

# **Expanding Webs of Exchange and Conflict, 500 CE–1500 CE. On CWH volume V**

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In the concluding essay of this volume, Diego Olstein convincingly answers the question: Does it make sense to speak of global history for the premodern eras? Olstein provides several precise criteria that justify the label of global history in relation to different regions of Afro-Eurasia; these same criteria can also be applied to pre-Columbian America, where processes of transregional interdependence that fit his criteria can be identified. Thus, in several regions of Asia, Europe, Africa, and the Americas, one sees roughly synchronous processes that result in a level of complexity that transcend the limits of the respective “worlds”. However, what is missing in the “Middle Millennium” is an exchange between the so-called Old and New Worlds, although comparable processes can be detected in both.

The twenty-five chapters of this volume (plus introduction and epilogue) are divided into five parts of different lengths. “Part I: Global Developments” consists of five chapters, with contributions by Joachim Radkau (on humans and the environment); Susan Mosher Stuard (on family, sexuality, and gender), Susan Reynolds (social institutions and hierarchy), Linda Walton (on educational institutions), and Clifford J Rogers (on warfare). Thus, each contribution to this first section analyses continuity and change in a specific historical process. Although there is no explicit connection between chapters, each author succeeds in bringing a global perspective to their topic. “Part II: Eurasian Commonalities” has only two chapters. The first chapter is a collaboration by eleven authors and provides a comparative analysis of courtly cultures in Western Europe, Byzantium, the Islamic world, India, China, and Japan. In the second chapter of this section, Björn Wittrock examines “transmutations and renovations of complexes of religious-cultural, societal, and political practices that occurred between the tenth and the thirteenth

century in several civilizations” (p. 208). He argues that this period represents an Axial Age and uses the term “cultural crystallization” to designate “articulations of new conceptions of cosmology, temporality, agency, and belonging” (p. 209) that fundamentally impacted social organization and institutions.

“Part III: Growing Interactions” is comprised of six chapters. Richard Smith discusses trade relations in Afro-Eurasia; Michael Balard examines European and Mediterranean trade networks; and Himanshu Prabha Ray addresses trade routes and maritime communities in the Indian Ocean. Dagmar Schäfer and Marcus Popplow jointly analyse technological innovations within expanding webs of exchange, while Charles Burnett focuses on the transmission of science and philosophy. In the final chapter of this section, Anatoly M. Khazanov focuses on the contribution of pastoral nomadic migrations and conquests to these “growing interactions”. Clearly, these chapters share a common focus on connectivity. But what makes this section particularly interesting is that, unlike many studies, the discussion of connectivity is not limited to trade links between different regions of the world. It also addresses scientific and technological innovation. The inclusion of Khazanov’s contribution on pastoral migrations and conquests in this section, rather than in the fifth part on state formation, may come as a surprise to some readers. However, its placement here is justifiable given that not all nomadic migrations resulted in the formation of empires and undoubtedly these migrations made a significant contribution to “growing interactions”.

“Part IV: Expanding Religious Systems” has only three chapters. Michael Cook’s contribution on the “centrality” of Islamic civilisation opens the section. It is followed by Miri Rubin’s examination of Christendom’s regional systems and Tansen Sen’s contribution on the spread of Buddhism. By placing the discussion of Islam first, the editors highlight two key points: (1) the unmistakable geographic centrality of the areas in which Islam was the dominant religion and (2) the fact that Islam is the only religion that emerged during this time frame. Because of Islam’s central geographic location – and the relative religious toleration it offered – members of other religious groups living in the “Arab-Islamic world” as well as Muslims were able to act as cultural mediators between Europe, Africa, and Asia.

Under the heading “State Formation”, the fifth and final section of the volume focuses primarily on the issue of empire building and is the longest section of the volume with seven chapters. Johann P. Arnason opens the section with a theoretical and empirical analysis of the fundamental features of state formation and empire building. The next six chapters focus on state building in various parts of the world. Richard von Glahn details the history of Chinese empire formation between the Sui and the Song dynasties. Michal Biran examines the Mongol’s unprecedented mobilization of peoples, goods, and ideas that led to the formation of the largest contiguous empire in history. Although Biran acknowledges the destructive dimension of empire formation, she primarily highlights the active role played by Chinggis Khan and his descendants in advancing intercivilizational exchange. Jean-Claude Cheynet traces the history of the Byzantine empire, arguing that contrary to the image of stability promoted in imperial discourse and later accepted

by many historians, the structures of the empire underwent multiple adaptations in response to new situations. David C. Conrad examines “early polities of Western Sudan” from the eighth century to the fifteenth century (i.e. West Africa, not the modern state in East Africa). Finally, the last two chapters shift the focus to the so-called New World. Michael E. Smith analyses empire formation in Postclassic Mesoamerica (from the eighth century to the fifteenth century), and Sabine MacCormack examines the entanglement of state and religion in the formation of the Inca empire.

An introduction by the two editors and an epilogue by Diego Olstein titled “‘Proto-globalization’ and ‘Proto-glocalizations’ in the Middle Millennium” provide a cohesive framework for interpreting the five sections. This structure of the volume allows the editors to present a global history of the Middle Millennium that is comprehensive enough to capture the complexity and diversity of the age while, at the same time, offering a clear analytical path that stimulates synthesis and theory formation. This latter task is largely accomplished in Olstein’s concluding essay, which skillfully condenses the results of the chapters into a cohesive synthesis. In writing the epilogue, Olstein expressly follows the preparatory work of the late Israeli sociologist Shmuel Eisenstadt, who worked out the concept of the synthesis before his death.

The first section utilizes a global comparative perspective to examine changes in nature and society. The second and shortest section is guided in the narrower sense by a comparative studies approach, whereby facets of historic change and of human agency play only a subordinate role. Although the comparison of courtly cultures in the first chapter of this section provides an illuminating and meaningful example (and, if sources allowed, would certainly have included analogous materials on pre-Columbian cultures), Wittrock’s contribution on “transregional reorientations” between the tenth and thirteenth centuries is probably the most theoretical in the entire volume. Together, the two contributions offer enlightening perspectives, even though the reader may wonder why the two contributions are grouped under the heading “Eurasian Commonalities”. The conceptual framework of sections three, four, and five, in which the focus is on interactions of people often across (supposed) cultural, civilizational, and imperial boundaries, is immediately apparent. But the sphere of human interaction represents a departure from the typical focus of global medieval histories on trade, migration, and empire – although these topics are certainly covered in this volume. Under “Growing Interactions”, the editors also include contributions on exchange processes involving the transmission of scientific knowledge and technological innovations. The fourth section addressing religious expansion refers to previously discussed trade routes, whose existence was a prerequisite for the dissemination of Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism, and one could add essential for the spread of Judaism, as, for example, into the area of the Ashkenazi and for Sephardic Judaism’s spread within the Arab-Islamic world. This section also touches on migration – a topic also broached in the preceding section, albeit with reference to nomadic migrations and empire building. The topic of empire building *grosso modo* corresponds with the focus of the fifth section “State Formation”.

This volume can be understood as realizing the oft-cited maxim of “provincializing Europe”, given that China, not Western Europe, is the point of inception. The volume also provides only minimal coverage of the “Islamic World”, despite one chapter’s title referencing its “centrality”. Similarly, Judaism’s contribution to the era receives few mentions, although Richard Smith’s discussion of Afro-Eurasia trade routes briefly touches on long-distance Jewish traders, known as Radhanites, who were said to have traded their goods all the way from the land of the Franks to China. However, their very existence remains a topic of scholarly controversy; for example, Michael Toch, a professor of medieval history at Hebrew University of Jerusalem, has expressed doubts about this alleged network of Jewish traders.

The volume does encourage comparisons beyond those found in Olstein’s epilogue: on the existence of commercial corporations and dealer associations in Europe and in India (see pp. 287, 295, and 305–6), on competition as stimulus for technological innovation (see p. 332), and on reactions to comparable environmental conditions (see p. 336). For example, one could compare the translation practices used by persons of different backgrounds at various levels of mediation. These distinctions can be seen not only in the translation practices used in Toledo, but also in Tang and Song China (see pp. 453 and 472). The volume also prompts other comparisons such as between the institutionalization of Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism.

Beginning with the Song dynasty, the Chinese civil service examination system had established a non-hereditary elite based on educational merit. However, China had no educational institution comparable to European universities, which were formed in the Middle Millennium as self-regulating legal corporations. As Olstein notes in his concluding essay, “the development of universities with well-defined rights and duties” that were recognized by rulers and state institutions was “singular” to Latin Europe (p. 678). Europe’s special status on the world stage was not a given during the Middle Millennium; at best, its exceptionality was limited to its natural environment (i.e. its preponderance of coastline in relationship to its continental mass) and its autonomous institutions, the latter of which only receives sporadic coverage in this volume. But knowledge, as everyone knew in the Middle Millennium and in antiquity, came from the East, not the West (p. 344).

The fifth section opens with Arnason’s comparative study of civilizations; global in its scope and perspective, this study makes an exemplary contribution to category formation and theory building. In Arnason’s essay, Latin Europe is presented as a “western Eurasian periphery”, in which the Carolingian empire, as a “civilizational matrix”, has decisively shaped the course of political and cultural history. Nonetheless, the Carolingian empire did not encompass the whole of Western Christendom, and Europe continued to have multiple political centres and differing regional patterns of development. This pluralism of political centres and divergence of regional trajectories is particularly evident when juxtaposed with China, where the staying power of a sacral-imperial centre of power prevented a comparable territorial and institutional division between secular and sacred power (*inter imperium et sacerdotium*). However, after the demise of the Tang

dynasty, the imperial centre increasingly withdrew from the regulation of everyday life, which, in turn, encouraged the rise of cities and led to the strengthening of local elites. A by-product of these changes was the downfall of the old aristocracy; after the Tang era, there were no longer any elites capable of challenging imperial authority. The Chinese imperial model became the political ideal, and Korea, Japan, and Vietnam emulated it in forming their own more centralized states. However, each adapted the model to local conditions, as evidenced, for example, by the Japanese court's promotion of a distinct ideology of elite formation. In Latin Europe, there was no comparable centre of imperial power having the same level of political and cultural clout. In the Islamic world, many traditions from the Byzantine and Sasanian worlds were absorbed, and various ethnic communities were integrated into the Islamic realm; this was particularly the case in North Africa, as well as in Western and Central Asia. However, unlike in early medieval Western Europe, no state formation based on ethnicity emerged.

The large-scale comparison of civilizations is also impressive, since, unlike older European comparative models, European developments do not serve as the yardstick against which other civilizations are judged inferior. In fact, in Arnason's analysis, Europe appears deficient in many respects, especially when compared to the Chinese empire. In China, the invasion of steppe nomads continued until the early modern era, so that Chinese civilization was constantly shaped by the dual influence of sedentary and nomadic populations. This combining of traditions gave rise to some of the most successful dynasties (e.g. Sui and Tang dynasties) of the Chinese Middle Millennium. Under the Tang dynasty, China experienced what was probably the most cosmopolitan and multi-cultural epoch in its history, and it was in this era that the Chinese model took root in the East Asian periphery. The political, social, and cultural changes of the Tang dynasty point to the advantages of applying newer entangled history approaches to the study of history (see pp. 514–15). In Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, we see not only the adoption of the Sui-Tang political model, but also the adoption and further development of Chinese script and of Buddhism. The history of Buddhism's spread also highlights multidimensional and reverse processes of exchange. For example, Buddhist pilgrims from India (the homeland of Buddhism) travelled to China to visit holy sites, impacting tradition building in India. Also, traditions from Japanese Buddhism affected Chinese schools. The inclusion of African history in a global history of the Middle Millennium is a challenge, especially given the absence of written traditions outside the Islamic world. The present volume overcomes this challenge through an entangled history of economic exchanges on Saharan trade routes and through a comparative analysis of empire formation in what is now present-day Mali. Here we see some unique models of social organization, such as government by "heterarchy", i.e. networks of groups of competing and overlapping interests, such as farmers, herders, hunters, and merchants. Another possible comparison between African and Eurasian history concerns the frequent dominance of mounted invaders (p. 607), which receives only a brief mention in this volume.

The integration of American history requires the use of a comparative perspective, since there were no detectable interactions between the so-called Old and New Worlds (the

Vikings' arrival in North America is ignored given the lack of any appreciable effect during this era. For the Maya, we can surmise that the collapse of classical Maya culture and its political communities coincided roughly with the (alleged) decline of the late Roman period in Latin Europe. With the end of the Classical period, the Maya writing system continued to exist, but in a reduced and functionally limited form. The focus of Maya urban society also shifted from the southern lowland cities to the northern part of the Yucatán peninsula during the postclassic period. The collapse of this period, like that of the classical period, is compared with the "decline processes" of late antiquity (p. 623). However, against the backdrop of subsequent Spanish conquest, the possibility of interpreting such changes as transformations (as occurs in current research on the early Middle Ages) is ignored. The history of Mesoamerica offers numerous possibilities of comparison with Eurasian history, with reference to developmental trends, the emergence of imperial centres (e.g. Chichén Itzá, Teotihuacán, or Tenochtitlán), or the dissemination of the so-called "international" sign and semiotic system (p. 633), which could be compared to the dissemination of Latin or Chinese writing systems. Another noteworthy avenue of comparison with Eurasia is the transregional exchanges of technological innovation between South and Central America.

Unlike in Mesoamerica, the Incas established an imperial system that lasted only a few decades. The Incas reorganized the existing religious cults of conquered peoples within the Inca religious framework (cult of the sun) and created empire-wide pilgrimage centres in which sacred rituals advanced the legitimacy of Inca conquest. The principles of reciprocity, redistribution, and vertical control governed all relations in the Inca empire. Nonetheless, some subjugated groups resisted integration of the empire and even collaborated with the Spanish invaders. The Inca economy produced such large surpluses that its accumulated wealth survived until the end of the sixteenth century. The Incas imagined their empire as a "world" of its own. Despite the absence of indigenous writings, this world can be interpreted utilizing the methods of historical comparison and the findings of archaeological research.

This volume can only be criticized on a few points. The structure of Miri Rubin's contribution on regional systems of Christianity unfortunately is rather unclear; its initial reference to the Virgin Mary's centrality is unnecessary, given this may not have been the case for East Syriac (so-called Nestorian) Christians. Also, although Emperor Justinian did succeed in conquering the Vandal and Ostrogothic kingdoms, he did not conquer the Visigoth kingdom; only a coastal strip in the southeast of the Iberian Peninsula was temporarily under Justinian's rule (contrary to what is stated on p. 427). This essay also exhibits some repetitions (see pp. 428–29) and would have benefited from a clearer structure.

Also, it would have been helpful if this volume had included a discussion of changing approaches to world history and more specifically a discussion of this volume's methodology: How did new (and old) concepts of world history inform the writing of this volume and other volumes in this series? Clearly this volume draws on newer approaches; yet changes in terminology and concepts are never explicitly addressed.

However, this shortcoming pales in the face of Diego Olstein's concluding magisterial large-scale civilizational comparison that does not shy away from offering an incisive and pointed theoretical analysis. Olstein begins with the local and then turns to large-scale transformations that reshaped local worlds, especially in Afro-Eurasia. He examines the often entangled transregional processes of empire building, the expansion of trade routes, and religious conversion and institutionalization (especially with reference to Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Confucianism) that acted as integrative forces in the Middle Millennium. Following Eisenstadt's theory, Olstein describes this period as "a second axial age of sorts" (p. 667). These forces of regional integration, he argues, resulted in the three levels of proto-globalization. The first level encompasses economic, political, military, and cultural relations between the realms of Islam, India, China, and Europe. The second level involves relationships that gave rise to processes of hybridization in at least two of the above four regions. The third level concerns the success of some states in constructing hegemonies within the realms of Islam, India, China, and Europe and the reaction to these. However, the geographic scope of this "proto-globalization" was limited to North Africa and Eurasia; thus, it fell short of encompassing the entire globe. Moreover, in comparison to the modern era, local conditions prevailed upon global trends in a process that Olstein labels "proto-glocalization". Nonetheless, the changing balance between local structures and processes of regional and transregional integration – that is to say empire building, trade expansion, and religion – was transforming local communities. In addition to these three integrative forces, other factors, such as migration and the diffusion of languages, knowledge, and technological innovation, were also affecting local conditions. Islam was a proto-global phenomenon par excellence, as was the Mongol empire.

As in Afro-Eurasia, trade and conquest can be identified as forces of integration for the indigenous cultures of the Americas. In addition to these forces, periodization and sequencing could be added as points of comparison between the Old and New Worlds. In both Mesoamerica and Afro-Eurasia, we see the collapse of the largest political entities, political fragmentation, and decline in trade at the beginning of the Middle Millennium, and in all regions, these trends were subsequently reversed and "growing connectedness" intensified. If one considers the sixteenth century as the starting point of "full-fledged globalization", as some scholars have, then the Middle Millennium from Olstein's perspective "represents its threshold" (p. 684).