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Mediterranean Imperial Systems in the
Longue Durée

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Variations on a Theme of Empire: Comparing Mediterranean Imperial Systems in the *Longue Durée*

Empires require a functional infrastructure and sustaining resources, but there are many ways in which these can be achieved, and they have implications for the stability and persistence of imperial systems. This paper will compare and contrast key aspects of Mediterranean empires. It begins with the territorial states of Mycenaean Greece, which may or may not have formed a loose federal empire, then progresses through the Early Roman Empire to that of Late Roman antiquity, the Byzantine Empire, and ends with the Early then Late Ottoman Empire. Political structure, demography and economy will be given particular attention.

human ecology; social hierarchy; polis; Mycenaean; classical; Roman Byzantine; Ottoman

Reiche erfordern eine funktionale Infrastruktur und erhaltende Ressourcen, wobei es dafür viele Möglichkeiten gibt, und diese haben Implikationen für die Stabilität und Beständigkeit imperialer Systeme. Dieser Beitrag vergleicht und kontrastiert zentrale Aspekte mediterraner Reiche. Er beginnt mit den territorialen Staaten des mykenischen Griechenlands, das ein loses föderales Reich gebildet haben dürfte, und begibt sich dann zum frühen Imperium Romanum hin bis zur Spätantike, dem Byzantinischen Reich und endet mit dem Osmanischen Reich. Dabei erfahren politische Strukturen, Demografie und Ökonomie besondere Aufmerksamkeit.

Humanökologie; soziale Hierarchie; Polis; mykenisch; klassisch; römisch-byzantinisch; osmanisch

The purpose of this paper is to compare and contrast various sequent imperial systems in the Aegean and the wider Mediterranean from the Late Bronze Age to the Early Modern era.¹

1 The Mycenaean state(s)

Was there a Mycenaean Empire? Archaeology has identified a limited number of Late Bronze Age palace-states on the Greek Mainland and scholars have tended to adopt the much later Homeric picture of a series of independent kingdoms.² Not coincidentally noting the particular grandeur of royal burials at Mycenae, a place in legend where king Agamemnon ruled as *primus inter pares* when it came to the Trojan War, some have believed that Mycenae itself was a dominant centre but not imperial. However the political geography of the 13th century BC from Hittite sources treats the Mycenaean states as a group, the Ahhiyawa, and additionally as a Great Power under a King.³ This could still encompass the *primus inter pares* model where one dominant centre represented the other states, but

1 A study focussing on settlement patterns and economic sustainability over the same eras for the Aegean has appeared as Bintliff 2013a.

2 Bintliff 2012, chapter 7.

3 Latacz 2004.

a few scholars are persuaded that there may indeed have been real overlordship from a single palace.⁴ Given the immense territory and unparalleled size of the palace belonging to the Theban state, however, Mycenae is no longer the single candidate for this role.⁵

Traditionally Mycenaean states were seen as highly-centralized institutions, redistributing taxed foodstuffs and controlled trade items to their populace.⁶ Recently this model has been replaced by a complex socioeconomic system, with a more limited palatial production, and a major role for independent producers – comprising local magnates and peasant communities.⁷ The political hierarchy inferred from the Linear tablets, following recent discussions,⁸ makes it likely that regional magnates occupying a middle position in status, between the upper level of royalty (*wanax*, *lawagetas*?) and the peasant communities (*damos*) and slaves (*doeloi*), had roles similar to feudal lords in Medieval Europe. The palace affirmed their local power in return for their military and tax-collection duties to the state.

The origin of the Mycenaean middling powers can be sought in the preceding five hundred years, with the emergence of local clan leaders and chieftains. Late Middle and early Late Bronze Age tholoi (stone beehive tombs) and complex tumulus tombs in Messenia can suggest possible sociopolitical territories in MBA – early LBA Messenia, a well-researched province on the S.W. Mainland.⁹ Gradually higher level ‘princes’ appear with the grandest tombs in each region in mature LBA times. However even in the region around Mycenae itself there remain several other major, even palatial centres, although only Mycenae has a whole series of such princely grave monuments.

If the ‘states’ appear now internally to be mosaics of competing district leaders, there are also larger areas lacking palatial centres but sharing Mycenaean culture, where perhaps more tribal societies or those with competing ‘big men’ might have been only loosely associated with the palatial heartlands through core-periphery exchanges and treaties. One attractive theory attributes the massive military destruction of the Mycenaean states to concerted raids by these less politically-complex communities of the Mycenaean peripheries.

2 Dark Age to classical Greek city-state society

Although the palaces and top hierarchy disappeared after those palatial destructions, in the subsequent Iron Age the middle hierarchy survived to form a chieftain class, probably occupying elaborate halls like those discovered at Lefkandi.¹⁰ If most communities were villages with or without chiefs, there are a few Dark Age towns, where the houses and cemeteries form discrete clusters,¹¹ which have plausibly been seen as separate chief plus client hamlets.

By 600 BC however we have entered again into a literate society, where much of Southern and coastal Northern Greece has become highly urbanized and in high demographic growth. In some half of the resultant city states or *poleis*, the elite are forced to share power with the middle class and even rarely with the lower classes. Survey and excavation suggest that 70–80 % of city-state populations dwelt in urban centres, commuter farmers predominantly.¹² Hence the rise of people power in the polis, or ‘politics’. This was possi-

4 Kelder 2008.

5 Dakouri-Hild 2010.

6 Renfrew 1972.

7 Halstead 1992; Galaty and Parkinson 2007.

8 Driessen 1992.

9 Bintliff 1977; Voutsaki 1995; Voutsaki 1998.

10 Bintliff 2012, chapter 8; Morris 2000.

11 Morris 1991; Snodgrass 1991.

12 Bintliff 1997.

ble because according to the exhaustive ‘Polis Project’ coordinated by Mogens Hansen,¹³ of the 700–800 minimum city-states of the classical Aegean for which data are available, 80 % have populations of 2000–4000 people and maximal territories of 5–6 km radius, and in keeping with an ethos of moderate democracy they increasingly lived in modular, ‘egalitarian’ housing estates (e.g. Olynthus).

3 The decline of Greece and the expansion of Rome

The steady conquest of Greece by Rome in the final centuries BC, produces many fine urban monuments but an overall shrinkage in the number and size of cities and in the spread of rural settlement.¹⁴ This can be illustrated from our surveys in Central Greece. But more remarkably, even the major Roman colonies and provincial centres show the same shrinkage: the most dramatic example is the small Roman colony at Corinth set within the three-times larger, older classical city-plan.¹⁵ The origins of this diminished role for the rate of urbanization might be sought back in Italy, hence brought to Greece as a ‘transported landscape.’ Whilst as we saw, research suggests that polis landscapes in Southern Greece were often urbanized to a remarkable 70–80 %, in contrast in Roman Italy the figures are reversed, with merely 20–30 % dwelling in towns.¹⁶ Similar counterintuitive effects of Roman Imperial incorporation can be seen on Sicily, in the steady wastage of towns and their shrinkage, and long-term restructuring of rural settlement.¹⁷

So are we seeing the conversion from Greek polis to Roman town, as a radical transformation? As part of a European project Professor Luuk de Ligt and I are currently working on at Leiden University (Empire of 2000 Cities), we are considering the concept that in some Mediterranean landscapes Romanization meant streamlining towns to smaller urban foci of elite landowners, regional servicing and a novel class of entrepreneurial freedmen (*liberti*). We see this as a form of economic rationalization linked to a commercializing economy. There is increasing evidence that the later Hellenistic states and especially the Early Roman Empire saw the development of a basic form of globalized, proto-capitalism encouraging such a shift in the balance between town and country.

As I have written elsewhere:

There is a growing realisation that the trend in the Hellenistic world and even more in that of Rome, was to allow regional societies to be run by wealthy landowners, merchants and bankers, and other entrepreneurs. It was largely their activities and interests that drove the imperial economies. If a town lacked energetic elites it declined or stagnated. In turn, their wealth creation may often have been met by specialist production that did not necessarily stimulate high populations as producers or consumers. A mosaic of wealth, poverty, dense and low population across the map of these states posed no problem and is a consequence of a new economics with a very strong emphasis on *laissez-faire*. This imperial mosaic of prosperity and of key export regions is increasingly being characterised as a proto-capitalist economy.¹⁸

The general shrinkage of towns confirms that towns served very different roles in these two societies.

13 Hansen 2004.

14 Bintliff 2012, chapter 13.

15 Romano 2003.

16 Graaf 2012.

17 Wilson 1988; Bintliff 2018.

18 Bintliff 2013b, 288.

Nicola Terrenato, in his recent model for the rise of the Roman state and empire, argues that the driving force was essentially the self-interest of the wealthy classes dominating society, who alternately competed and collaborated to extend their access to resources.¹⁹ In Republican times there was no ‘state’ policy for empire, merely a *Cosa Nostra* of senatorial and equestrian Mafiosi sharing the spoils of conquest.

4 A different Late Roman Empire

Historical sources have always given the impression of dark times for the Roman Empire in Late Antiquity, beginning with decline from the 3rd and leading into the repeated barbarian incursions and then conquests of the 4th–5th centuries AD. Yet the Eastern Roman Empire survived through this period and in one form or another into the 7th century AD, before morphing into a much smaller Byzantine Greek Empire.²⁰ And it is in those eastern provinces that innumerable urban sites with their multiple new Christian basilicas seem to indicate a flourishing city life. Yet most Eastern Roman cities have shrunk and show symptoms of the decline of Greco-Roman institutions:²¹ the great forum of Thessalonika is largely abandoned from the end of the 4th century AD apart from some pottery kilns, for example. A visitor sailing to Corinth’s northern port at Lechaion would disembark to be suitably amazed by the giant basilica built around 500 AD.²² But if our traveller subsequently proceeded to the *city* of Corinth, a dramatic contrast appears – the Early Roman town had been merely 140 ha²³ compared to its giant classical predecessor around 500 ha, but by Late Antiquity it had shrunk to a mere 40 ha.²⁴

There is a paradox in the Late Roman Aegean and wider Mediterranean – in town and country we have striking contrasts between growth, stagnation and decline, extreme wealth and poverty. It seems this is symptomatic for an unstable society which is step-by-step declining as an empire, however flourishing some areas and some places and some people appear to be.

Can we offer some deeper theoretical insights into these unusual phenomena? Non-Linear System Dynamics follow the Second Law of Thermodynamics, in that complex structures of energy must break down over time, which for human societies equals historical decline. But Ilya Prigogine showed that as high-level complex systems dissipate their elaborate forms, provided that the system is open, remarkable new local organizational structures can emerge of surprising beauty.²⁵

The Later Roman Empire was subject from the 3rd century AD to overall decline in manpower, economic production, military effectiveness and political cohesion, and finally a possible phase of aridity, the cumulative crisis which eventually culminated in the loss of the Western Empire and then of the Middle Eastern provinces, leading to the small Byzantine state. As non-linear dynamics teaches us, universal decline is not the only option for systems, which are running down so dramatically. The remaining energy can form new patterns, often of considerable internal sophistication, through concentrating the constantly dissipating resources of the system into new constellations of highpoints surrounded by increasing zones of minimal energy.

Thus I think we can explain the polarization of visible phenomena in Late Antiquity: giant new buildings in shrinking towns being transformed into *kastra* or villages; empty or half-

19 Terrenato 2011; cf. Paterson 1998.

20 Bintliff 2012, chapter 17.

21 Liebeschuetz 2001.

22 Rothaus 1995.

23 Romano 2003.

24 Slane and Sanders 2005.

25 Coveney and Highfield 1990.

empty landscapes bordered by well-populated and ‘busy countrysides’²⁶; extraordinary elite wealth and the low living standards of a largely dependent peasantry. In reality, the declining total energy in the empire was being channelled into smaller but effective achievements. Yet sustainability was in increasing doubt, firstly from overpopulation related to carrying-capacity in marginal landscapes newly taken in, but especially from the high dependence on an elite-focussed commercial economy in an increasingly insecure military situation.²⁷

5 A cycle of empire in Byzantine times

After a desperate struggle to survive, the Eastern Roman Empire re-emerged as a smaller Byzantine Empire by the late 1st millennium AD. In Greece, villages re-colonized depopulated landscapes, as is well-illustrated from archaeological surveys.²⁸ With low taxes, these independent communities flourished and stimulated urban renewal. The same has been recorded from survey and excavation in Byzantine south Italy.²⁹ From the 8th and 9th centuries AD in particular we can document this explosion of new village sites. But in the later centuries of Byzantium, weaker central power allowed local magnates and monasteries to reduce villages to serf status, which led to the necessary replacement of the conscript army with expensive and unreliable mercenary forces. Depopulation, economic and military decline became inevitable. The conquest of most of Greece by western Crusaders in the 13th century AD often merely replaced Greek landowners with Franks above a dependent peasantry.

6 A cycle of empire in Ottoman times

The Ottoman conquest of Greece over the 14th to 15th centuries brought traditions of Near Eastern style empire to the country: in particular the re-peopling of deserted landscapes through encouraged or forcible population movement, low taxes and tolerance of multi-ethnic and multi-faith communities at all settlement levels from hamlet to palace.³⁰ Ottoman tax records in Boeotia match the archaeological survey record very well.³¹ Almost empty landscapes were rapidly filled with invited immigrants such as Albanian clans, so that some 100–150 years after conquest these policies had created massive recovery in towns and villages. The population florescence peaked around 1570, the achievement of a Pax Ottomanica.

Subsequently however we observe a renewed downward spiral of population decline tied to Imperial decline during the 17th century AD. As historians have noted, the fate of the Byzantine Empire was to be recapitulated with that of the post-medieval Ottomans. From the late 16th century a series of weak sultans, climate difficulties, military setbacks and the aggressive intervention into the Ottoman economy of the capitalist economies of Western Europe (creeping global commercialization), allowed the flourishing independent peasant communities of the Balkans to be absorbed into the *çiflik*-estates of local magnates (the *ayans*).³² To cite a case-study example from our Boeotia Project in Central Greece: the deserted village site of Panagia in early Ottoman times gives clear textual and

26 Pettegrew 2007.

27 Bintliff 2012.

28 Vionis 2008; Bintliff 2012, chapter 17.

29 Arthur 2012.

30 Bintliff 2012, chapter 20.

31 Bintliff 1995; Kiel 1997.

32 Inalcik 1972; Lawless 1977.

survey evidence for great settlement growth (the tax record lists > 1000 inhabitants). Panagia village during the 17th–18th Ottoman decline, in contrast, shows slight occupation (the tax records give a loss of 2/3 inhabitants and gradual site relocation to the modern village). Mainland rural communities become typified by semi-feudal estates or *çiflik*s, where the estate-owner's or manager's home revives the medieval mainland tradition of towerhouses.³³

But this cycle has a more positive side. While the Ottoman Empire gradually fell apart from internal failings and external pressure, it was the very multicultural nature of this empire that produced divergent pathways for its different component ethnic and religious communities. In the Balkans and other provinces, a new class of Christian and Jewish entrepreneurs opened up direct commercial networks to western merchants, bypassing the restrictions of Ottoman production and trade regulation. They got rich and westernized, and were a key element in the eventual creation of independent national states out of the disintegrating Ottoman Empire.³⁴

7 Conclusion

The comparative study of empires in a single region allows us to see the diverse ways that land, labour and power can be combined to form very contrasted socio-political formations. We can also gauge their medium and long term effectiveness as modes of social organization.

33 Bintliff 2012, chapter 21.

34 Stoianovich 1960.

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