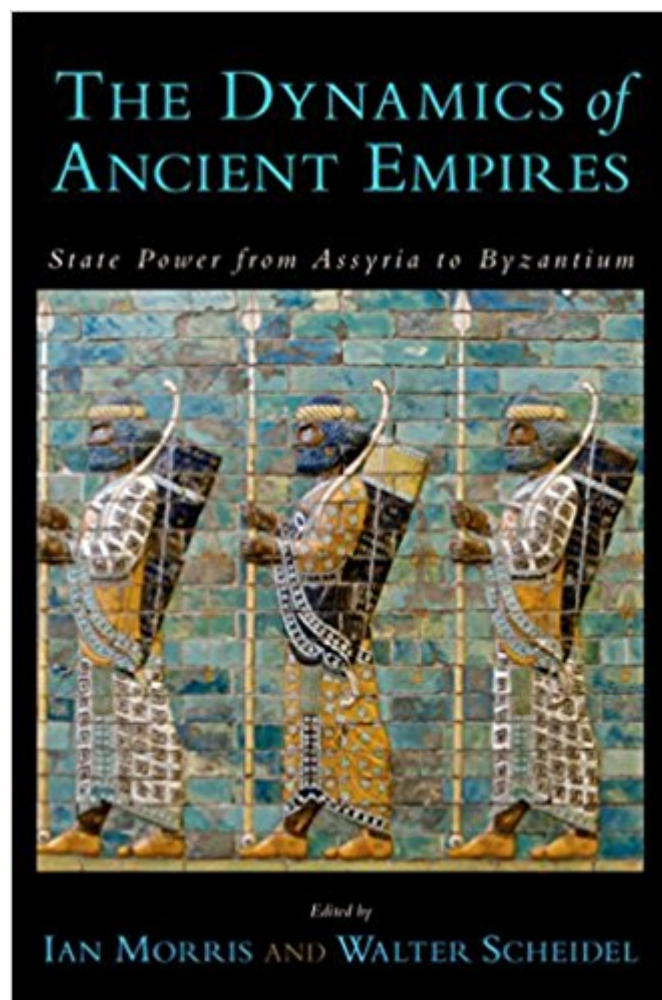




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The Dynamics Of Ancient Empires: State Power From Assyria To Byzantium (Oxford Studies In Early Empires)



Synopsis

The world's first known empires took shape in Mesopotamia between the eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea and the Persian Gulf, beginning around 2350 BCE. The next 2,500 years witnessed sustained imperial growth, bringing a growing share of humanity under the control of ever-fewer states. Two thousand years ago, just four major powers--the Roman, Parthian, Kushan, and Han empires--ruled perhaps two-thirds of the earth's entire population. Yet despite empires' prominence in the early history of civilization, there have been surprisingly few attempts to study the dynamics of ancient empires in the western Old World comparatively. Such grand comparisons were popular in the eighteenth century, but scholars then had only Greek and Latin literature and the Hebrew Bible as evidence, and necessarily framed the problem in different, more limited, terms. Near Eastern texts, and knowledge of their languages, only appeared in large amounts in the later nineteenth century. Neither Karl Marx nor Max Weber could make much use of this material, and not until the 1920s were there enough archaeological data to make syntheses of early European and west Asian history possible. But one consequence of the increase in empirical knowledge was that twentieth-century scholars generally defined the disciplinary and geographical boundaries of their specialties more narrowly than their Enlightenment predecessors had done, shying away from large questions and cross-cultural comparisons. As a result, Greek and Roman empires have largely been studied in isolation from those of the Near East. This volume is designed to address these deficits and encourage dialogue across disciplinary boundaries by examining the fundamental features of the successive and partly overlapping imperial states that dominated much of the Near East and the Mediterranean in the first millennia BCE and CE. A substantial introductory discussion of recent thought on the mechanisms of imperial state formation prefaces the five newly commissioned case studies of the Neo-Assyrian, Achaemenid Persian, Athenian, Roman, and Byzantine empires. A final chapter draws on the findings of evolutionary psychology to improve our understanding of ultimate causation in imperial predation and exploitation in a wide range of historical systems from all over the globe. Contributors include John Haldon, Jack Goldstone, Peter Bedford, Josef Wiesehöfer, Ian Morris, Walter Scheidel, and Keith Hopkins, whose essay on Roman political economy was completed just before his death in 2004.

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Customer Reviews

This is the missing link for those interested in the great empires of the past. Most often empires are examined as an isolated timeline of historical events led along by famous men. This collection of essays seeks to delineate the factors that lead to and maintain the great powers of the past. There are a variety of approaches to state formation here from political economy to social imperatives.

A good scholarly review of the dynamics of empire building which presents some current theories held by historians. I would have liked to see more debate between different theoretical perspectives, but otherwise a good read.

This is a useful collection of essays on ancient empires of the Near East and Classical world. Empires discussed include the Neo-Assyrian, first Persian, Athenian, Roman, and Byzantine empires. As pointed out by the authors of the essays on the Athenian and Byzantine states, these polities were not, strictly speaking, empires but rather different kinds of states. Given the diversity of the polities discussed, it's probably better to regard this collection as discussing a variety of ancient states, not just empires. These essays are bookended by a discussion of the concepts of empire

and state formation by Goldstone and Haldon, and a final essay that attempts a Darwinian perspective on ancient empires. All essays are well written and interesting. The essays on Neo-Assyrian, Persian, and Byzantine empires are largely solid overviews of the nature and histories of these states. Ian Morris' essay on the Athenian state is a particularly interesting discussion of state formation in Classical Greece. Keith Hopkins' essay on the Roman Empire focuses on political economy and is also analytically strong. The opening, and more theoretical, essay on the nature of empires is thoughtful and given the present strong interest in empires, very useful because it provides some analytic clarity lacking in a lot of historical discussions of empire. The final essay by Walter Scheidel on the role of male reproductive fitness as a driving social force is well written and argued but will strike anyone with a background in biology as pretty obvious. Nice bibliography.

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