



Chapter 1

Imperialism: Materiality and Ideology

It is first of all necessary, or at least convenient, to clarify what is meant by “empire”; such a clarification is in turn the basis upon which an analysis of imperialism, or imperial ideology, can proceed. The definition of empire has always been subject to debate,¹ and I hereby limit myself to two traditional definitions. The first is that of John Gilissen:² “un état souverain, un territoire relativement vaste, de multiples groupes socio-politiques, une certaine durée, la concentration du pouvoir entre les mains d’une même autorité, généralement monocratique, la tendance à l’hégémonie, voire à l’universalisation.” The second is that of Michael Doyle:³ “Empire is a relationship, formal or informal, in which one state controls the effective sovereignty of another political society. It can be achieved by force, by political collaboration, by economic, social, or cultural dependence. Imperialism is simply the process of establishing or maintaining an empire.” The first definition includes—and the second omits—what is to my mind the essential prerequisite for any consideration of empire, namely the ideological principle, the “imperial mission”: imperialism as the mission to subjugate, or at least to impose hegemony over, the entirety of the known world.⁴

Unfortunately, two opposed but equally superficial tendencies prevail in the compilation of lists of empires—one tendency applies the “empire” label widely, while the other restricts its use. In ancient Near Eastern studies, an uncritical approach is typical, in which the term “empire” is liberally extended to any state with regional dimensions. This is true even when such states lack the expansionistic and hegemonic impulse, the will to dominate that ought to characterize an empire. Evidently, scholars feel more justified in their pursuits when their object of study is defined as an empire rather than as an ordinary state or city-state. There is also greater public interest in reading a book entitled—to give but one among many possible examples—

1. Bang and Koldziejczyk 2012.

2. Gilissen 1973: 827–49.

3. Doyle 1986: 45.

4. On the “imperial mission” (to conquer the world in order to ensure peace and justice), see the comparative treatment by Münkler 2005: 131–46.



“The Hittite Empire” than there is in reading “The Hittite State.” Consequently, it has become customary to label all of the large state formations in the ancient Near East as “empires,” including those that preceded Assyria: the Akkadian empire,⁵ the Neo-Sumerian Ur III empire,⁶ the empires (however fleeting) of Šamši-Adad and Hammurabi,⁷ and, finally, the Neo-Babylonian empire.⁸ Beyond Mesopotamia there are the empire of Ebla,⁹ the Hittite empire,¹⁰ and above all the Egyptian empire of the New Kingdom.¹¹ The definition of “empire” is also sometimes used for the early historical expansion of Uruk.¹² In his writings, Nicholas Postgate has considered the kingdoms of Akkad and Ur III to be empires, along with their Old Babylonian, Hittite, Neo-Assyrian, and Neo-Babylonian counterparts; analogous is the broad sense of the term in its use by Szlechter.¹³

The recent volume edited by Gehler and Rollinger (2014) adopts the principle of maximal inclusion, while granting the individual contributors the freedom to evaluate the validity of the “empire” rubric in their own case studies.¹⁴ Of particular interest is the introduction to the volume, which explores the political motives informing the recent proliferation of discussion and writing on the subject of empire and imperialism, both in scholarly circles and in the popular media. Current debates about empire arise from and focus on the modern world, which implies a very broad understanding of the term: after all, real empires of the traditional type (militaristic, territorial, expansionist, universal by nature) no longer exist, and if they do they would be roundly condemned. In a sense, the logic leading from an understanding of the term *imperium* as “power/control” to its conceptualization as a “large territorial entity”¹⁵ has been reversed, returning to a general sense of “power” in its various forms: informal empire, hegemony (the Greek translation of *imperium*), commercial and financial empire. Such empires are global powers that neither dominate the

5. Bottéro 1965; Liverani ed. 1993; Westenholz 1999; van de Mieroop 1999; now Foster 2016.

6. For a recent example, see Sallaberger 1999.

7. I am thinking of Larsen 1979.

8. In particular Brinkman 1984; also Beaulieu 2003.

9. Matthiae 1977.

10. Klima 1973; Gurney 1979.

11. Already Pirenne 1973, which is no longer current; now Kemp 1978, Frandsen 1979, Leclant 1980, Galán 1995, Hasel 1998, Gundlach 2004; on the Levant Morris 2005; on Nubia Lohwasser 2014. Titulature and terminology have been studied by Lorton 1974 (for the 28th dynasty) and Grimal 1986 (for the 19th dynasty).

12. Algaze 1993 (although with caution: “informal empire,” “world system”); for a critical analysis, see Selz 1998.

13. Postgate 1977; Szlechter 1973; see also Liverani 2004a.

14. I refrain here from listing the authors of the individual chapters, as they are easily traceable in the bibliography.

15. See Garnsey and Whittaker 1978, and now also the detailed analysis of Richardson 2008; for Greek and Persian parallels, cf. Herrenschildt 1980: 70–72.



whole world nor claim to do so but nevertheless penetrate multiple regions of the world by means of their influence and in pursuit of their interests.

The uncritical conceptual expansion of the term “empire” is by no means limited to the study of the ancient Near East. In comparative and general studies—and notably in anthropological research—the preference for fuzzy concepts is well established, particularly when contrasted with older, more rigorous definitions. The practical consequence of this is an amorphous understanding of “empire” that can include states of modest dimensions, feeble structures like those of the nomadic “shadow empires,”¹⁶ pre-colonial sub-Saharan state formations,¹⁷ and ambitious city-states such as Carthage and Athens.¹⁸ All of these polities might qualify as empires according to modern criteria, but they certainly do not when measured by former standards. There is, moreover, a tendency in comparative volumes with multiple authors for individual specialists to adopt—or feel compelled to adopt—a stance of the “I have it too!” variety, confusing strict definitions with the game of bingo.

Conversely, the main contribution of twentieth-century historiography has been the claim that imperialism is a phenomenon limited to modernity. In her analysis of imperialism, for instance, Hannah Arendt¹⁹ approaches empire as an exclusively modern phenomenon, a preparatory stage in the development of totalitarianism that is located in the combined emergence of the bourgeoisie and of trade finance. Arendt thus fails to consider any of the empires of antiquity, which are not pertinent to her scheme—neglecting even the Roman Empire, from which the very term is derived. Arendt’s position on the exclusive modernity of imperialism is rooted in the disparate works of Hobson, Lenin, and Schumpeter.²⁰ In practice, her position is common to most modern historians, who relate to the momentous changes that took place around 1500—the beginning of modernity—as though they constitute a “year zero” of sorts, which permits the exclusion of earlier phenomena as inadequate and irrelevant.²¹ Indeed, Wolfgang Mommsen still adheres to the particularly German tradition in which true and proper imperialism—or, rather, the “new imperialism”—only begins in 1870 and comes to an end in 1918, excluding in the process both proto-modern and contemporary empires—to say nothing of ancient ones!²² It is admitted that a generic imperialism can be detected in every period of history, but it is

16. Barfield 1989 and 2001; on the Huns (Hsiung-nu), also Di Cosmo 2002: 161–205.

17. Tymowski 2011.

18. Whittaker 1978 and Finley 1978 respectively. According to Morris 2009, fifth-century Athens is a powerful and aggressive state but not a real empire.

19. Arendt 1948.

20. Hobson 1902; Lenin 1916, Schumpeter 1919. I revisit their respective positions in chap. 29.

21. See in this respect the syntheses of Barratt Brown 1963 and 1974; of Mommsen 1977 and 1978; and the studies of Kemp 1967 and Fieldhouse 1973. See also the work of the Assyriologist Lamprichs 1995.

22. Mommsen 1990; but previously Friedjung 1922, Baumgart 1972 and 1975, and others.



considered useless to go back further than the Roman Empire, which is familiar even to modernists. And yet, at the level of broader public dissemination, it is remarkable that when they have entries on “imperialism,” all of the encyclopedias of the second half of the twentieth century and their many digital equivalents today relate to it as an exclusively modern phenomenon. I do not believe that the aim of such entries is to deny that empires existed before modernity, but their implication is that pre-modern empires were, in essence, empires without imperialism: empires lacking an organic theory, without self-awareness, in want of imperial ideology.

In his foundational sociological and comparative work on the political system of empires, Samuel N. Eisenstadt²³ avoids becoming ensnared in the modern “capitalist” framework for imperialism. His research is based on a sample of great diachronic and spatial breadth, as befits a comparative discussion of “world history.” Even so, Eisenstadt is willing to exclude “pre-axial” state formations from his analysis and neglects to mention Assyria (though he does include pharaonic Egypt!).

And why should one expect otherwise? After all, restrictive paradigms of empire are also common among classical historians. The Roman Empire is obviously an empire,²⁴ but Momigliano nevertheless considers himself an adherent of the modernist thesis concerning imperialism (harking back to Hobson and Lenin). Momigliano’s position has prompted a detailed and opportune rebuttal on the part of Musti²⁵ in which he makes clear that imperialism—conceived as the “tendency toward domination accompanied by exploitation”—is certainly present in the case of Rome. We might add that this is equally true in the case of Assyria, though it would be unreasonable to expect Musti to have extended his analysis backward in time to incorporate Assyria in his arguments. The historiographic points of departure touched upon above—along with numerous others—are informed above all by methodological principles. Among these are an emphasis on the innovations of modernity and an intolerance for earlier phenomena, which are disregarded as being too simple to be included profitably in the discussion. This is, however, only part of the story: I believe that much of the scholarly focus on modernity is attributable to widespread ignorance about pre-Classical civilizations and a reluctance to deal with the unfamiliar.

Modern historiography is further characterized by two inclinations that serve the same end. On the one hand is the persistence of a positive evaluation of modern Western imperialism: in the colonial period, this positive assessment was rooted in the idea of the West’s “civilizing mission,” whereas in today’s post-colonial world imperial justification is found in notions like defensive imperialism and accidental imperialism (*absent-minded imperialism*²⁶), frameworks that have been applied

23. Eisenstadt 1963; I quote from the revised edition of 1993.

24. See, for example, Frank 1964.

25. Momigliano 1973; Musti 1978: 13–39 and 111–32.

26. Cf. Garnsey and Whittaker 1978: 1–3; on this topic, see chap. 12.



(not coincidentally) by British scholars to British imperialism,²⁷ as well as to the model empire, Rome. The notion that Western empires—unlike despotic oriental empires—arise “disinterestedly” or “reluctantly,” driven by defensive needs and commercial practices, continues to linger.²⁸ By way of illustration, it should suffice here to quote a few passages from the work of Tenney Frank: “the apparent paradox that Rome became mistress of the whole world adhering with a high degree of fidelity to a sacred rule which forbade wars of aggression”; “specific accidents that led the nation unwittingly from one contest to another until, to her own surprise, Rome was mistress of the Mediterranean world.”²⁹ Aside from what strikes me as deep naivety and a fundamental underestimation of political strategy, the substance of Frank’s statements appears banal: all imperialisms (conscious or unconscious) have indulged in conquests and massacres in pursuit of their political and economic interests. Excuses for such practices (attested also in Assyria, with its own “defensive imperialism”) belong to the domain of ideology and propaganda and cannot simply be transposed to the operative level. This likewise applies to the dichotomy between “domestic peace” and “foreign war,”³⁰ in which imperial conquest is characterized as the extension of peace,³¹ an ideological justification that I will revisit later.

Methodologically, the traditional approach tended to merge celebration of empire with the reality of empire, considering only the imperial point of view in its role as agent and assessing imperialism on the whole positively. New historiographic trends pay more attention to the role of the periphery, to the role of subject populations and their perspectives on events, to the fluidity of borders, to the fact that imperialism causes more harm than progress; accordingly, such historiography assesses imperialism on the whole negatively. David Mattingly contrasts traditional studies written in an imperialist/colonial setting with recent works inspired by anti-imperialist thought,³² and his observations are particularly instructive. Thus, the very same Roman Empire that was held up as a model in the Victorian and colonial age, as well as lauded and admired as a source of civilization, can today be accused of any and every evil; indeed, Mattingly himself (pp. 22–26 and 30–37) insists on the cruel, destructive character of Roman imperialism, which produced millions of victims.

27. Beginning with Seeley 1883.

28. Cf. Porter 1996 and 2004 on absent-minded imperialism; Parsons 1999 for reluctant imperialism; Robinson and Gallagher 1953 and Semmel 1970 for commercial imperialism (“free-trade imperialism”).

29. Frank 1914: x and 120–21.

30. Typical is the Islamic distinction between *Dar es-salam* and *Dar el-harb*, but cf. Raaflaub ed. 2007, with chapters on China, India, Egypt, Persia, Israel, Greece, Rome, Christianity, Islam, the Aztecs, and the Inca, and the very title of Salomon 2007.

31. Cf. DeBrohun 2007 on the *pax augustea*. On Roman imperialism, see also the synthesis of Martin 1997.

32. Mattingly 2011: 13–22.



In the traditional approach, the justification of Western imperialism has historically been accompanied by a negative view of oriental empires, which are qualified as “despotic.” From the proto-modern phase through to the middle of the twentieth century, scholarly inquiry into empires was predominantly Eurocentric and the extra-European empires (Islamic and Asian in general) were studied separately, by “orientalists.” These oriental empires elicited little interest, were largely excluded from discussions of imperialism, and were not considered a relevant point of comparison. This approach was overturned by the emergence of a global and essentially comparative historiographic turn, which emerged in the wake of decolonization in the middle of the twentieth century and then globalization toward its end. If (oriental) empires are back in fashion, it is as a result of their position as the real “evil empires”; meanwhile, Western empires continue to be defended as non-empires, or even as exporters of democracy—but I will return to this point with further detail in chap. 27. Be that as it may, now that oriental and despotic “evil empires” are back in the limelight (most prominently in the form of the new ISIS caliphate), we can position the present project as a reevaluation of Assyria as—at the very least—a prototype of the “evil empire.”³³

Finally, in the last two decades, there has been a proliferation of comparative projects (with related conferences and volumes), among them Peter Bang’s “Tributary Empires Compared” (Copenhagen), Walter Scheidel’s “Ancient Chinese and Mediterranean Empires” (Stanford), Phiroze Vasunia’s “Network on Ancient and Modern Imperialism,” Gizewski 1994, and Kurt Raaflaub’s “The Ancient World: Comparative Histories” (Cambridge). Scheidel and Bang³⁴ both furnish useful insights; the comparative material available today is extraordinarily abundant and complemented by substantial critical analysis.

As I mentioned previously, however, I believe that it is essential to foreground the “imperial mission” in any discussion of empire. With this in mind, I think it would be correct to define empire as a political-territorial formation that sets as its program, its goal, to enlarge its borders incessantly, to subjugate the rest of the world through direct conquest or indirect control, to the point where its frontiers are coterminous with those of the entirety of the inhabited world. The imperial aspiration to universal rule is more realistic in theory (if not in practice) when the mental map of the known world is limited—in other words, when the imperial territory can truly aim to include all known lands that are both inhabited and civilized, surrounded by a periphery of inferior character and of minor ideological significance. In the context

33. Referring to Holloway 2002: 12–42, for a history of the question, particularly on the relationship between Assyrian, British, and Ottoman imperialisms, the last being the model of “Oriental Despotism.” Note that Bainton (1966: 19–20) considered Assyria (which he knew indirectly, only by hearsay) as a world exception in never looking for peace.

34. Scheidel ed. 2009: 6–10; Bang 2011 and Bang and Bayly eds. 2011. Already van der Speck 1993 compared Assyria, Athens, and Rome.



of realistic knowledge of the world as a whole, modern “empires” cannot aspire to the full realization of the imperial project; this fact does not, however, alter imperial ideology, the emphasis of which shifts instead from direct territorial control to indirect economic (and particularly commercial) hegemony.

The principle of an imperial “mission” is patently ideological in nature. I do not think that there are any objective parameters against which it is possible to usefully measure the fulfillment of imperialism’s universal goals, such as control over a certain percentage of the world’s surface (or that of the known world), or control over a given percentage of the world’s population, or over natural resources—the list of impractical options is endless. The imperial “mission” is an ideal project based on a political or theological theory and is articulated in ideal principles. These principles vary through time, oscillating above all between a religious foundation (obedience to divine mandate, spreading the one true faith) and a civil basis (spreading civilization, be it in the form of technology, education, health care, or something else), also in relation to the prevailing political system and the level of education. As I noted previously, even the ideological justification for empire changes over time, though the cosmological principle—namely, the extension to the periphery of the benefits of the central state—always retains its validity. To the ancients, the realization of the cosmological principle is tantamount to the completion of creation; to the moderns, it is “the end of history.” In general, the ideological motivation informing imperialism serves to ennoble and justify the crude material interests of imperial expansion: these interests are the pursuit of power and, principally, economic returns, be they in the form of tribute for “archaic” empires or in the form of commercial or financial privileges for their modern counterparts.

Despite the variability of historical contexts, the permanence of ideal principles leads us to a reformulation of our problem: does Assyria constitute a plausible “prototype” for empire, in the sense that it already manifests certain “simple forms” of imperial ideology? To answer this question negatively or affirmatively, it is necessary to examine these “simple forms,” these basic principles of imperial ideology, in order to determine if—and to what extent—they overlap (in whole or in part) with those of later empires. Further, it is necessary to determine if—and to what extent—differences between Assyria and its successor empires are attributable to changed historical conditions, that is, to the context but not to the model.

In this regard it is necessary to note at least some of the basic differences.

1. Assyrian imperial expansion, like that of ancient empires in general, is terrestrial in character, whereas modern European imperialism is directed above all to lands beyond the sea.
2. Assyrian expansion took place in monopolistic conditions, in contrast to the strenuous competition faced by modern European imperialisms (between Portugal and Spain, England and the Netherlands, France and England, England and Spain, etc.).



3. The aim of Assyrian imperialism was not to find lands to populate and colonize but rather to find sources of manpower to import, in a world where land was overabundant relative to the number of people.
4. Assyria did not enjoy (at least not normally) any significant technical superiority in armaments or means of transportation of the kind that enabled the rapid European success in America and Africa.
5. The economic component of Assyrian imperialism was of the tributary type (directed toward acquisition), and not commercial (export-driven, oriented toward securing markets).

These are all major differences—and many more could be added—but they all pertain to the operational sphere and to material conditions. As such, if the ideological dimension of Assyrian imperialism were to prove comparable to (if not homogenous with) those of later empires, this aspect would assume much greater importance relative to the enormous historical differences. I would also add that, although the concrete aims of imperialism are economic and related to the pursuit of power, it is also true that ideological justifications are not merely a smokescreen but an essential factor: all peoples/states with expansionist aims have practical goals, but only those equipped with a strong ideology (religious, militaristic, or otherwise) can actually expand.

In this study, I therefore intend to outline the ideal principles of Assyrian imperialism, while incorporating some points of comparison. I do not pretend to be able to conduct a study that considers all empires equally, from Assyria to current American hegemony or the contemporary Caliphate; that approach would demand much more space than a mere monograph can give and would in any case exceed my competence—and not mine alone. A “reevaluation” of the role of Assyria is necessary precisely because that role, as well as that of other oriental (pre-Roman) empires, has been largely undervalued and overlooked (as an exception, see Bedford 2009). Let it suffice to observe here that the edited volume of Morris and Scheidel (2009) includes Assyria but not Egypt or Akkad, while Garnsey and Whittaker (1978) instead include Egypt but not Assyria! Assyriological complaints are thus joined by those of Egyptology and Iranian studies.³⁵

In this endeavor, I am not at all a “voice crying in the wilderness.” There are several comparative works that include Assyria among their case studies.³⁶ There

35. See the Egyptological complaint of Moreno García 2014; but cf. Gundlach and Weber (eds.) 1992 for a comparison between Egypt and modernity on the point of the sacral legitimization of the Emperor; for a complaint from the point of view of Iranian studies, see Rollinger 2014.

36. For example Alcock et al. eds. 2001, with Liverani 2001 for Assyria; the previously cited Morris and Scheidel eds. 2009, with Bedford 2009 for Assyria; Arnason and Raaflaub eds. 2011, with Liverani 2011 for Assyria; Bang and Kolodziejczyk eds 2012, with Barjamovic 2012 for Assyria; Meißner et al. (eds.) 2005 with Fuchs 2005 for Assyria; not to forget the less-recent Duverger ed. 1980, with Garelli 1980 for Assyria.



also exist volumes that focus on the ancient Near East, in which Assyria enjoys pride of place.³⁷ Still other books are concerned specifically with Assyria but make use of comparative insights, either explicitly³⁸ or at least by way of illustration.³⁹ What has so far been lacking is a work that seeks first and foremost to define Assyrian imperial ideology (its imperial “mission”) as a phenomenon that contains—embryonically—numerous aspects and principles that persist through the course of subsequent historical developments.

Finally, the efficacy of comparison as a means of attracting the attention of historians in general (classicists and modernists, Sinologists and Americanists) to the case of Assyria is yet to be demonstrated. The reverse, however, seems to me more easily attainable—and that is to attract the attention of “Assyriologists” to the extent to which knowledge of the operational mechanisms and theoretical principles of other empires can aid them in their pursuit of a better and deeper comprehension of the mechanical and theoretical (or theological) foundations of Assyrian imperialism. At a personal level, this has been for me an undeniable benefit.

37. Like Larsen (ed.) 1979; Oded 1992.

38. Especially the excellent Lamprichs 1995; now also Bagg 2011: 271–81 and 301–8 (which refers repeatedly to Münkler 2005).

39. Like Holloway 2002, which makes almost exclusive use of the British Empire as its point of comparison (and more rarely the Roman Empire, pp. 117–18 and *passim*).