

Empire and Eurasia: In the Footsteps of Alexander

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ABSTRACTS

Alle Imperien streben nach Universalität, das heißt, sie wollen Weltreiche sein. Sie sind sich jedoch im Allgemeinen der Existenz anderer Imperien in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart ebenso wie der Notwendigkeit bewusst, sich mit ihnen auseinanderzusetzen. Es hilft, wenn sie sich ideologisch und materiell miteinander verbinden können. Im Falle der älteren eurasischen Landimperien – Rom, Byzanz, Arabische und Persische Reiche, Indien, China – wurden die Verbindungen durch Handel und religiösen Austausch – christlich, islamisch, buddhistisch – hergestellt. Mit den neueren überseeischen Reichen – spanisch, holländisch, französisch, britisch – wurden diese Verbindungen fortgesetzt, nun aber ergänzt durch die starke europäische Präsenz in allen Ecken der Welt, die sie noch stärker zu eurasischen macht. Vieles davon, so wird argumentiert, stützt sich auf das Beispiel des großen eurasischen Reiches von Alexander dem Großen, dessen Erinnerung in praktisch jedem nachfolgenden Reich zu finden ist und dessen Vorbild alle nachahmen wollten.

All empires aspire to universality, which is to say that they aim to be world empires. But they are generally aware of the existence of other empires, past and present, and of the need to come to terms with them. It helps if they can make links, ideologically and materially, with each other. In the case of the older Eurasian land empires – Rome, Byzantium, the Arab and Persian empires, India, China – the links were supplied by trade and religious interchange, Christian, Islamic, Buddhist. With the newer overseas empires – Spanish, Dutch, French, British – these links continued, but were supplemented now by the strong European presence in every corner of the globe, making them Eurasian in an even stronger sense. Behind much of this, it is argued, is the example of the vast Eurasian empire of Alexander the Great, the memory of which is to be found in practically every succeeding empire, and the example of which all aspired to imitate.

“Another thing that puzzles me is why three distinct women’s names [Libya, Europe, Asia] should have been given to what is really a single land-mass”.
Herodotus, *The Histories*

“Now that commerce has connected the entire universe, that politics are enlightened regarding its interests, and that humanity extends to every people, there is no sovereign in Europe who does not think like Alexander”.
Louis de Jaucourt, *Encyclopédie*, 6, 1756

Universal Empire: Linking East and West

Empires have always striven to be universal. There could, in principle, only be one empire in the world, one that possessed the true religion, one that could give direction and guidance to the whole of humanity.¹ Dante, in his *De Monarchia* (c. 1314), gives the fullest and most eloquent expression of why that should be so.

*Mankind is the son of heaven, which is quite perfect in all its workings ... Therefore mankind is in its ideal state when it follows the footsteps of heaven, insofar as its nature allows. And since the whole sphere of heaven is guided by a single movement (i.e. that of the primum mobile), and by a single source of motion (who is God), in all its parts, movements and causes of movement, as human understanding perceives quite clearly through philosophical reasoning, then if our argument is sound, mankind is in its ideal state when it is guided by a single ruler (as by a single source of motion) and in accordance with a single law (as by a single movement) in its own causes of movement and in its own movements. Hence it is clear that monarchy (or that undivided rule which is called 'empire') is necessary to the well-being of the world.*²

Whatever their aspirations, most empires have not sought a literal conquest of the earth. The claims have largely been symbolic. But they have been seriously meant all the same. Humanity is one. Peace, righteousness and justice require the rule of one – monarchy or empire, as Dante says. An empire might not literally rule the whole world, but its influence and authority should irradiate that world. Others should acknowledge that centre of authority, as subordinates or tributaries. In calling itself Zhongguo, the “Middle Kingdom”, the Chinese Empire did not mean to suggest that there were other kingdoms beyond. It meant that it was the only kingdom, the centre of the world. Beyond that were only barbarians.³

1 Peter Fibiger Bang, and Dariusz Kołodziejczyk, eds. *Universal Empire: A Comparative Approach to Imperial Culture and Representation in Eurasian History*, Cambridge 2012.

2 Dante, *Monarchy* [De Monarchia], translated and edited by Prue Shaw (c. 1314), Cambridge 1996, 13.

3 Besides noting that the word “Zhongguo” (which he says is “more accurately” translated as “Central Kingdom”, not “Middle Kingdom”) as the name for the country of China only came into general use under the Qing (1644–1912) – before that the country was referred to usually under the name of the reigning dynasty, Han, Song,

The Roman Empire too thought of itself as ecumenical, as ruling the “*orbis terrarum*”, the whole of the known earth. That was the destiny famously laid out for it by Vergil in the *Aeneid* (1: 278), where Rome is said to have been granted “*imperium sine fine*”, empire without end. “It was a familiar concept to the Romans”, says the great classicist Theodor Mommsen, “that they were not only the first power on earth, they were also, in sense, the only one.”⁴ A fifth-century poet, Rutilius, praises Rome because “thou hast made a city of the once wide world.”⁵ It was not just that Rome was itself a cosmopolis, a “world city”, but that – in the words of the second-century CE rhetorician Aelius Aristides – it had made a world in its own image, it had established “a civil community of the World.”⁶

There was something else too that Rome was held to have accomplished. It had healed the traditional enmity of West and East, Europe and Asia, as recorded in various ancient myths and legends. In one version (as e.g. in Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, II, 812–44), Europa, a Phoenician (Asian) princess, was seduced by the Greek god Zeus disguised as a white bull, and carried off to Crete. This “rape of Europa” is repaid by Paris, the son of the Trojan (Asian) king Priam, when he in turn captivates (or seduces) the Spartan King Menelaus’ wife, Helen, and takes her off to Troy.

Herodotus in his *Histories*, seeking to explain the lengthy war between Persia (Asia) and Greece (Europe), draws on Persian and Phoenician sources to give a more extended – and, he hopes, more historical – account of the origins of the enmity of Europe and Asia, as symbolized in the legends. His is a story of the seizures of not two but four young women, all princesses, two of whom (Io and Helen) are European and two (Europa and Medea) Asian. First Phoenician sailors capture the Greek princess Io in Argos and take her to Egypt – “the first of a series of unjust acts”. Then some Greeks – “probably Cretans” (here is the echo of the old story about Zeus) – put into the Phoenician port of Tyre (in modern-day Lebanon) and carry off the king’s daughter Europa – “thus giving them tit for tat”. The Greeks continue the “outrages” by sailing to Colchis on the Black Sea – this is usually held to refer to the voyage of Jason and the Argonauts in search of the golden fleece – and, “not contented with the regular business which had brought them there, abducted the king’s daughter Medea.” Some time later Paris retaliates when he “steals a wife for himself out of Greece” and carries Helen off to Troy. When the Trojans

etc. – Endymion Wilkinson rightly remarks: “It is sometimes implied that Chinese people were unique in regarding their country as the center of the civilized world. Nothing could be further from the truth: like the ancient Chinese, the Mesopotamians, Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Indians, Japanese, Khmers, Aztecs, Incas and Mayas all saw themselves as the center of the world and in modern times imperial powers and superpowers have had the same tendency. The difference is that the Chinese, albeit very late in their history, came to use the concept for the name of their country.” Endymion Wilkinson, *Chinese History: A New Manual*, Cambridge, MA 2012, 191. See also Goldstone, this issue.

4 Quoted by Anthony Pagden, *Lords of All the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain, and France, c. 1500–c. 1800*, New Haven, CT 1995, 23.

5 Peter Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, London 2006, 234.

6 Krishan Kumar, *Visions of Empire: How Five Imperial Regimes Shaped the World*, Princeton, NJ 2017, 49.

refuse to return Helen – there is no evidence that she wishes to go back – the Greeks, under Agamemnon, unleash war against the Trojans.⁷

Though Herodotus declines to pass judgment on the “truth or falsity” of what the Persians and Phoenicians say, it is clear that this is a rhetorical trope and that he agrees that “it was the Greeks who were, in a military sense, the aggressors.”

*Abducting young women ... is not, indeed, a lawful act; but it is stupid after the event to make a fuss about avenging it. The only sensible thing is to take no notice, for it is obvious that no young woman allows herself to be abducted if she does not wish to be. The Asiatics, according to the Persians, took the seizure of the women lightly enough, but not so the Greeks: The Greeks, merely on account of a girl from Sparta, raised a big army, invaded Asia and destroyed the empire of Priam. From that root sprang their belief in the perpetual enmity of the Grecian world towards them – because the Persians claim Asia and the barbarian races dwelling in it as their own, Europe and the Greek states being, in their opinion, quite separate and distinct from them.*⁸

It was because the Romans were so aware of this historical memory that they made so much of their Trojan origins. The Trojan War, as recounted in Homer’s *Illiad*, was the defining instance of the enmity between Europe and Asia, East and West. Rome, founded by Trojans but developed on western soil with western (Latin) peoples, symbolized the healing of the breach and the fusion of the two. As recounted in Vergil’s epic of empire, the *Aeneid* (c. 20 CE), the foundations of Rome were laid by the Trojan prince Aeneas, fleeing the Trojan war with his father Anchises and his son Ascanius. Vergil renames Ascanius “Iulus Ascanius”, and, in the famous prophecy concerning Rome made by Jupiter to Venus in Book 1 of the *Aeneid*, declares him the ancestor of the Julian family and so of the emperor Augustus.

*To Romans I set no boundary in space or time.
I have granted them dominion, and it has no end ...
From the fair seed of Troy there shall be born a Trojan Caesar (Augustus),
Iulius, his name derived from great Iulus. Shall his empire
Reach to the ocean’s limits, shall his fame end in the stars (Aeneid Bk. 1, 278-9)*

In his *De Monarchia*, Dante quotes liberally from the *Aeneid* to show that Aeneas, by ancestry, birth and marriage, fuses in his own single person all the known continents of the world, Asia, Africa, and Europe.⁹ The Romans were particularly fascinated by the figure of Aeneas’ son, Ascanius. In artistic representations, Aeneas is usually shown in European or Western dress. But, as Rolf Michael Schneider has so beautifully shown, Ascanius is always depicted as “the handsome Asian”, in the typical Asiatic garb of long trousers, belted v-necked tunic, and soft shoes. If Aeneas symbolizes Rome’s Western foundations,

7 Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. Aubrey de Sélincourt, revised with an introduction and notes by John Marincola, London 2003, 3-4.

8 *Ibid.*, 4.

9 Dante, *Monarchy*, 34-37.

Iulus Ascanius keeps alive the memory of its Oriental origins. “The Trojan East and the Roman West were brought together by the genealogical model of father and son ... Iulus became the Trojan prince on whom Rome’s claim of imperial universalism depended.”¹⁰ In his plea for universal monarchy or empire, Dante singled out the Roman Empire as the providentially ordained agency for bringing peace, justice and righteousness to the whole world. Again he quotes Vergil, where Anchises lays out to Aeneas Rome’s destiny (*Aeneid* VI, 847–53):

*Roman, remember to rule over other nations.
Your arts shall be: to impose the ways of peace,
Spare subject peoples, and subdue the proud.*

“The Roman people”, says Dante, “were ordained by nature, carrying out God’s purpose, to rule; therefore the Roman people by conquering the world came to empire by right.”¹¹ One might question – as did Tacitus and several other Roman writers – Rome’s right to rule. But Dante is writing in a long tradition – starting with the Church fathers – that saw in Rome’s empire the signs of a divinely ordained mission to unify and pacify the world.¹² Certainly if universalism is one of the hallmarks of empire, in Western thought Rome became the supreme expression of that principle, one that later Western empires sought also to embody.

Alexander the Great: Eurasianism in Action

The Romans, some of them at least, Pompey and Caesar chief among them, were also admirers of Alexander the Great (356–323 BCE). Indeed practically all we know about Alexander comes from Roman writers, though many of them wrote in Greek. Though something like twenty accounts by contemporaries – some of whom fought with Alexander – are known to have been written, none of them have survived. What we have are histories – drawing on documents extant at the time – by writers such as Arrian, Curtius, and Plutarch, writing some four hundred years after the events they describe, about Alexander’s conquests and policies in his empire.¹³ Not unnaturally, they give us an Alexander shaped by Roman hopes and concerns. “The Alexander that we know and re-interpret is a ‘Roman’ construct, a product of Roman sensibilities and worldview; it was the Romans who made him ‘the Great’.”¹⁴

What appealed to the Romans – what they aspired to imitate – were the great breadth of Alexander’s empire (stretching from Macedonia to northern India), and his cosmopoli-

10 Rolf Michael Schneider, *The Making of Oriental Rome: Shaping the Trojan Legend*, in: Bang and Kolodziejczyk, *Universal Empire*, 76–129, here at 105–106.

11 Dante, *Monarchy*, 47.

12 Kumar, *Visions of Empire*, 68–73.

13 Tania Gergel (ed.), *Alexander the Great: Selected Texts from Arrian, Curtius and Plutarch*, London 2004.

14 Diana Spencer, *The Roman Alexander: Reading a Cultural Myth*, Exeter, UK 2002, xv.

tanism, his embrace of the many peoples incorporated in the empire. Plutarch records that in this respect Alexander rightly ignored the advice of his tutor, Aristotle, to treat all but Greeks as “mere brutes and vegetables”. That would have “filled his empire with fugitive incendiaries and perfidious tumults.” As so often, the student proved himself wiser than his teacher.

*Believing himself sent from Heaven as the common moderator and arbiter of all nations, and subduing those by force whom he could not associate by fair offers, he labored thus, that he might bring all regions, far and near, under the same dominion. And then, as in a festival goblet, mixing lives, manners, customs, wedlock, all together, he ordained that every one should take the whole habitable world for his country, of which his camp should be the chief metropolis and garrison”.*¹⁵

Alexander has been called “the last of the Achaemenids”¹⁶, and there is a good deal of plausibility in seeing him as continuing the Persian inheritance as well as mixing it with a strong dose of Hellenism. In conquering the Persian Empire of the Achaemenids, Alexander took over a vast empire with a clearly Eurasian character, stretching from the eastern Mediterranean – including at one time Macedonia – to the Indus: the first “world empire”, it has fairly been claimed.¹⁷ He found there established institutions and structures that had proved remarkably successful in governing the far-flung empire with its mixture of peoples and cultures. The wanton – and perhaps accidental – destruction of Persepolis aside, Alexander took care to adopt many of the institutions and practices of the Persians. He kept rule through satraps and satrapies; he took over the vast machinery of the treasury and of record-keeping in Babylon; he maintained the administrative centres of Susa and Ecbatana; he appointed many Persians to the bureaucracy and the army. In addition he himself married two Persian princesses, having previously also married

- 15 Plutarch, *The Fortune or Virtue of Alexander the Great*, in: *Plutarch’s Morals*, ed. William W. Goodwin, 5 vols., Boston 1871, 1: 475–516, here p. 481. Drawing on Plutarch, among others, Montesquieu, in *The Spirit of the Laws* [1748], lavishes praise on Alexander for the respect that he showed to the customs and traditions of the peoples he conquered, thereby winning the gratitude of the conquered. He aimed, says Montesquieu “to unite the two nations” of Greeks and Persians, and to “abolish the distinction between a conquering and a conquered people.” Baron de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. Thomas Nugent, Two Volumes (1748), New York 1962, I: 144. Plutarch’s account is also the basis of Sir William Tarn’s classic interpretation of Alexander’s empire and his achievements: W. W. Tarn, *Alexander the Great*. 2 vols., Cambridge 1948. It has been much debated; for recent accounts, with extensive reference to the literature, see A. B. Bosworth, *Conquest and Empire: The Reign of Alexander the Great*, Cambridge 1993; Paul Cartledge, *Alexander the Great: The Hunt for a New Past*, New York 2004. See also James Davidson, *Bonkers about Boys*, in: *London Review of Books*, 23 (2001) 1: 7–10; Pierre Briant, *Alexander the Great and His Empire: A Short Introduction*, trans. from the French by Amélie Kuhrt, Princeton, NJ 2012; Carol G. Thomas, *Alexander the Great in his World*, Malden, MA 2007; Anthony Pagden, *Worlds at War: The 2,500-year Struggle between East and West*, New York 2008, 41–68.
- 16 Pierre Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire*, trans. Peter T. Daniels, Winona Lake, IN 2002, 876.
- 17 Amélie Kuhrt, *The Achaemenid Persian Empire (c. 550–c.330 BCE): Continuities, Adaptations, Transformations*, in: *Empires: Perspectives from Archaeology*, eds. Susan Alcock et al., Cambridge 2001, 93–123, here p. 93; see also Josef Wiesehöfer, *The Achaemenid Empire*, in: *The Dynamics of Ancient Empires: State Power from Assyria to Byzantium*, eds. Ian Morris and Walter Scheidel, New York 2010, 66–98.

Roxanne, daughter of the Bactrian (Afghan) king. He also made several of his commanders marry Persian brides. He never had a wife from his native Macedonia.¹⁸

Alexander's desire to unite East and West, to merge Greek and "barbarian", also had Persian roots, in the claims of the Achaemenid rulers since Cyrus to be "king of the four rims of the earth", "king of kings" (*shahanshab* in modern Persian, as adopted by later Persian rulers and those influenced by them, such as the Ottomans and the Mughals).¹⁹ Their universalism was to be a feature of practically all later empires. But it was Alexander who most forcefully stamped his imprint on this universalism. Partly this was because his empire actually went beyond the Persian, in incorporating the Greek territories, making it the most extensive Eurasian empire before that of Chingiz Khan. Partly also because the Hellenism – the Greek culture – that infused the empire proved flexible enough to accommodate many local variants, drawn from existing traditions, as was clear in the Hellenistic kingdoms that succeeded Alexander's empire. Hellenistic culture was fundamentally syncretic, a fusion of Greek culture with the cultures of western Asia Minor, Egypt, Syria, Iran and India.²⁰

Alexander's influence has been carried by myth and legend, as much as – perhaps far more than – by any recorded achievements. Early in the 3rd century CE there appeared the *Alexander Romance*, by the Greek writer "pseudo-Callisthenes", a fanciful, mostly eulogistic, account of Alexander's conquests and accomplishments. Phenomenally successful over the ages, it was translated into practically all the "high" Eurasian languages – Latin, Arabic, Ottoman Turkic, Persian, Sanskrit – thereby making it available to the elites of all the Eurasian empires. "More than eighty versions of the Alexander-romance, in twenty-four languages, have been collected ... No other story in the world has spread like his".²¹

18 Thomas plausibly suggests that Alexander was here following, on a larger canvas, many of the policies of his father Philip in relation to Macedonia's own imperial territories and peoples, in Greece, Thrace, and Illyria. And in invading Persia Alexander was of course simply renewing Philip's abortive attempt of 337-6 BCE. Alexander the Great, 220. Macedonia itself had been – intermittently – part of the Persian Empire between 512 and 476 BCE, and had prospered under it. Briant suggests that the Macedonian kings may have learned much from Achaemenid rule. Here again Alexander's empire represents continuity, not disruption: From Cyrus to Alexander, 875; see also Pagden, *World at War*, 48-9.

19 Kuhrt, *The Achaemenid Persian empire*, 105.

20 Carlos A. Picon and Sean Hemingway (eds.), *Pergamon and the Hellenistic Kingdoms of the Ancient World*, New York 2016; Peter Thonemann, *The Hellenistic Age*, Oxford 2016.

21 Tarn, *Alexander the Great*, I: 145. Stoneman says that "in the *Alexander Romance* the historical Alexander is almost entirely overlaid by another Alexander, a protean character who is able to embody some of the deepest fears and longings of the human condition." Richard Stoneman, *Alexander the Great: A Life in Legend*, New Haven, CT 2008, 2-3; see also Spencer, *The Roman Alexander*, xiii. Stoneman gives the fullest account of the worldwide spread and manifold uses of the *Romance* in all the major world literatures, East and West. See also François de Polignac, *From the Mediterranean to Universality? The Myth of Alexander, Yesterday and Today*, in: *Mediterranean Historical Review* 14 (1999) 1: 1-17; Garth Fowden, *Pseudo-Aristotelian Politics and Theology in Universal Islam*, in: Bang and Kołodziejczyk, *Universal Empire*, 130-148, here p. 133; Phiroze Vasunia, *The Classics and Colonial India*, Oxford 2013, 103-104. The attribution to "Callisthenes" artfully links the *Romance* to the historian Callisthenes, Aristotle's nephew, who travelled with Alexander and wrote an account of his campaigns, *The Deeds of Alexander*, which was a prime source for later accounts in the Roman era. It was unfinished because he fell foul of Alexander and was condemned to death in 327: Bosworth, *Conquest and Empire*, 296.

Alexander features prominently in the Persian poet Firdausi's great tenth-century epic of pre-Islamic Persian history, the *Shahnama*, "whose cultural authority was second only to that of the Quran" in all Muslim empires.²² Here Alexander is presented however not as a Greek conqueror but as the son a Greek princess and a Persian emperor who goes on to become a world-ruler famed for his magnanimity and respect for Persian traditions. When in 1501 Shah Ishmail inaugurated the Safavid Empire in Iran, he placed himself in succession to the pre-Islamic kings of the *Shahnama*, among them "Iskandar", the Muslim name for Alexander.²³ In Persian legend, Alexander has become not so much the conqueror of the Persian Empire as its inheritor, charged with its continuation and fulfilment. Hellenism and Iranism, in this view, both prepare the way for Islam; they are its antecedents, not its antitheses.²⁴

Muslim empires – Arab, Ottoman, Mughal, Safavid – were indeed all enamoured of Alexander. Besides translating the *Alexander Romance*, the Arabs also translated and lavished much commentary on the (untitled) "Alexander File" and the *Secret of Secrets*, Greek works purporting to be letters from Aristotle to his pupil Alexander and containing advice, in the form of "the mirror of princes", on how to rule his vast empire. The great prestige of Aristotle in the medieval Muslim world ensured that these "pseudo-Aristotelian" writings, focusing on Alexander, would achieve great prominence and inspire Muslim rulers. The *Secret of Secrets* declares - *contra* Plutarch! - that "by following [Aristotle's] good advice, and obeying his commands, Alexander achieved his famous conquests of cities and countries, and ruled supreme in the regions of the earth far and wide".²⁵ In the Ottoman Empire there was even a genre, the *Iskendername*, or *Book of Alexander*, that recounted and celebrated Alexander's exploits.²⁶ The cult of Alexander was well-suited to Ottoman ideologies that wished to stress the Empire's linking of East and West. "Eastern and Western traditions were typically mixed in the Ottoman political vocabulary and symbolically united in the person of Alexander the Great (*Iskender Du'l-karneyin*, lit. 'Alexander, lord of two horns')." ²⁷

In India too, a succession of rulers and regimes aspired to follow in the footsteps of Alexander. When Chandragupta ("Sandrokottos" to the Greeks), the founder of the third-century BCE Mauryan dynasty, was asked how he had conceived his empire, he is said to have replied, "I watched Alexander when I was still a young man". Alexander, he claimed, having taken northern India, could have gone on to conquer the whole of India, "since the king at the time was hated and despised for his iniquity and low birth".²⁸

22 Stephen F. Dale, *The Muslim Empires of the Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals*, Cambridge 2010, 20.

23 *Ibid.*, 70.

24 Garth Fowden, "Pseudo-Aristotelian Politics and Theology in Universal Islam", in Bang and Kołodziejczyk, *Universal Empire*, 130-148, here p. 136.

25 Quoted *ibid.*, 139-140.

26 Dale, *Muslim Empires*, 168.

27 Dariusz Kołodziejczyk, *Khan, Caliph, Tsar and Imperator: The Multiple Identities of the Ottoman Sultan*, in: Bang and Kołodziejczyk, *Universal Empire*, 175-193, here p. 182.

28 Plutarch, *Alexander*, in: *Greek Lives: A Selection of Nine Greek Lives*, trans. Robin Waterfield, Oxford 1998, 369; Robin Lane Fox, *Alexander the Great*, London 1986, 372.

Chandragupta, as well as his most famous and successful Mauryan successor, Ashoka, maintained strong links with the Hellenistic kingdoms – especially the Seleucid – that were formed by Alexander’s generals after his death, thereby ensuring the persistence of Hellenic culture in the empire.²⁹ The Indian cities of Secundra and Secunderabad, named after the “great Secunder”, still today testify to Alexander’s presence in the region and his impact there. Hegel indeed went so far as to claim that “by spreading the maturity and culmination of [Greek] culture over the East”, Alexander “as it were changed the stamp of subjugated Asia and assimilated it to a Hellenic land.”³⁰ Nationalist historians of India have indignantly denied this; but allowing for the hyperbole most scholars have been willing to accept the degree of truth it contains.³¹

The Muslim rulers of India were, as we have noted, likewise powerfully attracted by the Alexander romance. In the last years of the Delhi Sultanate, Nizam Khan (r. 1489-1517) of the Lodi dynasty, known to history as Sikandar Lodi, was only one of the several Delhi sultans who formally styled themselves “Sikandar”.³² Following them the Mughal emperors even more fervently embraced the Alexandrian legend. Like the Delhi sultans, they were heavily influenced by Persian literature and poetry, and drew heavily on the Alexander story as recounted in Firdausi’s *Shahnamah* and Nizami’s *Iskandarnamah* (part of his twelfth-century *Khamsab*).³³ Mughal court painters, using these sources, responded to the rulers’ wishes by displaying explicit parallels between Alexander and their imperial patrons, for instance by portraying them in locations associated with Alexander, or showing Alexander’s funeral with attendants clothed in Mughal attire. Indian writers, like Ottoman ones, developed the genre of the *Iskandarnamah*, in which Alexander’s achievements are offered, in the manner of the “mirror of princes”, as objects for emulation by Mughal rulers (the Arabic *Secret of Secrets*, translated into Persian, may have been

29 Peter Fibiger Bang, *Between Asoka and Antiochos: An Essay in World History on Universal Kingship and Cosmopolitan Culture in the Hellenistic Ecumene*, in: Bang and Kolodziejczyk, *Universal Empire*, 60-75, here pp. 60-62.

30 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (1830-31), New York 1956, 272.

31 See especially the essays by Ioannis Xydopoulos and Alastair Blanshard in eds. Himanshu Prabha Ray, and Daniel T. Potts, *Memory as History: The Legacy of Alexander in Asia*, New Delhi 2008, 19-39; see also Bang, “Between Asoka and Antiochos”. On Indian nationalist historiography, and the denial of Alexander’s importance, see Vasunia, *Classics and Colonial India*, 91-92. Vasunia points to the importance of the Hegel-inspired German historian Johann Gustav Droysen’s *History of Alexander the Great* (1833) and *History of Hellenism* (1877-8) in establishing the view of Alexander’s lasting impact on Asia: *ibid.*, 36-51, 101. It is fair to say that not only nationalist Indian historians deny these claims – see e.g. Romila Thapar, *A History of India*, Vol. One, Harmondsworth 1966, 59; John Keay, *India: A History*, Uttar Pradesh 2000, 70-71; Thomas R. Trautmann, *India: Brief History of a Civilization*, New Delhi 2011, 56. Yet Thapar, Keay, and Trautmann all show the extensive contacts, in trade and people, between the Mauryan Empire and the Hellenistic kingdoms that stretched from India’s western border all the way to the eastern Mediterranean (Thapar, *History of India*, 60-2; Keay, *India*, 82-5; Trautmann, *India*, 57, 63-4). A good deal of what we know of Chandragupta’s empire in fact comes from the memoirs of the Seleucid ambassador, Megasthenes; while the famous Rock Edicts of the emperor Ashoka – some of which are in Greek and Aramaic – specifically mention Alexander as well as the Hellenistic kingdoms of the Seleucids, the Antigonids, and the Ptolemies (Bang, “Between Asoka and Antiochos”, 60; Trautmann, *India*, 59). Alexander’s impact, and that of Hellenism generally, clearly cannot be reduced to Alexander’s two-years in the Punjab.

32 Keay, *India*, 250, 289; Vasunia, *Classics and Colonial India*, 104.

33 Nasim Akhtar, *Visual Illustrations of the Life of Alexander in Persian Manuscripts*, in: Ray and Potts, *Memory as History*, 76-88.

an inspiration). Even when, in the nineteenth century, Persian ceased to be the principal literary language at the Mughal court, Urdu continued the tradition of the *Iskandar-namah* – aided now by the translation of Plutarch’s “Life of Alexander” into Urdu.³⁴

The British, as successors to Mughal rule in India, were if anything even more enthusiastic in wishing to take on the mantle of Alexander. In the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a host of British agents, explorers, and geographers painstakingly traced the route of Alexander’s march from Iran to India, noting the many settlements established by Alexander and even purporting to find the traces of descendants of Alexander’s soldiers, in such peoples as the “white” Kafirs of Kafiristan in northern Afghanistan (Rudyard Kipling’s famous short story, “The Man Who would Be King” [1888] draws on this belief).³⁵ In doing so, they felt that they, and the British Empire that they represented, “were not simply walking the same ground as Alexander, but playing an identical historical role. They explored; they conquered; they civilized.”³⁶ With the conquest of the Punjab in 1849, which gave Britain possession of the whole of India, and so completed the process begun by Clive at Plassey in 1757, the British commander General Hugh Gough could declare triumphantly that “that which Alexander attempted, the British army have accomplished”.³⁷

“If you wanted to establish your own empire or march your army towards India or explore the limits of power, Alexander had got there first.”³⁸ Western imperialists, regarding Alexander as one of theirs, were of course even more drawn to Alexander’s example than their Eastern counterparts. Here they followed in the tradition of Pompey, Caesar, Trajan, and Caracalla, Roman leaders who all aspired to be the “Roman Alexander”.³⁹ For Western empire-builders, Rome was always the model; for them too the “Roman Alexander” – the Alexander as conceived by Rome – was virtually irresistible as an example to follow.

The French were particularly drawn to him, as a whole tradition of French painting – especially the grand sequence by Charles Le Brun – attests.⁴⁰ Le Brun influenced the official painters who flatteringly portrayed Napoleon on horseback in the dashing manner of Alexander. Napoleon himself, arriving in Egypt in 1798, was fully conscious that he was walking in the footsteps of Alexander, as he contemplated the further move to India and the conquest of the Orient – a parallel that the British were also only too

34 Vasunia, *Classics and Colonial India*, 105-115.

35 *Ibid.*, 51-89.

36 C. A. Hagerman, *Britain’s Imperial Muse: The classics, Imperialism, and the Indian Empire, 1784–1914*, Houndmills, Basingstoke 2013, 175, 153-154, 162, 178-181; see also Hagerman, *In the footsteps of the ‘Macedonian Conqueror’: Alexander the Great and British India*, in: *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 16 (2009) 3/4, 344-392.

37 Quoted Lawrence James, *Raj: The Making and Unmaking of British India*, New York 1998, 118

38 Vasunia, *Classics and Colonial India*, 115.

39 Spencer, *The Roman Alexander*, 165-203; Bosworth, *Conquest and Empire*, 181.

40 Spencer, *The Roman Alexander*, 164; E. J. Baynham, *Power, Passions, and Patrons: Alexander*, Charles Le Brun, and Oliver Stone, in: Waldemar Heckel and Lawrence Tritle (eds.), *Alexander the Great: A New History*, Malden 2009, 294-310; Pierre Briant, *The First European: A History of Alexander in the Age of Empire*, trans. Nicholas Eliott, Cambridge, MA 2017, 31.

acutely aware of.⁴¹ In a nice reversal, Alexander, in the words of the French writer Denis Jullien du Rouet in 1809, was now seen as “the Napoleon of the Ancient World, [who] cleared the path to a universal commerce for Europe.”⁴² Even Chateaubriand, a bitter opponent of the French Revolution and critic of Napoleon, was driven to write in later years that “our armies like Alexander’s spread light among the peoples where our flag wanders: Europe became French under Napoleon’s footsteps, like Asia became Greek in Alexander’s course.”⁴³ In the late nineteenth century, as the French set about re-building their empire in North Africa and Indo-China, Alexander was again invoked as the great exemplar of the carrier of the *mission civilisatrice* to Asia and other non-Western regions. Hellenization and Gallicization made congenial bed-fellows.⁴⁴

Universal Empire: The Axial Moment and the Axial Age

Given the immense popularity of the Alexander legend over two millennia of world history, and its capacity to inspire rulers throughout Eurasia, Peter Fibiger Bang has suggestively proposed that we should think of Alexander as representing an “axial moment” in the development of “large empires with universal aspirations.”⁴⁵ The analogy of course is with the “Axial Age” (*Achsenzeit*), the term coined by Karl Jaspers to describe the epoch – roughly 800 to 200 BCE – in which “were born the fundamental categories within which we still think today, and the beginnings of the world religions, by which human beings still live, were created.” Both Alexander’s empire and the systems of thought and ethics of the Axial Age were “a step into universality”, as Jaspers characterizes the Axial Age.⁴⁶ Just as the thinkers and religious prophets of China, India, Palestine and Greece offered accounts of the “good life” and transcendental histories that incorporated all of humanity, so the succession of empires inspired by Alexander broke through the more limited, self-enclosed, horizons of the ancient civilizations to claim universal rule and the unification of all peoples. In both cases this meant effectively Eurasia, though the aspirations were of course for all humans, and contact with the pre-Columbian civilizations of the New World cannot be ruled out.⁴⁷

41 Hagerman, *Britain’s Imperial Muse*, 164-165, 179; Briant, *The First European*, 208-209, 249-250; After his defeat, while in exile, Napoleon wistfully reflected “if I had stayed in the Orient, I would probably have founded an empire like Alexander, by going on a pilgrimage to Mecca, where I would have prayed and genuflected”. He also regretted that he had been unable to follow Alexander’s example of mixing peoples by “making each of the [European] peoples into a single body of nations” (in Briant, *The First European*, 253). Charlemagne is often cited as the inspiration of the European Union; it is also possible to invoke Alexander!

42 Quoted Briant, *The First European*, 249.

43 Quoted *Ibid.*, 246-47.

44 Pierre Briant, *Impérialismes antiques et idéologie coloniale dans la France contemporaine: Alexandre le Grand modèle colonial*, in: *Dialogues d’histoire ancienne* 5 (1979): 283-292; Vasunia, *Classics and Colonial India*, 33-34.

45 Bang, “Between Asoka and Antiochos”, 63-64.

46 Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, trans. by Michael Bullock (1949), Abingdon, UK 2010, 2.

47 See the suggestions in Peter N. Stearns et al., *World Civilizations: The Global Experience*, Seventh Edition, Upper Saddle River, NJ 2015, 167-168. Striking similarities between Olmec and certain African – if not Eurasian – sculptures suggest some contact across the Atlantic.

Is there a link between the Axial Age of universal thought and the axial moment of universal empire that occurred at much the same time – the middle centuries of the first millennium BCE? Any answer is bound to be tentative and speculative – but no more so than Jasper’s own speculative (and inconclusive) propositions concerning the simultaneous yet distinct origin (in no more than three of or four places) of the thinkers of the Axial Age.⁴⁸

There have always been those who have held that the philosophy of the Epicureans, Cynics and Stoics, with their idea of the “cosmopolis” and the “brotherhood of all men”, was inspired by Alexander’s achievements. These were influential thinkers of the Axial Age whose schools developed, in the third and second centuries BCE, in the wake of Alexander’s empire.⁴⁹ More generally we can say that while, as Jaspers suggests, the sources of Axial Age thinking are to be found in a period of “Warring States” – to use the Chinese expression – throughout Eurasia, their decisive development, the foundations of schools and sects, takes place in the succeeding age of empires. For the West, these are those of Alexander and his Hellenistic successors, the Seleucids, Antigonids, and Ptolemies. Rome too built up its empire in this time during the Republic, including the important victory over the Carthaginians, before formally inaugurating the Augustan Empire (27 BCE). In India this is the period of the Mauryan Empire (321–187 BCE), in China the formation of the Qin and Han Empires (221 BCE–220 CE).

These empires covered the entire Eurasian landmass, from the Atlantic to the eastern Pacific. But more importantly, there was intensive interaction between all of them, in diplomacy, in commerce, and in the movement of people and ideas. The Hellenistic king-

48 Jaspers, *Origin and goal*, 13-21. Jaspers explicitly rules out, as an explanation for the origins of the Axial Age, “the unity of the whole Eurasian bloc, determined by constantly renewed advances, migrations, and conquests from Central Asia” – the thesis essentially of Alfred Weber, of a series of invasions by the Indo-Europeans from Central Asia. In other words, he denies connections between the different places and peoples within which Axial Age thinkers arose, insisting – against Weber and others – on independent and separate origins. But in place of this view he has little to offer, beyond the suggestion of certain “common sociological conditions favourable to spiritual creativeness” – many small states and small towns, incessant conflict, upheavals and “misery” caused by wars and revolutions – which he admits “merely illuminate the facts and do not provide a causal explanation of them.” In the end he has to confess that “no-one can adequately comprehend what occurred here and became the axis of world history!”, and that “the fact of the threefold manifestation [China, India, the West] of the Axial Period is in the nature of a miracle, in so far as no really adequate explanation is possible within the limits of our present knowledge”, *ibid.*, 17-18. See also Robert Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age*, Cambridge, MA 2011, Chs. 6-9, and the essays in *The Axial Age and its Consequences*, eds. Robert N. Bellah and Hans Joas, Cambridge, MA 2012.

49 See, e.g., George H. Sabine, *A History of Political Theory*, 4th edition, revised by Thomas Landon Thorson, Hinsdale, IL 1973, 125-156; Sheldon S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought*, expanded edition, Princeton, NJ 2004, 63-85; A. R. Burn, *Alexander the Great and the Hellenistic World*, new edition, New York 1962, 187-188. The association is strengthened by Alexander’s well-known admiration for, and meeting with, the Cynic philosopher Diogenes of Sinope, as recounted by Plutarch and others; and Onesicritus’s History – a now lost contemporary account by a follower of Diogenes who served with Alexander as his naval commander – portrayed Alexander as a Cynic philosopher-king. Plutarch in his turn declared that what Zeno, the founder of Stoicism, had imagined as “a philosophical commonwealth”, Alexander “made good by his deeds”, by mixing Greeks and barbarians: “The Fortune or Virtue of Alexander the Great”, 481, 487; “Alexander”, 309, 323; *The Oxford Companion to Classical Civilization*, eds. Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth, Oxford 1998, 203.

doms interacted not just with each other but with the Mauryan empire of Chandragupta and Asoka.⁵⁰ They later contributed hugely to the trade and culture of the Roman Empire. Rome had extensive trading links with China, and while Romans themselves may not have gone to China, there were plenty of intermediaries along the Silk Road and the oceanic routes that connected the two regions.⁵¹ Just as Paul was able to travel and preach his Christianity throughout the Roman Empire, as a Roman citizen, so traders, scholars, artists, monks, and missionaries travelled between empires with the sense of an emerging *ecumene* encompassing the whole of Eurasia. The new universal empires created a vast, pan-Eurasian space, for the sharing of goods, ideas, and people.

Indian links with other Eurasian empires are a good example of this inter-imperial traffic. Indian science – astronomy and mathematics especially – shows clear signs of communication with the Hellenistic empires, especially that of the Ptolemies, though the influences certainly went both ways. India contributed “algebra” and “Arabic numerals” – though carried westwards by the Arabs and so having Arabic names – while receiving much from the Greeks, as indicated by the incorporation of certain Greek scientific terms (*hora*, *kendra*, *kona*) into Sanskrit.⁵² Indian traders travelled to Alexandria in Egypt, Greeks came the other way and established trading settlements in South India. There was also an extensive trade with Rome, as evidenced by the large number of Roman coins found in South India and Sri Lanka.⁵³ Later the Mughal emperors continued this pattern of trade with the European empires, being particularly in need of the silver (for their currency, as with China) which the European trading companies brought to India.⁵⁴

Indian religion, along with Indian art, Indian science, the Indian language, and Indian political forms, similarly spilled over into adjacent Eurasian realms in Central, East and South-East Asia. Here there took place, beginning with the Mauryan empire and stretching over a millennium and a half, a comprehensive process of “Indianization”.⁵⁵ Religion lead the way, with Buddhism and Hinduism being adopted, or co-existing with other religions, in a wide swathe of lands from Central Asia to China and Indonesia – Sogdian merchants of the Silk Road being among the principal carriers.⁵⁶ But Indian goods – textiles, elephants – also had a ready market, while the Indian language – Sanskrit – formed

50 Thapar, *History of India*, 70-74.

51 John Ferguson, *China and Rome*, in: ANRW 11 (1978) 9/2: 581-603; Peter Fibiger Bang, *Commanding and Consuming the World: Empire, Tribute and Trade in Roman and Chinese History*, in: *Rome and China: Comparative Perspectives on Ancient World Empires*, ed. Walter Scheidel, New York 2012, 100-120, here 120; Ann Kolb and Michael Speidel, *Imperial Rome and China: Communication and Information Transmission*, in: *China's Development from a Global Perspective*, eds. Maria Dolores Elizalde and Wang Jianlang, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK 2017, 28-56.

52 Trautmann, *India*, 122.

53 *Ibid.*, 137; William Dalrymple, *The Great and Beautiful Lost Kingdoms*, in: *New York Review of Books*, 2015 May 21: 11-14, here p. 13.

54 Dietmar Rothermund, *Empires in Indian History*, in: *Empires in Indian History and Other Essays*, New Delhi 2013, 15-35, here 30.

55 Georges Coedès, *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*, trans. Susan Brown Cowing, Honolulu, HI 1968. See also Schnepel, this issue.

56 Peter Frankopan, *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World*, London 2015, 27-32.

the scripts of several South-East Asian countries (Burma, Thailand, Cambodia), and Indian literature and mythology created something like a “Sanskrit cultural cosmopolis” in the region. Indian artistic forms are to be found all over the region, notably in the sculptures adorning the great Hindu-Buddhist temple of Angkor Wat in Cambodia.⁵⁷ Indian royal forms and court cultures were another export, with southeast Asian kings drawing up Indian royal genealogies to claim Indian origins. This whole process of Indianization was largely carried out not, like Hellenization, by conquest and colonization, but by the sheer appeal of Indian civilization, by diffusion and imitation, through the movement and reception of Buddhist monks, Brahmin priests, Indian merchants, and Indian royal officials.⁵⁸

What of China? How Eurasian was the Chinese Empire, formed in 221 BCE, and how did it contribute to the Eurasian culture inaugurated by the Axial Age? In one way its contribution has never been in doubt, in the widespread diffusion of Confucianism into the surrounding region of Japan, Korea, and Indo-China (especially Vietnam), and more generally by the tributary relations established by China with many of its neighbours (extending finally to Tibet). But often the relationship has been seen as one-way only, a perception naturally encouraged by Chinese self-conceptions of the “Central Kingdom”. The Chinese invented paper, printing, gunpowder, the compass: others, such as the Europeans, took these over, often through intermediaries such as the Arabs. The trade in Chinese ceramics, silk, tea, spices was enormous and virtually world-wide – but in return the Chinese needed little from anyone else, save European gold and silver, and a few items such as European furs and glass.⁵⁹ Overall the impression left by much of the literature is of a relatively self-contained civilization, in the early fifteenth century famously disdaining world exploration and possible colonization even when in possession of a large ocean-going fleet that dwarfed anything developed at that time in Europe.⁶⁰

57 Angkor Wat was originally built by the Khmer king Suryavarman , in the early 12th century CE, as a Hindu temple devoted to Vishnu; by the end of the 12th century it had become Buddhist. It stands as the greatest monument of Indian art outside India, though the Buddhist stupa of Borobudur in Indonesia is another spectacular example, as are numerous Buddhist temples in China. See especially *Lost Kingdoms: Hindu-Buddhist Sculpture of Early South-East Asia, Fifth to Eighth Century*, ed. John Guy, New Haven 2014; see also Jacques Gernet, *A History of Chinese Civilization*, trans. J. R. Foster, Cambridge 1982, 226-232; Amartya Sen, *China and India*, in: *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity*, New York 2005, 161-190, here pp. 180-181.

58 For these developments, see Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India*, Berkeley, CA 2006; Trautman, *India*, 132-137; Sen, *China and India*, 167-168; Rothermund, *Empires in Indian History*, 21-22; Dalrymple, *The Great and Beautiful Lost Kingdoms*. The phrase “Sanskrit cosmopolis” is Pollock’s. Michael Wood has said that “history is full of Empires of the Sword, but India alone created an Empire of the Spirit”, quoted Dalrymple, *ibid.*, 12.

59 Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A. D. 1250–1350*, New York 1989, 316-351; Jack Goldstone, *Why Europe? The Rise of the West in World History, 1500–1850*, New York 2009, 4-14.

60 The reference is to the fleet commanded by Admiral Zheng He in the early Ming dynasty on his seven great voyages across the Indian Ocean to East Africa (and, according to some, possibly beyond, across the Atlantic). See especially Louise Levathes, *When China Ruled the Seas: The Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne, 1400–33*, New York 1994. Every Chinese museum now celebrates these, illustrating them usually by visual comparisons of the vast ships of Zhen He’s dragon fleet with Columbus’s diminutive caravel, the Niña, in which he first sailed to the Americas (see, for an illustration, Stearns et al, *World Civilizations*, 616). The reasons for the destruction of the

This picture of self-sufficiency and self-containment has rightly been questioned in several respects. Peter Perdue has emphasized China's expansiveness and imperial ambitions in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, especially in Central Asia in competition with the Russians. With the acquisition of Xinjiang, Mongolia, and Tibet, China became a much more multi-ethnic empire.⁶¹ Trade between China, India, the Middle East and the Mediterranean – whether along the multiple “Silk Roads” or by the maritime routes – was more of a two-way process than commonly stressed. China was twice conquered by “foreigners” – Mongols and Manchus – and despite their undoubted “sinicization” they retained a sense of their difference from the Han majority, at the same time making their own distinctive contributions to Chinese civilization (for instance Qubilai Khan's founding in 1272 of the future Beijing as the Yuan city of Ta-tu, and the building of the Grand Canal between the new capital and the old Sung capital of Hang-chou).⁶²

Most important of the imports was religion. Indian Buddhism – especially in its Mahayana form – entered China in the first centuries CE via the Central Asian oasis kingdoms, carried by Central Asian monks and merchants along the Silk routes.⁶³ Indian religious scholars travelled to China, bringing with them Sanskrit documents which they translated into Chinese. In the early Tang dynasty, especially under the patronage of the Empress Wu Zetian (690–705), Buddhism enjoyed great influence, as can be seen from the great Buddhist temples and sculptures from the period.⁶⁴ It was during this period that Chinese Buddhist monks, such as Xuanzang and Yi Jing, travelled the arduous “Nalanda trail” – a parallel route of cultural communication to the commercial Silk Road – to study at the Buddhist university of Nalanda in north-east India. Others went to Buddhist centres in Central and South-East Asia.⁶⁵ Buddhism received an additional boost under the Yuan dynasty, when Qubilai Khan promoted Tantric (Tibetan) Buddhism as the dominant faith in China.⁶⁶ Today Buddhism is the most popular religion in China – a testimony to its enduring presence in Chinese civilization.⁶⁷

But the traffic between India and China was not just in religion. Scientific and “secular” concerns were also important. Indian scientists and mathematicians participated in the scientific life of China, one of them, Gautama Siddhartha (Qutan Xida, in Chinese) even becoming the president of the official Board of Astronomy in the eight century. Indian

fleet by the Ming emperors remain uncertain – for some helpful thoughts, see Abu-Lughod, *Beyond European Hegemony* 321-322, 343-344.

61 Peter Perdue, *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia*, Cambridge, MA 2005; see also Bellér-Hann, this issue.

62 David Morgan, *The Mongols*, 2nd edition, Oxford 2007, 108, 115.

63 Gernet, *Chinese Civilization*, 210-232; Frankopan, *Silk Roads*, 31.

64 Gernet, *Chinese Civilization*, 219-220.

65 Sen, *China and India*, 168-169, 173-174; Sen, *India: The Stormy Revival of an International University*, in: *New York Review of Books*, August 13 (2015): 69-71, here p. 71; Gernet, *Chinese Civilization*, 222-225. It is interesting that “the first printed book in the world with a date (corresponding to 868 CE)”, was a Chinese translation of a Sanskrit treatise, the so-called “Diamond Sutra”, first translated in 402 CE by the half-Indian scholar Kumarajiva based at the Institute of Foreign Languages and Literatures in Xian: Sen, *China and India*, 183.

66 Morgan, *The Mongols*, 110.

67 Ian Johnson, *The Souls of China: The Return of Religion after Mao*, London 2017, 5.

writings on astronomy, astrology, mathematics, and medicine were widely translated into Chinese. Indian phonetics and linguistics helped the Chinese establish a firm basis for the phonetics of their own language. Similarly, the Chinese scholars who came to Nalanda did not simply study Buddhism. The Nalanda curriculum included also languages, linguistics, literature, medicine, mathematics and astronomy, and Chinese scholars took back important elements from all these to China.⁶⁸

As is well known, the Jesuits later, in the seventeenth century, introduced key elements of Western science into China, including the idea of “Laws of Nature” – though strongly resisted by Chinese savants of the time.⁶⁹ In the late nineteenth-century, mainly via Japan, Chinese intellectuals received additional stimulus from the West – Darwinism and nationalism – together with a discourse of “pan-Asianism” that was itself modeled on Western civilizational models and that, once more, pointed to a world larger than China itself.⁷⁰ China gave much to the world; but it also received. It might regard itself as the Central Kingdom, and it had grounds to be proud of its civilization. But it remained a Eurasian civilization, subject to the influences and cross-currents of all Eurasian civilizations.

Empire and Eurasianism: Arabs and After

We have focused so far mainly on the pan-Eurasian character of the early empires – a necessary emphasis in view of the tendency to treat them as separate, more or less independent and isolated entities. With the later empires we can be briefer, since their Eurasian dimension is increasingly obvious. From the Arab empires of the seventh century, to the overseas European empires of the Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, French and British, it would be a highly eccentric scholar who ignored this Eurasian dimension.

The Arab empires were not simply the carriers of a universalist religion, Islam, but were established, mostly in the space of an astonishing one hundred years or so (632–750 CE), across a vast Eurasian region that stretched – like Alexander’s empire – from the Mediterranean to the Indus. They actually went further than Alexander, in conquering Spain and Portugal as well as North Africa. Like Alexander, but again to a much greater extent, they stamped their culture decisively on their many territories, leaving a legacy

68 Sen, *China and India*, 161-166, 175-180; India, 69; Gernet, *Chinese Civilization*, 231-232; Coedès, *The Indianized States*, 88-9. Nalanda Mahavihara, “the oldest university in the world” – Bologna, the first European university, was founded in the eleventh century, Oxford and Cambridge in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries – was a Buddhist foundation of the fifth century CE in Bihar, at the time one of the most prosperous regions of India. Its capital, Pataliputra (modern Patna), established by the Mauryas, served as the capital of the early all-India empires for nearly a millennium. Nalanda, at the time “the greatest repository of learning east of Alexandria”, was destroyed by Turkic invaders in the 1190s; it has recently been revived. Sen, *India*, 69; Dalrymple, *The Great and Beautiful Lost Kingdoms*, 11.

69 Joseph Needham, *The Grand Titration: Science and Society in East and West*, Toronto 1969, 308; Joel Mokyr, *Culture of Growth: The Origins of the Modern Economy*, Princeton, NJ 2017, 300-314.

70 Prasenjit Duara, *The Discourse of Civilization and Pan-Asianism*, in: *Journal of World History* 12 (2001) 1: 99-130.

of Islamic religion and in many cases the Arabic language in much of the region (Spain and Portugal are the main exceptions, though both clearly carry the marks of a nearly 800-year period of “Moorish” rule).⁷¹

Like all the Eurasian empires, the Arab empires not only had a dominant ideology – in their case Islam – which they favoured and promoted, but were also open to the influences of the peoples and cultures that they conquered. When in the eighth century the Abbasids conquered Tokharistan and neighbouring parts of Central Asia, they were brought into contact with the Buddhism that was solidly established in the area. Many Central Asian scholars and thinkers were drawn to the Abbasid capital, Baghdad, bringing with them Buddhist doctrines and practices that had a major influence on Arabic thought and institutions.

The Buddhist *vihara*, for instance, the college of higher education of which Nalanda was a prime example, became the model for the Islamic *madrassa* established in Central Asia in the eighth and ninth centuries. Other aspects of Indian thought and culture – in science, mathematics, and linguistics – also had a profound effect on Abbasid learning, notably under the patronage of the Barmakid family that monopolized the vizierate under the early Abbasid caliphs. Later, Greek thought began to be cultivated by the Abbasids, and to some extent this displaced or hid the Indian influences. But, says Christopher Beckwith, “many areas of knowledge in classical Islamic culture, including astronomy, linguistics, mathematics, metaphysics, meditational mysticism, and to some extent medicine, nevertheless remained largely Indian in their fundamental inspiration, as did the education system and educational methods of the *madrassa*.”⁷²

The Arabs were of course the great preservers and transmitters of Greek culture. Christian and Jewish thought also made important contributions, as is clear already in the Qur’an and was especially prominent in Moorish Spain. The Arabs were also fascinated by pre-Islamic Persian (Sasanian) culture, as shown by the many translations of Firdausi’s *Shahnama*.⁷³

The later Islamic empires of the Mughals, Ottomans, and Safavids were equally open, equally permeable. Not only did they share many things with each other: an admiration and acceptance of Persian as the highest literary language, and the patronage of Persian painters at their courts; the adoption of a common model of mosque building, the *kulliye* complex, which included besides the mosque a *madrassa*, a *hammam* (public bath), and often other public facilities such as a kitchen or library; and the commitment to certain basic planning principles in their cities, such as that major public buildings such

71 Good accounts of the Arab conquests and the resulting Arab empires can be found in Hugh Kennedy, *The Great Arab Conquests: How the Spread of Islam Changed the World We Live in*, Philadelphia, PA 2008, and Robert G. Hoyland, *In God’s Path: The Arab Conquests and the Creation of an Islamic Empire*, Oxford 2014. See also Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, New York 1992, Part One. For Moorish Spain, see Richard Fletcher, *Moorish Spain*, Berkeley, CA 1992.

72 Christopher Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road: A History of Central Eurasia from the Bronze Age to the Present*, Princeton, NJ 2011, 154.

73 Dale, *Muslim Empires*, 15-152; Fowden, *Pseudo-Aristotelian Politics and Theology in Universal Islam*; Fletcher, *Moorish Spain*, 131-156.

as tombs or palaces should be surrounded with shops, bazaars, and *caravansarais* (Delhi's Red Fort and Humayun's tomb, as well as the Taj Mahal in Agra, provide outstanding examples). Equally common was the device of the *waqf* – the “pious” or charitable foundation – to fund these public institutions. Architectural styles similarly travelled across all three empires, along with poets, scholars, craftsmen, and merchants (despite the rivalry and enmity between the Ottomans and the Safavids as champions of Sunni and Shi'i Islam respectively).⁷⁴

It is striking that all the Islamic rulers were anxious to claim descent from Chingiz Khan or Timur – preferably both, as in the fortunate case of Babur, the founder of the Mogul dynasty.⁷⁵ This was not so much to certify their Islamic credentials – neither Chingiz nor Timur showed much Muslim fervour – as to lay claim to the power and universality that were associated with the vast Chingizid and Timurid empires. The Islamic empires were ready where necessary to go outside the *dar-al-Islam* for inspiration and flattering comparison. We have seen that already with Alexander. But the Romans too exerted enormous ideological power. The Ottomans in the early years, after the conquest of Constantinople in 1453, saw themselves as the successors to Byzantium, and in effect as taking on the mantle of Rome.⁷⁶ Ottoman rulers clothed themselves in a lavish variety of titles, from a variety of cultures: not just khan (Central Asian) and caliph (Arab), but also Caesar (*kayser-I Rum*) (Roman), tsar (Slavic), and imperator (Western Christian).⁷⁷ With their European possessions in the Balkans and Central Europe, and their increasing involvement as one of the “Great Powers” of Europe, they can perhaps claim to be the most Eurasian of the later Islamic empires.

Russia's Eurasian credentials are also of course impeccable. The Russian Empire, in both its tsarist and Soviet varieties, spanned the vast Eurasian region from the Baltic to the Pacific, taking in a huge variety of religions and cultures.⁷⁸ In the early twentieth century, this led to the development of a restrictive and exclusive ideology of “Eurasianism”, in which Russia features as the spiritual centre, destined to rule the rest of Eurasia, if not

74 See on these common features of the Muslim empires Dale, *Muslim Empires*, 219-221, 226, 229-230, 245-246; on Persian and European influences in the Mughal empire, see also Annemarie Schimmel, *The Empire of the Great Mughals: History, Art and Culture*, London 2004; Ebba Koch, *How the Mughal Padshahs referenced Iran in their Visual Construction of Universal Rule*, in: Bang and Kołodziejczyk, *Universal Empire*, 194-209. On the travels of scholars between the empires, and their sharing of texts and commentaries, leading often to marked similarities in the curricula of the madrasas, see Francis Robinson, *Ottomans – Safavids – Mughals: Shared Knowledge and Connective Systems*, in: *Journal of Islamic Studies* 8 (1997) 2: 151-184.

75 One could, and should, of course consider the empires of Chinghis Khan and Timur as prime examples of Eurasian empires – the most clearly Eurasian, in fact, along with that of Alexander's. Space forbids treatment here; a good start can be made with Morgan, *The Mongols*; Beatrice Forbes Manz, *The Rise and Rule of Tamerlane*, Cambridge 1999; see also Favereau, this issue.

76 Kumar, *Visions of Empire*, 89-93.

77 Kołodziejczyk, *Khan, Caliph, Tsar and Imperator*.

78 Kumar, *Visions of Empire*, 213-309. One should also remember that for more than a century and a half (1232–1380), Russia was subject to Mongol rule, the rule of the Golden Horde (which formally did not end until 1480). For discussion of the extent to which this left an “Asiatic” legacy in Russian society and culture see Kumar, *ibid.* 216-7.

the world.⁷⁹ But before that, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a rather less ideological version of Eurasianism flourished in Russia, one that saw Russia as neither East nor West but as partaking of both, drawing its principles from the many cultures and traditions that it came into contact with and, in some cases, incorporated.

With regard specifically to Asia, Russia's "orientalism" was not of the one-sided, Eurocentric discourse famously excoriated by Edward Said, but a more interactive and differentiated variety born of the fact that "in Russia, the oriental 'other' was not necessarily an unknown creature set apart by thousands of miles and vast oceans. In Russia, the 'other' was all around – in ethnic enclaves penetrating deep into the heartland of Russian settlement, in scattered settlements and in vast stretches of borderland in which ethnic groups met and interacted over the course of centuries."⁸⁰ Russia was itself "orientalized", disparaged as "Asiatic" and the site of "oriental despotism", by many Europeans. Several Russian thinkers embraced this attribution, turning it into a positive quality, marking Russian difference from western European nations and the source of a new kind of civilization bridging both East and West. "Who is closer to Asia than us?", wrote the Russian orientalist and statesman Vasilli Grigorev in 1847; "which of the European tribes preserved in itself more of the Asiatic element than the Slavs, who were the last to leave their primitive homeland?"⁸¹ For Grigorev, based in the borderland outpost of Orenburg on the Ural River, studying and working among Tatars, Cossacks, Bashkirs and Kirghiz, Russia's Eurasian character and destiny were inescapable and to be welcomed.⁸²

The European overseas empires of the Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, French, and British were Eurasian almost by definition. From the start, following the discovery and conquest of the New World, the Atlantic powers moved eastwards, whether via the Indian Ocean or the Pacific. Large parts of South, South-East, and Far East Asia fell to them. From the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries, Europeans were an unmistakable presence and power in Asia.

How did that long experience of the East affect them? To what extent were their societies influenced, perhaps in ways that most people were unconscious of, by the long period of contact, during which many generations of Europeans actually lived much of their lives in the East? That has always been the object of endless fascination and speculation, in fiction and literary criticism as much as in the thinking of historians, anthropologists,

79 Chris Hann, A Concept of Eurasia, in: *Current Anthropology* 57 (2016) 1: 1-27, here 9-10; Dimitri V. Shlapentokh, Thermidor or Mongol Empire: History as Political Model in Russian Émigré Thought, in: *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique* 32 (1991) 3: 379-408; Charles Clover, *Black Wind, White Snow: The Rise of Russia's New Nationalism*, New Haven, CT 2016.

80 Nathaniel Knight, Grigorèv in Orenburg, 1851-1862: Russian orientalism in the service of empire?, in: *Slavic Review* 59 (2000) 1: 74-100, here p. 95.

81 Quoted Knight, *ibid.*, 79.

82 Russian orientalism is a complex subject, with many differing views of its character. For a good discussion, with reference to much of the recent literature, see Knight, Grigorèv in Orenburg, and the debate over his views in the journal *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 1 (2000) 4: 691-727. See also Alexander Morrison, Metropole, Colony, and Imperial Citizenship in the Russian Empire, in: *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 13 (2012) 2: 327-364.

and sociologists. It became an especially sensitive, and often highly politicized, issue, once the European empires had gone, and Europeans were faced with the need to evaluate their legacies. Some were inclined to belittle the imperial experience, to say that the empires had left virtually no trace in European societies. Others saw plenty of evidence of the effect of empire, not least in the many Asians who now dwelled in the cities of the former metropolises.⁸³

Compared to the land empires of the Ottomans and the Russians, where metropole and colony were in close proximity to each other, and the mingling of peoples more extensive as well as intensive, one would expect the Eurasianism of the overseas empires to have a different character, and to leave different legacies. Distance, and the greater cultural and racial difference between colonizer and colonized as compared with the land empires, matter. This remains a subject still waiting serious exploration. What surely cannot be doubted is that these were global empires where the influence of the parts was bound to be, at least to some degree, reciprocal. Europe might initially have gone to Asia more than Asia come to Europe, but in the long run, for better or worse, the fates and futures of the two were conjoined.

As concepts, empire and Eurasia seem tailor-made for each other. The empires considered in this paper were, or aspired to be, world empires. As with all human endeavours, their achievements rarely matched their aspirations. All fell short of attaining that universality, that unification of all humanity, that in principle they stood for. But what matters more for our present purpose is the striving, the desire to be more than a particular people or nation, to make everyone take, as Plutarch saw Alexander's mission, "the whole habitable world for his country", or as Aristides said of Rome, to establish "a civil community of the world".

Eurasia is not the world; but it came to possess or dominate the greater part of it. What happened there had, and continues to have, global consequences. The empires established there competed and fought with each other, even as they sought to make themselves the only empire, the empire of empires. Their worlds thoroughly penetrated each other, in a continuous exchange of ideas, people, and goods. They borrowed the language of illustrious predecessors – Alexander, Rome – in an attempt to show their continuity and harmony with earlier, world-transforming, efforts. We should perhaps stop treating these empires as isolable, independent entities, available, as in the standard treatments, for "contrast and comparison". Rather we should treat them as part of a chain or tradition of empires, a set of instances of what is in fact a continuous experience of empire across the entire Eurasian landmass, with numerous *translationes imperii* as one or another people carried on the tradition.⁸⁴ It has often been said that there has really been only one revolution, the Great French Revolution of 1789, and that all other revolution

83 There is a judicious, empirically-based, and wide-ranging discussion of these issues in Elizabeth Buettner, *Europe after Empire: Decolonization, Society and Culture*, Cambridge 2016; see also Kumar, *Visions of Empire*, 465-75.

84 See for some further thoughts on this Krishan Kumar, *The Time of Empire: Temporality and Genealogy in the Development of European Empires*, in: *Thesis Eleven* 139 (2017) 1: 113-128, though I restrict myself there to the European empires.

have only led up to it or away from it. Perhaps there has only been one Eurasian empire, Alexander's empire, and all others have, knowingly or not, followed in its footsteps.