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Introduction: Politics of Pasts and Futures

This volume aims to explore how references to past empires and imperialism have shaped perceptions of history and imagined futures, both in imperial and in post-imperial contexts. These include, for example, not only references to imperial foundation narratives, but also stories of success and resilience during times of crisis and uses of imperial symbolism and history to express civic, national, and/or imperial identity. Our focus on temporality aims to reflect on an aspect of empire and imperialism that has often been pointed out without taking centre stage. These are, for example, the ways in which peoples and polities relate to other epochs (temporality), how that changes the way in which they perceive their own position in time, and the extent to which this leads to a reshaping of told histories. Just as much as “space,” “time” influences and shapes empire and imperialism.

In the wake of the so-called “new imperial history,” many aspects of empire have been object of studies that challenge previous notions of empires as top-down structures imposed from the centre on the periphery.¹ In particular, the modes with which empires governed diverse territories and their ways of mapping, managing, and ruling over a multi-ethnic and multi-religious populace have been in the focus of these studies.² Although “new imperial history” opened up a wide field of possible lenses through which imperial rule can be studied, most definitions and analyses of empire employed by scholars in this field still focus on spatial order. For example, it is stressed that empires generally operate on a logic of expansion both through conquest and through networks or intermediaries, or it is pointed out that empires govern their territories unequally instead of trying to homogenise them.³

1 For an introduction into New Imperial History, see Ulrike von Hirschhausen, “Diskussionsforum: A New Imperial History? Programm, Potenzial, Perspektiven,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 41, no. 4 (2015), doi:10.13109/gege.2015.41.4.718.

2 Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); Jörn Leonhard and Ulrike von Hirschhausen, eds., *Comparing Empires: Encounters and Transfers in the Long Nineteenth Century*, Schriftenreihe der FRIAS School of History 1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012); Jürgen Osterhammel, *Die Verwandlung Der Welt: Eine Geschichte Des 19. Jahrhunderts* (München: C.H. Beck, 2020), doi:10.17104/9783406751653, 565–672.

3 Burbank and Cooper, *Empires in World History*, 8; see also Heinrich Münkler, *Imperien: Die Logik Der Weltherrschaft - Vom Alten Rom Bis Zu Den Vereinigten Staaten* (Berlin: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 2005), 15–26, who has rejected the notion that multi-ethnicity is a meaningful

While this time-transcending aspect of imperialism is well known, there still is a lack of understanding regarding the many ways the engagement with imperial pasts can shape (post-)imperial societies.⁴ The contributions to this volume are united in the assumption that it is valuable to analyse the relationship of empires and time just like it has been proven to be valuable to understand their special connection to space. The unique quality of imperial rule is not only shown in regard to the way their rulers and elites imagine and manage spaces but also in the way that they manage and imagine time. One of the main threads of this volume is the different ways in which empires, the people living in them, their enemies, and scholars nowadays interested in their history shape perceptions of time and history in a way that is recognisable as “imperial.” We do not aim to give all-encompassing definitions of empire and imperialism, but rather to broaden our understanding of the use of time and history to assert or deny political legitimacy, to bolster or criticise imperial rule, and to invoke or reject an imperial lineage.⁵ This volume aims to present a wide array of contributions from the disciplines of history, archaeology, literary studies, and political science that deal with the diverse ways in which imperial pasts can be instrumentalised and engaged with. While the thematic scope of the contributions is broad, there are a number of perspectives that will be emphasised throughout, which will be discussed below.

Temporal Longevity as an Imperial Characteristic

One of the commonly attributed temporal characteristics of empires is their alleged longevity, in other words, their long temporal existence and their ability to continue under the rule of an external dynasty or even a different ruling ethnic

characteristic; for a discussion and review of epoch-transcending literature on empires, see Jürgen Osterhammel, “„Imperiologie“? Neues Nach Der New Imperial History,” *Neue Politische Literatur* 67, no. 3 (2022), doi:10.1007/s42520-022-00446-7.

⁴ The chapters in e.g. Peter F. Bang and Dariusz Kołodziejczyk, eds., *Universal Empire: A Comparative Approach to Imperial Culture and Representation in Eurasian History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), discuss the temporality of “universal empire.”

⁵ There has been a variety of studies in recent years that centre temporality in one way or another, for example: Holt Meyer, Susanne Rau, and Katharina Waldner, eds., *SpaceTime of the Imperial*, De Gruyter eBook-Paket Geschichte 1 (Berlin, Boston, CT: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2017); Wouter Bracke, Jan Nelis, and Jan de Maeyer, eds., *Renovatio, Inventio, Absentia Imperii: From the Roman Empire to Contemporary Imperialism*, Etudes (Institut Historique belge de Rome) 6 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018); Hans-Christian Maner and Ioannis Zelepos, eds., *Antike Und Byzanz Als Historisches Erbe in Südosteuropa (19.-21. Jahrhundert)*, Südosteuropa-Jahrbuch Band 45 (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2020).

group.⁶ This does not have to mean that all empires pose as coming from an uninterrupted tradition. For example, there are instances in which parts of history are erased from a certain narrative to create a seemingly seamless transition between a glorious past and the present. Imperial legacies, as is seen in these cases, not only enjoy long lifespans, but can also be revived and used to overwrite the parts of history that run counter to the desired narrative of whoever wants to reference them. For example, references to alleged longevity and ancient tradition have been a common element in the construction of nationalist historical narratives and identities in the nineteenth and twentieth century. A closer study of imperial longevity can help to show both the overlap and the differences between imperial identities and other forms of political uses of history that have been used to foster allegiance to a national, ethnic, or civic community.⁷

Furthermore, the longevity of imperial time can be a source of contention. For example, an empire's claim to fulfil a historical mission can be challenged if the empire does not live up to its supposed ancient forebears. Opponents of imperial rule can subvert and attack the notion of imperial longevity as an outdated and anachronistic idea and thereby challenge the empire's legitimacy. In post-imperial contexts, connecting one's political enemies with imperial legacy can be a powerful tool to establish a new order or to criticise it by comparing it unfavourably to the imperial past. These discussions about the lingering effects of the imperial legacy can be much more complex than simply claiming successorship or opposition to imperialism. Effects of empire that are felt long after its fall can be engaged with in surprising ways that do not necessarily fall into a dichotomy of imperial nostalgia in the former core and remembrance of resistance in the former periphery.

Reviewing the many ways in which the ideal of imperial longevity can be expressed unveils the flexibility of imperial heritage. The celebration and commemoration of imperial histories and achievements occur in lots of different ways: conquerors can pay reverence to other empires because they want to appear as their heirs, and post-imperial polities can glorify the empires that they replaced by framing the imperial history as a part of their own history, just as they can try

⁶ At the same time, a significant number of short-lived empires have also existed, some of them creating similar long-lasting legacies. See Robert Rollinger, Julian Degen, and Michael Gehler, eds., "Approaching Short-Termed Empires in World History, a First Attempt", in *Short-Term Empires in World History*, ed. by Robert Rollinger, Julian Degen, and Michael Gehler, Universal- und kulturhistorische Studien. Studies in Universal and Cultural History (Wiesbaden: Springer VS), 2020.

⁷ Stefan Berger with Christoph Conrad, *The Past as History: National Identity and Historical Consciousness in Modern Europe*, Writing the Nation (Camden: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015).

and pose as the brave resistance that finally brought the empire down. This flexibility has made imperial longevity an excellent tool in political discourse, in public contention, and in self-representation. As a trope it can rely on figures of thought and ways to conceptualise the flow of time that are themselves tightly intertwined with the legacy of empires, the most well-known of which would be the notion of *translatio imperii*.

Translatio Imperii: The Succession of Empires as a Figure of Thought

As a pivotal point in the annals of history, Rome has transcended its physical existence on the banks of the Tiber River having become an enduring archetype traversing the epochs of Europe and the world since the decline of the Western Roman Empire. The notion of “*translatio imperii*” finds its origins in the belief that the transfer of power follows a divine or cosmic order governing its passage from one centre of authority to another. This concept can be traced back to the ancient civilizations of the Near East and the Mediterranean, where the transference of power was perceived as an integral part of a cyclical historical pattern. The idea of this imperial power transition, however, predates the Christianized interpretation of “*translatio*,” as elucidated by Werner Goetz in his seminal study.⁸ This ceaseless relay of authority is classically encapsulated through the Assyrians/Babylonians, Persians, Greeks/Macedonians, and Romans.⁹ Within the framework of the four-kingdom doctrine, Rome occupies the final position among these four global empires, marking the culmination of world history.¹⁰ Its decline, perpetually postponed by its transmission, is envisaged from the perspective of salvation history as the dawn of the Kingdom of God, transcending the confines of time itself.

The transfer of power and its legitimacy constitutes a recurring theme in the exploration of imperial legacies that we endeavour to dissect in this collection.

⁸ Werner Goetz, *Translatio Imperii Ein Beitrag Zur Geschichte Des Geschichtsdenkens Und Der Politischen Theorien Im Mittelalter Und in Der Frühen Neuzeit* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1958).

⁹ Daniel 2:31–45; Iust., *Epit.*; for a recent study on the notion of succession of rule in Antiquity prior to *translatio imperii*, see Marie Oellig, *Die Sukzession von Weltreichen: Zu den antiken Wurzeln einer Geschichtsmächtigen Idee*, *Oriens et Occidens* 38 (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2023).

¹⁰ Iohannes, *Apocalypsis* 17:9; Tert., *Apol.*; see also Tamás Nótári, “*Translatio Imperii*—Thoughts on Continuity of Empires in European Political Traditions,” *Acta Juridica Hungaria* 52, no. 2 (2011).

Figures of thought such as *translatio imperii* served as a prevalent strategy to legitimise one's exercise of power while delegitimising others, and functioned to invoke an ancestral lineage legitimising a particular rule. In Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, references to the Roman Empire as *exemplum* and legitimation became widespread, both in Christian Europe and beyond. As perspectives on time changed, the teleological aspect of Christian *translatio imperii* did not align anymore with newly developing linear views of time and corresponding political concepts. Genealogical constructs à la *translatio imperii* have continued to be used until this very day in different shapes and forms, always with Hellenistic or Roman empires in mind as example.¹¹ Hence, *translatio imperii* represents merely one angle to treat imperial history and ascribing meaning to the past. In tandem with the departure from this conceptual framework, as exemplified by Petrarch in his pursuit of *renovatio imperii*, and continued by the French humanists of the sixteenth century, a plethora of alternative imperial constructs emerged.¹²

With the passage of time, diverse conceptual frameworks have emerged to challenge the “*translatio imperii*” paradigm, offering alternative viewpoints on imperial history. Notably, an emphasis on moments of transition and upheaval underscores instances where established systems disintegrate, giving rise to new ones. Conversely, the will for continuity and restoration focuses on preserving and perpetuating a specific way of life or political order. Another conceptual framework centres on the notion of a distant and lost or again rising golden age, shaping our comprehension of imperial history. In totality, the exploration of an idealized imperial past is an intricate and multifaceted undertaking, demanding a nuanced comprehension of abstract entities such as time, power, and knowledge. The concept of “*translatio imperii*” serves as just one lens through which we can interpret imperial history. This collection aims to delve into the variety of other figures of thought that have emerged over time, each contributing to a richer understanding of the studied phenomena. The diverse narratives and tropes employed to engage with imperial legacies have also played a pivotal role in shaping collective memory and political discourse.

11 See e.g. Pierre Briant, *The First European: A History of Alexander in the Age of Empire*, with the assistance of Nicholas Elliott, (trans.) (Cambridge, MA, London: Harvard University Press, 2017); Bracke, Nelis, and Maeyer, *Renovatio, inventio, absentia imperii*.

12 On typologies of early modern founding narratives see Judith Frömmer, *Italien im Heiligen Land: Typologien frühneuzeitlicher Gründungsnarrative* (Konstanz: Konstanz University Press, 2018); Petrarca, Africa and his letters, for example Sen. IX, 1; Jean Bodin, *Methodus ad Facilem Historiarum Cognitionem* (1572).

Cultural Memory and Imperial Histories

A study of the usage and utilisation of imperial history cannot move past a discussion of the concept of memory. Especially since the later 1980s and 1990s, studies discussing the way the past is remembered have relied heavily on a number of influential scholars. By developing the concept and theory of collective memory, Jan and Aleida Assmann have argued that memory can exist outside an individual as the memory of a group.¹³ They have further made the distinction between social and cultural memory, where social memory features memories which have been experienced by the group or by members of the public, whereas cultural memory features recollections of the past which lie beyond the experienced memory of the group, as the memory happened before members of the public were born.¹⁴

An increasing circulation of a certain highlighted past can lead to a development or establishment of a cultural identity of a group, of which nationalism in nineteenth-century Europe is a prime example. Certain nationalistic movements based and still base their identities, and their commemorated and activated histories, on imperial pasts, whether in the contemporary present, the relatively near past, or the distant past. Such differentiation in pasts remembered can lead to a change in temporality, that is, the way in which time and one's relative position is experienced.

Also, the use of imperial pasts for contemporary matters of (collective) identity and political power is not exclusive to the modern and contemporary ages.¹⁵ In fact, several studies over the last decade have shown how history was reimagined and instrumentalised already in Antiquity. This was the case both on a level of ruler ideology and legitimation, but also for local communities in new empires, as imperial conquerors would try to establish their position relying on

13 Following philosopher and sociologist Maurice Halbwachs: Maurice Halbwachs, *La Mémoire Collective*, with the assistance of Alexandre, J. (ed.) (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950).

14 Jan Assmann, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity," *New German Critique* 65 (1995); in Aleida Assmann, "Memory, Individual and Collective," in *The Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis*, Vol. 5, ed. Robert E. Goodin and Charles Tilly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), a distinction is made between political and cultural memory. Although they both distinguish themselves from individual and social memory by going beyond the time – they are no longer based on shared experiences, but are mediated and transgenerational – cultural memory consciously selects the episodes it wants to remember ("active memory") against a background of the available knowledge of the past ("archival memory").

15 Maria Mälksoo, ed., *Handbook on the Politics of Memory* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2023), doi:10.4337/9781800372535.

former imperial might.¹⁶ In particular, the idea of a succession of empires (*translatio imperii*), as mentioned above, formed an important part of Christian medieval and early modern discussions about empires, their rise and downfall, and their *Nachleben*, causing an almost teleological linearity in its thinking.¹⁷

In many of these instances, a shift in experience of time, and one's position in time and history, occurs. As certain historical events, episodes, or time periods are invoked in public discourse, a differentiation in hierarchy between historical pasts can occur, which can lead to canonisation of a collective's history, but also to a conscious or unconscious *forgetting* of other episodes.¹⁸ Both canonisation and forgetting can manifest in the identification with a person or a group of people in the past – also sometimes called a “time collapse” or a “folding” of time – or rather a distancing to the activated past. Selecting and highlighting remembered pasts push other pasts to the background, at least in that narrative. At the same time, a multiplicity of memories and narratives remains inherent to the phenomenon, causing constant interaction between conflicting memories.¹⁹

Memory and remembrance are not just about the past and the present, but also relate to the future, for example by shaping expectations and nourishing fears and hopes.²⁰ As observed by Phiroze Vasunia, when talking about “memory of empire,” this phrase can be understood in two different ways: first, as the memory to a past empire, and second, as an empire having memory itself.²¹ However, these two understandings of the phrase in many cases also engage with each other, when one imperial order engages with or even appropriates memory of another empire. This volume, therefore, combines these two angles and hopes to engage with these levels of temporality. It attempts to show the entanglement of imperial orders, the evocations of imperial histories, and the role of temporality in this.

16 See e.g. Rolf Strootman and Miguel J. Versluys, eds., *Persianism in Antiquity* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2017); Julian Degen, *Alexander III. zwischen Ost und West. Indigene Traditionen und Herrschaftsinszenierung im makedonischen Weltimperium*, *Oriens et Occidens* 39 (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag), 2022.

17 Oellig, *Die Sukzession von Weltreichen*.

18 Assmann, “Memory, Individual and Collective”; on memory and canonisation, see Jan Assmann, “Communicative and Cultural Memory,” in *Cultural Memories. The Geographical Point of View*, ed. Peter Meusburger, Michael Heffernan, and Edgar Wunder, *Knowledge and Space* 4 (Dordrecht, Heidelberg, London, New York, NY: Springer, 2011), 22–25.

19 Gregor Feindt et al., “Entangled Memory: Toward a Third Wave in Memory Studies,” *History and Theory* 53 (2014): 37–38.

20 Feindt et al., “Entangled Memory,” 29, 40–41.

21 Phiroze Vasunia, “Memories of Empire: Literature and Art, Nostalgia and Trauma,” in *The Oxford World History of Empire: Volume 1: The Imperial Experience*, ed. Peter F. Bang, C. A. Bayly, and Walter Scheidel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 499–500.

The Outline of the Volume

The volume is divided into three parts, each of them discussing certain ways in which individuals, communities, and imperial powers dealt with imperial histories and legacies. The contributions in Part 1 discuss ways in which the transfer of (imperial) power and authority, both political and cultural, has been used to legitimise power relations and to establish new (cultural or political) authority. Although classically entitled “*Translatio imperii*,” Part 1 goes beyond the traditional classical reception, showing the relevance of ancient Greek and Roman empires both in Rome and European states and in Western Asia.

Part 2 focuses on the legitimisation and discrediting of imperial and authoritarian rule in cases where the historical identification “leapfrogged” over the immediate predecessor to more distant pasts. Especially in the case of empires, legitimisation with an older imperial order could be beneficial as it allows a distinction between contemporary structures and the preceding ones to be created. The relevance and seemingly ubiquity of imperial leapfrogging is shown by the temporal extent of the cases and historical connections, reaching from the Archaic period until the present day.

Part 3, on the other hand, delves into situations in which local communities in (former) imperial territories and declining empires dealt with the decline or even disappearance of the imperial structures. Focusing on cases from the nineteenth and twentieth century, this part unequivocally offers perspectives into the modern empire and post-imperial contexts in Eurasia. In Part 3, individual experiences and structural societal legacies of imperial and colonial policies, in particular, are studied, focusing less on imperial strategies, as was the case for the first two parts.

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