

A World with States, Empires, and Networks, 1200 BCE–900 CE. On CWH volume IV

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I have the fourth volume of the seven-volume series “The Cambridge World History” in front of me. The period covered extends from 1200 BC to 900 BC, a proud 2100 years in all. Beyond that, it is about nothing less than the whole world. Global social, economic, cultural, political and technological developments and contexts are to be the focus of the individual contributions. The aim is to avoid the still predominant view of the “advanced civilizations” of this epoch and to include hitherto marginalized spaces and societies in the academic consideration. The beginning and end of the chosen period are justified as follows: Until 1200 BC, i.e. about 8000 years after the first appearance of agriculture and sedentary life, a differentiation and diversity of human communities and ways of life had emerged, which would shape the following period. On the one hand, there were large agrarian cultures in the Afro-Eurasian world zone, which were dominated by small elites within a “state structure”. On the other hand, people in many other regions continued to follow nomadic habits. Often they had not even adopted agriculture and settled down, let alone founded “states” and “civilizations”. One may accept this explanation for the beginning of the epochal boundary, but one searches in vain in the introduction for a plausibility check regarding its end point. For the European-Middle Eastern region it could be justified with the end of Late Antiquity and the establishment of the Frankish and Abbasid Empires and the simultaneous consolidation of Byzantium. But for the rest of the world?

The volume is divided into two parts. First, eight contributions offer global historical approaches via the cross-cutting areas of economy (“Global economic history”, pp. 29–54), gender and power (“The gendering of power in the family and the state”, pp. 55–75), slavery (“Slavery”, pp. 76–100), axis time (“The Axial Age in world history”,

pp. 101–119), science (“Developments in science and technology”, pp. 120–153), gender and sexuality (“Discourses on gender and sexuality”, pp. 154–178), art (“Art”, pp. 179–234), and nomadism (“Pastoral nomadism”, pp. 235–266). These themes are all important, but their selection is not justified anywhere. In this respect, the feeling of a certain arbitrariness arises. Why these objects? Why not the environment, mobility, knowledge, religion, war and peace, domination, or culture, for example? Interestingly, as is so often the case, the law is missing. Yet legal norms and practices form the basis of every social order, at least if one understands by it a system that is defined by institutions, social relations, value orientations, and actions.

In the second part of the collective volume, we find a series of regional overviews (West and Central Asia, the Mediterranean, East Asia, South Asia, the Americas, Africa, and Australasia and the Pacific), each of which is accompanied by one or two case studies that examine a smaller geographical area or a topic within that region in greater detail. The focus of this individual analysis naturally depends on the expertise of the – by the way, excellently selected – authors. For example, Jeffrey Lerner writes about Bactria, Xinru Liu about the Silk Road, Ralph Austen about the Trans-Saharan trade, and Shonaleeka Kaul about Pataliputra.

Since I am of course not an expert on all the topics discussed in this volume, I will concentrate on two contributions in the following that I can reasonably assess. In this way, it may be possible to arrive at more general statements about the quality of the individual contributions and the coherence of the volume and to make an overall assessment of this form of world history.

First a few words about the article on slavery by Peter Hunt. Hunt, who teaches Greek history at the University of Colorado Boulder, is a specialist on the classical Greek form of slavery. While his book “Slaves, Warfare and Ideology in the Greek Historians”¹ deals with the question of the participation of slaves and Helots in war campaigns and the representation of these groups in Greek historiography, he has also written an excellent introduction to the subject for students.² So what is his contribution to the *Cambridge World History*? He begins by stating that although source material is extremely difficult to find for many regions of the world, one must assume that the phenomenon of slavery occurred in almost all societies during the period under study. This is followed by a more detailed discussion of a possible definition of “slavery”. According to Hunt, the fact that persons are considered property is the focus of many approaches. However, there are two problems: first, someone can have property rights over another person without that person being enslaved. Furthermore, slaves are not treated exclusively as property in any legal context, but also as persons who have certain rights and are responsible for their crimes. To escape this dilemma, Orlando Patterson described slavery as the “permanent, violent domination of natally alienated and generally dishonoured persons”.³

1 P. Hunt, *Slaves, Warfare and Ideology in the Greek Historians*, Cambridge 1998.

2 P. Hunt, *Ancient Greek and Roman Slavery*, Hoboken 2018.

3 O. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, Cambridge 1982, p. 2.

Slaves, according to his famous dictum, are “socially dead”. This, of course, only means that they have no recognized legitimate rights and ties. At this point, one wonders why slavery researchers are always trying to distinguish slavery from debt bondage, serfdom, forced labour and forced prostitution, unfree peasants, etc. Sometimes one gets the feeling that they are eager to maintain the supposed singularity of the system. This may be a legitimate aspiration, but it may be equally reasonable to view all these phenomena as different forms of strong and enduring asymmetrical dependencies. In the Cluster of Excellence (EXS 2036) “Beyond Slavery and Freedom. Asymmetrical Dependencies in Pre-modern Societies”⁴, which was newly established at the University of Bonn in 2019, we refer to the internal relationship between two actors, in which one actor completely controls the other – and especially their access to resources – so that the other loses his/her autonomy completely to define strong asymmetrical dependencies. Such asymmetrical dependency between actors must be supported by an institution that guarantees that the dependent actor cannot change his situation either through escape or resistance/contradiction. This rather sociological approach has the double advantage of being able to compare different forms of asymmetrical dependency and to avoid the semantic charge of the term “slavery” (and its opposite “freedom”).

In the second section of his essay, which deals with the different functions of male and female slaves, Hunt uses an approach developed by Moses Finley half a century ago.⁵ In his model, he distinguished between “slave societies” and “societies with slaves”. In a “slave society”, according to Finley, at least 20 percent of the population are enslaved. In addition, they play the leading role in the production of economic surplus. Finally, slaves must be important enough in a society to exert a lasting cultural influence. In total, only five (Western) societies met these criteria: ancient Greece and Rome, modern Brazil, the Caribbean, and the southern United States. This means that in the period considered by Hunt there were only two slave societies in the world, Rome and Greece. The problem is that we know very much about these two societies and very little about most of the others. Therefore, many statements Hunt makes about the use of slaves in non-Roman and non-Greek contexts are quite general. For example, he quotes David Turley: “the social distance in slave societies between slaves and their masters was more emphatically underlined than in most societies with slaves.”⁶ Is this proven to be the case? Or is this more of a claim still waiting to be validated by empirical research? This vagueness runs through the rest of the contribution, despite all of the author’s efforts to find examples from outside of Rome and Greece. Statements such as “slavery is rare among hunter-gatherers, is sometimes present in incipient agricultural societies, and then becomes common among societies with more advanced agriculture” (p. 87) are somehow as banal as the statement that due to wars there were a great many prisoners of war who were sold as slaves through an international slave trade. Moreover, Hunt’s understanding of the law remains influ-

4 www.dependency.uni-bonn.de.

5 M. Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology*, New York 1980.

6 D. Turley, *Slavery*, Oxford 2000, pp. 62–100, here p. 63.

enced by the model of the classical world when he formulates, for example, “A large-scale system of slavery requires the coercive backing provided by a strong state [...]. States promulgate laws; these usually confirmed property rights [...]. Behind the law lay the state’s superiority in the exercise of violence” (pp. 91–92). It is a very controversial and ultimately open question whether non-European societies have developed a similar understanding of property and ownership. This seems rather doubtful. With my remarks I do not want to question the author’s expertise at all. Peter Hunt has tried very hard and his article certainly has its merits, but he fails in his attempt to make really coherent and at the same time differentiated statements about slavery all over the world for a period of more than 2000 years in just over 20 pages.

Let us look at another contribution, as already announced above. Charles F. Pazdernik, Professor of Classical Philology at Grand Valley State University in Allendale, Michigan, devotes his essay to Late Antiquity in Europe, i.e. he concentrates on the period from about 300 to 900 AD. At the beginning of what is commonly called “Late Antiquity” were the governments of the two Roman emperors Diocletian (r. 284–305) and Constantine I. (r. 306–337). This is a common consensus, because the far-reaching reforms of Diocletian and Constantine’s toleration of Christianity can certainly be understood as an important caesura. The end of the epoch was marked by the end of the Carolingian Empire, the renewed strengthening of Byzantium and the fragmentation of the Abbasid Empire. Space, i.e. “Europe”, was rather an arbitrary term, behind which there was no concept. This can be accepted. However, one could certainly have chosen a different, less problematic concept of space. Anyway, after the spatial turn, it seems to be not quite up to the current state of discussion to continue thinking in terms of purely geographically defined metropolitan areas.

Pazdernik characterizes late antiquity as follows: “Late antiquity, especially as it relates to Europe, may accordingly be characterized as a period of disruption, transition, and transformation away from a Mediterranean-centred, late Roman imperial political and sociological order, the effects of which were experienced differently in the various post-Roman successor states that developed both within and beyond former, centrally administered imperial territories” (p. 379). This certainly valid claim should be read together with the author’s own statement that an important aspect of this epoch was the adoption of monotheistic religions and universalistic aspirations for power by empires. The 7th and 8th centuries in particular should no longer be seen as the “Dark Middle Ages”, but rather as a time of shifts and new orientations that led to the establishment of the three empires mentioned above and, in the medium term, to the emergence of a radically changed world shaped by Christian monarchies throughout Europe. These are not fundamentally new insights. However, the fundamental importance of the epoch, also in terms of global history, could have been emphasized even more. As is the case with many handbooks from Anglo-American academia, it is striking that German-language research is almost not taken into account in the *Cambridge World History*. Thus, this article, for example, does not include the results of the collective research project (Priority Program 1173) which focused on “Integration and Disintegration of Cultures in the European

Middle Ages” over a period of six years (2005–2011). Among other things, Michael Borgolte, one of the two spokespersons of the joint project, has published a weighty monograph on the European Middle Ages.⁷ In his opinion, the history of Europe during this period was characterized by the competition of three monotheistic religions, one of which – Christianity – even split into two major branches. In my opinion, the most important phenomenon seems to be that a huge monotheistic cosmos developed over late antiquity, which, despite its bloody inner conflicts, is nevertheless characterized by numerous path dependencies and shared perceptions of the world. The formation of the three monotheisms ultimately represented a long process. During the period under scrutiny here, there were of course also numerous polytheistic cultures, but these are incomparably less well documented in the sources and unfortunately are not taken into account in the contribution by Pazdernik. Pazdernik might also have been able to say something more about the second major complex of themes of Late Antiquity in Europe, the so-called “migration of peoples” (“Völkerwanderung”). Here, German-speaking medieval historians have been able to provide important impulses in recent years. In 2017, for example, the collegiate research group (FOR 2496) “Migration and Mobility in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages” at the University of Tübingen, which was established by Mischa Meier, Steffen Patzold, and Sebastian Schmidt-Hofner, began its work. The intensive discussions about the period from 300 to 900 AD have shown that the formation of larger, more powerful associations of rulers, which, unlike the small groups they replaced, could no longer be controlled by the conventional instruments of Roman politics, can only be understood against the background of complex social changes and processes of differentiation in the regions beyond the Roman borders. These groups, which cannot be grasped by the modern term “ethnicity”, often acted situatively, were generally fluid in their composition, and were in a state of constant change. Unfortunately, the contribution by Pazdernik tells us nothing about all these things. Instead, the history of the Roman Empire in the 5th century and the upheavals in the two following centuries are presented in a very traditional way. The subsequent descriptions of the three great empires that emerged at the end of the epoch are just as concise and thus rather undifferentiated as the descriptions of post-Roman Britain, Scandinavia and the Slavs. In this case, too, it must be stated that the author simply fails in his attempt to present the highly complex subject adequately on 25 pages. No wonder, because on the one hand an interested, educated reader should probably also get an insight into the topic. On the other hand, the entire European area is supposed to be covered in one article. That leaves only 1–2 pages each for the history of the Byzantine Empire, the Abbasids (where are the beginnings of Islam and where are the Umayyads?), the British Isles, Northern Europe and the Slavic region... This must be unsatisfactory in the end.

In the context of the article on Late Antiquity in Europe discussed here, it should be pointed out that it would certainly have been good for a “world history” to take into

7 M. Borgolte, Christen, Juden, Muselmanen. Die Erben der Antike und der Aufstieg des Abendlandes 300 bis 1400 n. Chr., Munich 2006.

account the relationship of the Islamic world to Late Antiquity together with Europe. Both regions must be thought of in a common horizon. Looking at only one side, one becomes suspicious of a Eurocentric viewpoint and also neglects the more recent discussions in Islamic Studies. The long-term project “Corpus Coranicum”, which is affiliated with the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities and was initiated by Angelika Neuwirth, Michael Marx, and Nicolai Sinai, as well as the Collaborative Research Centre 980 “Episteme in Motion. Knowledge Transfer from the Old World to the Early Modern Period” are on the one hand about placing the Qur’an in the context of late antique debates and revealing the interrelationships between the Qur’an and late antique knowledge content and cultures.⁸ On the other hand, however, they also aim at placing the emergence and formation of Islam in a context of late antique processes of change and transformation. The accompanying re-evaluation and temporal expansion of Late Antiquity up to the 9th century deconstructs the discourse of decline (keyword: fall of the Roman Empire) and the narrative of the triumphant rise of Christianity. This leaves room for revealing substantial commonalities between the three text cultures.

At this point, let us note that the two texts that were analysed in more detail cannot fulfil the claim of providing an all-encompassing insight into their respective topics. A cursory review of the other contributions to the volume unfortunately yields similar results. In this respect, I do not consider the overall concept of the *Cambridge World History* to be very convincing. Against this background, the question arises as to what the claim of a “world history” – or better: a “global history” – could be. I think that Sebastian Conrad, in his introduction to this topic is right when he writes: “The focus is on cross-border processes, exchange relations, but also comparisons within the framework of global contexts. The interweaving of the world is always the starting point, and the circulation of and exchange between things, people, ideas and institutions are among the most important objects of this approach.”⁹ In his opinion, global historical investigations should always be accompanied and mirrored by case studies on the meso or micro level. What remains open is the fundamental question of how one can “write a history of the world and its interdependence that is not Eurocentric and does not pre-structure its narrative logic by using Western terms.”¹⁰ Writing real global history is a very great theoretical, but above all methodological challenge.

Are there other, better approaches than the one chosen for the *Cambridge World History* to cover large topics via numerous shorter individual contributions? I think so. In “History of the World”, edited by Jürgen Osterhammel and Akira Iriye, the burden is shared

8 See for example the two excellent anthologies by A. Neuwirth/N. Sinai/M. Marx (eds.), *The Qur’ān in Context. Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur’ānic Milieu*, Leiden/London 2010 and N. Schmidt/N. K. Schmid/A. Neuwirth (eds.), *Denkraum Spätantike. Reflections of Antiquity in the Context of the Koran*, Wiesbaden 2016.

9 S. Conrad, *Globalgeschichte. Eine Einführung*, Munich 2013; quote from the extended English edition: *What Is Global History?*, Oxford/Princeton 2016, p. 9.

10 Ibid., p. 136.

by only a few shoulders. This is how the volume that deals with our epoch¹¹ consists of a very reflective introduction and five long contributions: “Pre- and Early History” (Hermann Parzinger); “Early Advanced Civilizations” (Karen Radner); “The Classical World” (Hans-Joachim Gehrke); “Ancient China” (Mark Edward Lewis); “South Asia and Southeast Asia” (Axel Michaels). Of course, this structure also has its disadvantages, especially if the individual contributors do not follow overriding thematic guiding questions, but rather narrate from a disciplinary internal perspective. The editors of “Neue Fischer Weltgeschichte” have chosen a different approach. The series consists of 21 monographs which, in contrast to their predecessor, are largely written by German authors. The aim is a global history of individual spaces and the relationship of the spaces to each other. The authors were asked to take into account state, economy, society, religion and culture. Whether the individual authors will really succeed in doing so remains to be seen. If one looks at the volume written by Reinhold Kaiser, for example, his presentation – to put it bluntly – still follows the Eurocentric narrative of the birth of high medieval and modern Europe from the defensive struggle against the Muslims and the brilliant victory of the Christian church.¹²

11 Frühe Zivilisationen. Die Welt vor 600, ed. by Hans-Joachim Gehrke, München 2017; English version: Making Civilizations: The World before 600, ed. by Hans-Joachim Gehrke, Harvard 2020.

12 R. Kaiser, Die Mittelmeerwelt und Europa in Spätantike und Frühmittelalter, Frankfurt on the Main 2014.