasizing local adaptations and complex interactions, especially between neighboring or competing empires.[7] A growing consensus is emerging that each empire needs to be studied within its own historical moment and particularities. Still, even in this changed perspective, there seem to be good intellectual reasons in favor of wide-ranging comparisons between empires. First, they are numerically far fewer than the thousands of states known in the history of humanity, arguably below one hundred. Then, they often tend to cluster in a limited number of core regions where they aggregate, fission, and succeed each other over very long periods of time. Because of this contiguity in space and time, imperial ideologies and ideas are often circulated and passed on, producing significant recurrences in different contexts. Indeed, sometimes ethnohistorical and semi-mythical narratives of empires of old can still affect the behavior of much later polities.

---

[5] Michael W. Doyle, *Empires* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986).

[6] For instance, Anthony Pagden, *Lords of all the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain and France c.1500–c.1800* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995); and David Cannadine, *Empire, the Sea and Global History: Britain's Maritime World, c. 1760–c. 1840* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

[7] Susan E. Alcock, Terence N. D'Altroy, Kathleen D. Morrison, and Carla M. Sinopoli (eds.), *Empires: Perspectives from Archaeology and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

Imperial cities

Since empires are unique, "superlative" kinds of political organization, imperial cities too should be seen as a special kind of urban form, having distinctive traits and markers in comparison with non-imperial settlements. This explains why, even if empires normally comprise many cities, the focus here is on the role of the primary imperial city, which is often referred to as the imperial capital, a central place where political, economic, and symbolic power take a material form in urban structures that represent the administrative and ideological institutions of the empire. It is crucial in particular to examine the connection between actual built environments and the material and ideal forces that generated them.

When the origins of imperial capitals are considered, it is immediately apparent that their emergence is frequently the result of a successful expansionist bid. Indeed, in many pre-modern cases, the imperial capital is simply a normal city[8] that manages to impose its control over its peers (as well as over less complex polities). Such was the case for Rome, for Tenochtitlan, and for Aššur, to stay within our examples, as well as many others, such as Venice, Carthage, or Cuzco. In these cases, the political institutions of these cities often have to be stretched and adapted to serve as administrative centers for a much larger group of peoples. They also have to grow at a dramatic pace, incorporating population from the dominions, a process that, as it has been argued in the chapter on Rome, can lead to an effective power sharing that provides a much broader and stable base for the emerging empire. Alternatively, imperial capitals can be founded once the empire has already reached a considerable size, either from scratch (as is the case for some Assyrian capitals, as well as many other ones, from Alexandria to Moscow) or by refounding existing regular cities and promoting them to a new and exalted role (for example, Constantinople) or finally by taking over capitals of empires that have been supplanted (for example, Ottoman Istanbul or Mongol Beijing).

Whatever their formation process, these capitals almost always tended to concentrate vast amounts of wealth from conquered regions far and close into relatively small areas. Such movements of resources typically enhanced and reinforced their status as the largest and the most sophisticated focal

---

[8] In some cultural contexts defined as city-states: Mogens Herman Hansen (ed.), *A Comparative Study of Thirty City-state Cultures: An Investigation* (Copenhagen: Kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskab, 2000).

points within complex networks and hierarchies of subordinated settlements over short periods of time. In the case of Tenochtitlan the acceptance and assimilation of external groups into the city played an important role in maintaining an effective program of imperial expansion, since demographically Tenochtitlan had several times more inhabitants than the average rival states around it. Rome's population too grew exponentially to reach a million as a result of similar processes. In material terms, this typically translated into a display of the newly acquired power by means of ambitious construction programs. Large palaces, lavish temples, impressive boulevards and plazas, complex networks of canals, and other sophisticated urban amenities are found densely packed within imperial capitals. These building projects are not only excessive in terms of their individual size and of their number, but also in terms of their quality relative to other forms of architecture. Enormous investments and efforts are made to achieve monumentality and excellence in every respect. All three of the cases of study presented in this section exemplify this unequivocally. The Great Temple and the pyramids of Tenochtitlan, just as the temples, fortifications, and palaces of Assyrian capitals, had no rivals in their world: The Assyrian king proudly named his palace at Nineveh, a miracle made up from more than 100 rooms, the "Palace Without Rival." The case of Rome, on the other hand, presents an interesting latency, as its nature of imperial capital did not manifest itself in monumental construction until a relatively late stage of its ascending parabola, essentially only when most of the expansion was complete and the power shifted to dynastic emperors.

A common trait to most imperial cities, in any case, was the pressing of art and architecture into the service of the dominant political ideology. The monumental structures themselves were often explicit in this sense, even simply in terms of the sheer scale of their displays. Colossal architecture and stone sculpture automatically proclaimed greatness and invincibility to the ruling group, to their subjects, and to their enemies at the same time. These projects in the capital attest to the ability of the empire to command the enormous labor required for the quarrying, the transport over long distances, and the erection of colossal stones. The topmost level of the carving and sculpting, typically done by the best artists within the confines of the empire, serves the same purpose in qualitative rather than quantitative terms. The imperial message is further reinforced and articulated through the visual arts. Very frequently, narratives of minor and major military successes are conveyed in sculpture and painting. Artists and patrons select and use iconography, motifs, styles, and public inscriptions as a medium to

celebrate past achievements of the empire and announce its future ambitions. Monumentality is further complemented by the crafting and acquisition of fine transportable art that conveys symbolic power through the use of abundant precious and exotic materials. The success or failure of individual emperors were displayed by the rate of continuous additions to the main temple together with the burial of rich offerings coming from the newly conquered regions. Here again, the imperial city further emphasizes its exceptionalism by attracting the best craftsmen who master unique and often secret technologies. The display of portable art in the imperial city (or in a distant province) immediately signals the status of the settlement that hosts it in the hierarchy of the empire. Imperial seals and insignia are carried by imperial officers on objects and clothing. The display of such symbols provokes respect and fear, thus facilitating the business of imperial administrators in the conquered provinces.

Imperial cities also often stand out because of the amount of urban planning that is invested in them, when compared to ordinary cities. Piazzas, marketplaces, avenues, gardens, game-parks, gates, and arches serve functional purposes as well as symbolic and propaganda ones, as they can accommodate vast numbers of participants in religious and political ceremonies, business transactions, feasting, or recreational activities. Empires tend to concentrate commercial and social exchange in the capitals and must provide appropriate spaces for it. The primacy of the city, already signaled by the monumental construction and the refined art, is further reinforced by exceptionally spacious, impressive, and well-laid-out common areas. Monumentality and planning are of course typically coordinated, with broader and better-constructed thoroughfares leading to and showcasing palaces, temples, pyramids, and gateways. These often are the setting for processional routes, such as the Roman triumphal one along the Sacred Way or the march of the captives to be sacrificed along the Ixtapalapa Street. At Nineveh, the 34-meter-wide royal road led straight to the seat of the emperor and the temples on top of the citadel. Long and wide causeways, following ritually or politically significant alignments, might connect the expansive open spaces, adding a sense of grandiose urban scenery. This armature imposes an imperial order on the urban form and effectively directs transit and movement along key vital points of the capital. Straight lines converging in the distance on focal points, usually temples, palaces, gardens, or sacred landmarks, create perspectives that capture the gazes of the inhabitants of the city as well as those of its visitors. Pilgrims from all over imperial domains can converge into capitals to experience veritable

hierophanies produced by the political and religious might embodied in their monumentality. More practical purposes can be found in vast engineering projects to supply the growing population of imperial cities. For instance, in the case of Tenochtitlan, its causeways functioned not only as streets, but also as dikes that collected vast amounts of fresh water in large collection ponds. This supply of water was regulated and used to irrigate the chinampa gardens and maintain an acceptable water level in the navigable canals. A sophisticated system of dams, canals, and aqueducts brought water from a distance of more than 40 kilometers to Nineveh, and Roman aqueducts are obvious examples.

The urban arrangements take different forms depending on whether the imperial capital was founded *ex novo*, grew slowly from simpler origins, was built on an existing city, or was taken over from a previous empire. In the first case, the planners had a free hand in designing a symmetrical, aesthetically pleasing, and harmonious complex. The tabula rasa offered by the virgin site is engraved with significant geometries – orthogonal, gridded, star-shaped – that celebrate the new political order without being impeded or clouded by other, older meanings and geographies. Such was the case of Tenochtitlan, Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta, and Dūr-Šarru-kēn in our cases of study. Other capitals, such as Aššur and Rome, instead grew slowly and organically as they established dominance over peer polities around them. Here the exceptional urban form is the end result of many smaller improvement projects carried out over many generations. Roads and piazzas are progressively widened, straightened, and redecorated, layouts realigned and regularized until the material city is considered to be worthy of its massively increased importance. In some such cases meaningful landmarks of the older city, as represented by ancient shrines, tombs, earlier fortification, palaces, sacred or natural features, cannot be moved or altered. There, the new urban layout must be arranged around such previous relics or they are completely subsumed within new buildings and precincts. This happened very frequently in the urban history of Rome;[9] at Tenochtitlan, the original foundational temple was covered by at least seven imposing superstructures. The temple of the god Aššur remained the religious and ideological center of the Assyrian empire for centuries.

[9] See for instance the case of the Black Rock in the Forum: Albert J. Ammerman, "The Comitium in Rome from the Beginning," *American Journal of Archaeology* 100 (1996), 121–36.

Ordinary cities that become capitals by imperial fiat often present similar processes except with an increased tempo, since the redesigning does not happen organically over long periods but rather as a sudden consequence of the promotion to capital status. In these cases the reorganization can be more structured and symmetric but the preexisting city still necessarily has a role in shaping the aspect of the new center of the empire. In seized capitals, finally, there is generally already a planned monumentality that needs to be reshaped to fit the political and ideological needs of its new owners. In the two last cases, urban planners and architects are often faced with a difficult balance between the conservation of existing landmarks and armatures and the exaltation of the present and future dominant ideology.

Imperial urban people

It is not only their physical form that sets aside the imperial cities from all other ones. The people who live there often represent an even more exceptional assemblage than the townscape surrounding them, in terms of resource accumulation, socioeconomic differentiation, functional specialization, cultural sophistication, ethnic composition, multilingualism, and much else. Precondition to the monumentality is of course the heavy flow of all kinds of wealth from all over the empire to the city at the center of it. Although most often remarked on by scholars, war loot, tribute, and taxes arguably are but the visible tip of the iceberg. Economic, human, and symbolic capital move to the center in massive quantities as a result, among many other factors, of elite and commoner migration, of group migration, of external investment and of internal growth. Successful imperial cities persuade elites everywhere that they cannot afford not to have a presence there without jeopardizing their status, merchants that they will find in the imperial capitals an insatiable market for their goods, ranging from slaves to exquisite fragrances and spices, prophets of exotic cults that they can find the audience that ignores them in their own land. Trade networks create another layer of centrality around the imperial capitals with exchange routes that can extend beyond the imperial frontiers. The wealth is as much in the imperial people themselves and in what they bring with them as it is in the literal coffers of the empire.

The convergence of the highest elites and the lowest beggars and enslaved prisoners in the same place necessarily produces a broader vertical socioeconomic range than anywhere else in the empire, which is often reflected in archaeologically visible private architecture. An equal if not

greater variability is displayed horizontally in terms of functional and craft specialization. The state machine itself hires and trains special military forces, specific bureaucrats, and other expert civil servants. Hyperspecialized workshops, particular trades, unique productions can all be supported only at the intersection of elite demand for competing display. Complex religious and intellectual professions also tend to emerge, as high priests, seers, magicians, doctors, lawyers, engineers, astronomers, philosophers, artists, musicians, dancers, actors, chefs all find the discerning customer base without which they cannot exist at a high level of refinement.

The imperial kaleidoscope is particularly rich when it comes to identity, ethnicity, and language. Capitals are typically cosmopolitan, characterized by a veritable Babel of tongues, peoples, attires, rituals, mentalities, and mores. This further dimension of diversity can intersect in very complex ways with the hierarchies and specializations recalled above. Language and background can for instance be used to differentiate between social groups and ranks and be expressed through elements such as clothing, jewelry, or body markers. Moreover, it is generally assumed that the ethnic group that is responsible for the expansion automatically enjoys some privileges over those who were brought by force under the control of the empire. Recent studies that have been looking more closely at individual agents in this process often reveal more cultural permeability and power distribution than one would imagine, with subordinated elites often finding a way to mitigate (or even completely nullify) the disadvantage of having been conquered, for instance by infiltrating the dominant ethnic group in a variety of ways, from intermarriage to emulation.[10] At the commoner level, additionally, the size of imperial capitals typically balloons as a result of the constant inflow of people from the conquered provinces as prisoners, slaves, servants, laborers, or conscripts, and this automatically changes its demographic and cultural nature. Some version of the original idiom of the conquerors often becomes the official government language, as well as the lingua franca of the vast domains. But local communities often display a surprising attachment to their traditional tongues and dialects, especially at the commoner level, while the local elites can adopt bilingualism as a strategy that allows them to act as power and cultural brokers for their subordinates.

---

[10] For example, Martin Millett, *The Romanization of Britain: An Essay in Archaeological Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); and Serge Gruzinski, *The Conquest of Mexico: The Incorporation of Indian Societies into the Western World, 16th–18th Centuries* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993).

Keeping together such disparate constituencies is probably the single biggest challenge that empires have to face. Coercion and threat may have had a critical role at the time of the conquest, but no empire can survive long without some additional cohesive force, typically found in the realm of ideology and religion. Legitimizing and justifying beliefs are constantly propounded by the center of power to all the participants in the empire. This "battle for hearts and minds" can take many different forms depending on the context, but it almost always includes the idealization of the imperial machinery, with a particular emphasis on its leadership. Positive moral attributes, such as bravery, nobility, wisdom, piety, fairness, are attributed in general to the victorious group and are unrivaled in the top echelon of the state, typically represented by monarchs. A monarch is often seen, appropriately for a "superlative" state that controls other states, as "king of kings." This is a title possibly first used for Tukulti-Ninurta I and then used in many other empires, from Persia to Ethiopia. In the Aztec Empire the *huey tlatoani* (the great speaker), who presides over many lesser *tlatoque* (those who speak) conveys a similar meaning. Rome (in spite of having coined the term "emperor") presents an anomaly in that it transitions to an absolute monarchy at a relatively late stage in its trajectory and the emperor acquires royal and divine status only in the third century CE, a couple of hundred years before the collapse.

The head of the state sits at the very top of the political hierarchy, very far from the next rung on the ladder. He is usually the highest magistrate of the empire and rules in matters of life and death. As a leader of his people, he is the apex of a complex network of followers. Among them are retainers who are in charge of the administration, the cult, and the military structure that maintains the imperial program. These imperial followers, who can be members of the ruling lineage, satraps, petty or puppet kings, oligarchs, bureaucrats, or elected officials, become more diverse and cosmopolitan as the empire grows and expands. The emperor takes precedence over everybody, with the possible exception of the highest god of the empire, unless of course he is himself a divine incarnation. In any case, thanks to his transcendent investiture, he is venerated and embodies all ritual and political powers. The emperor continuously displays his divinity (or his unique link to the major god) and earthly powers through complex ritual performances that recreate and confirm his covenant with the divine realm.[11] He highlights

---

[11] Nicole Brisch (ed.), *Religion and Power: Divine Kingship in the Ancient World and Beyond* (Ann Arbor, MI: Edwards Brothers, 2008).

his position by performing the primary ceremonies of the religious calendar, and the main sanctuary of the empire becomes the most sacred place in the empire, where all the major civic and religious festivals take place.

In the capital, the religious and political supremacy of the emperor (or in any case of the prime source of power) is materialized in space with the construction of palaces, senate chambers, tombs, and high courts. Temples are almost always associated with these compounds, clearly signaling the indivisibility of religion and rulership. The palaces in particular subsume and embody many of the higher functions that are at the core of the imperial administration. They are often clearly and tightly segregated from the rest of the city, for instance, walled off or physically placed in an elevated and dominant position. They contain the residence of the royal family, the treasury, headquarters of the administrative apparatus and of the military organization. The "Old Palace" of Aššur is a perfect example of the role that these built environments can have over hundreds of years, since even after other palaces had been built and the capital had been moved elsewhere, the Assyrian kings would return to be buried there. The regularity of the buildings and the order of the Assyrian cities may have also been due to ideological reasons, because in the Assyrian self-concept the king's duty was to establish and maintain the order of the world. In the case of the Aztec capital, the later emperors began the tradition of building their own palace and reusing those of their predecessors for different purposes. The main palace of the last emperor, Moctezuma, was located close to the main ritual precinct. Even though it was vast and multi-functional, it did not suffice to cover the new demands of the growing court and empire; thus Moctezuma created more specialized palaces outside the central area of the city as well as recreational gardens, hunting parks, and a zoo to display animals coming from all over Mesoamerica. In Rome (in spite of having originated the term "palace" from the name of the Palatine Hill, where the later emperors resided), it is only after the great fire of 64 CE that space is made in the center of the city for a palace of similar scale to those of other Mediterranean rulers. Until then, the primary materialization of imperial ideology was represented by the main city temple, in line with the original oligarchic nature of the political system.

The imperial hinterlands

Just as the capital city in many ways mirrors the imperial structure that generated or appropriated it, so the city itself transforms the hinterland around itself but also the furthermost countryside of the empire. The

administrative policies implemented by the leaders of course have reper-
cussions wherever they are applied. But, almost more importantly, all that
the city is in terms of its demography, economics, culture, technology, and
religion has an important effect on the rest of the empire. People, commod-
ities, goods, and wealth converge there and this apparently bottomless
demand can stimulate growth, deplete resources, or change productions.
Improved (and often cheaper) trade routes change the nature and the size
of long-distance trade. Information, beliefs, and propaganda circulated by
the capital affect decision-making everywhere. Reviewing all these complex
interconnections is impossible, but some of the main patterns can be
outlined.

Highly visible, especially through the archaeological record, are the
infrastructural investments that are usually associated with the establish-
ment and growth of the capital city. These include road networks that can
encompass the whole empire, as well exemplified by the Roman or Persian
Empires. Water supply, canals, dikes, river walls, and drainage systems are
also almost invariably required as the city's needs exceed the local resources.
The monumental remains of the Chapultepec or Claudian aqueducts are
eloquent mementoes of such a significant component in the process that
scholars like Karl Wittfogel even saw it as a prime mover for the process of
state formation that is a precondition to the emergence of empires.[12] More
generally, landscape modifications in the hinterland and further afield are
often undertaken, as happened with the lacustrine or lagoon environments
of Tenochtitlan or Venice, which became completely humanized with a
network of causeways and dikes to create artificial islands and water farms.
A similar process can be observed for the floodplains of Mesopotamia and
central Italy.

At the political and administrative level, on the other hand, empires tend
to reorganize the regions they conquer into provinces with their own
administrative centers, frequently recycling the former capital of a local
state for this purpose. The extraction of tribute in labor, kind, and taxes
from the rest of the empire is of course an important source of income for
the capital, but also has deep effects on the local taxpayers. The power
relationships between core and periphery are obviously asymmetrical, but
their economic consequences can range from exploitation and impoverish-
ment to an increase in the production of goods in demand or to the spread

---

[12] Karl A. Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power* (New Haven,
CT: Yale University Press, 1957). This view, however, has long been rejected.

of currency and more advanced exchange systems. Empires may vary widely in terms of their actual administrative practices (hence the recalled dichotomy of territorial versus hegemonic). The differences begin already in the immediate aftermath of the military conquest, with some empires entirely replacing the local power structure and looting and confiscating a large proportion of the resources, while others are content with imposing heavy tributes, payments, and levies but otherwise leaving the incorporated community to its own devices. Similarly, some empires are keen on imposing administrative overseers, like the Mexican *calpixque*, and on having governors sent in from the center, as happened for the later Roman provinces.

Most empires, in any case, rely heavily on ideological propaganda (as well as on actual consensus-building measures). The main message is that domination is beneficial over the long term for all the imperial subjects. This is not necessarily and not always completely false. The large-scale reorganization can actually prevent or mitigate regional competition and violence, which in turn can stimulate more production and trade. A similar effect can be produced by the increased demand, the central investments, and the improved lines of communication. There are also of course intended or unintended consequences for the rulers, from incorporating conquered people into the imperial network. The convergence of resources, information, and people to the core of the empire and to its capital city necessarily changes by degrees its original nature. Gods and other sources of symbolic power are appropriated from the defeated people, while culturally their very identity, mentality, and ethos are incorporated and blended into a newly emerging common worldview.

Epilogue

A trait that is common to many mature empires is the creation of additional capital cities as an answer to the growth of bureaucracy or to highlight the sacredness of the original capital, which then can become a purely ceremonial city. This delicate decision requires consensus and negotiation among the different relevant constituencies and can result in overt factionalism. It also requires the reallocation and expenditure of vast amounts of wealth that can easily test the economy and organizational limits of the empire. It is not a coincidence that, as exemplified by the case of Assyria or Egypt, these momentous actions are usually undertaken by powerful and charismatic emperors. In spite of that, in some situations the emergence of a second

capital, typically at the opposite end of the dominions, is a clear sign of imperial weakness. It can mark the beginning of the end for the original capital, at least in its present form, but it can also be a harbinger of civil strife and of imminent fission (or even dissolution) of the empire. Described more generally by human geographers and spatial archaeologists as the transition from a concave to a convex rank-size curve,[13] the loss of primacy of the main city is often a trait of empire maturity, and it illustrates well the significance and diagnosis value of the capital for the overall health of the state around it.

What happens to empires after they peak has attracted at least as much historiographic attention as the first half of their parabola, from Gibbon onwards. As they become larger and more complex, empires seem to become more vulnerable. Once the zenith of expansion has been reached, the gradual and perhaps unintended assimilation of subjects can weaken the imperial systems in many ways.

Progressively, the periphery tends to appropriate and reelaborate the ideology, technology, military organization, and administration system of the empire to the point where the real and symbolic sources of imperial power are reduplicated in every province. Such redundancy can cause the pacific or violent splits, usually at times of political crisis at the core of the imperial society. In other cases, internal contradictions and factionalism in the imperial capital or its hinterland can trigger deep transformations, in which the subjects lose their original identity and loyalty to the empire. This is particularly typical in commoner groups who find themselves impoverished and disenfranchised by a voracious nobility or imperial bureaucracy. Yet other imperial societies find their end when they are absorbed by another larger empire, which either grew in one of their former provinces or beyond the frontiers. In situations like this the provinces usually fail to assist the metropolis with a calculated passivity or even by actually assisting the new invaders to defeat their former masters, as was the case with Tenochtitlan, where the imperial capital was defeated by a few Europeans assisted by tens of thousands of former imperial subjects. The process can then start again in a new empire with a highly dominant, waxing imperial city.

---

[13] Gregory A. Johnson, "Aspects of Regional Analysis in Archaeology," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 6 (1977), 479–508.