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Unit Four: Age of Empires ca 1000-1500 BCE

4.1 Definitions

There was a remarkable shift in political organization affecting large swaths of the Afroeurasian world between 300 BCE and 300 CE: the development of large scale empires. One way to imagine this political shift is to consider what it takes to change from just being a political state to being an empire, a group of states or peoples under one powerful leader or sovereign entity that enjoy centralized political authority and are under centralized military control. Consider, in other words, what it takes to use force to expand and extend borders and bring other groups into a subject position.

This historical transition from state to empire developed in part because of certain military innovations and one of the tasks of emperors was to craft a type of multi-ethnic cohesion that allowed people from different groups to bridge their differences. Additionally, political consolidation and elaboration at times facilitated economic growth, increased agricultural yield, and led to higher populations. At the same time, however, empires also responded to upheaval and innovation, and we see scenarios in which empires developed in the context of change and upheaval: climate changes, migration, technological change. These changes included new ways of transporting troops and supplies with animals like camels and elephants. New types of transportation crossing long distances made new forms of trade possible. And trading networks like the Silk Road -- which connected the Afroeurasian landmass -- enjoyed a type of stability because of the ways empire was constructed and maintained. New ways of traversing bodies of water also impacted how empires functioned, and new methods of working metal also contributed to the rise of empire. Iron, especially, was significant for its malleability and when metal workers began adding carbon to iron an early form of steel was created -- this in turn allowed new tools, better plowing instruments and of course weapons. Agricultural instruments - iron plowshares allowed farmers to move away from a reliance on floods to rejuvenate the soil, and thus extended greatly the amount of arable land available, especially if canal systems and roads connected these far-flung agricultural outposts. In short, empire was built upon a number of material factors -- better weapons, better tools, and better agricultural instruments -- that allowed both population growth as well as military might.

Empire entailed new ways of governing populations of citizens and subjects, and there were important changes in political administration that coincided with the growth of empire. New weapons have allowed the extension of borders, but authority needed to be continually asserted. This could happen militarily with annual reinvasions of subject territories or it could happen politically through the establishment of a colonial administrative apparatus. Often military/imperial control resulted in the expansion of a slave-empire -- captives taken and deported to other regions to provide labor. The military/administrative nexus also was used to demand and extract tribute from subject peoples -- this was an innovation that in some places led to a growing bureaucracy of people who not only transferred information but also people, troops, and goods within the border of the empire as a whole. In short, empire helped shape entirely new ways of governing.

4.2 Egypt

One way to investigate empire and its history is to test the definition against political entities with which you are likely already familiar. In this segment, we investigate the question: was Egypt an empire?

Egyptian society was a riverine culture, its agricultural production tied to the annual and predictable flooding of the Nile. One big problem facing Egyptian rulers was the question of how to forge a unified culture from the different regions. Egypt is usefully imagined as having different zones: the south has higher elevations while the north is lower, and they each have much different power bases and regional concerns. The Pharaohs typically sought to unite these regions into a common political unit under one ruler's control. One way of achieving this political aim was to suggest that the Pharaoh was an embodiment of natural forces and powers and he (and sometimes she) also had to protect the long strip of land under his control from attacks from outsiders or marauders from Nubia to the South. For a long span of time -- 3100 BCE to the conquest of Egypt by Alexander the Great in 332 BCE -- Egyptian society and politics responded to these demands: defend Egyptian territory, expand it when possible, and develop new forms of rule that promoted political legitimacy as an expression of the natural and divine order. With this in mind, you should know that pharaonic Egypt is divided into three periods: the old, middle, and new kingdoms.

During the period known as the Old Kingdom -- 2686-2181 BCE -- Egyptian rulers embarked on a strategy of using sacred architecture to promote an idea of divine rule. The grandeur of the buildings was a visual representation of the rulers political power. It is during this period that we see the creation of monumental pyramids built in the style of ziggurats that functioned as a testament to the pharaoh's power. These sacred locations were the location of a set of important rituals that not only promoted kingly authority and power but also symbolically enacted the political unification of upper and lower Egypt. The pyramid complex at Giza, for instance, dates to the Old Kingdom, and it indicates the some of the ways that symbolic or sacred architecture could be deployed politically. Together, they indicate the economic and political complexity of Old Kingdom Egypt. Building these complexes required not only a massive priestly class but also a robust bureaucracy that could be mobilized in support of such a large-scale undertaking.

Over time the political stability of the Old Kingdom collapsed, and out of the chaos and turmoil of that collapse (caused in part by irregular Nile flooding and the religio-political crisis that that crisis symbolized) came a new set of political leaders. These rulers sought to reestablish political control over a unified north-south Egypt and also to expand the territory under their control. Centered on the city of Thebes, these new rulers built power by forging symbolic and dynastic connections to the gods. One of them -- Amenemhet I -- built a new cosmology by taking a formerly insignificant deity, Amun, and placing him at the center of religious and political life. When Amun was merged with the God of the Sun, Re, to form the deity Amun-Re he assumed rule over all the other gods. His champion on Earth -- Amenemhet I -- then could wield unparalleled power. This political-religious synthesis was a powerful tool. It ushered centuries of peace and economic expansion. This, however, made the Middle Kingdom (2055-1650 BCE) a tempting target of outside invaders. Around 1640 BCE, waves of migrants and military invaders from the west known as Hyskos -- the Rulers of Foreign Lands -- conquered the pharaohs and their armies, ushering in another century of chaos and turmoil.

Beginning around 1550 BCE the New Kingdom rose to dominance in Egypt. The best known of these leaders was the pharaoh Hatshepsut. She pushed the borders of the kingdom to the South and into Nubia, where she could control the reserves of gold. Importantly, Hatshepsut ruled as a king -- she employed male pronouns and she was depicted visually as a bearded man. This strategy of rule raises important questions about gender and authority in the New Kingdom.

Part of the novelty of ancient Egypt is centered on the ability of its rulers to imagine new ways of creating, consolidating, and expanding power. They did this in part through military prowess and by expanding the territories under their control. But they also achieved this aim by unifying the different parts of the country and by using religion as a way of legitimizing political power. In these ways, we can begin to see some of the forms that power would take when it was expressed in the form of empire.

4.3 Nubia

A second important political entity developed in East Africa during this period as well. Nubia -- whose kings also ruled for a time as Pharaohs of Egypt -- lets us see a different strategy at work when it comes to the question of political consolidation. Nubia is located around the upper Nile, to the south of pharaonic Egypt.

The state of Kush, with its capital city Kerma, was the first to unify the various regions between 1700 and 1500 BCE. Kerma and Kushite Nubia represented an early experiment with powerful centralized city-states. Kerma exerted influence throughout the upper Nile and the city, which was known for its strong mud-bricked architecture, was the location of impressive palatial architecture. Kerma was not just a political center, however, it was also a powerful military and commercial center. Nubia was a conduit for trade between Egypt and sub-Saharan Africa. This cross-cultural trade took place over long distances and consisted of trade in gold, ivory, and slaves.

Besides Kush, there was also the Meroë kingdom, which was located between the Nile and the Red Sea. Meroe had its highpoint between 400BCE and 300 CE. The Meroë kingdom was also deeply influenced by Egypt and its cultural forms, even taking its leadership class from among Egyptian royalty. It is also important to recognize the commercial and trading significance of the Meroë Kingdom, which was known for its ironworkers and its textiles. Indeed, its metallurgy was recognized as being some of the best in the world at the time.

One of the significant factors at work in Nubia is the degree to which the histories and political fortunes of Nubia and Egypt were intertwined. That the two polities shared rulers and were trading partners, but that they also at other times fought to control territory along the Nile river indicates the complexity of African political and military life before the Common Era. And while it is not appropriate to call Nubia an empire (at least for much of its history) we should be mindful of how the region functioned not only as a conduit between the Mediterranean powers like Egypt and the sub-Saharan ones, but also how its craftsmen and architects developed reputations for their skill throughout Afroeurasia.

4.4 Persia

Thanks to a 1998 comic book series and a subsequent color-saturated and ultraviolet movie, a lot of Americans have some basic idea of the story of the battle of Thermopylae. This was a juicily romanticized moment in the history of Greco-Persian contact in the ancient world, almost 500 years before the common era. The cinematic version seems to teach that Persians are dark, pierced and bad; Greeks (except Spartans) a waste of space, and Spartans the coolest, manliest hardbodied killers ever – in short, a weird homage to a particular city-state in ancient Greece. That the movie is predictably unreliable as a historical text is not the point. That's never the point. The interesting thing here is that the movie helps us to think about the enduring value of empires in our imagination. For millennia, the huge, ethnicity-encompassing, territory-gobbling, infrastructure-improving societies we call empires have captured our attention. We've

already seen some of the ways in which early civilizations helped to spawn the even larger entities we call empires; now, let's take a look at two players in the ancient Imperial game, Greece and Persia.

We'll start with Persia. The territory we now know as Iran was just the center (more or less) of the massive Persian Empire around 500 BCE. Starting with the king Cyrus the Great, around 550 BCE, the Persian empire grew through military conquest to absorb not only what we think of as the Middle East, but all the lands between India and Egypt, including present-day Turkey and Armenia.

At its height, the Persian empire (also known as the Achaemenid empire) contained something like 50 million people, give or take. That's huge – more than 40% of the world's population at the time. That's the biggest the world had seen at that point. Moreover, an empire that size – based in military conquest of (we assume) initially unwilling subjects – took an awful lot of governing. Remember how civilizations reflected a more abstract, a more symbolic and less personal form of government than the old chiefdoms? In the same way, empires depended on communicating the ruling structure – the basic hierarchies of society, and the power of the guy at the top – over huge distances to huge numbers of people. This was an immense logistical challenge. Part of the success of the Persian kings like Cyrus, his son Cambyses, and later rulers like Darius and Xerxes lay in their insistence on a royal cult. Especially during Darius's rule, the king of the empire and his power were linked directly to the god Ahura Mazda, the central deity of the Zoroastrian religion (named after the prophet Zoroaster or Zarathustra, about whom we'll hear more later). And while we see examples of divine kings all over the place (in Sumer, in Egypt, wherever) it seems that this divinity was really enforced throughout the Persian empire; at the death of the king, for example, national mourning was enforced, and a variety of monuments and writings attest to Darius's claims that he was divinely appointed.

At the same time, it's important to get that the Persian empire was *diverse*, and deliberately so. Many of the tens of millions of people who found themselves in the empire were NOT Zoroastrian, but found a warm welcome nonetheless. Many Jewish people – whose homeland had been conquered by the Babylonians – were witness to the Persian empire conquering the Babylonians in turn. The Persians, however, were by all accounts tolerant and even generous toward the Jews, including the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. This resulted in the strong positive influence of the Zoroastrian faith on Jewish mythology and theology.

But tolerance and impressively divine kings alone don't rule an empire. On the practical side, the Persian empire employed an impressive system of delegated governors, called *satraps*, who managed provinces in the name of the emperor, employing a complex system of local authorities under them. And should these trusted satraps get an idea, for example, to dip in to tax revenues before sending them off to the emperor – a bad idea, because of the impressively exact surveys of Persian lands that had already been conducted – a system of spies, the “eyes and ears of the king,” would quickly report on the bad behavior of the governor. Perhaps most impressively, the news of good or bad behavior was communicated with lightning speed along the “Royal Road,” a thoroughfare of more than 1,500 miles with fresh horses posted at stations along the way to ensure the fastest possible communication of news.

Overall, the Persian empire was the absolute most impressive entity of its time in the ancient world, in size and sophistication. Far from the creepily hedonistic warmongers of the 2006 film, the Persians maintained an impressive, vibrant, and multiethnic empire.

4.5 Greece

The Greeks, on the other hand, were a different story. Loosely connected through language, shared ancestry and an every-four-years-sports festival worshipping their common gods of Mount Olympus, the Greeks were hardly an empire as much as a bunch of city-states, each maintaining their own distinct identity in the naturally divided topography of the mountainous peninsula. The city states warred with one another as often as they cooperated, but a unified interest in merchant activity (beginning in the 7th century BCE) and growing populations spurred Greeks to migrate into neighboring lands, establishing colonies on the shores of the Mediterranean.

But these colonies were nothing like the colonies that we usually associate with empire – they weren't armed invasions, or even centrally coordinated – instead, they were just small settlements of Greek traders and farmers, who made it as far as present-day Spain, Ukraine, and Egypt. To be fair, they were often launched by a particular city-state, and the founders of colonies were honored as heroes; this is hardly the same as a coordinated imperial expansion, however. With these colonists came elements of Greek culture, including language, currency, art and architecture, and religion, and a vibrant Mediterranean and Black Sea trade ensured that the colonies kept in touch with their nominal homes.

We should note, too, that while later histories have absolutely blown the Greek-civilization horn to distraction – lauding their democracy, their concept of citizenship, their philosophy and mathematics and science and mathematics and whatnot – there's a lot to be impressed with. They were no Persia, to be sure – but at the same time, perhaps it's the very disaggregated, diffuse, antagonistic nature of the Greek community that makes their achievements all the more impressive. Certainly larger city states like Athens, Corinth, and Argos – and the anomalous Sparta, with few citizens but lots of slaves – developed significant new political organizations, including (famously) democracy. That's not nothing, as we'll see. So we have two very different models of expansion; one military and centrally driven, and one opportunistic and piecemeal. Let's remember, too, that the Persian empire dwarfed the Greek conglomerate, which had maybe ten million inhabitants – again, in divided, antagonistically oriented city-states. But it's still not surprising that these expanding entities would eventually bump up into one another.

When some Greek colonies on the coast of Anatolia – present-day Turkey – rebelled against their Persian overlords (remember, there were Greek colonies all over the place, including in Persia) the opportunistic leader of the rebellion managed to draw in the support of Athens. With Athens, the rebels burned a Persian city, thereby managing to secure the attention and intense anger of the Persian king, Darius. He launched a series of military campaigns against the Greeks; an early one against Athens ended, famously, at the battle of Marathon, when in 490 BCE a courier managed to run more than 170 miles – first to try in vain to get Spartan help, and then to deliver good news of the Athenian victory over the massive Persian forces – before falling down dead. Now fully enraged, Darius planned further punitive attacks, but other troubles delayed him and it fell to his son Xerxes to launch the next attack, in 480 BCE.

This brings us to Thermopylae, and the doomed efforts of the Spartan king, Leonidas, and his bodyguard of 300 men (and thousands of other allied Greek troops). Although defeated there by the Persians, the Greek forces would fight such costly battles that, after their decisive naval defeat at Salamis, the Persians decided to call the whole thing off.

This didn't matter much to the Persians, honestly – the Greeks were just another slightly fractious element in a massive empire, and there were other more pressing matters. For the

Greeks, however, this was close to miraculous; and it propelled Athens into a pretty cocky position, from which it later attempted to control all of Greece – launching the Peloponnesian War, which marked the end of a unified Greek empire until the rise of Alexander the Great. So what does this mean for us? Well, part of the idea is that empires come in very different shapes and sizes, with very different approaches towards managing their own populations. The Greek and the Persian case help us to see that; it also helps us to think about how empires (again, in different ways) are necessarily expansive and therefore destined to bump up against each other. And, given the romantic treatment this particular encounter has received, we can also see how empires have captured the imaginations of historians and regular folks alike for millennia.

4.6 Macedonia

The eastern Mediterranean saw the rise not only of Egyptian political power but also the Greek and Persian Empires. Following these inspirations, Alexander the Great expanded the power and significance of Greek culture throughout the eastern Mediterranean and Southwest Asia, crafting what some scholars argue was the largest multiethnic empire in the world.

Alexander the Great's empire, however, was culturally unified around "Hellenism," or the Greek-speaking culture of the eastern Mediterranean. Hellenism was a unified culture that was not rooted in the historical experiences of any one of the specific Greek-speaking city-states, but rather represented a broader set of cultural experiences and social practices. Alexander's empire represented the diffusion of these cultural practices and norms through military conquest and trade. Alexander's conquests also brought stability and peace in their wake, allowing urban environments to grow and to become more sophisticated. Indeed, one outcome of Alexander's conquests was to provide the stability necessary for the Western section of the Silk Road to thrive and in this way a bridge between East and West was formed.

Alexander started his empire in Macedonia -- a area of Southeastern Europe at the northern edge of the Greek isles -- and built an empire on the basis of a unified polity created in Macedonia by his father Philip II. Beginning around 330 BCE, Alexander began the expansion of his empire out of Macedonia, attacking Southwest Asia, and conquering the Persian Empire. Once the Persian Empire was under his control, Alexander encouraged a broader range of trade with his territories in the eastern Mediterranean. One of the methods that Alexander used to solidify his power was to seize the wealth of conquered territories and redistribute it. This was famously carried out against the Persian empire when Alexander seized the wealth of the Persian royalty and dispersed it throughout the eastern Mediterranean. He further reinforced his authority by founding cities that were infused with hellenistic cultural beliefs and naming them after himself -- the city of Alexandria in Egypt is just one example of the process.

Alexander died at a young age in 323 BCE -- he was only 32 at the time of his death, but he had conquered a vast swath of territory spanning northeast Africa, the Greek isles and Macedonia, through what is now Syria, Iran, and Iraq, and even into modern-day Pakistan and Afghanistan. Because his empire depended on his person for unity, his death caused a crisis of succession. Who would control these territories after his death? Alexander had a number of generals who sought to cement their own power, which they did over large chunks of Alexander's broken-up empire. Alexander's empire was huge, and upon his death it was split into three main zones of control, each administered by one of his generals. Egypt and North Africa was ruled by Ptolemy I; Seleucus seized control of the territory spanning the Persian empire and what is now modern-day Afghanistan; Antigonus Gonatas came to control the Greek isles and Macedonia.

4.7 Mauryan Empire

The massive empires of the Eastern Mediterranean were not alone, and Alexander the Great served as an example of empire-building prowess to others. Before his death in 323 BCE Alexander the Great marched his army into the Indus Valley in South Asia, a region of the world his troops occupied between 327 and 325 BCE. Alexander's army brought an end to the chronic fighting between different groups in the region, generating a period of stability and political consolidation. Following Alexander's departure, however, the question of political control again became paramount and a chaotic political environment once again characterized South Asia. Out of this chaos came the creation of the Magadha kingdom under the rule of Chandragupta Mori in 321 BCE. The Mori family, for whom the Mauryan empire is named, took advantage of the power vacuum created by Alexander's departure, and used this opportunity to extend and expand its influence. The Mauryan Empire, led by Chandragupta, came to include much of what is now modern-day India, from the Ganges and Indus Rivers into the North to the southern tip of the subcontinent and the Indian Ocean. Chandragupta's abilities as a military leader meant that the Mauryan empire soon was rubbing up against the remnants of Alexander the Great's empire, most significantly against the Seleucid empire dominating the span of territory between modern day Turkey and Afghanistan. Military conflict between these two polities was avoided through savvy marriage arrangements and diplomatic missions that connected the two courts through kinship. In this fashion we see another form of empire-building: kinship networks could stabilize imperial borders and de-escalate the tensions that existed between political groups. In a similar way, diplomatic missions that connected rival courts meant that political solutions to crises could be fashioned before violence broke out.

Chandragupta was a capable military leader who secured the borders of his empire through diplomacy and with a military presence in the border regions. But the empire enjoyed its greatest period during the reign of Chandragupta's grandson, Asoka, who extended the borders of the empire further to the South. Asoka was a devout Buddhist who came to regret the bloodshed and misery he caused in the course of the military campaigns that had expanded the borders of his empire. In a famous decree -- the Kalinga Edict -- he doubled down on his adherence to Buddhism and publicly sought to rule his empire according to the moral code of dharma, expressing sorrow for the violence of his campaigns and the deaths of those people caught up in the violence of empire.

4.8 Han China

Centered on the turn of the millennium, we see a major transition in the way the Afroeurasian world was structured. Beginning in the third century BCE we see the creation of parallel imperial structures -- one based in the Mediterranean and the other in China. We focus first on the eastern section, looking at the creation of empire in China.

The third century BCE in China is called the "warring states period," a time of political chaos defined by the lack of a single power center that could dominate the region. Beginning in the eastern range of Zhou China this period of political turmoil was brought to a conclusion with the rise of a dominant political power: the Qin. The Qin absorbed the Zhou dynasty in 221 BCE, winning a series of military confrontations not only with their infantry and cavalry, but also with a dedicated core of archers employing crossbows to deadly effect. This military prowess was not just politically significant, it was also symbolically important, a fact demonstrated by the "terra cotta army" buried alongside the Qin emperor to battle alongside him in the afterlife.

Having solidified their political position and masters of China militarily, the Qin dedicated a portion of their energy to developing the tools necessary to administer a large empire. It was in this environment that a range of new ideas from Daoism and Confucianism to legalism were created which together helped create a strong centrally powerful state supported by an elaborate bureaucracy. These innovations by the Qin helped fuel the rise of what came to be known as the Han Dynasty after 207 BCE.

One way that the Han dynasty achieved dominance was through the inclusion of subject peoples in its political system. And this inclusion was one that went beyond the mere extraction of tribute and taxes but included legal absorption, religious conversion, and the consolidation of trade networks. There was also an attempt at cultural assimilation, forged through a common written language and immersion in a common intellectual tradition of Confucianism.

The Qin Dynasty employed a new system of territorial control based on the unit of the province. Each province -- of which there were 36 -- was controlled by a dual political structure that was part military and part civilian but which was responsible to the Emperor. The emperor's subjects were required to register with the state apparatus so that they could be taxed or pressed into service on public works projects or into the army. The Emperor extended his power over the economic life of China by instituting standard weights and measures as well as a unified coinage system. There was also the imposition of a standardized legal code with established punishments for wrongdoing. Writing too was standardized. These tools, which generated not only standardization but also resistance to the government, contributed to the collapse of the Qin in 211 BCE. Following a short period of civil war, the Han Dynasty was founded when Liu Bang declared himself to be the first emperor in 202 BCE, setting in place a dynasty that would last for the next four centuries.

The Han Dynasty thrived because of its bureaucracy, staffed by men who benefitted from a sophisticated educational system created in part to generate the man-power for the bureaucracy. Historians note that this educational system -- which grew to 30,000 students by the 2nd century BCE -- was a cornerstone of imperial control, in part because of the ways that Confucian ideology was wedded to administrative capability and to imperial authority and legitimacy. The scholars trained in the state educational system went on to control the administrative processes of the government. Especially under Emperor Wu around 100 BCE these government officials oversaw taxation and military service and over time began to erode the power of the local nobility.

These reforms in turn facilitated military expansion of the Han. Following the silk roads, Han armies conquered territory to the West and then also into the Korean peninsula. Attacks into modern-day Mongolia against the Xiongnu were only partially successful, however, demonstrating that there were limits to Han military might.

The Han succeeded in crafting what scholars call the *Pax Sinica* -- or Chinese Peace -- between 149 and 87 BCE. This period was known for its internal peace, the expansion and solidification of trade networks, and a general period of social peace and economic prosperity.

4.9 Rome

Han China was one empire in the Afro-Eurasian world that brought stability and peace to large sections of the system. Rome was another. The two empires, in fact, operated contemporaneously, and may be usefully compared and contrasted.

The Roman empire grew through a process of legal and political consolidation; it exerted trade dominance; and it offered a type of cultural cohesion -- most obviously in the form of

“Christendom” after the 3rd century CE -- but also by creating a universal language — Latin — and also through the military power of the Roman state. The power of Rome originated in the loose political world of 4th century BCE Mediterranean. Rome, attacked by other city states in modern-day Italy, initiated a massive military buildup that allowed them to dominate the Italian peninsula, forcing their rivals to acknowledge their subservient status and to provide men for the Roman military.

This massive Roman army -- staffed only in part by people who called the city of Rome their home -- then fought three wars with the Carthaginians of North Africa to determine which power would rule the Mediterranean. These wars — called the Punic Wars — were fought between Rome and Hannibal, the leader of Carthage. One result of the Punic Wars was Roman dominance of the Western Mediterranean. The final defeat of Carthage in 146 BCE was a type of total war. The city of Carthage was destroyed by Roman troops, and salt was even sown on the fields to render them infertile. Rome’s domination of the Carthaginians facilitated attacks on the eastern Mediterranean as well as military incursions into Spain and Gaul, modern-day France.

The Romans built new political institutions that matched this impressive expansion. The Roman Republic was governed by the Senate, elected among free men who enjoyed citizenship of Rome. Two of these senators would be selected as consuls, leaders of Rome’s military. Two others, elected as tribunes, spoke for the common people. During a political crisis, a notable citizen could be elevated to the position of dictator, his word law. It is important to remember as well, however, that Rome was also a slave state -- and its unfree subjects, pulled in from across the Mediterranean world to serve their Roman masters -- were the victims of a brutal economy of mining, plantation work, and most famously, gladiatorial entertainment.

The power dynamics informing the Roman republic -- powerful elites with political connections held in check by a huge population of poor, but free, citizens -- were unstable. This instability culminated in a period of civil war in the middle of the first century BCE. When Julius Caesar -- still a member of the Senate despite his military prowess -- attempted to assert power as dictator, he was thwarted in his ambitions to become an emperor only by assassination. His heir, however, Octavian, adopted the title *imperator* -- emperor -- to signify his awesome status and unbounded political authority. His imperial title coincided with the creation of the *Pax Romana* -- the Roman Peace -- that historians argue characterized Roman politics throughout the Mediterranean from 25 BCE to 235 CE. The *Pax Romana*, which like the *Pax Sinica* facilitated trade, was crafted in part through the ruthless incorporation of subject peoples into the Roman imperium.

4.10 Life outside Empire

Empires and empire building were defining features of the period around the beginning of the common era. Throughout the Afroeurasian world we see the creation, extension, and elaboration of territorial empires. These empires helped generate new ideas about military prowess, new experiments with political power, and new forms of governmental administration. While empire building was an inherently violent process, the empires also put into place conditions for peace, prosperity, and trade. The *Pax Sinica* and the *Pax Romana* -- at either end of the Afroeurasian world connected by the Silk Road -- indicate how empire and economic vitality could go hand in hand.

That said, empire was not the whole story, and those groups on the periphery of empire, or who resisted incorporation into an empire, also have historical importance. The Europeans who rejected Roman imperium -- the German tribesmen fighting under Arminius, for instance -- or the Xiongnu horsemen who rejected the Han tell us that empire was never a completely

successful project. Empire, in other words, was incomplete, and those people and those regions who were not bound to some imperial order nonetheless developed their own economic forms, their own political structures, and their own social codes.

We should also note the experience of empire in the Afroeurasian world was not a necessarily a normative one. Other forms of empire existed elsewhere in the world — in Central and South America, for instance — and these political structures operated in ways that were different than what we find in the empires along the Silk Road.



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