

E pluribus unum or divide et impera? Empires and their Elites

The rulers of every major political entity had to control (or be able to co-opt) members of various elite groups—ranging from the polity’s core elites (e.g., members of the ruling lineage, top aristocrats or bureaucrats, palatial elites, military commanders, and so forth) to a variety of local potentates and informal leaders who could maintain social control over their communities without any official position. Controlling or co-opting the latter group was an especially challenging task to vast continental empires, which had to incorporate disparate populations, some of them explicitly hostile, into a unified imperial enterprise. The ways adopted to achieve this task and individual trajectories of specific imperial regimes differed dramatically. For instance, in a recent study, Clifford Ando noticed: “ancient empires largely conceived themselves as aggregations of subordinate populations and developed sophisticated normative resources by which to describe and explain themselves as internally heterogeneous.”¹ Yet whereas this depiction fits not a few empires, others (such as, e.g., Qin, the earliest Chinese empire) were strongly intent to fully integrate their subjects into something more resembling a modern uniform state than a heterogeneous conglomerate of occupied populations. Some empires (Rome) eventually moved toward greater homogeneity, whereas other (the Achaemenids, the Mongols) were much less intent on doing so; for them segmentation of the ruled population appeared to be a more advantageous approach.

Our workshop aims to explore different modes of imperial control over the divergent populations and different modes of interaction between the imperial regime and a variety of local elites. Which empires were more prone to integrate the realm administratively (and culturally?), and which preferred indirect control and/or even consciously maintained separation between the subjugated population? Which empires were prone to distinguish between the core “super-elite” and local elites, and which were less inclined to do so? What were the advantages and disadvantages of each of the approaches? How much was the founding (conquest) elite ready to share power with the conquered? What were the differences (if at all) between incorporating subjugated elites and incorporating larger segments of the conquered population under the imperial control? To which extent did different empires encourage (if at all) processes of acculturation and assimilation of the subjugated population? What was the role of migrations—forced and voluntary—in facilitating or hindering integration of disparate

¹ Ando, “Empire as State: The Roman Case,” in *State Formations: Global Histories and Cultures of Statehood*, ed. John L. Brooke et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2018), 176.

populations or of their elites? How did different empires affect the composition of their subjects' elite for the short and long run? Did they create new channels for acquiring elite status? By answering these sets of questions from a broader comparative perspective we hope to advance understanding of one of the most crucial aspects of the empire-building.

The participants in our conferences were selected from leading universities in Europe, Israel, and the U.S., and they cover major imperial formations in each of Eurasian macro-regions. They were asked to focus on common parameters and a common set of questions. Each will broadly identify the nature of the elites s/he is dealing with (and if relevant distinguish clearly between the “super-elite” and local elites and sub-elites and address the patterns of their interaction). Second, each will identify long-term patterns (and changes in these patterns if relevant) in the interactions between the empire's rulers and a variety of local elites. Third, the participants will consider the following questions (or at least some of them): Did the empire distinguish (legally or otherwise) between the elites and the broader population? Did it attempt to lure local elites into the imperial core or prefer to leave them segregated at their localities? Did it attempt to integrate (administratively, culturally, etc.) distinct elites or prefer separation?

This focused discussion based on the common set of questions will prompt, so we hope, not only cross-fertilization of the participants but, more crucially, will yield a new advanced understanding of the empires' interaction with their elites. The resultant volume, which is due to continue our series of “comparative imperiology” published by the Cambridge University Press, will, hopefully, raise the studies of imperial elites and the complexities of their role in ensuring the empires' longevity (or hastening their collapse) to a qualitatively new level.