



What is an Empire?

By Dennis RM Campbell

There are as many definitions of empire as there have been empires, but some pretty familiar elements appear in most of them. It starts with working on our “control issues”.

940L



All shapes and sizes

We generally think of empires as being really big. The British Empire controlled nearly 14 million square miles, about 24% of the entire world! But that example, from 1920 CE, is a little too recent to really get an idea of the 4,300 years of empire the world has experienced. The Akkadian Empire of Mesopotamia (2330–2200 BCE) controlled only 30,000 square miles when it began, an area roughly the size of South Carolina. Most likely, its control never extended much further than that. Yet, it was a historically significant empire. As we will see, empires are more accurately measured by power and wealth than by square miles.

Developing a definition

What exactly is an empire? To put it simply, an empire is a political system in which a powerful central state controls weaker peripheral (outer) states. There is no single recipe for making an empire, but the main ingredient is always control. Nearly any kind of state can have enough power over other states to create an empire. However, all empires are not the same. The center's control over its peripheries can be either loose or strong, and it can change over time.



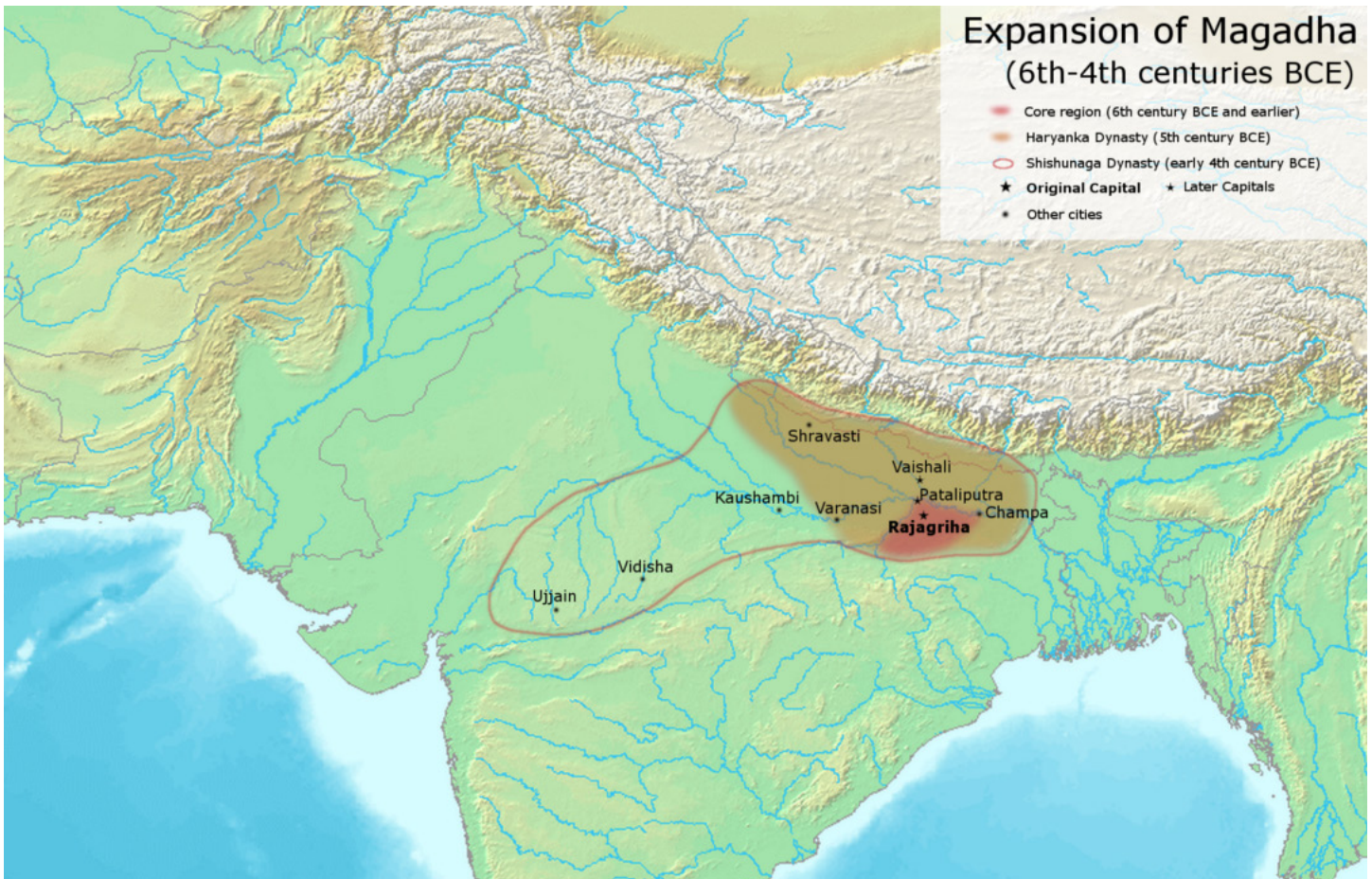
Map of the Akkadian Empire. All regions north and west of Eshnunna were at best very weakly controlled by the Akkadian Emperors. By Zunkir, CC BY-SA 3.0.

The earliest known empire was the Akkadian Empire. For around 1,000 years, Mesopotamia was divided into city-states—small political units, in which a city controlled its surrounding area. In 2330 BCE, Sargon of Akkad took control of southern Mesopotamia. He ruled from the city of Akkad, the center of his small empire. The other city-states kept their own separate cultures, but became the periphery of Sargon's empire, whether they liked it or not.

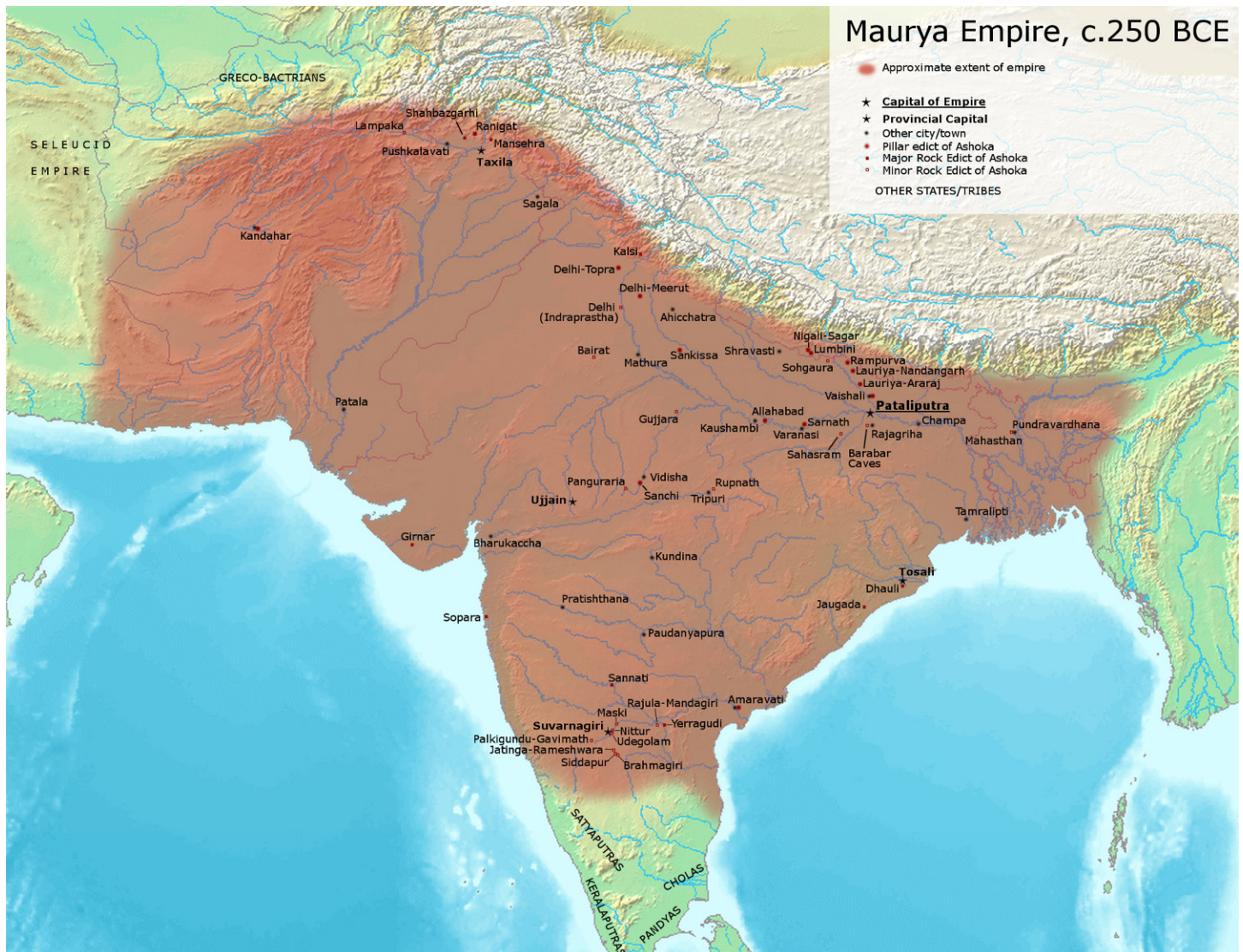
Let's compare this with what happened in Egypt. Between 3100 and 3000 BCE, a ruler of Upper Egypt conquered Lower Egypt. Though Egypt was larger than Akkad, it didn't become an empire. Instead, it became a kingdom. Upper and Lower Egypt became politically and culturally united, with citizens of both regions self-identifying as "Egyptians" rather than as citizens of a particular city or region.



Bronze head of an Akkadian emperor, possibly Sargon, discovered at the site of Nineveh (Iraq). The piece is currently on display at the National Museum of Iraq. By Iraqi Directorate General of Antiquities, public domain.



Map of the Magadha Empire (6th-4th centuries BCE). Note that the center (dark red) is quite small. By Avantiputra7, CC BY-SA 3.0.



Map of the Maurya Empire (c. 250 BCE). Compared to the earlier empire of Magadha and that of the Nandas, the Maurya Empire was extremely large. By Avantiputra7, CC BY-SA 3.0.

In general, empire creation results from a drive to gain greater power and control. In Mesopotamia, powerful city-state rulers gained more power by conquering their neighbors. From the 6th through 4th centuries BCE, various states in northern India fought for power. The region eventually fell to the Nanda Empire (345-322 BCE), which itself lost control to the Maurya Empire (322-185 BCE). We see a similar process in China: As the kingdoms of the Warring States Period (402-221 BCE) fought each other, the Qin conquered all of them, creating the first Chinese empire.

So why empire?

Why would rulers want an empire in the first place? Running an empire is complicated. Empires create inequality, as peripheral peoples are not given the same rights as people in the center. In fact, most peripheral people are oppressed, and that often leads to rebellions that need to be put down. All of this is expensive, so empires need to be worth the high cost.

There is no single reason empires existed. In the case of Mesopotamia, empire was a practical solution to a problem: a lack of resources. The region lacked important materials like hard wood, stone, and metal ore. True, these things could be obtained through trade. However, simply conquering regions with these resources secured a cheaper and more reliable source for the empire.



Map of the extent of the empire created during the Roman Republic period (created between 264 and 61 BCE). The empire continued to grow until it encompassed all of the lands around the Mediterranean Sea, Gaul (France), and contested areas in Germany and the Near East. By G.W., CC BY-SA 3.0.

For other empires, resources were a secondary benefit. The primary goals were often security and wealth. Rome first expanded out of Italy during the Punic Wars against Carthage (264-146 BCE). It quickly became an empire, controlling most of the Mediterranean basin. Its initial growth was the result of a fear of powerful neighbors, whom the Romans believed could become a threat at any time. The Romans decided to attack and defeat these neighboring states before they could hurt Rome. As their empire expanded, resources such as grain, ore, and slaves flowed into Rome in great quantities. This made the Romans, or at least some of them, immensely rich.

Center vs. Periphery

The relationship between center and periphery is defined by inequality. The center, as the seat of power, considers itself superior. This provides a reason, or excuse, for the center's control of the periphery. Inequality is often reinforced through the legal system. People living in the periphery are usually denied the rights and protections given to those of the center.

Since peripheral peoples are not typically seen as true citizens, they do not have much legal protection. Roman governors were legally allowed to rob, beat, and even kill peripheral peoples. China's Han Empire committed similar abuses against its peripheral peoples.

Challenges to empire

Running an empire is not easy. The earliest empires of Mesopotamia lasted less than 200 years. That's because their rulers had to figure out how to run an empire. Ruling and feeding millions, and defending against enemies, was no easy trick. There was a lot to learn.

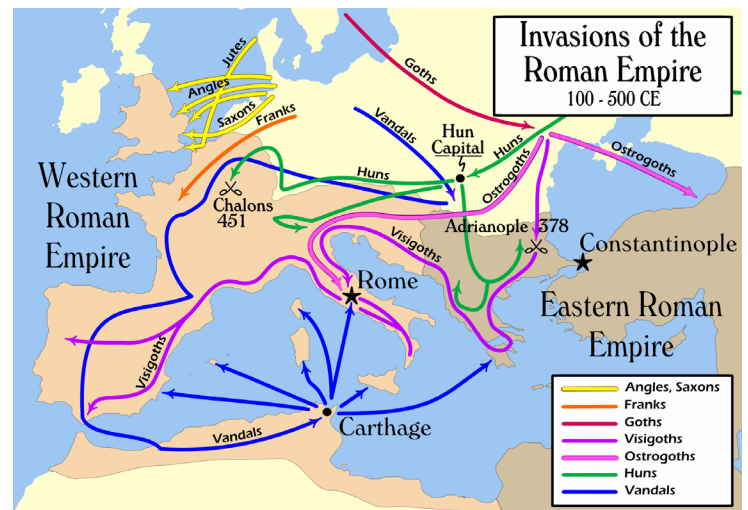
Then there is the periphery problem. We've mentioned how the strong center often oppresses the weak outsiders. But when the periphery is strong, it's difficult for the center to control it. Each time an Akkadian Emperor died, the new emperor faced uprisings in the periphery.

Nomadic peoples living beyond an empire's borders could also be a problem. These wandering groups did not live permanently in any one place. They wanted, and often needed, resources from the empire. But because they were typically treated as "barbarians," they often had to attack the empire to get anything.

Another problem empires can face is becoming too large. As empires conquer more territory, controlling the periphery becomes harder. People living in territories far from the center typically do not feel any close connection to the empire. Empires needed loyalty from their periphery, and often sent large armies to get it. Another problem is that as an empire expands, so do its borders. Longer borders cost more to defend against outsiders. Both the Han and Roman Empires struggled to protect their lengthy borders against invaders.

Conclusion

Empires have formed across the world throughout history. The earliest were typically short-lived and not very successful, but over time, empires became better at maintaining their control over other people. The primary benefit of developing an empire is better access to resources. However, empire comes with a high cost. When empires fall—as all eventually do—it is usually because they can no longer pay that cost.



Map of the various Germanic invasions of the Roman Empire. The northern border of the Roman Empire was extremely long, making it difficult to prevent incursions from outside groups. By MapMaster, CC BY-SA 2.5.

Sources

Ando, Clifford and Seth Richardson eds. *Ancient States and Infrastructural Power: Europe, Asia, and America*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017.

Doyle, Michael. *Empires*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986.

Morris, Ian and Walter Scheidel. *The Dynamics of Ancient Empires: State Power from Assyria to Byzantium*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Dennis RM Campbell

Dennis RM Campbell is an associate professor of History at San Francisco State University. He primarily conducts research on esoteric topics in ancient history and writes about ancient language, religions, and societies.

Image credits

Cover: Reconstruction of the Balawat Gates, three sets of gates from Balawat, an ancient Assyrian Empire, with embossed scenes showing scenes of warfare, the presentation of tribute and hunting of Lions and bulls. © Photo by: Universal History Archive/Universal Images Group via Getty Images

Map of the Akkadian Empire. All regions north and west of Eshnunna were at best very weakly controlled by the Akkadian Emperors. By Zunkir, CC BY-SA 3.0. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Empire_akkad.svg#/media/File:Empire_akkad.svg

Bronze head of an Akkadian emperor, possibly Sargon, discovered at the site of Nineveh (Iraq). The piece is currently on display at the National Museum of Iraq. By Iraqi Directorate General of Antiquities, public domain. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sargon_of_Akkad.jpg#/media/File:Sargon_of_Akkad.jpg

Map of the Magadha Empire (6th-4th centuries BCE). Note that the center (dark red) is quite small. By Avantiputra7, CC BY-SA 3.0. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Magadha_Expansion_\(6th-4th_centuries_BCE\).png#/media/File:Magadha_Expansion_\(6th-4th_centuries_BCE\).png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Magadha_Expansion_(6th-4th_centuries_BCE).png#/media/File:Magadha_Expansion_(6th-4th_centuries_BCE).png)

Map of the Maurya Empire (c. 250 BCE). Compared to the earlier empire of Magadha and that of the Nandas, the Maurya Empire was extremely large. By Avantiputra7, CC BY-SA 3.0. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Maurya_Empire,_c.250_BCE_2.png#/media/File:Maurya_Empire,_c.250_BCE_2.png

Map of the extent of the empire created during the Roman Republic period (created between 264 and 61 BCE). The empire continued to grow until it encompassed all of the lands around the Mediterranean Sea, Gaul (France), and contested areas in Germany and the Near East. By G.W., CC BY-SA 3.0. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Roman_Republic-61BC.png#/media/File:Roman_Republic-61BC.png

Map of the various Germanic invasions of the Roman Empire. The northern border of the Roman Empire was extremely long, making it difficult to prevent incursions from outside groups. By MapMaster, CC BY-SA 2.5. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Invasions_of_the_Roman_Empire_1.png#/media/File:Invasions_of_the_Roman_Empire_1.png



Articles leveled by Newsela have been adjusted along several dimensions of text complexity including sentence structure, vocabulary and organization. The number followed by L indicates the Lexile measure of the article. For more information on Lexile measures and how they correspond to grade levels: www.lexile.com/educators/understanding-lexile-measures/

To learn more about Newsela, visit www.newsela.com/about.



The Lexile® Framework for Reading

The Lexile® Framework for Reading evaluates reading ability and text complexity on the same developmental scale. Unlike other measurement systems, the Lexile Framework determines reading ability based on actual assessments, rather than generalized age or grade levels. Recognized as the standard for matching readers with texts, tens of millions of students worldwide receive a Lexile measure that helps them find targeted readings from the more than 100 million articles, books and websites that have been measured. Lexile measures connect learners of all ages with resources at the right level of challenge and monitors their progress toward state and national proficiency standards. More information about the Lexile® Framework can be found at www.Lexile.com.