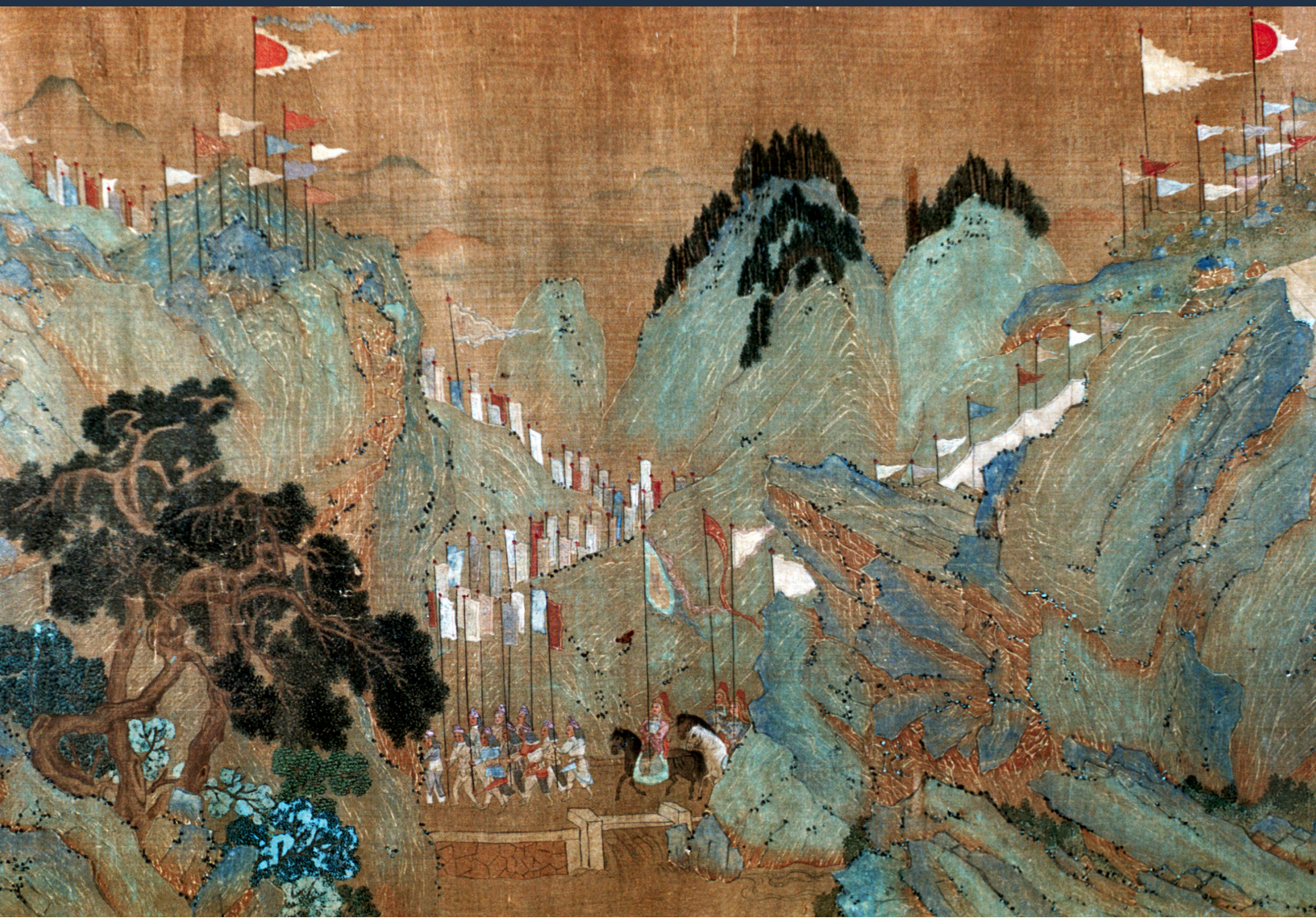
WORLD HISTORY PROJECT



Authority and Control in Ancient Empires

By Dennis RM Campbell

Gods, family, and taxes: an emperor's guide to controlling subjects and legitimizing authority.

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In the mid-third century BCE, the Mauryan emperor Ashoka conquered most of what today is India and Pakistan. When his conquests were done, he erected a series of large pillars in public spaces. The inscriptions on these pillars declared that Ashoka's empire was now one of peace, guided by Buddhism. The warfare used to create the empire was in the past.

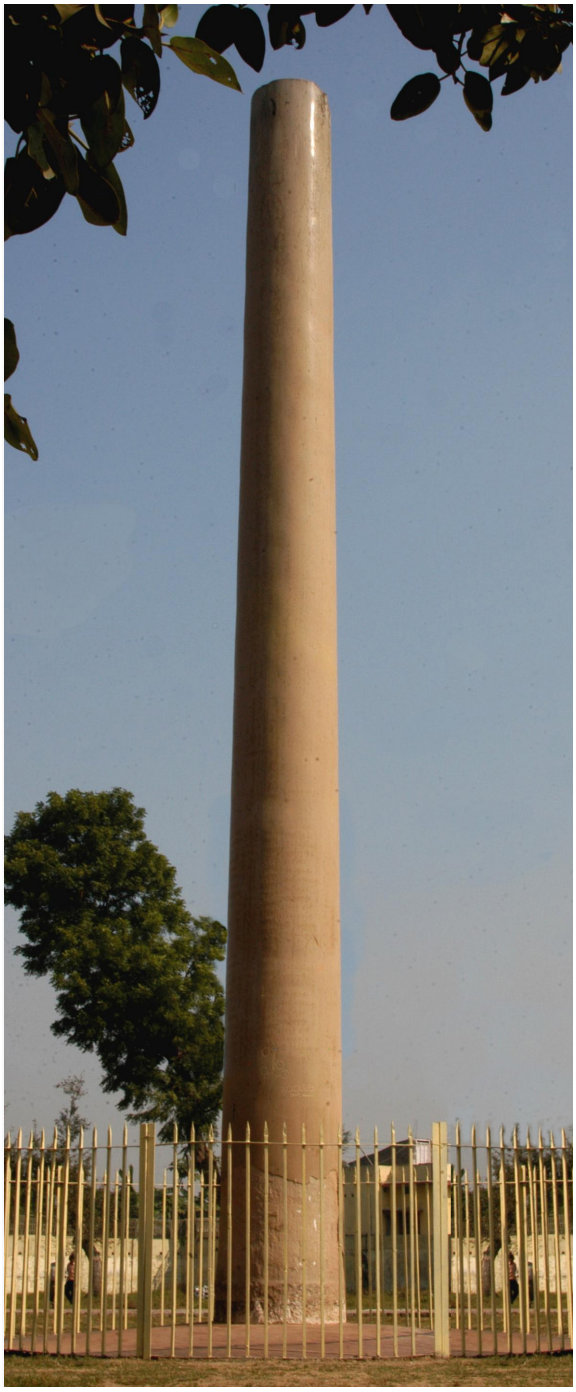
Yet, these texts were not just about peace. They clearly were also statements of Ashoka's total control. He certainly never shrank his mighty army. In any case, most of his people couldn't read. All they saw were monuments to Ashoka's greatness.

Ashoka and his descendants were careful to maintain their power and authority in order to keep their people in line. Empires are always run this way, as the examples below will show.

Dynastic legitimacy

For an empire to work, its people must accept that a particular family line, or dynasty, has the right to rule.[1] In many areas, dynasties were based on real blood relations. For example, all emperors of the Chinese Han Empire (c. 202 BCE–220 CE) were directly related to the first Han ruler, Gaozu.

Some empires did not pick their rulers based on direct family ties. The rulers of the Roman Empire (60 BCE–476 CE) were mostly chosen based on their leadership qualities. Yet even there, the idea of a dynasty was important. New emperors were often adopted into the previous emperor's family, to create the appearance of family ties.



The Ashoka pillar at Lauriya-Araraj. The capital, a carved piece set atop the pillar, is missing. The pillar, which stands thirty six and a half feet high, contains six of Ashoka's edicts (orders). By Sachin Kumar Tiwary, CC BY-SA 3.0.

1 A few empires were not run by emperors. For example, the Athenian Empire was controlled by democratic Athens. The early Roman Empire was run by the Senate during the Republic period.



The emperor Jimmu, while on an expedition, watches a sacred bird fly away. Whether legendary or a true historical figure, Japanese emperors have acknowledged him as the first of their line. Woodblock print from Ginko Adachi's Emperor Jinmu—Stories from "Nihonki" from 1891. Public domain.

Emperors and empresses

Most empires were controlled by male emperors, and rule was passed down through the male line. Generally, empresses had no real power. Their primary role was to give birth to a son who would eventually become emperor. But some empresses did have political power. For example, the Eastern Roman Empress Theodora (ca. 497-548 CE) played an important role in running the empire. The emperor frequently asked for her advice.

In other cases, empresses were the real rulers, even if they were not officially recognized as such. The empress Lü was married to Gaozu (256-195 BCE), first emperor of the Han. When Gaozu died and their son was too young to take over, Lü became the empire's ruler, even though she never took the title of emperor. Something similar happened in Egypt, where Hatshepsut (1507-1458 BCE) was the real power behind the child emperor Thutmose III. By 1478 she had taken the title of king. She then openly ruled over Egypt for the next 20 years. However, to rule, Hatshepsut had to present herself as a man. In art she is shown as a male figure.



Mosaic of the Empress Theodora of the Eastern Roman Empire from the Basilica San Vitale in Ravenna. Powerful women often received terrible treatment at the hands of male commentators. Public domain.

Religion and control

Many emperors based their right to rule on the supposed support of the gods. In China, the Zhou Dynasty (1046-226 BCE) created the concept of a Mandate of Heaven. According to this concept, there could be only one rightful ruler of China at a time, and this ruler has the blessing of the gods. As long as a dynasty ruled, it was assumed to have the gods' support.

Religion was often used to help control conquered people living in an empire's periphery (outer area). For example, the Neo-Assyrian Empire made sure the people in the peripheries worshipped the Assyrian god Assur. The Mauryan emperor Ashoka used Buddhism to unite the people of his empire.

Some emperors directly involved the gods of their peripheral territories. Cyrus the Great of Persia (died 530 BCE) claimed he was the rightful ruler of Babylon because that city's god, Marduk, had personally selected him. A thousand years earlier, the Hittites of ancient Anatolia had a more direct approach. They stole conquered people's idols[2] and brought them back to their capital city.



Statuette of Hatshepsut as pharaoh. Note that she is depicted here as completely masculine. This includes a male skirt and the fake beard of the pharaohs. From the Metropolitan Museum of Art, public domain.

Death and taxes: Controlling the periphery

Ensuring the loyalty of the periphery was no easy task. Loyalty was important for two reasons: collecting taxes and preventing revolts. In addition, an important benefit of conquering other people was being able to use them as soldiers. The only thing an empire hates more than a subject who doesn't pay taxes is a subject who rebels. Making someone a loyal soldier was a great way to keep rebellion off their mind.

Empires have done many things to ensure loyalty in the periphery. In its early period, the Roman Empire preferred to allow peripheral areas to be run by local kings. These kings were officially recognized as independent rulers. However, they did whatever the Romans wanted. Eventually, the periphery of the Roman Empire was placed in the hands of Roman government officials.

2 An idol is a physical object that represents a god.

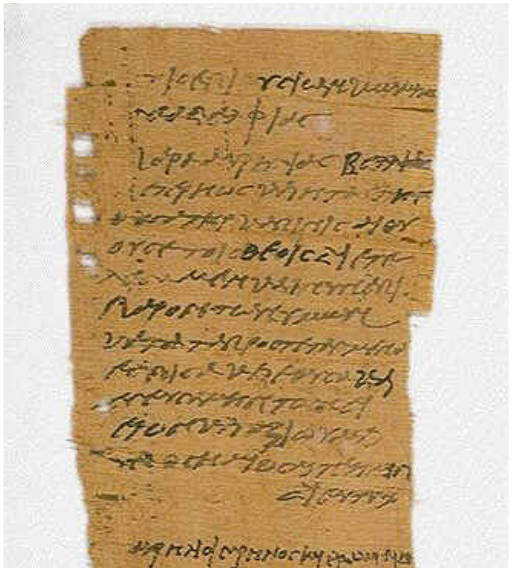


The Cyrus Cylinder, which was discovered at Babylon, was a piece of royal propaganda from the Persian Emperor Cyrus the Great. In it he proclaims that Marduk, god of Babylon, had personally chosen Cyrus to rescue Babylon from its corrupt king. By Mike Peel, CC BY-SA 4.0.

As mentioned, empires love taxes and hate rebellion. However, the first often leads to the second. For example, in 66 CE Jews in Judea, which was then part of the Roman Empire, rose up in revolt against their Roman rulers. The Jews of Judea were being heavily taxed by the Romans. To make things worse, the Romans had failed to protect them from being mistreated by Greeks. A series of riots broke out that soon turned into rebellion. The revolt lasted until 73 CE. By then, at least a million Jews had been killed.

Control through toleration and violence

The Persian Emperor believed it was his responsibility to protect his empire. He allowed peripheral states considerable freedom as long as they paid lip service[3] to the emperor. The Romans, on the other hand, treated their peripheral people as lesser beings and controlled them through force. A few wealthy peripherals were granted citizen rights. However, the majority were not so lucky. They could be punished harshly for any reason.



This libellus (250 CE) was a signed and countersigned document proving that a Roman citizen, here the women Aurelia Bellias and her daughter Kapinis, had made sacrifice to the gods. Failure to perform sacrifice could result in imprisonment, loss of property, and death. Public domain

3 To pay lip service is to pretend to agree with or like something, even when your real feelings are the opposite.



The site of Masada in Israel. Here 967 Jewish rebels resisted the Roman army from 72-73 CE. When the Romans finally broke into the city (the ramp they created can be seen on the right of the image), they found that 960 of the rebels had committed suicide. By Andrew Shiva, CC BY-SA 4.0.

Conclusion

Families, gods, and force. These are time-tested methods by which empires control their subjects. It is remarkable just how long these methods were used. Many European empires in the 18th and 19th centuries still had dynastic rulers. Religion played a central role in controlling British colonies, where many local people were converted to Christianity. Colonial governments collected taxes and took resources from Britain's colonies. When locals resisted, there was always the British navy with its cannons.

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

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The Ashoka pillar at Lauriya-Araraj. The capital, a carved piece set atop the pillar, is missing. The pillar, which stands thirty six and a half feet high, contains six of Ashoka's edicts (orders). By Sachin Kumar Tiwary, CC BY-SA 3.0. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ashoka_pillar,_Lauriya-Araraj.jpg

The emperor Jimmu, while on an expedition, watches a sacred bird fly away. Whether legendary or a true historical figure, Japanese emperors have acknowledged him as the first of their line. Woodblock print from Ginko Adachi's Emperor Jinmu—Stories from "Nihonki" from 1891. Public domain. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tennō_Jimmu.jpg

Mosaic of the Empress Theodora of the Eastern Roman Empire from the Basilica San Vitale in Ravenna. Powerful women often received terrible treatment at the hands of male commentators. For example, this powerful empress was depicted as a depraved ex-prostitute in Procopius' Secret History. Public domain. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Theodora_mosaic_-_Basilica_San_Vitale_(Ravenna)_v2.jpg

Statuette of Hatshepsut as pharaoh. Note that she is depicted here as completely masculine. This includes a male skirt and the fake beard of the pharaohs. From the Metropolitan Museum of Art, public domain. https://picryl.com/media/hatshepsut-in-a-devotional-attitude-46502d

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The site of Masada in Israel. Here 967 Jewish rebels resisted the Roman army from 72-73 CE. When the Romans finally broke into the city (the ramp they created can be seen on the right of the image), they found that 960 of the rebels had committed suicide. By Andrew Shiva, CC BY-SA 4.0. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Aerial_view_of_Masada_(Israel)_01.jpg

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