



Indeed, Elizabeth came to be known as “Gloriana,” a name that reflected the triumphs of her reign.

Margaret Collinson and David Collinson

See also British Empire; Enlightenment, The; Scientific Revolution

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Empire

Empire is one of the most commonly used terms in world history. It appears in reference to a long list of powerful states and societies, ranging from the ancient Akkadians to contemporary America. Many of the leading themes in world history—war, migration, and trade, for example—arose in conjunction with empires, which touched the lives of immense numbers of peoples. “To write the history of empire,” Dominic Lieven has observed, “would be close to writing the history of mankind” (2002, xiii).

The very pervasiveness of *empire* as a historical category makes its meaning difficult to pin down. Definitions abound. Typologies proliferate. The term is often used interchangeably with “dynasty” and “civilization.” While most historians are likely to agree that *empire* refers to the political power exerted by a state or its agents over a culturally diverse group of peoples, this understanding of the term is so vague as to accommodate any number of different historical phenomena, ranging from the continental-wide conquests of the Mongols to the transoceanic extortions of the Portuguese. Moreover, even this definition may not be broad enough to account for the meaning of *empire* associated, for example, with the Holy Roman Empire, a loose affiliation of central European states that shared a common allegiance to the Catholic faith. In the end, *empire* can be seen a kind of palimpsest on which historians have written about various subjects associated with the consolidation of communities into large political units.

Etymology and Uses

The term *empire* derives from the Latin *imperium*, which originally meant the sovereignty held by a magistrate, but later evolved to refer to the authority that the ancient

The terra cotta warriors of the Qin Dynasty in China created in about 210 BCE to guard the emperor's tomb.

Romans established over much of Europe and the Near East. Its etymology indicates the main source and standard for its usage. The Roman empire became the archetype of what an empire should look like and how it should behave, a positive model for the Europeans who sought to emulate its achievements. In the east, the Byzantine empire kept its heritage alive for nearly a millennium. In the west, the Carolingian empire, the Napoleonic empire, the British empire, Hitler's Third Reich, and various other expansionist European states consciously evoked the Roman empire in their iconography and ideological claims to legitimacy. The Roman model made its mark on European historiography as well, acquiring a prominent place in literature that sought to discern the patterns of history and distill its lessons. Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–1788) is arguably the most influential work of history ever written.

Empire also carries negative connotations, evoking charges of political and cultural oppression. This use of the term has its origins in the classical Mediterranean world as well, though its principle source is probably the Achaemenid empire of Persia, which threatened the independence of the Greeks. The same connotations are attached in Western historiography to its successors, the Sasinid and Safavid empires, as well as to neighboring states that came in collision with Europe, notably the Ottoman and Mugal empires. The term is used less consistently in other geographical and historical contexts. While the closest counterpart to the Roman empire was in many respects the contemporaneous Han polity of China, it is more often called a dynasty than an empire. The same is true for its successor states—the Tang, the Song, the Ming, the Qing, and others.

Some historians have shown similar reservations about using the term *empire* in reference to the Abbasids and Umayyads, who consolidated political authority across much of the Near East and North Africa under the banner of Islam. In sub-Saharan Africa, indigenous polities



rarely receive the appellation empire, the main exceptions being the West African states of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai, whose indirect association with medieval Europe gave them mythic reputations. Similarly, the only polities in the Americas commonly characterized as empires are those that fell to Spanish conquerors, the Aztecs and the Incas, even though archeologists have determined the earlier existence of other large states in the same locations and in other parts in the western hemisphere. The ambivalence and inconsistency that have characterized the use of *empire* serve as a reminder that words and their meanings are no less embedded in the particularities of history than other aspects of human experience.

Empire Building as State Building

For all the semantic uncertainty surrounding the term *empire*, there can be little doubt that the phenomenon it signifies was a consequence of the rise of states. Empires appeared on the scene soon after the first states came into existence in the densely populated river valleys of Mesopotamia, Egypt, China, and elsewhere. Indeed, the association between the two is so close that it is not entirely clear when state building becomes empire building. Every successful state soon expanded its reach well beyond the real or fictive lineage ties and ethnic bonds that supplied its original claims of sovereignty, relying on conquest and other coercive methods to bring additional peoples under its control. The demands for labor and tribute, the reliance on armies and bureaucracies, and the

It is yet another Civilized Power, with its banner of the Prince of Peace in one hand and its loot-basket and its butcher-knife in the other. • MARK TWAIN (1835–1910)

insistence on hierarchy and hereditary privilege were common to both types of polities. As David Armitage has stated, “Empires gave birth to states, and states stood at the heart of empires” (2000, 15).

The distinction most often drawn between empires and other states can be characterized as functions of intent and degree: Empires are those states that seemed especially aggressive in their expansionist ambitions and especially accomplished at extending their sway over other peoples. Yet the same state could fluctuate quite dramatically in terms of the policies it pursued and the territories it controlled, thus exhibiting more or fewer of the characteristics of an empire as its aims and fortunes varied. It is impossible, for example, to know how to classify Pharaonic Egypt, which expanded and contracted repeatedly over the course of its long history, conquering others and being conquered in turn. Part of the problem derives from the fact that we tend to look at the intentions and actions of individual states to determine whether or when they were empires, whereas it was their “spheres of interaction” with neighboring peoples that often determined this outcome (Barfield in Alcock et al. 2001, 40).

In modern times, the rise of the nation-state presents what seems at first sight a much clearer typological contrast to empire, since its reliance on linguistic and/or ethnic homogeneity and the claim of popular sovereignty stand at odds with the foundational premises of empire. Yet archetypal nation-states like Britain and France established huge empires that stretched around the globe. They resolved the apparent contradiction between their dual roles as nation-states and empires by maintaining strict institutional and ideological boundaries between the metropolitan sphere, where the principles of the nation-state applied, and the overseas possessions, where they did not.

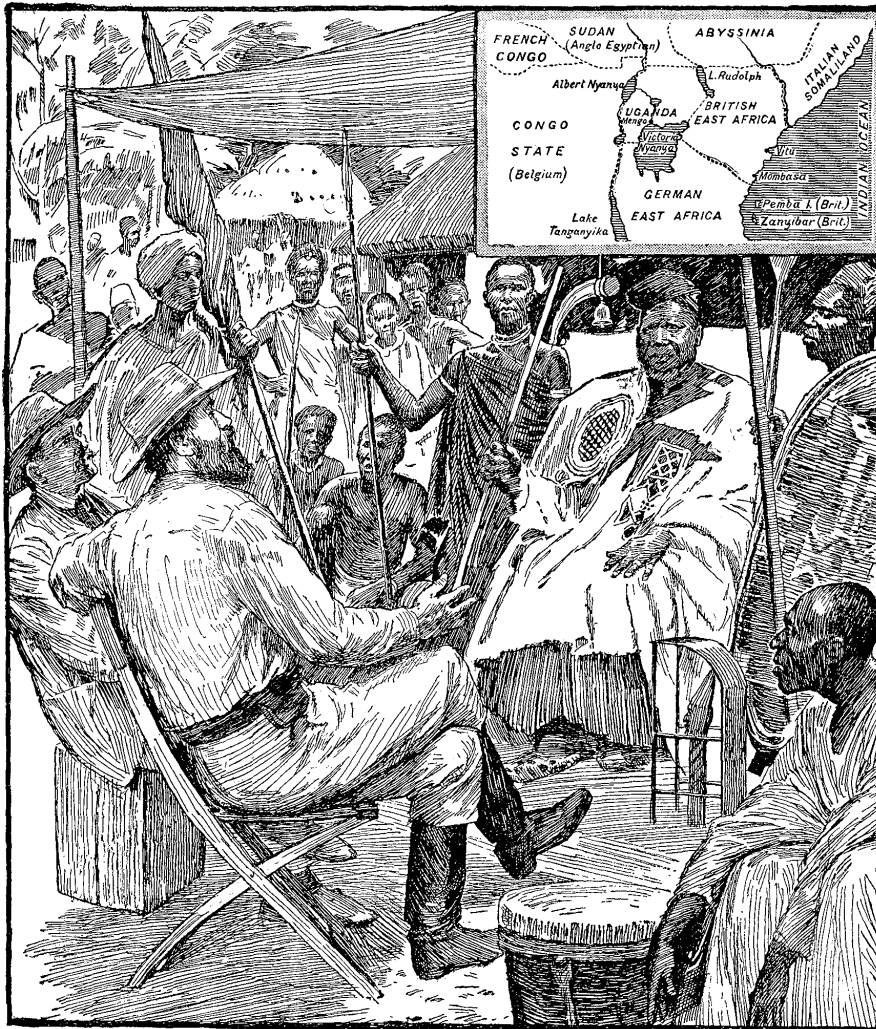
Land-Based Empires

The vast majority of empires until the last four or five hundred years consisted of states that extended their power into contiguous territory, either through conquest or composite monarchy. A key dynamic in the rise and

fall of these land-based empires was the sometimes complementary, sometimes adversarial relationship between the sedentary agricultural societies that gave rise to states and the pastoralists and other mobile peoples who operated outside the boundaries of those states. The two groups usually kept their distance from one another, coming together mainly to trade goods, but environmental changes, demographic pressures, and other forces provoked periodic clashes between them. States and their agrarian populations enjoyed the advantages of concentration, central direction, and sheer numbers over their widely dispersed, frequently fissionary adversaries, and their demand for land, labor, and tribute gave them motive to encroach on the domains of the latter.

Even when states merely sought to secure their frontiers against raids by nomads, their efforts often sucked them further and further into the hinterland in an unending quest for security. Given the right circumstances, these dynamics could lead them to absorb an immense amount of territory: Two classic examples are the Roman and Han empires. The significance that these empires attached to their troubled relations with pastoralists and other unpacified peoples is evident in the way they represented themselves and their actions as advancing the cause of “civilization” against the “barbarians” on their borders. One of the standard tropes of empire would become this dichotomy between civilization and barbarism.

Pastoralists were by no means the mere victims of empires, however. A perennial theme of world history is the sudden breakout by nomadic invaders whose mobility, weaponry, and warrior ethos overwhelmed sedentary agricultural societies. These events had several quite different outcomes. One was the destruction of the conquered state and the fragmentation of political authority. Examples include Western Europe after the fall of Rome in the fifth century CE and West Africa after the invasion of Songhai in 1591 CE. In other instances, the “barbarian” invaders preserved the lineaments of the state, but placed themselves at its head. Although they ran the risk of cultural absorption by the host society, they also gained access to its immense resources, which they were able to



This illustration from a 1914 children's magazine is entitled *Round the World with the Union Jack* and supports the notion of empire with the European explorer sitting casually as he talks to the African leader.

rise of new gunpowder empires in Europe, Russia, China, India, and the Near East which hemmed in their nomadic neighbors and put an end forever to their depredations on agricultural communities.

Transoceanic Empires

The mid-fifteenth century marked a related shift in the history of empires—the rise of Western European transoceanic empires. The projection of power by sea was not in itself a new phenomenon. The Greeks and the Phoenicians had used their seafaring skills to plant their peoples and spread their influence across the ancient Mediterranean world, though neither found a way to knit their scattered

communities together into a single powerful state. The Vikings faced the same problem despite their remarkable success in raiding and settling coastal zones from the North Sea to the Mediterranean. The Persian Gulf, Indian Ocean, and the South China Sea all sustained their own series of seaborne traders and raiders, some of whom established polities of considerable size and sophistication. By sitting astride the Malaccan Strait, a chokepoint in the Asian seaborne trade, Srivijaya became the dominant power in Southeast Asia in the seventh century. Oman, a small city-state on the southern Arabian coast, controlled trade along the east coast of Africa through much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the estimation of some historians, both states became empires.

After about 1450 CE, however, the pastoralist threat to agrarian societies began to disappear. As William McNeill and others have argued, the gunpowder weapons that came on the scene around this time proved to be more than a match for nomadic warriors on horseback. They gave an irreversible strategic advantage to large sedentary states, which had the fiscal, technical, and logistical means to produce these weapons on a large scale and put them into use with devastating effect. The result was the

communities together into a single powerful state. The Vikings faced the same problem despite their remarkable success in raiding and settling coastal zones from the North Sea to the Mediterranean. The Persian Gulf, Indian Ocean, and the South China Sea all sustained their own series of seaborne traders and raiders, some of whom established polities of considerable size and sophistication. By sitting astride the Malaccan Strait, a chokepoint in the Asian seaborne trade, Srivijaya became the dominant power in Southeast Asia in the seventh century. Oman, a small city-state on the southern Arabian coast, controlled trade along the east coast of Africa through much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the estimation of some historians, both states became empires.

The transoceanic empires established by Western European states shared some features with the cases mentioned above, but they differed in crucial respects as well.



Fortifications have also been a key component of empire building. This fort is El Morro, built by the Spanish in San Juan, Puerto Rico and maintained as a tourist attraction and educational facility.

Like most of their sea-borne predecessors, they set out in search of trade, not of the tribute that sustained land-based empires. Trade would remain an integral feature of these empires, so much so that many theorists and historians have concluded that modern European imperialism was driven first and foremost by the demands of commerce and capitalism. But Western European states also established the sort of centralized political control over their overseas possessions that was more characteristic of land-based empires than of previous seaborne polities. This can be explained in part by the fact that they were at the forefront of the military revolution precipitated by gunpowder weaponry, allowing them to exercise power over greater distances than ever before. Above all, however, it was due to the contemporaneous consolidation of strong centralized states at home, which provided the incentives—and the blueprints—for the extension of these policies and institutions abroad.

Portugal, the earliest and least developed of the European states that sought an overseas empire, had the least success in establishing a political foothold in foreign lands. Its larger and more powerful neighbor, Spain, effected a far greater transformation on the territories it claimed. And although France, England, Holland, and other European states each had its own distinct imperial

style, all of them sought to subordinate the colonies they established to the political will of the metropolis.

Most historians agree that these European overseas empires had an unprecedented effect on world history. By bringing together parts of the world that had been effectively isolated from one another since the dawn of civilization, they set in motion a series of changes that rippled around the globe. They brought about a transfer of diseases, plants, and animals which transformed environments and societies almost everywhere. One of the most immediate consequences was the sharp reduction of indigenous populations in the Americas, Australia, and other regions where the arrival of deadly new microbes generated “virgin soil” epidemics, while over the long term the spread of new food crops supported an unparalleled growth in the world’s population. European overseas empires also facilitated the transfer of peoples from one continent to another.

Streams of emigrants from Europe settled in North America, Australia, New Zealand, and other mainly temperate lands, laying the foundations for what Alfred Crosby has aptly termed “neo-Europes.” At the same time, millions of Africans were sent as slaves to New World plantations, while large numbers of indentured servants from India, China, and other lands sailed across

Imperialism is based upon a persistent misrepresentation of facts and forces chiefly through a most refined process of selection, exaggeration, and attenuation, directed by interested cliques and persons so as to distort the face of history. • J. A. HOBSON (1858–1940)

the seas to meet the labor demands of European-owned economic enterprises. These enterprises were integral to the global transfer of goods that also distinguished the transoceanic empires of Western European states. By orchestrating the operations of this system, Europeans became its main beneficiaries. This was especially true after industrialization at home skewed the terms of trade in favor of European manufactured goods, creating a growing disparity of wealth between Europe and much of the rest of the world. Although the United States, Japan, and other countries worked their way into the column of industrialized countries, the fissure between rich and poor peoples remains a lasting legacy of European overseas empires.

Ideologies of Empire

While the drive for power and wealth may have been the basic motive behind imperial expansion, no empire lasted very long if it didn't develop an ideological claim on behalf of its own legitimacy. Quite apart from inspiring the empire's agents or easing their consciences, this claim sought to make conquered peoples more acquiescent to their own subjugation. The key to accomplishing this goal was the dissemination of an idea or doctrine that overcame ethnic or cultural particularisms, offering in their stead integration into a larger imperial identity. The Romans were famous for their promise of citizenship under Roman law. The Han and their successors embraced Confucian principles and perpetuated them through the efforts of a relatively open bureaucratic elite. Although rulers also relied on religion to bolster their authority, they ran the risk that their official faith would alienate subject peoples who worshipped different gods. Most empires took care to respect religious diversity.

The relationship between empire and religion did, however, undergo a significant shift with the emergence of Christianity and then Islam. Both were universalist creeds that welcomed all converts, irrespective of their origins. This made them attractive to empires seeking ways to incorporate newly conquered subjects; by the same token, empires were attractive to them as instruments for

the propagation of the faith. Though forced conversions were uncommon and counterproductive, both Christianity and Islam often worked hand-in-glove with empires, supplying them with important ideological rationales for their rule.

Christianity was integral to the early modern European empires, which found especially fertile grounds for their missionary endeavors among the demoralized and much diminished peoples of the Americas and the deracinated slaves shipped from Africa. Once they came into possession of large tracts of South and Southeast Asian territory in the late eighteenth century, however, they had to develop alternative justifications for their presence, since Christianity simply antagonized the region's Hindu, Muslim, and Buddhist populations. The introduction of stable government and the rule of law, the promotion of prosperity through international trade, the advancement of scientific knowledge and its application in modern medicine and technology, and various other claims were made in justification of European imperial rule. Underlying all of these claims was the assertion that empire brought the benefits of civilization to colonial subjects. Whether expressed in secular or religious terms, a belief in the superiority of its own way of life—what it characterized as civilization—lay at the ideological heart of every empire.

Costs, Benefits, Consequences

Whether for good or ill, empires were crucial engines of change in world history. They were the paramount institutional expressions of the human will to power, exerting greater authority over greater numbers of people than any other system of rule. Their armies and ambitions caused untold human suffering and destruction. At the same time, they brought culturally diverse and geographically scattered peoples together, providing the political framework for the rise of those large, vigorous societies that often go by the name of civilizations. They also served as the nurseries for the acquisition of skills, the invention of products, and the origination of ideas that spread far beyond the physical boundaries and the temporal existence of the

*In the eyes of empire builders men are not men
but instruments.* • NAPOLEON BONAPARTE
(1769–1821)

empires themselves. Lastly, their relentless drive for expansion supplied much of the impetus for those ever-enlarging systems of interaction and exchange that eventuated in what we now know as globalization, with all its attractions and drawbacks.

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See also Imperialism

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Energy

When seen from the most fundamental physical point of view, all processes—natural or social, geological or historical, gradual or sudden—are just conversions of energy that must conform to the laws of thermodynamics as such conversions increase the overall entropy (the degree of disorder or uncertainty) of the universe. This perspective would make the possession and mastery of energy resources and their ingenious use the critical factor shaping human affairs. Also, given the progressively higher use of energy in major civilizations, this perspective would lead logically to a notion of linear advances with history reduced to a quest for increased complexity that is made possible by higher energy flows. People who could command—and societies and civilizations who could use large or high-quality energy resources with superior intensities or efficiencies—would be obvious thermodynamic winners; those converting less with lower efficiencies would be fundamentally disadvantaged.

Such a deterministic interpretation of energy's role in world history may be a flawless proposition in terms of fundamental physics, but it amounts to a historically untenable reductionism (explanation of complex life-science processes and phenomena in terms of the laws of physics and chemistry) of vastly more complex realities. Energy sources and their conversions do not determine a society's aspirations, its ethos (distinguishing character, sentiment, moral nature, or guiding beliefs) and cohesion, its fundamental cultural accomplishments, its long-term resilience or fragility.

Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, a pioneer of thermodynamic studies of economy and the environment, made a similar point in 1980 by emphasizing that such physical fundamentals are akin to geometric constraints on the size of the diagonals in a square—but they do not determine its color and tell us nothing whatsoever about how that color came about. Analogically, all societies have their overall scope of action, their technical and economic capacities, and their social achievements constrained by the kinds of