

Axial Civilizations and World History

Edited by

Johann P. Arnason, S.N. Eisenstadt,
and Björn Wittrock



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AXIALISM AND EMPIRE

SHELDON POLLOCK*

I am one of those who have always regarded the theory of an Axial Age with a certain “dark suspicion.” As usually enunciated it seemed another of Bacon’s worrisome “idols of the tribe,” where “the human intellect, from its peculiar nature, easily supposes a greater order and equality in things than it actually finds.” In terms of cultural change, the core form of the theory regards as meaningfully synchronous—such meaning, after all, is implicit in postulating an “age”—the various new insights into human being, or “breakthroughs,” that appeared in places as diverse as China, India, Israel, and Greece in the course of the first millennium before the Common Era. Whether in fact any meaning may be attributed to this synchrony is uncertain, however; indeed, it is unclear whether the conceptual innovations should even be taken as synchronous in the first place. In typical Axial Age thinking the supposed concomitance seems to have constituted an argument in itself and to have replaced the need for any causal explanation, perhaps because it is no easy task to imagine one for so global a transformation (those on offer are vague and question-begging, such as the argument of civilizational stages, which presupposes the very developmentalism it is intended to explain). As for the concomitance itself of these breakthroughs, they often appear through the clearer lens of specialist historiography to be, not so much sudden eruptions of the new, but rather spikes on a timeline of more continuous intellectual history reaching far into the past and future. If the synchrony is “mysterious” enough, as Jan Assmann seems to suggest, to require extending the epoch so far back as to encompass Pharaonic Egypt, or, as implied by others, to require extending it so far forward as to encompass Islamic Iraq or even the twelfth-century “renaissance” in northern Europe—the one as preparatory event,

* I am grateful to the participants in the Florence seminar, especially Shmuel Eisenstadt and Peter Wagner, and above all to spirited postprandial discussions with Johann Arnason. My colleague Steven Collins has, as always, been very generous with his learning in early Buddhist texts and scholarship.

the others as secondary or tertiary breakthroughs—then even the mystery of synchrony vanishes and the Axial Age stretches out so as to be more or less coextensive with premodernity.¹

It is not entirely obvious, therefore, what gain in explanatory power or expository precision will be had from using “Axial Age” as a narrowly historical category. If the quest for a temporally defined age is abandoned, axialism can still be useful as a typological category, though here too the normal acceptation may need modification. For the qualification “transcendental,” repeatedly used by scholars to explain the axial breakthrough, besides being hopelessly vague, illegitimately privileges the religious, and a narrow conception of the religious at that. Benjamin Schwartz’s definition of “transcendence” as “a kind of standing back and looking beyond”; his list of instances that jumbles together “Abraham’s departure from Ur . . . the Buddha’s more radical renunciation . . . the Greek strain toward an order beyond the Homeric gods”; and his assertion that these breakthroughs left the world “permeated with the numinous, the sacred, and the mythic,” exhibit most of the difficulties I have in mind.² Far more useful as a heuristic is the understanding of the axial moment proposed by Björn Witrock, as a point of emergence, marking a historic rupture, of a new or intensified *mentalité* comprising elements of reflexivity, historicity, and agentiality.³ When they are understood typologically and under this description, there can be no doubt that “axial” moments exist at various times in history, and that Buddhist thinkers produced one such moment in early South Asia, effecting as they did a fundamental conceptual revolution in each of the three domains just noted.

However, if early Buddhism suggests that with respect to *culture* generally speaking axialism can be typologically consistent even if it may be historically unsystematic, so to speak—given that axial moments as stipulated above occurred autonomously and across several millennia—the reverse appears to be the case with respect to *power*. Although axial theory, so far as I can gauge it, is less ex-

¹ See Assmann’s contribution to this volume; also Hodgson cited below (n. 24), and Brown’s remarks on the transformations in the twelfth century that are “strangely germane” to axial theory (1975), 133. Wagner (this volume) notes the elasticity of the Axial Age. Benjamin Schwartz recognized all these problems, along with the “dark suspicion” of the doubters, but soldiered on with the axial concept nonetheless (Schwartz 1975).

² Schwartz (1975), 3.

³ See Björn Witrock’s paper in this volume.

plicit about the place to be accorded new forms of the political principle (some scholars even want to place these new forms at the end of the Axial Age), a stronger argument for historical coherence in innovation may be made here than in the domain of *mentalités*. In the course of the first millennium BCE there came into being a new and highly consequential model of polity—in some ways, a foundational model for the culture-power orders involved—that envisioned political rule as essentially and necessarily translocal rather than local; and this vision was to be re-enacted, not autonomously but by a process of historical imitation, across much of Eurasia for the next half-millennium (and then, to be sure, by yet a further process of imitation, in the modern epoch). The origin of the model in the western Eurasian world lies with the Achaemenids, who created what has recently been described as the “first political world-empire,” and what at the time was seen as something unprecedented—by Herodotus, for example, who in 440 BCE attributed to Xerxes the intention to

extend the Persian territory as far as God's heaven reaches. The sun will then shine on no land beyond our borders; for I will pass through Europe from one end to the other, and . . . make of all the lands which it contains one country.⁴

Yet if with respect to power axial theory has a certain *historical* salience—power was newly reconceptualized as transregional beginning around 500 BCE and in emulation of this primal instance reproduced as such in the course of the next five or more centuries in places as diverse as India, Greece, and Rome—it is *typologically* unsystematic. The historical regularity of the empire-model is not matched by any deep contentual uniformity, aside from this transregionality itself. The ways of being imperial were very various—assumptions in axial theory notwithstanding, such as the view of Karl Jaspers himself, popularizer of the idea of axialism. Jaspers asserted that one feature of the Axial Age is a new socio-political formation consisting in “the genesis of *peoples* who feel themselves a unity with a common *language*, a common *culture*, and a common body of *myths*.” But were we to accept this characterization, we would have to conclude that nothing like an Axial Age occurred, in India at least, prior to the twentieth century.⁵ To formulate this typological inconsistency

⁴ *Historia* Book 7 (tr. Rawlinson); for the recent judgment, Fowden (1993), 6.

⁵ Jaspers (1953), 45.

more generally, if in some places the imperial political principle was thought of as related to the religious, in particular the ecumenicism of the new “world religions,” this was not necessarily so elsewhere, certainly not in early South Asia, again *pace* received opinion. There is thus some irony, and no little complication, in the fact that what is typologically a decidedly axial moment of culture, the conceptual revolution of Buddhism, produced no enduring inflection in what is historically a decidedly axial moment of power, the empire-form of polity in early South Asia. In fact, Buddhist thinkers spectacularly failed to give, as they clearly hoped to give, a specifically Buddhist content to the form of power in mainland South Asia. Accordingly, alternative explanations of imperial practices need to be elaborated, along with alternative models of the relationship of culture and power beyond those familiar from western history and the Euro-American social theory that this produced.

I want to explore this paradox in the conception of axialism by first demonstrating the typologically axial character of early Buddhism. This can be done more or less telegraphically, since much of the basic substance of Buddhism is familiar, though the focal points of the approach adopted here differ entirely from previous discussions of the topic. The contrasts in the empire-form itself are less familiar, however, and so the greater part of the paper will be devoted to charting, in a historical-comparative spirit, several exemplary varieties and their genealogies. Let me note, too, my usual proviso that this essay in comparative empire-forms is not meant to be a merely antiquarian exercise. Both because the divergent modes of realizing the imperial political principle in South Asia and Europe have had reverberations across history and because they demonstrate the existence as such of alternative possibilities in transregional polity, studying them is meant as a form of “actionable” history, an attempt to produce statements about past events that can inform the conduct of present practices.⁶

Axial Culture in Buddhist India: A Transvaluation of All Values

Buddhism has long figured as a core component in the theorization of the Axial Age in general and in its Indian manifestation in par-

⁶ This specific formulation is owing to Tony Bennett (1990), 277. The observations here on Rome and India are expanded from their first schematic presentation in Pollock (2002), 23-28.

ticular. It was one of the central exhibits in Jaspers' founding enunciation of 1953 (1949), a position reaffirmed in Schwartz's conference proceedings of 1975, and in Shmuel Eisenstadt's reconsideration of the theme in the edited volumes he published from 1986-92. Not everyone, of course, has seen Buddhism as constituting the "whole truth" of the axial moment in early South Asia. Eisenstadt himself first categorized Buddhism as a "secondary breakthrough" while assessing late Vedic thought as wholly "axial" (an assessment that cannot be sustained according to the typology offered above). More specifically, Jan Heesterman has argued that it was the "gap" between Vedic revelation and ritual routinization, where rational order replaced "unsettling . . . revelatory vision," that constituted India's "axial turning point," a conception again too vague to be of much use. Where Buddhism has been placed at the center of discussion, this was often more on account of its practices than on account of its precepts. Hermann Kulke has thus laid stress on the sociality of early Buddhism that led to the institutionalization of the "transcendental breakthrough" (not further elucidated), singling out three aspects in particular: the "republic"-like religious assembly (that is, the *saṅgha*); the democratizing promulgation of doctrine; and the development of a lay community of co-religionists (*upāsaka*).⁷ The contours of what is typologically representative of Axial theory in the *conceptual* revolution that Buddhism effected have yet, so far as I can see, to be distinctly traced.

In fact, this sort of conceptual map is a desideratum not only for a systematic presentation of Axial typologies, but for Indological scholarship itself. No adequately detailed and textually sensitive account is available of what the critique enunciated by the early Buddhists meant within the larger intellectual history of South Asia, for which the very underdevelopment of this history is itself partly to blame. The chronological development of basic doctrines of Mīmāṃsā, for example, the core science of Vedic discourse (*vāk-yasāstra*), remains unclear in itself let alone in relation to Buddhism.⁸

⁷ Jaspers (1953), *passim* (entirely superficial references), also Schwartz, ed. (1975), 1-7 and the contribution of Thapar; Eisenstadt, ed. (1986), in particular 291-305 (here the concept of axiality itself becomes scarcely distinguishable from civilizational identity); (1992), vol. 3, 9-149, especially the essay by Bechert; Heesterman (1986), 394-95; Kulke (1986), 390. Tambiah (1986), 453 ff. has little discernible connection with the problematic of axialism.

⁸ Though see now Bronkhorst (2001).

While there can be hardly any doubt that the principal thrust of the Buddhist critique was directed toward actually-existing elements of the thought-world of early Brahmanism, it also seems likely that at least some of the most salient articulations of this world, what we now tend to think of as its foundational principles, may have first been conceptualized as a defensive, even anti-axial, reaction to Buddhism. At the very least we can say some of these principles were formulated dialectically in a polemic with Buddhist critics (one that was to continue for centuries, reaching its high-water mark only a millennium later, in the seventh-century agon of Kumārila and Dharmakīrti). It is self-evident that no one would elaborate propositions of the sort we find Mīmāṃsā to have elaborated, such as the thesis of the authorlessness of the Veda, unless the authority of the Veda and its putative authors had first been seriously challenged.

Clearly spelling out the transvaluation of values effected by Buddhism is therefore an important task on several accounts. But its importance is matched by its difficulty, which is such that far more specialist expertise than I possess is required. I therefore offer only a sketch of what might constitute some elementary aspects of the Buddhist transvaluation: (1) the process of semantic appropriation; (2) the focalization of human agency and history; (3) the assertion of the conventionalism of social-political life in general and of cultural practices in particular (especially with reference to language); (4) the place and nature of textual articulations.

(1) A simple inventory of the ways in which at the semantic level early Buddhism sought to appropriate, redefine, and transform central components of the late *vaidika* (that is, the “Veda-derived”) conceptual order shows how thorough-going the Buddhist transvaluation was. The basic procedure in evidence here is well-known from other oppositional movements in the domain of religion and culture more generally; the dynamic is perhaps best captured in Assmann’s notion of “normative [or, subversive] inversion,” whereby one group’s rights and responsibilities are turned by another group into prohibitions and scandals (and often vice versa).⁹ A preeminent instance of a substantive sort would be the Buddhist proscription of one of the great sacred mysteries in the Vedic world, animal sacrifice. In the *Kuṭadanta Sutta*, for example, a Brahman is dissuaded from his

⁹ Assmann (1997) and elsewhere in his oeuvre.

original intention to offer a blood sacrifice—described, with grotesque hyperbole far beyond actual *vaidika* practice, as consisting of the slaughter of a hundred bulls, a hundred steers, a hundred heifers, a hundred goats, and a hundred rams—by the tale of a far more successful sacrifice where

neither were any oxen slain, neither goats, nor fowls, nor fatted pigs, nor were any kinds of living creatures put to death. No trees were cut down to be used as posts, no Dabbha grasses mown to strew around the sacrificial spot. And the staves and messengers and workmen there employed were driven neither by rods nor fear, nor carried on their work weeping with tears upon their faces. Whoso chose to help, he worked; whoso chose not to help, worked not. What each chose to do, he did, what they chose not to do, that was left undone. With ghee, and oil, and butter, and milk, and honey, and sugar only was that sacrifice.¹⁰

But even this kind of sacrifice—where we can observe how non-violence is coupled with noncoercion, another major ethical inversion of the early Buddhists—is shown in the sequel to be more difficult and less successful than a whole range of other “sacrifices” that are centered on Buddhist moral practices, entrance into the Buddhist order, and Buddhist forms of meditation.

At the more intimate level of doctrinal terminology other illustrations abound, less obvious but no less significant. Notice first the very name chosen for the Buddha’s teaching, *dharma* (Pali *dhamma*), or even more combatively, *saddharma*, the real or true *dharma* (already in the oldest parts of the Pali canon). *Dharma* is of course the keyword of Vedic ritualism. An ancient, even primary, meaning of the term—present in the very first words of the *Mīmāṃsāsūtra*, “Now, then, the inquiry into *dharma*”—is in fact sacrifice, and so refers precisely to what early Buddhism most fundamentally rejected. In the *Brahmanadhammadika Sutta*, *dharma* itself is said to disappear from the world the moment Brahmins commenced animal sacrifice (the practice was unknown previously and was devised only as a means for gaining bigger sacrificial fees). Even the term’s somewhat later sense of “duty” as an expression of one’s essential nature is turned into its opposite in the anti-essentialist Buddhist appropriation.¹¹ Sim-

¹⁰ Tr. Rhys Davids (*Sacred Books of the Buddhists Volume II, Dialogues of the Buddha, Part I*, [141] 18).

ilarly transgressive borrowings are *ārya*, which was recoded from its old meaning “noble,” that is, a member of a “twice-born” social order, to “adherent” (a transformation reminiscent of that of the term *junzi* in early Confucianism); *ārṣa*, which, originally meaning “relating to the sages [*rṣi*]” and thereby referring to the Veda, was appropriated as an epithet of the Buddha; *dakṣinā*, a “payment to a priest for sacrificial services” in the Vedic world, which became “merit accrued from giving gifts” in the Buddhist. Even more striking is the case of the Pali word *sutta*, which refers to the discourses of the Buddha: It is has recently been argued that this is a dialectal variant, not as long assumed of Sanskrit *sūtra* (that is, a précis of any form of systematic knowledge), but rather of Sanskrit *sūktā*, literally “well-spoken” but specifically connoting a Vedic hymn. In a related if less developed way, the Buddhist idea of three knowledges (*vijñā*)—of one’s former lives, of the lives of others, and of the Four Noble Truths—may very well have been intended “to parallel and trump” the *vidyātraya*, or triple knowledge, of the Brahmins (that is, knowledge of the three Vedas). More subtly, the notion of (ritual) action at the heart of the term *karma* in the *vaidika* world is replaced by (spiritual) intention in Pali *kamma*.¹² These positive inversions or transvaluations in early Buddhism of core *vaidika* values are complemented by a range of pure negations; foremost among these is *an-atta* (*an-ātma*), the denial of a personal essence whereby the fundamental conception of Upanishadic thought is cancelled. All this evidence suggests that semantically Buddhism sought to turn the old *vaidika* world upside down by the very levers offered by the *vaidika* world.

(2) At the heart of the reinterpretation of human being in the discourse of Buddhism lie a type of rational agentiality unprecedented

¹¹ For *dharma* as “sacrifice” see e.g. *Rgveda* 10.90.16; for the *Brahmanadhammika Sutta* see *Sutta Nipāta* 2.7, vv. 295 ff., especially v. 316. Mīmāṃsā sought for centuries to come to limit the enlargement of the term’s semantic realm (as for example in the *Pūrvottaramīmāṃsāvādanakṣatramālā* 254–57, a treatise of the sixteenth-century thinker Appayya Dīkṣita; see Pollock [in press]).

¹² For *ārya* (*ariya*), see Deshpande (1979), 40–41; for *ārṣa*, Lüders (1940), 712–714; for *sūktā* (*sutta*), Gombrich 1990: 23. The triple knowledges of Buddhism in reference to Brahmanism, and the transformation of *karma/kamma*, are noted by Gombrich (1996), 29 and 51–52 respectively. Norman curiously misses most of these instances, but provides one important addition, *nhātaka/snātaka*, transformed from “one who engages in ritual bathing” to “one who washes off evil by means off the Eight-fold Path” ([1993], 276).

in the earlier Indian thought-world and an equally unprecedented understanding of the historicity of human life that such agentiality makes evident. Consider the Four Noble Truths themselves, the distillate of the Buddha's teachings: first, that the human condition is one of suffering; second, that suffering arises; third, that accordingly it must be capable of being ended; fourth, that it must be susceptible to some procedure for ending it. Although the relationship of the Four Truths to the more narrowly physiological doctrine of the earlier Indic medical tradition has long been assumed, what is being offered is a new, as it were performable, analysis of the human condition. The procedure, or Way, toward which this points is itself subject to further rational explanation and enactment—the Eight-fold Path—and is fully elaborated in the theory of *pratītyasamutpāda*, or dependent origination. According to this concept, action requires an understanding of causal relationships, and the action intended to end suffering requires a grasp of how ignorance leads to karmic conditioning, which leads to consciousness, and so on through the twelve stages ending with old age, suffering, and death.¹³

To stress this dimension of what might be called the voluntarism of early Buddhism is not to imply that the Vedic belief system saw action as will-less or mechanical: If Mīmāṃsā, the theory of the Veda, is about anything it is about the nature of deontic language, the obligation to act that the Veda places upon members of the *vaidika* community, the resolve (*samkalpa*) one must make to act, and so on. But as Mīmāṃsā itself is very careful to explain—and indeed, is very rational when explaining—the truth-value of such paradigmatic Vedic commandments as “He who desires heaven must sacrifice” derives directly from the fact that their substance *exceeds* the rational, instrumental understanding—precisely the understanding that underpins any authentic form of agentiality. The Veda’s injunction to act is meaningful precisely because it enunciates something that transcends the phenomenal, something inaccessible to observation, inference, or other form of empirical reasoning—something, in fact, irrational.¹⁴

¹³ The twelve-fold linkage in the *pratītyasamutpāda* doctrine has homologies in Vedic thought but means to negate what is central to that thought, the perduring self (*ātman*), so Jurewicz (2000). The relationship (or lack of it) between early Buddhism and medical discourse is discussed by Collins (1998), 230 (with references).

¹⁴ Or, as the equally rationalistic Tertullian would have put it, *credibile quia ineptum est*: It is reason that dictates belief in a thing in direct proportion to the

The most direct manifestation of the rational agentiality of Buddhism (here the coeval movement of Jainism could be brought into the discussion) is arguably to be found in the very idea of *śaraṇāgamana*, “taking refuge with the Buddha,” in other words, “conversion” (if this concept is not too historically specific to find application in Indian Buddhism). The *vaidika* world seems to have been one of pure Bourdieuan *doxa*, where both the order of society and one’s place in it went without saying, and where accordingly the possibility of reordering society and self—indeed, of choosing a new self beyond the ascribed and a new society beyond the natal—was outside the conceptual scheme. (Even renouncing society and self was routinized as normative.) If historically exogenous communities were eventually incorporated in some measure in the *vaidika* social sphere, nowhere and never did this process have an evangelical dimension. Attracting monastic and lay members somehow to the new community, however, seems to have been a value of Buddhism from the start. To read the accounts—entirely legendary though they probably are—of the Buddha’s progress through north India, where villages were emptied of their youths, who elected to follow the Buddha and join the *saṅgha*, is to get a sense of what the new agentiality meant as an ideal in practice, “as a personal and individual decision,” and of its universal applicability.¹⁵ Presumably closely related to the acknowledgement of the capacity for willed change epitomized in the act of choosing to affiliate oneself to the Buddhist order is the fact that early Buddhism developed historical accounts of this order, Pali *vamsa* literature, which represent the first (non-dynastic) historiographical tradition in South Asia. In this again like the Jains, Buddhists would be concerned with the progress of their faith in time and space for centuries to come.¹⁶

(3) It is in complete harmony with the causal analysis of the human predicament that the Buddha and his disciples developed a wide-ranging understanding of contingency or conventionalism in human life, in opposition to the naturalization of the *vaidika* thought-world.

thing’s improbability (see Sider (1980). On the Mīmāṃsā principle *adṛṣṭe śāstram arthatvāt*, see Pollock (1990).

¹⁵ See the sensible remarks of Bechert (1992), 18 (quoted in the text). The problem of conversion in early Buddhism remains oddly understudied for India (for China, however, Zürcher [1959], and for Tibet, see Kapstein [2000]). Some scholars even deny that exclusivist allegiance was at issue, a view that seems to me simply contrarian.

¹⁶ On the early histories see Collins (1998), 254 ff., and Walters (2000).

In respect to the dominant representations of that world two dimensions of Buddhist conventionalism seem especially important: one that pertains to the origin and character of social-political life in general and an another, to the nature and function of language in particular.

Perhaps no two texts more effectively demonstrate how this conventionalist critique manifests itself in the analysis of society and polity, and better reveal the transgressive nature of early Buddhism, than the *Aggañña Sutta*, the “Discourse on What is Primary,” and the *Cakkavatti Sihanāda Sutta*, “The Discourse (containing) a Lion’s Roar on the Wheel-turning King.”¹⁷ Both can also be seen as offering extended exemplification of the doctrine of *pratītyasamutpāda* at the level of the body politic: When in the *Aggañña Sutta* the young Brahman converts complain of the disdain with which their apostasy is regarded by their former castemen prideful of social superiority, the Buddha explains the entirely contingent nature of all social categories, and the process of social evolution through which this contingency manifests itself. The Brahman is not superior biogenetically; indeed, “Brahman” is shown (by etymology) not even to be a natural kind, he is simply one who “keeps away from bad things,” as the true Shudra is anyone who “leads a cruel, mean life.” The target of this discourse is of course the discourse of the celebrated Rigvedic text, the *Puruṣasūkta*, “The Hymn to the Primal Being.” Here the natural and social worlds are represented as entirely congruent products of a primeval cosmogonic sacrifice, and the hierarchy and stability of the social orders are sheer givens; the Brahman was made from the Puruṣa’s mouth and the Shudra from his feet with the same ineluctable necessity whereby the moon was engendered from his mind and the sun born from his eye. The sacrifice of the Puruṣa and the fixed social order that thereby emerged seem almost recombined in the Mīmāṃsā doctrine of the fixity of the right to sacrifice, *adhikāra*, which was reserved to the three twice-born orders.

Analogously, in the “Lion’s Roar,” when the eighth in a lineage of kings fails to consult his father and to learn from him the correct ways of rule, he neglects to give money to the poor, and from this “Poverty flourished; because poverty flourished, theft flourished; because theft flourished, armed violence flourished . . .” whereas the

¹⁷ Fundamental here is Collins (1998), 480 ff.; see also Gombrich (1992).

reverse sequence occurs when he follows the old tradition of rule.¹⁸ Nothing mysterious let alone numinous attaches to good or bad governance; the causal linkages are as intelligible as is the social contract by which the ruler in the *Aggañña Sutta*, the *Mahāsammata* (the one “greatly approved [by the people]”) is appointed to protect society. Choices good or bad, not necessity, are what characterizes human life, and choice is of course susceptible to an analysis of the conditions of choosing, so that the good may be secured and the bad avoided.

A fundamental correlate of this new realism, or social conventionalism, was the Buddhist critique of the *vaidika* view of language, especially the theory of signification as argued out by *Mīmāṃsā*. This critique needs far deeper historicization than it has received to date, but its lineaments are clear, and point up a contrast in positions as sharp as it is possible to get. Against the *Mīmāṃsā* tenet that the relationship between word and meaning is *autpattika*, “originary” or natural—a primal, necessary, and non-arbitrary relationship (sometimes absurdly reduced by its opponents to a mechanical, even magical view of reference)—Buddhists typically argued for a relationship based on pure convention (*sanketa*, also *avadhi*).¹⁹ What was at stake for *Mīmāṃsā* in asserting the uncreated, eternal nature of language is the possibility that *vāṇimaya*, or a thing-made-of-language—that is, a text, like the *Veda*—could be eternal too, something the Buddhists sought fundamentally to reject. About the fact that nothing in language generally or in Sanskrit particularly is transcendent, Buddhist doctrine is unambiguous. Here again we encounter the subversive inversion of *vaidika* terminology in a way that must have resonated scandalously in the minds of twice-born candidates

¹⁸ Tr. Collins (1998), 607.

¹⁹ The *Mīmāṃsā* doctrine is found in theoretical discourse first in *Pūrvamīmāṃsā-sūtra* 1.1.5. No adequate historical scholarship on the Buddhist view is available. The notion of *sanketa* and related terms seems nowhere to be fully developed in the extant sources; the earliest references are relatively late and thin (*Abhidharmakośa* 2.47, ed. Varanasi, 272, 275; *Pramāṇavārttika* 3.92, ed. Gnoli 1.92). Early Pali texts do not comment on the matter; later Pali grammars are however unequivocal, e.g., *Saddanīti* 636.26, 786.5: *sanketaniruļho saddo atthesu ti* (“The signifier is related to the signified as a matter of pure convention”). The Buddhist *sanketa* is related to, and perhaps the source of, the *samaya* of early *Nyāya* (*Nyāyasūtra* 2.1.55), an issue I cannot discuss here, nor the relationship between semantic conventionalism and the concept of *apoha* (on which see most recently Tillemans, [2000], especially 220-223).

for membership: “All mental formations” (*sarve saṃskārāḥ, sabbe saṃkhārā*)—in fact, all things formed, no doubt including all Vedic rites (*saṃskāra*) and perhaps even Sanskrit itself (*saṃskṛta*)—“are non-eternal”; they arise and having arisen, disappear. It was again fully in keeping with such a theory of language that the early Buddhists rejected the use of Sanskrit, the language of the gods, whether in favor of local dialects or Pali, a new hieratic competitor language. It is no small measure of the exhaustion of the Axial energies of early Buddhism that around the beginning of the Common Era in the north at least this old opposition was abandoned and the repressed returned: Buddhists turned to Sanskrit with a vengeance, translating their canon into the language.

(4) The very fact of the existence of a canon of Buddhist sacred texts is the final typologically Axial property I want to consider. The textual articulations of early Buddhism recapitulate many of the tendencies discussed so far. The creation of a Pali canon seems to have been a response to the presence of organized Vedic text-corpora. In its very structure, it embodies a range of Vedic archaic-tonic principles, such as the arranging of texts in increasing segments, in the same way as we have seen it appropriate the genre title of *sūkta* (*sutta*).²⁰ There are stark and instructive differences as well, however, that conform with other aims. The Vedic corpus increasingly sought to escape confinement in any spatiotemporal framework, and fully articulated this desire in the doctrine of the uncreatedness of the Vedic texts (based on the *śabdārthautpattikasambandha*, or the originary character of the relationship of signifier and signified): Vedic texts are *apauruṣeya*, produced by no author human or divine, and existing outside of all history whether cosmic or terrestrial.²¹ Buddhist holy texts, on the other hand, typically specify the place, time, audience, and of course speaker—the Buddha—thereby enmeshing the very truth of the message in its concrete historicity.

Two observations on the Buddhist critique noted earlier merit restating at this point. First, there was something of a dialectical process at work in this intellectual history: It was almost certainly in response to the disenchantment of the *vaidika* world effected by Buddhism, above all perhaps by the new reflexivity and conception of human agency it offered, that *vaidika* thought itself developed some

²⁰ Gombrich (1990) 23-24.

²¹ Pollock (1989).

of the more distinctive characteristics that were to mark it long into the future. The explicit formulation of what are now rightly regarded as axioms that reified the social world and the world of discourse—the right to offer sacrifice, *adhikāra*, for example, or the view of a primeval linkage of word and meaning capable of grounding an authorless and eternal *Veda*—likely developed in response to the Buddhist critique, even if the proclivities behind them were deeply rooted in a web of *vaidika* cultural convictions. For none of these axioms makes much sense in the absence of contestation to the contrary. Second, even though the basic oppositions at issue in categories such as *autpatti*/ *krtaka* (natural/ factitious), may remind us of similar disputes elsewhere in the ancient world—such as that in fifth-century Greek thought (powerfully formulated in Plato's *Cratylus*) over whether signifiers and signifieds were connected to each other by nature (*physis*) or convention (*nomos*)—the stakes of the debate in early South Asia were far higher. The Greek debate may also be extended beyond the bounds of language analysis so as to include crucial questions of justice, but the philosophical positions in India were expressions of radically different visions of life, of separate and apparently irreconcilable understandings of human being and destiny.²²

If the above account has some validity, and if, accordingly, Buddhism represents a typologically axial phenomenon in respect of its *mentalité*, we shall see that, with respect to the creation of a related axial form of polity, it contributed nothing, or at least nothing that would find any long-term resonance in India. In fact, the most interesting thing about Buddhism in the present context is the disconnect it evinced between the spheres of culture and power. Wholly countervailing tendencies seem to present themselves, between a truly universalist “Sangha of the Four Quarters” and what we will see to have been a political vision that was “universalist” only within definite limits. If it is correct, as many believe, “that there is a (more or less potential) Buddhist imperial claim of which Aśoka is the original paradigm,” this was a claim never demonstrably actualized in India itself—with the sole exception of Aśoka—or perhaps anywhere

²² Sophists like Callicles contended that the law, *nomos*, was actually a conspiracy of the weak against the strong, who by nature, *physis*, would always possess more than the weak (Plato's *Gorgias* 482c-484c).

else.²³ In other words, power as a set of real practices in which this claim would have been cashed out never became demonstrably Buddhist in India. The contradiction here, between a religious community that knew no boundaries and polities that always did, is only one of several that confront us in reconsidering the origin and diffusion of the imperial form in the Axial Age.

Axialism and Empire

Many scholars who have written on the subject of the Axial Age have assumed a close, even causal relationship between the emergence of the new *mentalités* and especially religious consciousness—of the sort just described in the case of Buddhism—and the empire-form. The first was Jaspers himself, who juxtaposed the rise of “mighty empires” and the new “spiritualization” of the age, though seeing these political forms as a response to the “anarchy” unleashed by axial thought. For Eric Voegelin, the political struggle of the Achaemenid empire against hostile nations was a “transposition” of the cosmic struggle of good (Ahuramazda) against evil (Ahriman). With more focused vision Marshall Hodgson addressed the problem in the Near East, arguing that “Empires were built . . . [that] tended to found themselves, at best, on some elements of the best philosophic thinking in their respective regions.” Heesterman saw an even greater complementarity to the relationship in India (and in this he is surely typical), with empire at once embodying and promoting the new Buddhist universalism: “Buddhism . . . becomes intimately connected with the Maurya empire that arose together with other new empires at the end of the Axial Age. Giving the empire a new ethical legitimization, Buddhism owes to the empire the realization of its universalistic claim . . . The pattern for a new type of universalistic imperial policy . . . was set.”²⁴

Underlying the connection these and other scholars have drawn between the axial spiritual breakthrough and empire are two important assumptions, one more obvious and explicit in the literature, the other less so. The first is that empire constitutes a set of prac-

²³ See Walters (1998), 23 ff.

²⁴ Jaspers (1953), 3-6, 45-46; Voegelin (1956), 47; Hodgson (1974), 118 ff.; Heesterman (1986), 383. See also Schwartz (1975), 2.

tices in the domain of power that embody the transcendence held to be intrinsic to the new religious consciousness, though it is not always made clear whether the relationship between transcendence and polity is understood by analogy (that the limitlessness of the applicability of a religious truth finds expression in the limitlessness of the application of political power), by homology (that one supreme god in heaven, polytheistically or monotheistically viewed, is mirrored by one supreme king on earth), or in some other manner.²⁵ One careful study of prenational polity expressed this relationship between power and culture as follows:

Transcendental myths attributing universal sacral qualities to the empire by asserting that it was the terrestrial reflection of divine order had been potent instruments for transforming collections of minor polities . . . into large, compound polities. Later imperial polities in the ancient Middle East and the Hellenistic period systematized this legitimizing *mythomoteur* on a quasi-secular basis. The Roman empire constituted the culmination of this dilution of a sacral myth by appeals to the supreme value of order and prosperity.²⁶

Put in the most general terms (though the idea actually predates the axial theory itself, having been intimated already by Max Weber), the roots of the reordering of polity in, or as the outcome of, the Axial Age are to be located “in the conception of the relation between the political and the higher transcendental order.”²⁷ The second assumption, one less clearly articulated perhaps but nonetheless widespread—I have seen it nowhere openly challenged—is that (post-)axial empires, emerging out of the same putative causal matrix of this transcendental breakthrough, were basically comparable as both political and ideological formations: in respect of territorial infinitude, for example, or the “extreme centralization” of

²⁵ Influential interpretations of the relationship of empire to polytheism, and monotheism are offered by Momigliano (1987) and Fowden (1993), especially 37 ff. (and, to dualism, by Voegelin [1956], 46 ff.), yet these are curiously elusive. Momigliano does not make clear what “disadvantages” for a universal state are owing to monotheism; Fowden argues that polytheist universalism “did not impart motive or expansive force to empire even to the limited extent that Christianity would” (57), implying—the overall claim of the book notwithstanding—that both religious ideologies were irrelevant to political practice.

²⁶ Armstrong (1982), 165. The last part of this statement may be seriously doubted; contrast Fowden (1993), 37 ff.

²⁷ See, for instance, Weber (1978), vol. 1, 418. The quote is from Eisenstadt (1986), 8.

the political structure, or the “absolute power” and divinization of the emperor.²⁸

Both these assumptions about the historical realizations of the empire-principle need to be reconsidered. The most consequential forms of imperial polity in mainland South Asia seem to have owed nothing to religious universalism or transcendentalism. It is true that Buddhism—to continue with that example, since no polity ever paid the least attention to the second (supposed) form of the axial *mentalité* in India, Upanishadic monism—continued to enjoy royal patronage throughout the first millennium. Yet no Buddhist empire, in any acceptable sense of the phrase, was ever to reappear in India after the fleeting moment of Aśoka (assuming for the sake of argument that this even was a Buddhist empire) or indeed even in Southeast Asia, where the belief-system never provided the basis for transregional political unity. Among the Kuṣāṇas in the north or the Sātavāhanas in the Deccan (early centuries of the Common Era), in Harṣa’s Kanauj (mid-seventh century), even in Pāla Bengal (last quarter of the millennium), precious little that can be identified as “Buddhist” can be found in their actual practices of governance. And as little as universalistic Buddhism shaped the actual practices of imperial rule among the Pālas, the Puṣyabhūtis, Sātavāhanas, or Kuṣāṇas, so little did cosmic Shaivism, or Vaishnavism, or Jainism—cosmic rather than universalist, since none of these systems saw evangelizing as a core concern—differentiate the practices of any other post-Aśokan transregional political formation. If there is any determining religious dimension to rulership it seems to have been Brahmanical ritualism.²⁹

Furthermore, beyond certain components such as the development of a supralocal language and highly self-conscious literary culture, in neither its semantics nor its pragmatics does empire in early South Asia have much in common with the orders of culture-power constructed elsewhere around the same time, most notably the *imperi-*

²⁸ I cite from the recent synthetic account of empire in van Creveld (1999), 35–52 (46, and cf. 41).

²⁹ Buddhist inflections of political theory are found elsewhere to be sure, in Sri Lanka (see Lingat [1989]), for example, or Thailand, though even here Brahman ritualism at court remained common; again, Bechert is worth consulting on all this (1992), 23 ff. A new chapter in political history begins with the *regional* kingdoms of the Vernacular Age. Here the Gajapatis of Orissa and their relationship with the Jagannātha cult may be taken as representative; see for example Kulke (1979) and Berkemer (1993).

um romanum. Much has been written on the problem of categorizing political forms across cultures, and the conceptual difficulties encountered when we try to think outside the box of dominant models—of “nation” beyond the form of the western European exemplar, for example, or indeed of “empire” beyond the model of Rome.³⁰ If we must perforce use the same terminology to describe it, this should not lead us to ignore the possibility that the empire-form across world areas may have been filled with radically different content. And there is accordingly reason to believe that, far from emerging orthogenetically from any single ideational or even material matrix—that of an axial breakthrough in spiritual consciousness in the one case, that of “tangible” factors such as the control of nomadism in the other³¹—the rise of the empire-form in southern Eurasia may be more cogently ascribed to altogether different forms of social change, whether synchronic or diachronic. One may be “peer-polity interaction,” a notion developed in recent studies of early European archaeology; another, historical imitation, whereby the style if not the structure of imperial rule is consciously adopted and adapted from preeminent exemplars of the past.³² This latter process, a potentially significant dimension of political action but one that is still poorly understood, is not helpfully explained from an externalist perspective, as for example in the Marxian trope of the farce that follows tragedy (where all political actors are con artists, who “anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past,” using “time-honored disguise and borrowed language,” Luther with the mask of the Apostle Paul, the Revolution of 1789–1814 “draped in the guise” of the Roman Republic and then Empire). It is much better understood from within the subjective horizon of the agents as a kind of ethno-theory of practice.

These questions can be illuminated by some comparative reflec-

³⁰ For the general problem of defining empire see Duverger (1980), 5–23, and more recently Morrison (2001), 1–9; also Pollock (1998). When Woolf writes “Rome was more than simply a typical early empire: in some senses it was an archetypal one,” he captures at once the scholarly problem of taxonomy and the historical dimension of emulation (Woolf [2001], 311 ff.). The resolutely Romanocentric imperial vision of Hardt and Negri (2000) is the most recent descendent of this imitative tradition.

³¹ So already Jaspers (1953), 45–46.

³² For the first, see Renfrew and Cherry (1986); for the second, I am aware of no large-scale interpretation; Pagden (1995) considers the colonial European imitation of the classical empire form.

tions on the Indian and Roman empire-forms both as discourse and as practice. I examine four different features, some in less detail than I have discussed elsewhere, others in more: language and especially literary culture; territoriality; governance; and what may be called the ethno-transcendent, that is, the political place of the (tribal or local) deity become God in the (post-)axial world. The aim is to try to provide some of the “contrasts and parallels between the most far-reaching changes” in the civilizational traditions, some sense of the “different patterns of interrelations between new cultural patterns and changing power structures” that were identified as key objectives in this exercise in rethinking the axial paradigm.³³ At the same time, I want to suggest something of the imitative quality of the reproduction of the imperial form, as well as the centrality of empire as a historical component to a reconfigured theory of axialism.

Axial Empire-Forms

First let us consider, on the basis of two key texts, the kind of empire-form that arose during the Axial Age itself and that at its end would be replaced by more achieved forms, after, however, having established certain tendencies—quite divergent tendencies—that would be preserved in subsequent traditions. The first text is the celebrated Behistūn inscription of Darius I, the fourth overlord of the Achaemenid Empire (its dates are c. 550-330; those of Darius himself, 522-486):

(1) I am Darius, the great king, king of kings (*xšāyatha xšāyathiy*), the king of Persia, the king of countries, the son of Hystaspes, the grandson of Arsames, the Achaemenian. (2) Proclaims Darius the King (*thātiy dārayavahuš xšāyathiya*): My father is Hystaspes; the father of Hystaspes was Arsames; Arsames’ father was Ariaramnes; Ariaramnes’ father was Teispes; Teispes’ father was Achaemenes (3) Proclaims Darius the King: That is why we are called Achaemenians; from antiquity we have been noble; from antiquity has our dynasty been royal . . . (5) Proclaims Darius the King: By the grace of Ahuramazda am I king; Ahuramazda has granted me the kingdom (*xšāšam*). (6) Proclaims Darius the King: These are the countries which are subject unto me, and by the grace of Ahuramazda I became king of them: Persia, Elam, Babylonia, Assyria,

³³ See the general introduction to this volume.

Arabia, Egypt, the countries by the sea, Lydia, the Greeks, Media, Armenia, Cappadocia, Parthia, Drangiana, Aria, Chorasmia, Bactria, Sogdiana, Gandhara, Scythia, Sattagydia, Arachosia and Maka; twenty-three lands in all. (7) Proclaims Darius the King: These are the countries which are subject to me; by the grace of Ahuramazda they became subject to me; they brought tribute unto me. Whatsoever commands have been laid on them by me, by night or by day, have been performed by them.³⁴

The second text is from the equally well-known rock edicts of Aśoka, third overlord of the Maurya empire (its dates are c. 320-150 BCE; those of Aśoka himself 268-227):

Beloved of the Gods, King Piyadasi, proclaims thus (*devānampiye piyadassi lājā evam āhā*) . . . Everywhere within the conquered realm (*savata vijitamhi* [etc.]) of the Beloved of the Gods, King Piyadasi, and among the people beyond the borders, the Cholas, the Pandyas, the Satiyaputras, the Keralaputras, as far as Tamraparni [Sri Lanka] and where the Greek king Antiochos rules, and among the kings who are neighbors of Antiochos. . . .

[Conquest by *dhamma*] has been won here, on the borders, even six hundred leagues (*yojana*) away, where the Greek king Antiochos rules, beyond there where the four kings named Ptolemy, Antigonus, Magas and Alexander rule, likewise in the south among the Cholas, the Pandyas, and as far as Tamraparni. Here in the king's conquered realm (*vijaye*) among the Greeks, the Kambojas, the Nabhakas, the Nabhapamktis, the Bhojas, the Pitinikas, the Andhras and the Palidas, everywhere people are following the instructions in *dhamma* of the Beloved of the Gods.³⁵

In 519 BCE Darius had his inscription carved on a sheer rock face 100 meters above the ground, virtually illegible from any vantage point; a work for the eye of God, one might have thought. But we now know that the text of this epigraph circulated on papyrus far beyond the place on the road between Baghdad and Hamadan where it was originally inscribed, and that memory of the text remained alive for many centuries after the fall of the empire. We also know that Aśoka was familiar with and adapted the phraseology of the royal Achaemenid texts for his own inscriptions, as well as undoubtedly

³⁴ Tr. King and Thompson, ed. Lendering (cf., as of 1/03, http://www.livius.org/bebm/_behistun/behistun01.html#Introduction) and slightly modified here. See also the Persepolis platform inscription of Darius (DPeOP) available as of 1/03 at <http://www.oi.uchicago.edu/OI/PROJ/ARI/ARIIntro.html>.

³⁵ The three selections are Rock Edicts III, II, and XIII (Hultzsch [1925]) and date from 257-56 BCE.

the imperial epigraphical habit itself.³⁶ These, the first ever to be produced in the Indian subcontinent, were incised on dressed rock faces or on 40-tonne polished granite pillars 15 meters in height over some thirty years beginning soon after his accession. Although we will find repeatedly elsewhere, as we do here in the case of Aśoka, that a conception and set of practices of how to be imperial were passed down in historical memory and imitated both through time and across space, not all components of this vision were realized everywhere in the same manner. There are fundamental differences in the culture-power complex that can be perceived through the Achaemenid and Maurya inscriptions, differences that seem to have been reproduced—though the links in the historical chain of reproduction seem sometimes beyond recovery—in the very divergent instantiations of the empire-form that were to follow in the western Mediterranean and South Asia. My brutally brief review of these differences will be organized according to the categories noted earlier: language, territoriality, governance, and the ethno-transcendent.

With respect to language in general and literary culture in particular—the preeminent medium for the expression of the empire's essence, or so we may be prone to think of it—the empire-form would acquire in its later avatars an entirely different complexion from what we find among the Achaemenids and the Mauryas. Darius like his successors evinced a decided linguistic pluralism by publishing his inscriptions in three versions, Old Persian, Akkadian, and Elamite. Old Persian itself appears at no time to have been promoted as an imperial language and no imperial literature of any kind, so far as we know, was produced in it. Instead, Aramaic, a language entirely unrelated to Old Persian, served as the language of state, though again without generating a courtly literature. In his edicts Aśoka showed himself to be similarly if less dramatically pluralistic by using relatively localized registers of Prakrit, that is, Middle Indic ("less dramatically" because Aśoka did not choose to employ Dravidian languages for those inscriptions he had installed in southern India). Like Old Persian and Aramaic, Prakrit in the third century BCE and

³⁶ On the circulation of Darius's inscription see Kuhrt (2001), 98; its preservation in memory into the Sasanian period is noted by Utas (2001); Benveniste (1964), 144-145 points out that the Prakrit phrase cited above from Aśoka is calqued on the Old Persian—in the same way that the Kuṣāṇa titulature of three centuries later, *mahārāja rājātirāja devaputra*, is calqued on the Iranian (Maricq [1958], 383, see also below n. 57).

for some centuries thereafter seems to have had few literary-cultural associations.³⁷ In neither instance does it seem that a literary heritage has been lost; it is likelier that none was ever produced in the first place. By contrast, in both Rome and post-Maurya India, the literary-cultural component of empire was to become central to its conceptual production and actual promulgation, and in each case a new imperial language was cultivated in such a way that its own emergent transregionality would complement and reproduce, though in entirely incommensurate ways, the transregionality of imperial power itself. But this is the one area of convergence in the two later empire-forms; in every other feature, they are radically different, and their difference can be seen, now clearly, now dimly, to be prefigured in their two archaic models.

One remarkable and consistent area of conceptual divergence in the post-axial world of Rome and India is the nature of the idea of the transregion itself: the absolute boundlessness of the one, the relative boundlessness of the other. In our two texts the same distinction can be noted: Darius—along with Alexander and other descendants in one particular lineage of imperial emulation³⁸—sought paramountcy as far as paramountcy could be sought. Aśoka by contrast had a decidedly bounded view of space, a finite if large geopolitical frame of reference, beyond which the rule of other powers was acknowledged. Modes of governance provide a second point of difference. Thanks to what, comparatively speaking, is a remarkably rich archive of documents, we have a reasonably good idea of how Darius ruled. A fundamental component was the stationing of *satrap*s (guardians of the realm) in the various lands subject to him. This imperial ruling class was made up almost exclusively of Persian aristocrats—we find a very tight link, or so Pierre Briant has described it, between political power and ethnicity. Moreover, they produced across the empire what has been termed an “administrative uniformity.”³⁹ It is not in the least clear how the Mauryas ac-

³⁷ As relevant ethno-categories themselves required, the Middle-Indic scriptural texts of Buddhists and Jains are to be excluded from the category of expressive textualized language, or “literature”—what is called in Sanskrit *kāvya*—as are texts that exist solely in oral performance and not in written form.

³⁸ On Alexander as the “last of the Achaemenids” see Briant (mss.); also Fowden (1993), 20–21.

³⁹ Kuhrt (2001), 106, 114 (slightly softened 118–119). It was Pierre Briant who established the socio-political category of “ethno-classe dominante,” especially (1988), reaffirmed in (1996), 364, and (mss.).

tually ruled, or what in fact “rule” really meant, and this is so not only for Aśoka’s historically quite anomalous *dharma*-order. His inscriptions speak of governance beyond the core area by princes (*kumāra*) or “sons of the noble ones” (*āryaputra*), but this seems to have applied only to the four major provinces; we know little about the *mahāmātras*, or officials, who ruled beneath these viceroys. The inability of students of South Asian polity to describe with confidence how imperial power really worked (on which more below) may be a consequence, not only of the stunning dearth of good historical data, but of an incommensurability between this kind of power formation and what is known from other times and places. At all events, it seems improbable that the Maurya political order was, like the Achaemenid, an early form of the ethnically restricted and bureaucratically homogeneous patrimonial state.

A last area of divergence is the place in the imperial project of the ethno-transcendent. Here and in his other inscriptions Darius not only celebrates his lineage but also communicates an unmistakable conception of peoplehood: “That is why we are called Achaemenians” is not only a genealogical claim but an ethnic one. “Protect this Persian people,” he proclaims on the Persepolis platform. “If the Persian people shall be protected, thereafter for the longest while happiness unbroken . . . will by Ahura come down upon this royal house.” If later Indian rulers assiduously gave voice to their lineage pride—unlike Aśoka, whose utter silence about his ancestry is not only completely exceptional but also perhaps declarative of his new birth in the Buddhist order—they will continue Aśoka’s indifference to, or better said, his incomprehension of, ethnicity, at least so far as ethnicity might figure as an element in political discourse. It is unclear whether the Maurya emperor even had a religious plan to spread the *dhamma*—scholars increasingly stress the ideological over the religious let alone sectarian nature of this category in the Aśokan inscriptions (it is effortlessly translated by *eusebeia*, “piety,” or even social “deference,” in the Greek versions of the edicts). But even if he did, he certainly evinces no sense of divine guidance in doing so. Entirely different is the Achaemenid, whose vast kingdom, polytheistic though it may have been, came to him by the grace of the once narrowly tribal and now universally transcendent deity, Ahuramazda, the “Wise Lord.”⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Briant (1986). A targeted study of the interaction of political and theological

In all three of these areas—space, rule, and ethnicized-transcendentalized authority—powerful continuities of difference will mark the two historically consequential successor empires that came into being in the eastern and western zones of Eurasia during the several centuries around the beginning of the Common Era.

Components of the post-Axial Empire-Forms: Language and Literature

We may again begin with two core texts that set forth the paradigms of the post-Axial empire-form in South Asia and Europe. The first is a selection from the Allahabad Pillar Inscription, a *praśasti*, or praise-poem (here supplemented with the introduction, or “letter-head,” of the copperplate grants) of Samudragupta, second king of the imperial Gupta dynasty (its dates are c. 320-550; his own, c. 339-380):

Om. Hail . . . The prosperous Samudragupta, the great king of kings (*mahārājādhirāja*), and ardent devotee of Bhagavān (*paramabhāgavata*); who is exterminator of all kings; who has no adversary equal to him on earth; whose fame is tasted by the waters of the four oceans; who is equal to [the gods] Dhanada [Kubera, guardian of the north], Varuṇa [guardian of the west], Indra [guardian of the east], and Antaka [Yama, guardian of the south] . . . who is the great-grandson of Gupta, the great lord; the grandson of Candragupta, the great lord; the son of Candragupta, the great king of kings . . . [Allahabad] 19 ff. [Samudragupta’s] true magnificence combined with valor is illustrated by his first capturing and thereafter graciously releasing all the kings of the Southern Way (*dakṣināpatha*): Mahendra of Kosala, Vyāghrāraja of Mahākāntāra, Maṇṭarāja of Kurāla, Mahendragiri of Piṣṭapura, Svāmidatta of Koṭṭura, Damana of Eranḍapalla, Viṣṇugopa of Kāñcī, Nilarāja of Avamukta, Hastivarman of Veṅgī, Ugrasena of Pālakka, Kubera of Devarāṣṭra, and Dhanañjaya of Kusthalapuram . . . He exterminated many kings of Āryāvarta . . . [and reduced to tributary status] the frontier rulers (*pratyantāṇḍati*), such as the lords of Samantata, Davāka, Kāmarūpa, Nepāla, and Kartrpura, as well as the Mālavas, Ārjuneyas, Yaudheyas, Mādrakas, Ābhīras, Prārjunas, Sanakānikas, Kākas, Kharaparikas, and others [He was mollified] by various acts—the paying of homage, the offer of their daughters

discourses in Darius is offered by Lincoln (1996), and is expanded upon in work in progress. The nonsectarian significations of *dhamma* are argued out at length in Mukherjee (2000); years ago I pointed to a convergence of Aśoka’s *dhamma* and non-Buddhist political discourse (1986), 19-24.

in marriage, and their petitioning for the right to rule their own districts and provinces—on the part of the Daivaputra-Śāhi-Śāhānuśāhi, the Śaka Muruṇḍas, and all the lords residing in the islands, the Simhala and others . . .

24 ff. He is without antagonist on earth . . . he has wiped away the fame of other kings with the soles of his feet. He is Puruṣa [the Primal Being], being the cause of the prosperity of the good and the destruction of the bad . . . his officers are always engaged in restoring their powers (*vibhava*) to the many kings conquered by the might of his arms . . . His title “king of poets” has been gained through his many poetic compositions from which other learned men draw sustenance . . . He is a human being (*mānuṣa*) only insofar as he performs the rites and conventions of the world (*lokasamayakriyā*)—he is a god whose residence is this world (*lokadhāman*) . . . This column is like an upraised arm of the earth pointing out [the way for] the fame of Samudragupta. For having pervaded the whole earth by the great success obtained from his conquest of all the earth, it now has acquired a graceful easy step for going hence to the abode of the [Indra,] Lord of the Thirty [Gods].⁴¹

The second text is the *Res gestae divi augusti* (The Achievements of the Divine Augustus), of the first emperor of the *imperium romanum* (its dates are 27 BCE-c. 425 CE; his own, 63 BCE-14 CE):

1. The achievements of the Divine Augustus by which he brought the world [lit., the circle of the lands] under the empire of the Roman people (*quibus orbem terrarum imperio populi Romani subiecit*) . . . 3. I undertook many civil and foreign wars by land and sea throughout the world, and as victor I spared the lives of all citizens who asked for mercy. When foreign peoples could safely be pardoned I preferred to preserve rather than to exterminate them . . . 26. I extended the territory of all those provinces of the Roman people on whose borders lay peoples not subject to our government . . . At my command and under my auspices two armies were led almost at the same time into Ethiopia and Arabia Felix; vast enemy forces of both peoples were cut down in battle and many towns captured. 27. I added Egypt to the empire of the Roman people. Greater Armenia I might have made a province after its king, Artaxes, had been killed, but I preferred, following the model set by our ancestors, to hand over that kingdom to Tigranes, son of King Artavasdes . . . 28. I founded colonies of soldiers in Africa, Sicily, Macedonia, both Spanish provinces, Achaea, Asia, Syria, Gallia Narbonensis and Pisidia . . . 30. The Pannonian peoples, whom the army of the Roman people never approached before

⁴¹ Bhandarkar ed. (1970), 203 ff., and 228 (from the Nālanda copperplate). I use (though sometimes modify) Bhandarkar’s translation, and follow his geographical identifications (13-31) discussed below.

I was the leading citizen, were conquered . . . the Dacian peoples [were compelled] to submit to the commands of the Roman people . . . 32. The following kings sought refuge with me as suppliants: Tiridates, King of Parthia, and later Phraates, son of King Phraates; Artavasdes, King of the Medes; Artaxares, King of the Adiabenii; Dumnobellaunus and Tincommius, Kings of the Britons; Maelo, King of the Sugambri. . . .⁴²

The Samudragupta inscription, composed probably around 375 CE, is engraved on an 11-meter-high column, originally planted on the banks of the Yamuna River near today's Allahabad. The column carries two Aśokan edicts, another in a host of examples of how rulers in South Asia affiliated themselves with the imperial charisma of their predecessors by the most material of communicative practices. Perhaps a generation or two after Samudragupta the text of the Allahabad epigraph was adapted by the celebrated poet Kālidāsa in the fourth chapter of his mytho-political epic, *Raghuvamṣa* (The Dynasty of Raghu): In this medium the inscription circulated across southern Asia as far as Khmer country and Java, where it helped to define for a millennium something of what it meant to be imperial.⁴³ Three centuries before Samudragupta, a few years after Augustus's death in 14 CE, his *Res gestae*, likely in conscious emulation of Persian practices,⁴⁴ was carved onto bronze tablets (now lost) set on pillars before his mausoleum on the Tiber in Rome, which for its part was meant as an imitation of the tomb of Alexander. Indeed, the monument could well have been seen by Indian ambassadors to Rome—their presence is noted in the testament itself—or by others who participated in the newly burgeoning direct trade between India and Rome.⁴⁵ The text was also reproduced in various temples dedicated to the Divine Augustus across the empire—at Ancyra, Apollonia, Pergamon, Antioch, and very probably elsewhere.

What is first and foremost striking about these two documents—

⁴² Tr. Brunt and Moore (1967), 19 ff. A good analysis is provided in Nicolet (1991), 15 ff., especially 20.

⁴³ See for example Barth (1885), 13, vss. 6 and 7 (= *Raghuvamṣa* 4.49 and 54, in both cases eliminating local Indian reference) concerning King Bhavarman II in seventh-century Campā, or Sarkar (1971), 26, concerning King Sañjaya in eighth-century Java.

⁴⁴ Gagé cited in Nicolet (1991), 20 and 26 n. 15; Fowden (1993), 6 also comments on the Roman (and Sasanian) aspiration to imitate the Achaemenid achievement.

⁴⁵ *Res gestae* 31: "Embassies from kings in India were often sent to me, which had not been seen before that time by any Roman leader."

to a degree it is hard now to imagine, so far has the process of naturalization advanced—is the very languages in which they are written, Sanskrit in the one case, Latin in the other. I say “striking” because there was nothing at all predetermined about the fact that these were to become, not just languages of state but languages of empire—displacing, each in its own way, local or competitor languages—and to develop the kind of complex literary culture that would make it possible to achieve this status. In both instances, the earlier practices of the Achaemenids on the one hand and the Mauryas and their successors (Śuṅgas, Kuṣāṇas) on the other, were left far beyond.

I have written elsewhere about the slow development and peculiar career of what I have termed cosmopolitan Sanskrit, a code of poetry and polity used across the vast spaces of southern Asia for some fifteen centuries.⁴⁶ Here I will make only a few points by way of summary. Long a sacred code restricted to the domain of ritual practices and the associated knowledge-systems of *vaidika* society—itself a supralocal world already by the mid-first millennium BCE, with its members at home everywhere—Sanskrit was transformed into, or rather invented as, an imperial and courtly language only at the beginning of the Common Era. It was disseminated by a process that can nowhere be identified as the military-political project associated with Latin that I describe below. If this process is itself still obscure to scholars, there is nothing unclear about the speed with which the fashion for Sanskrit spread. In a couple of generations it displaced the various Prakrits, such as those used by Aśoka, that had monopolized the world of public inscription for some four to five centuries from the Maurya period on. The first large-scale Sanskrit epigraph with expressive intention was produced in 150 CE by a Śaka (Indo-Scythian) prince ruling in Gujarat; Samudragupta’s pillar inscription two centuries later is only the *second* in existence (a fact not often registered), and there is no reason whatever to believe that much has been lost; Sanskrit was simply not used for this purpose before the early centuries CE. From that point on for a millennium and more, however, the idiom in which power spoke in South Asia would be Sanskrit and Sanskrit alone, never again Prakrit, nor yet the vernacular. The latter, *deshabhaṣas*, or “languages of Place”—by which

⁴⁶ Pollock (1996)

I refer to everything from Kannada, Tamil, and Bangla, to Javanese and Khmer—were not proscribed during the Sanskrit epoch, far from it. Most were first literized under the influence of Sanskrit and (in the south at least) often functioned importantly in Sanskrit inscriptions themselves as languages of record, used for noting the specific terms of the endowment or whatever the inscription registered. Sanskrit monopolized the *literary* function because this function was and long remained homologous with the political function: as a supraregional ideal the sphere of the political presupposed a supraregional code, and as the practice of power comprised to a significant degree an aesthetic dimension, power required an instrument capable of aestheticization. When new geocultural limits of power came to be recognized in India (as they came to be recognized in western Europe) over the course of the vernacular epoch that began in the early second millennium, the languages of Place would take on this aesthetic function themselves, long and well tutored as they had been by Sanskrit.

The slow development of Latin over the course of many centuries, from a local idiom spoken in the lower Tiber Valley into a vastly supraregional language, confronts us with what one scholar has called “one of the surprises of history.”⁴⁷ Latin’s ennoblement took place in intimate and unambiguous dependence on a military-political project, first that of the Republic, later that of the Principate. Wherever Roman arms and Roman law traveled, Latin traveled, too, and in the process almost completely silenced all other linguistic codes. By the end of the first century BCE all languages of Italy other than Latin (Oscan, Umbrian, Etruscan) had disappeared from the inscriptional record; they had no continuing documentary let alone literary existence. A similar fate awaited regional languages elsewhere in the Roman world: those of Iberia and Gaul, of North Africa (Punic, Phoenician, Libyan), and most of those of the Roman Near East. All these languages may have retained an oral vitality for some centuries after conquest, but they participated (or were allowed to participate) in no way in literary culture and would all die out. An “absolute domination” of Latin in the West, Arnaldo Momigliano called it (Greek of course retained its position of prominence in the east); and he goes on to remind us that if Syrians, Egyptians, and

⁴⁷ Hammond (1976), 39.

Armenians saved their languages (and perhaps their souls), it was thanks in part to Christianity.⁴⁸

We are probably right to hesitate before drawing too critical a conclusion from the epigraphical and literary record. Yet there is no doubt that the expansion of the cultural borders of Latinity was viewed in history, and viewed consequentially, as closely linked with the expansion of the political borders of Latium. To many vernacular literati of the high Renaissance, the historical model of cultural politics they found in Rome was one they strove to apply in the crystallizing nation-states. And they found confirmation of this already in Augustine, for whom Rome “imposed its language upon the subject peoples at the same time as it imposed its political yoke.”⁴⁹ To be sure, these are expressions of minds from entirely different thought-worlds, and almost certainly mistakenly viewed as policy what was far more likely indifference on the part of the rulers coupled with opportunism on the part of the ruled. But the fact remains that the expansion of Latin was accompanied by a stunning eradication of language diversity.

We may not have any very strong models for the adoption of Sanskrit literary culture across the space of the Sanskrit cosmopolitan order, but what we can gather from its history suggests how little it has in common with the parallel process of Romanization. Nowhere did the conqueror’s prestige provide the catalyst for cultural change, for the simple reason that nowhere in the expansion of the Sanskrit cultural order can we point to conquest. There was no bureaucratic incentive to adopt Sanskrit, as there often was to adopt Latin given the place of Roman law in the administration of the provinces; law in the Sanskrit cosmopolis appears to have remained resolutely local (there is no evidence that *dharmaśāstra*, whatever its true relationship with positive “law,” was ever cultivated in Southeast Asia). Nor was there anything comparable to the influence exerted by a core culture in a center-periphery world system relationship. There existed in the Sanskrit cosmopolis only a conceptual and not an actual center, one that could and would be replicated in many different places, as the history of toponymic duplication

⁴⁸ Momigliano (1987), 142, 158.

⁴⁹ See for example Claude de Seysell cited in Derrida (1984), 98; Augustine (*De civitate dei*, XIX 7) cited in Dagron (1969), 24.

across southern Asia shows: every region seems to have had its own Ganges (see further on this below).

In other respects, however, the imperial careers of Sanskrit and Latin have many traits in common. They show above all that in the cultural repertory of the post-Axial empire-form an increasingly important component was a language of transregional stature, one that, in its very communicative capacities, was capable of embodying and transmitting transregional political aspiration. The most central—and, for the new empires, innovative—of all these communicative capacities was the development of that expressive textuality we now typically call “literature.” In the Latin case, this was the result of sudden and conscious invention around 240 BCE. Some three centuries of historical Roman existence prior to this left no trace of “artistic composition” and the merest scraps of text evincing “linguistic satisfaction and emphatic solemnity.” Evidence for such textuality prior to 240 is so meager as to suggest a purely “practical culture.”⁵⁰ Latin literature begins, no doubt in one sense of “beginning,” by the application to expressive language of writing, which before mid-third century BCE was rare; but also by appropriations from the Greek, the superposed literary culture, with which for the first three or four centuries of its career Latin existed in a relationship of pronounced inequality (versions of the *Res gestae* itself in the eastern empire are bilingual). The first writer in Latin, Livius Andronicus, a freed Greek slave from southeast Italy, produced a translation from Homer’s *Odyssey* and adapted Hellenic drama, creating in the process a specifically poetic language that would influence later Latin poetry. Cogent scholarly argument relates the invention of Latin literature to the First Punic War (264-41), Rome’s growing hegemony in the western Mediterranean, and its evolving imperial self-understanding. More important, it has ethno-historical support: the connection was one the Romans themselves later made.⁵¹ The specific relationship between culture and power in evidence in this genealogy manifests itself with ever greater clarity in subsequent literary history, not just in the work of Naevius and Ennius, the immediate successors to Livius, but above all in Vergil.

With respect to Sanskrit, no expressive textuality, according to

⁵⁰ Kenney and Clausen (1982), 53-58 (from whom I quote).

⁵¹ For the positivist history, see Rawson (1989), 429; for the ethnohistorical account, see Gellius 17.21.42 (cited Gruen [1990], 82, n. 10).

ethno-categories, existed in Sanskrit before this period, and a radical break in the history of culture was effected by the invention of what came to be called *kāvya* (for which “poetry” or better “literature” is a reasonable translation).⁵² The circumstances under which this invention occurred—or under which processes already under way were consolidated—must have been shaped by a number of factors: one, of a technological order, was the invention of writing, almost certainly at Aśoka’s court in the middle of the third century BCE (around the time written Latin first becomes common); another, of a social order, was the coming of new aspirants for power from Iran and Central Asia, such as the Śakas, who appear to have understood better than anyone before them the courtly possibilities available in the aesthetic resources of the Sanskrit language (as the Greek Livius, and the Oscans Naevius and Ennius may have done for Latin). Yet very few if any cases are to be found where literature was instrumentalized by power in the way that was foundational to Latin literature at its origin; this was certainly never the case with the Buddhist poets of the early centuries CE, nor yet of the great writers of courtly epic in the later centuries, who if they allegorized power did so almost too deftly to be made out. One additional parallel may however exist: Is the new deployment of a prestige language in written form for the creation of literature, which we find in Sanskrit and Latin at roughly the same epoch (about 200 BCE onward), a comparable reaction in the face of the same superposed cultural forms then manifesting themselves on the eastern and western frontiers of the Hellenic world? Whether India and Rome participated in the same system of literary-cultural circulation, however, must remain undecidable in the absence of new data. But whatever may be the brute facts of literary beginnings, Sanskrit cultural memory in South Asia acknowledged nothing superposed to Sanskrit either in its origins or in its later history.

The achievement of literariness in imperial language is important not only in itself but also because it could communicate and constitute key symbolic goods of the empire-form, among the most important being the fame of the overlord. This is something insistently expressed in Samudragupta’s text, and it holds for Augustus as well, for the preservation and enhancement of renown were as cru-

⁵² See Pollock (2003), 41 ff.

cial in Rome as in India. Closely related are two other components: the development of formal and rhetorical attributes, above all metrics and tropology, that regulated the production of beauty everywhere according to the same norms; and the cultivation of grammar and the dignity and stability it confers. Only in a code constrained by grammar and thereby escaping the danger of degeneration could those symbolic goods find enduring expression. Grammar was a relatively late intellectual enterprise in classical antiquity, never attaining the same epistemic centrality in Rome as in southern Asia; instead it was a consequence of, and always remained a component of, forensic rhetoric or the arts of public persuasion. Yet it became increasingly important in the Latin tradition as active competence in the language waned. As for the poets themselves, however, they had always cared deeply about language discipline—Latinitas was from the beginning a virtue of the writer—and as a result, a transregional normativity in grammar, metric, genre and the rest was widely cultivated. In the case of Sanskrit culture, by contrast, grammar was absolutely central from an early date, both as a cultural practice and as an epistemic paradigm.⁵³ And it was a key valence of kingly rule. It is in this spirit that Samudragupta, like virtually every ruler after him (and unlike most Roman rulers, who were patrons but rarely producers of literature), celebrates his achievement in literature and systematic thought (*kāvya* and *sāstra*), since the use of “just” or true language (*sādhuśabda*) was evidence of a man’s being just (*sādhu*).

As a result of all this, both Sanskrit and Latin literature possess a uniformity that gives a clear stylistic embodiment to the imperial cultural order. For, without denying some local coloring, to participate in that order meant precisely to occlude difference of location in space, and indeed, difference of location in time. Claims to universal sovereignty would hardly be intelligible, practically or ideologically, if asserted in a language of a given locale. It is this very spatiotemporal reach through uniformity that often makes it difficult to localize or date a work of Sanskrit or Latin literature—which, by the argument advanced here, is precisely what constituted one of their greatest attractions to a conception of power and fame that sought—in their very different ways—to transcend both space and time.

⁵³ Compare Shulman (this volume).

With the transregional homogeneity of the communicative medium of the empire-form, however, the similarities between India and Rome end. In everything else we find ourselves confronting two entirely different modes of understanding and enacting the culture-power complex of empire.

Components of the post-Axial Empire-Forms: Territoriality

A key component in the creation of the empire-form, universally recognized in the scholarly literature and clearly manifest in all four texts presented above, is the projection of power transregionally. Yet clearly not all such projections are the same across this world, and the peculiar shape of the imperial transregion in South Asia—indeed, the very fact that it has a peculiar shape—points toward a crucial point of difference over against the western Asian, Roman, and indeed and importantly, the later European colonial form. The case about India requires more detailed exposition, since no good account exists. The Roman Empire, with its much richer tradition of scholarship, can be treated in summary fashion.

The conceptual geography of imperial power in South Asia grew slowly over time, only gradually achieving what was to be its paradigmatic form. An early sign of political or political-cultural transregionality, as much concrete as discursive—the distribution is often evidence of a space, not of concrete power, but of an *imaginaire* of power—is to be seen in the reference and distribution of the Aśokan edicts themselves.⁵⁴ In view of what is to come, this space is notable both for what it contains and what it excludes. Except for a dense concentration in Brahmagiri, Gavimath, and other locales in central Karnataka, most of the Aśokan inscriptions are found in the Maurya core area and, remarkably, in the far northwest, today's Peshawar (Shahbazgarhi) and Kandahar in southern Afghanistan (ancient Arachosia). This physical distribution is corroborated in the text of the inscriptions themselves: peninsular India is “beyond the borders” of Aśoka’s domain, which however does include Greeks and Iranians in the northwest.

⁵⁴ The question of the centralization of power in the Maurya Empire is considered in Fussman (1982). Most scholars believe central control weakened in direct proportion to distance from the metropolitan core. A good exposition on the idea of the *imaginaire* is offered in Collins (1998), 72 ff.

On the eve of the consolidation of the new Sanskrit political order, if we might so call it, two Prakrit inscriptions chart out a different kind of mega-space. The first, from the world of the Sātavāhanas (who ruled c. 225 BCE-250 CE), describes the territory of king Satakarnī around 150 CE, basically comprising the entire region from the western Ghats (Malaya) to the eastern (Mahendra), and from Kathiawar south to the Kṛṣṇa river in Andhra (Rṣika).⁵⁵ The same area is more or less reproduced as a core region in the Hathigumpha cave inscription issued around the same time by King Khāravela of Kalinga, who describes how over the course of his reign he attacked the “western region” of Satakarnī and neighboring areas including Rṣikanagara on the Kṛṣṇa.⁵⁶ But we are then told something more: Khāravela made an expedition across “Bharadvavasa”—that is, Bharatavarṣa, the “Clime of the Bharatas,” one of the first appearances of the term for the transregion in Indian epigraphy—later bringing terror upon the “kings of the northern way” (*utarā-padha*) and the people of Magadha and Aṅga, and, in the south, upon the Pāṇḍya realm. Aside from some discontinuity in the representation of space, the two inscriptions offer the unmistakable impression of a slowly consolidating arena, and—what is more important in the present context—of the *finitude* of the arena within which political action was thought to make sense.

Within the span of two centuries, something significantly new in the conceptual space of power seems to manifest itself, and this is observable first in the Samudragupta inscription. The dominant concern of the record, overshadowing even the celebration of its aesthetic, is to establish the spatial realm to which Gupta power pertains. The impulse is of a piece with the Prakrit inscriptions, and indeed of the very first Sanskrit epigraph, that of the Śaka Rudradāman (150 CE), but Samudragupta’s geopolitical vision is of an order of magnitude grander and more coherent. There are some uncertainties in the names of places and overlords, but many can be set in the real world. The “kings of the southern way” probably represent the overlords and allies of what was earlier the Ikṣvāku zone and the then ascendant Pallava domain. Kosala, Mahākāntāra, and so on have been taken to refer, sequentially along a southern cline, to places in today’s Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu. This

⁵⁵ *Epigraphia indica* 20, 72 ff.

⁵⁶ *Epigraphia indica* 8, 60 ff.

tour d'horizon of the southern region is followed by, first, Āryāvarta, the north-central zone; then, in a sort of counter-circumambulation of the four quarters, the north-eastern frontiers (*paryanta*) (Samanta and Ḏavāka referring to areas in today's Bangladesh, Kāmarūpa to western Assam, Kartṛpuram to the Katyur Valley in Almora district); the west and northwest (Malwa etc.); the far northwest (toward Kabul and the Oxus beyond) where there ruled the last remnants of the Kuṣānas, "Son of [a/the] god, king of kings"—let us note the idiom, ultimately of Achaemenid-Sasanian coinage, that was picked up by the Guptas, "great king of kings"⁵⁷—and Surāṣṭra, with its remnants of the Śakas; and, lastly, the subcontinental islands, including Sri Lanka.

The exact correspondence of the place-names in this record with dots on a present-day map is not our principal concern, but rather the spatial morphology itself and its semiosis. What is being constituted here is a new representation about imperial sovereignty, one that is emphatically *quasi-universal*, seeking distant though not infinite projection within a geopolitical space that is bounded (there are both explicit and implicit "frontier" zones) and therefore intelligible. It can without contradiction be termed a universal conquest—a "conquest of all the earth," *sarvaprthivīvijaya*, in the words of the inscription itself—because it exhausts the domain where the extension of a particular kind of political power has meaning.

The geobody that here achieves what will be more or less its final state in the imperial imagination and that will come to be reproduced in royal Sanskrit inscriptions from now until the end of the imperial period is of a very stable, and very particular, sort. Consider the following two, entirely typical, examples from later in the Sanskrit cosmopolitan era. The first is an inscriptional praise-poem from the time of Nārāyaṇapāla of the Pāla dynasty of Bengal (r. 875-93) written in honor of a Brahman family who had served for generations as royal advisers. The deeds of three of these men

⁵⁷ See Maricq (1958), 375 ff., especially 383-6. Konow (1929), 163-165 (following Lüders) on the phrase *maharajasa rajatirajasa devaputrasa* /*xxji/xxj*rasa (a Kharoṣṭhī inscription of Kaniska II), along with Pelliot (1923), 97 ff., leads one on a wild goose chase. There is no connection in this titulature or its analogues with the representation that divided world political power into four sectors (China ruled by the "son of heaven," India ruled by the "great king," Persia ruled by the "king of kings," and Scythia—or Rome, or Byzantium, or Turkistan—ruled by e.g., Kaisara, /*kaji/sa*rasa, Lüders' certainly false conjecture for [probably] *khuṣaṇasa*).

(Garga, Darbhapāṇi, and Kedāramiśra) are celebrated as follows:

Śakra [i.e., Indra, king of gods] is lord only of the eastern quarter, and even there the demons were able to defeat him. I made my master Dharma[pāla] king of all four quarters.” So [the counselor Garga] thought, and laughed in derision at Bṛhaspati, counselor to the gods.

It was thanks to [the counselor] Darbhapāṇi’s political knowledge that King Devapāla could make all the world pay tribute, from the Father of Revā [Mount Vindya], whose high-piled rocks are moistened with the madder of elephants, to the Father of Gaurī [Mount Himālaya], whose whiteness is intensified by beams from the moon on Śiva’s crest, and all the way to the two oceans, whose waters are reddened by the rising and setting of the sun.

The lord of Gauḍa, having long paid homage to the wisdom of [the counselor Kedāramiśra], took possession of this footstool, the earth, with its tasseled border, the oceans, after annihilating the people of Utkal, humbling the Hūṇas, and humiliating the overlords of Drāviḍa and Gurjjara.⁵⁸

It is evidently crucial that in each ruler’s case the supraregion of his dominion be enunciated, whether by mythic reference (the king of men exceeds the king of gods in his universality), by geographical reference (which seems to naturalize the dominion), or by a more strictly political reference (again, the four peoples mark the four points on the relevant political horizon: the Hūṇas in the north, the people of Utkal in today’s Orissa in the east, the Drāviḍa in Tamil country in the south and the Gurjjaras in the west). My second exemplar of the standardized imperial geobody comes from the court of the Gurjara-Pratīhāras dating to the second half of the ninth century that celebrates an earlier king of the dynasty, Nāgabhaṭa:

Of [Vatsarāja] was born a son of great fame named Nāgabhaṭa—people said it was the Primal Being himself. Into his princely power fell, like so many moths, the kings of Andhra, Sindhā, Vidarbha, and Kaliṅga . . . He labored for the good of all humanity, and from the time of his youth his transcendent power made itself manifest by forceful seizures of the forts of kings: those of Ānartta, Mālava, Kirāta, Turuṣka, Vatsa, Matsya, and others.⁵⁹

Again, four points of a very specific compass function as the normative frame of reference for imperial power: Andhra in the south, Sindh in the west, Vidarbha in the north central, and Kalinga in

⁵⁸ *Epigraphia indica* 2, 160-167, vss 2, 5, 6.

⁵⁹ *Epigraphia indica* 18, 108, vss. 8, 11.

the east. These areas, by now virtually sheer placeholders, so to speak, for vast regional spaces, are given denser texture by the specific references to places in between: Ānartta in Gujarat, Matsya in present-day central Rajasthan, northeast of Jaipur; Mālava to the east in Madhya Pradesh, Turuṣka (country of the Turks) in the far north, Vatsa centered on the city of Kauśāmbī on the Yamunā, with the Kirātas standing for pastoral nomads everywhere in between. Real power, as conceptualized at this historical epoch, can be nothing less than this, but also nothing more. And if an explicit universalist political ethos accompanies this spatiality—everything that Nāgabhaṭa did, we are told, was for “the good of all humanity,” *viśva-janīnavṛt̄teḥ*; the lineage to which he belonged, as another record has it, was “a place for refuge for the whole universe,” *trailokyarakṣāspade*, and Nāgabhaṭa himself was Puruṣa, the Primal Being, like Samudragupta half a millennium before—it must be a universalism within and of a particular world.⁶⁰

The inscriptional evidence can be supplemented by the representation of political space in a text devoted to political theory, the *Bārhaspatyasūtra*, that long enjoyed renown as a political handbook parallel and complementary to the *Arthaśāstra*, but probably to be dated almost a millennium later.⁶¹ The third chapter describes the necessary attainments of rulership (personal, political, moral, religious), and then offers a detailed account of its essential geographical context:

The earth is five million of leagues in extent. It contains seven continents (*dvīpa*) and is surrounded by seven oceans . . . In the middle is the Land of Action (*karmabhūmi*), and in the middle of this land is the Rose-Apple Tree of Mount Meru. To the north is Mount Himavān; to the south the land extends nine thousand leagues. In the south lies Bhāratakhaṇḍa (the Sector of the Bhāratas), and it is there that people’s moral and immoral action manifestly bears fruit. It is there that political governance (*dandanīti*) pertains, something to be studied by Indian people of all four social orders in the present and the future as it was in the past (*pūrvabhāratīyah pathitavyah bhavisyair vartamānaiś ca cāturvarṇikaiś ca*). By this governance the blessed Sun became king, the Wind, and all the gods, and mortals, too . . . It is a thousand leagues

⁶⁰ Cf. vs. 6: “Vatsarāja, beloved of the whole world, which bowed down to him” (*natasakalajagatvatsalo vatsarājah*).

⁶¹ Thomas placed the text “no earlier than the sixth or seventh century,” without specifying an outer limit. Since it appears to refer to the Hoysalas its likely date is the twelfth or thirteenth century.

from Badarikā [in the Himalayas] to the Bridge [to Sri Lanka]. It is seven hundred leagues from Dvārakā [in Gujarat] to Puruṣottamaśāla-grāma [Puri in Orissa].⁶²

There is a larger world beyond the cosmopolitan sphere, but it is largely unknown and has no relevance to the conceptualization of Bhāratakhaṇḍa. This forms a coherent space in itself, clearly conceived in its extent, more or less homogeneous in terms of ethical valence: it is, uniquely and as a whole, the place of moral action (a *topos* as old as the oldest connected description of the sphere in the fourth- or fifth-century puranic accounts). More important, it is the object of a coherent mode of governance, *dandanīti*, the politics of legitimate force. Governance itself in the Sanskrit thought-world has a spatial location, and though it may have a cosmic dimension—it is, after all, what enables the gods themselves to govern—its terrestrial location is in Bhāratakhaṇḍa and there alone.

Thus, if repeatedly in all this material reference is made to universality; if this becomes, as it everywhere does, *diganta rājya*, “power to the ends of the four quarters of space,” this is no infinite universe, these are not horizons without limit. It is rather a bounded universality—the first apparent antinomy among several with which this world confronts us. A second is that multiple quasi-universal powers of this sort could exist simultaneously: the same claim Nāgabhaṭa was making could be made, and at the same time, by numerous other dynasties. Another is that multiple Indias existed: Every region had its own Ganges, and often Mount Meru (as in Java) and Kurukṣetra (as in Khmer country)—indeed, this seems to have been the geo-logic that permitted such quasi-universal polities to exist concurrently in the first place. Such polities and Indias were not mutually exclusive, nor was the fact of their co-presence illogical or unreal—it was simply a different logic and reality, of the sort that permitted the existence of a cosmopolis whose center was everywhere and periphery nowhere.

Much less needs to be said about the conception of political space in the Roman empire, given the extensive scholarship on the subject. But that it is something completely different from what we have just seen emerges as powerfully as anywhere from Augustus’s *Res gestae*. The first thing to notice about Augustus’s imperial geography

⁶² Ed. Thomas (1921), 3.64-133. On the textual history of the geography of Bhāratavarṣa, see Kirfel (1931).

is its immensity: the “circle of the lands,” in other words, the whole of the known inhabited earth, had been “subjected to the *imperium* of the Roman people.” And indeed, the list of conquered or (supposedly) subject peoples is stunning: the *orbis* extends from Britain to Romania to Syria and beyond to Parthia, and from Arabia to Libya to Spain and France. Indeed, it is really the whole of the ancient *oikoumene*, with the borders that were thought to contain it: the ocean to the west, the coast of Germany to the north, Arabia and Ethiopia to the south, and India to the east. All had been subjected by force or had demonstrated their submission by sending ambassadors or concluding treaties—at least according to Augustus’s representation. Obviously this was not the case with some, such as the Parthians and the Britons, but the reality of the fact is much less important for our purposes here than the reality of the fiction. This is empire whose logic, according to ethno-representation, is infinite extension for the sheer reason, it would appear, that extension can be infinite. Like the image that presents itself in the Darius inscription, or indeed, in the imperial project of Alexander the Great, there seems to be no deeper cultural logic at work that links the lands to be conquered beyond the fact that they exhaust the known world. This is truly an arena for political action that is without any limit, cultural, ecological, or other kind. The Romans in their own eyes had become, as Cicero put it, “the true masters of all the peoples and all nations on land and on sea.”⁶³

Not only was there no place for the replication of places in the Roman empire—there is no toponymic duplication until *Roma nova* (and note, it is not the *same* Rome but a *new* one) was created by Constantine in 330—there was no place for a centerless world. The entire world is reduced to the city of Rome.

How these conceptual spaces construed with the actual exercise of power is the next question in comparative empire, and one that, for South Asia, is far more difficult to answer with any kind of certainty.

⁶³ The *oikoumene* is discussed in Nicolet (1991), 21–22. *Orbis terrarum* means the whole of the habitable world (though other uninhabitable domains were known), and as Nicolet demonstrates, the Romans claimed world domination at least several generations before Augustus. He cites Cicero on 36. Brunt argues that “There was no point at which such expansion could halt, so long as any independent people remained” ([1972], 170).

Components of the post-Axial Empire-Forms: Governance

Everywhere we look across the world of Sanskrit text-production we find reiterated the limited political transregionality described above, one that was almost completely settled in its spatial contours by the middle of the first millennium and that remained the ultimate horizon of political aspiration for centuries. There is no doubt about the structure, stability, ubiquity, and cultural-political content of this transregionality. What is in doubt is its relationship to other kinds of more pragmatic reality.

The response of modern scholars to the kinds of pronouncements we encounter in Sanskrit inscriptional discourse has almost consistently been to impugn their veracity on the grounds of factuality. “More epic than historical,” writes the editor of a twelfth-century imperial inscription, expressing a widespread, even common-sense view—one with a long history, in fact. When visiting India in the eleventh century Alberuni wrote in reference to the Kashmiri king Muktāpiḍa that “According to their account he ruled over the whole world. But this is exactly what they say of most of their kings. However, they are incautious enough to assign to him a time not much anterior to our own time, which leads to their lie being found out.”⁶⁴ It is no doubt true that the quantity of reality effects found in Samudragupta’s pillar inscription—the insistent specification of persons and places—is much diminished in later records and that the entire discourse takes on the vagueness and flatness of a literary *topos*. Yet the dichotomy between “epic” and “historical”—between a putatively concrete reality of political fact and an airy unreality of political fiction—is simplistic and empties the political discourse of transregionality of all significance whatever, leading many scholars to characterize old India as “prepolitical.” We foreclose rather than expand the possibilities of interpretation by denying that fictions are themselves social facts, that ideals are actually existing values, that imagination is information. And we thereby exclude the possibility that the geomorphology of political aspiration of the sort described above—one moreover that is insistently promulgated in the Sanskrit epic *Mahābhārata*, which itself was insistently promul-

⁶⁴ *Indica* (tr. Sachau), vol. 2, 178. The editor cited is L. D. Barnett (*Epigraphia indica* 15, 86 n.).

gated by rulers across South Asia through temple endowments for public recitation—may have exerted existential force not just on medieval thinkers and writers, but indeed on rulers, too.

To be sure, recognizing that representation has an important element of reality to it, an element of the desirable if not the possible, does not free us of the obligation to inquire into the nature of the power that filled imperial space, to ask to what degree conceptual and actual spaces of power did or did not converge. But posing this question brings us to one of the thorniest problems of premodern Indian history, the structure and character of the imperial polity. It is intractable on every front, in terms of categories, evidence, interpretation.

Earlier attention was drawn to the problem of finding ways to think about political forms of the non-West outside of the presuppositions engendered by Western models.⁶⁵ Added to and reinforcing this categorical obstacle is an empirical one, deriving from the kinds of evidence we possess for making sense of early Indian empires. The primary reference point for any discussion of empire in first-millennium India is the Gupta formation. But consider the data we actually possess from the imperial Guptas themselves: The extant records issued by the dynasty, including seals, consist of perhaps twenty fragmentary documents, totaling hardly more than 250 lines of printed text. If we add all the documents produced by their subordinates, we can double the number of each, and if we include some newly published copperplate texts, another 300 lines. Roughly a thousand lines of text all told from a period of two and a half centuries constitute the sum total of the direct textual basis of our knowledge of the Gupta empire—thin gruel indeed, even if this calculation is off by a factor of two or three or five. And this is entirely typical of imperial polities of South Asia.⁶⁶

Students of early Indian political history have long wondered whether real bureaucratic centralization existed, or only ritual he-

⁶⁵ More difficulties of a local sort confront us in dealing with Gupta India in particular, given its place in the nationalist imagination of postcolonial India. The ideological constraints (nationalist, communalist, etc.) on writing the history of the Gupta empire are discussed in Lorenzen (1992).

⁶⁶ Even with respect to Vijayanagara (c. 1340–1565), the last great imperial formation to unify most of premodern southern India, the character of the evidence available leaves it uncertain what it means to speak of “unification.” See Sinopoli and Morrison (1995).

gemony in a virtual state; real conquest and domination, or more ceremonialized forms of incorporation and subordination. The data do not allow us to answer these questions. But we can still try to draw some kind of general picture of the political sphere in South Asia during the imperial epoch.

While local forms of dominion must have varied widely, the favored mode of organizing, or aspiring to organize, political power in terms of space was large-scale and transregional. For among all the dynasties from the Mauryas, the Kuṣāṇa-Śaka (c. 50 BCE-300 CE), the Sātavāhanas, the Guptas and their various successor political formations in the north—the realm of Harṣa of Kanauj, 606-47, the Gurjara-Pratīhāras (c. 725-950), the Pālas, c.750-1200—we seem everywhere to perceive big agrarian polities limited in number. These were “military-fiscal” formations, where the exaction of tribute from local overlords—who as a matter of *dharma*-ideology were left to rule in subordination to the emperor who defeated them—and the gathering of taxes from large populations, the command of military resources, or the acquisition of women in matrimonial alliances could be and were exercised over vast, “multilingualistic,” “multiethnic” populations.⁶⁷ Political ceremonies such as the archaic Horse Sacrifice famously celebrated in the book 15 of the *Mahābhārata*, and which historical kings professed to have performed (kings like Dhanadeva of the Śuṅga dynasty or Pulakeśin I of the Cālukya, among countless others), asserted transregional claims of power. The building or repair of temples, or the planting of victory pillars and other inscribed monuments far beyond the imperial core were meant to project an expansive territoriality. The fashion for many of these key elements of the Indian empire-form was set already by Samudragupta: “He has favored all the kings of the south by releasing them after capture [to rule their own domains in subservience to him] . . . The border rulers he has made to gratify his awesome governance by paying all tribute, doing his bidding, coming before him to make obeisance . . . He has restored many kingly lines and kingships that have fallen [due to his power] . . . [The Kuṣāṇas, Śakas, and all island lords] have been made to serve him by various acts: presenting themselves to him, giving their daughters as gifts to him,

⁶⁷ The scare-quotes flag the fact that discursively unified languages and memorialized group solidarities—necessary for “-lingual” and “-ethnic” to be conceptualized as “multi”—did not yet exist in South Asia.

requesting to be able to rule their own domains by under the sign of the Garuḍa seal” (lines 20-4).

Beyond this it is not easy to say much. But it can hardly be doubted that little in the way of governance here bears comparison with the practices of power in the Roman Empire. This is a vastly different world so far as we can take its measure against the imperfect image of the southern Asian empire-form—though indeed, that of the Roman Empire is hazy too. For however archetypal, it remains a structure of governance very much in the eye of the scholarly beholder. Francophone scholars (unsurprisingly) find a far more standardized and “bureaucratic” structure than Anglo-Saxon scholars, who (unsurprisingly) stress the limited aims of the empire, such as peace-keeping and (or rather, in the service of) taxation, and see a more passive and very much undermanned structure of governance.⁶⁸ It is clearly hazardous to take sides here, but to the observer looking from the vantage point of Gupta South Asia the Roman empire does appear to have striven for and achieved a degree of centralization and strong rule without the remotest parallel in South Asia. Its bureaucrats and military apparatus, spread over a vast territory, exercised control over everything from garrisons to (according to some scholars) the standardization of legal forms, currency, weights and measures. To impose its will the Roman state employed some degree of coercion, taxation and the enumeration of its subjects for purposes of taxation (six million were counted in 48 CE), legal machinery, and, on occasion, techniques of Romanization, uneven but real, in cultural and political behavior, with selective award of the prized status of citizen to incorporate elites from the periphery.

The Roman imperial order was not about expanding the center to the periphery, as so often occurred in the symbolic political practices of southern Asia, but about incorporating the periphery into the single Roman center. It is hard not to see some similarities between Augustus and Samudragupta in their catalogue of the conquered displayed in public inscription, and to hear certain harmonies, uncanny however faint, of political accommodation (“the model set by our ancestors, to hand over” a conquered kingdom to the son of the defeated, as Augustus has it, seems echoed in the claim, by Samudragupta, of “first capturing and thereafter graciously releas-

⁶⁸ Contrast Nicolet (1991), 130 ff. on the census, and Lendon (1997), 2 ff.

ing” kings, “restoring their powers to the many kings conquered by the might of his arms”). Yet the very idiom in the *Res gestae* of “subjecting the world to the power” of one people is nowhere attested in the Sanskrit cosmopolis, and never do we hear—with the possible exception of Aśoka’s confession of guilt for his Kalinga campaign—a declaration like the one Augustus made elsewhere in the same testament: “When foreign peoples could safely be pardoned I have preferred to preserve rather than to exterminate them” (3.2)—words written, as one scholar put it, to make known to foreign peoples Rome’s “powers of collective life and death.”⁶⁹

No imperial formation arising in the Sanskrit cosmopolis ever established garrisons of their troops to rule over conquered territories. No populations were ever enumerated. No uniform code of law was in force anywhere across caste groupings, let alone everywhere in an imperial polity. We cannot point with any confidence to evidence that transculturation was the route to imperial service in the bureaucracy or military, rather than, say, an aesthetic choice (something quite different even if made within a field of political power). What we seem to confront here are modes of rule belonging to two entirely different conceptual universes. And this is the same impression we get from examining their political theologies.

Components of the Post-Axial Empire-Forms: Ethno-Transcendence

There are two aspects of transcendence that I want very briefly to examine in India and Rome: the nature of the *numen* of the ruler, and the place of deity in the self-understanding of imperial rule.

In his inscriptions Aśoka showed no interest in claiming transcendent status or indeed, even in commemorating his genealogy. Moreover, deity plays no role whatever in his conception of imperial rule, an absence by no means a necessary correlate of his Buddhism, which always tolerated local cults. Some sense of how far Indian political theology changed in the post-Axial period may be gained from contrasting the Samudragupta inscription. In his copperplate letterhead the ruler is celebrated as a “supreme devotee of Bhagavān.” Bhagavān is the name of a deity whose origins in pastoral cults of the Midlands (the region of Mathurā) had by the fourth century long since

⁶⁹ See Veyne (1989), 348–350, 353–354.

been effaced, and who had been assimilated to a form of the polymorphic sustaining deity Viṣṇu. Besides worshiping the great god, the emperor is said to be “equal” to the four guardians of the quarters—no mere rhetoric here, since it was long a tenet of Indian political theology that the king in his very being was an amalgam of “shares” of the divine powers. More than this, Samudragupta is equated with Puruṣa, the “Primal Being,” an entity that by this date had lost most of its Vedic associations as the *prima materia* of the cosmogonic sacrifice, and come to loosely refer again to Viṣṇu. On the one hand, the king is claimed (only) to equal this being functionally, “because of the prosperity of the good and the destruction of the bad” that he produces; on the other, his very status as a man is discounted: “He is a human being only insofar as he performs the rites and conventions of the world—he is [in fact] a god whose residence is this world.”

There seems to be a certain conflation here of political-theological positions and views. It is not to our purpose to sort these out here, but three points can be made with reasonable certainty. First, the Indian king was widely viewed as what I once termed a “con-substantial godman,” an ontological peculiarity that, if in no way unique to the world of early South Asia, was central to it. That said, the king was not the object of the kind of worship offered to deity. Although their icons (*mūrthi*) might be displayed in temples—as early as those of the Pallavas in the Vaikuṇṭhaperumal Temple in seventh-century Kāñcīpuram and as late as those of Vāstupāla and Tejaspāla in the Lūṇavasahikā atop Mount Abu in the thirteenth century—kings were never the center of divine cults as such.⁷⁰ The king himself is a worshipper, and Samudragupta is entirely typical in celebrating himself as the “ultimate” devotee. Second, the supreme deity itself seems to me largely irrelevant as a source of royal authority. A talismanic presence or apotropaic force? Yes, without doubt, from Viṣṇu in the fourth-century Gupta world (their seal was marked with Garuḍa, the eagle of Viṣṇu) to Virūpākṣa in sixteenth-

⁷⁰ Or at least not until the seventeenth-century, if we accept a recent analysis of Nāyaka kingship, see Narayana Rao et al. (1992). I believe this statement holds true even for the *devarāja* cult instituted by Jayavarman II of the Khmers in the early ninth century; see Mabbett and Chandler (1995), 90 and Jacques (1994) (“divinities that were images of the king and kingdom it was their mission to protect,” 8). I discuss the divine king in the Indian epic in Pollock (1991), 15-54.

century Vijayanagara. But a granter of heavenly mandate, justifier of rule, transcendent real-estate agent awarding parcels of land? Never, not for Aśoka, and not for anyone in South Asia who followed after. Last, and concomitantly, the king's transcendent god was never the god of a political *ethnie*—indeed, peoples were never geographically-identified-and-politicized. There existed no Guptan people, no Pataliputran people—the very idea will strike the Indologist as absurd and the terms rebarbative—but there was not in fact even a Kannadiga or Drāviḍa people that formed a community of common descent with shared memories and horizontal solidarities in the sense familiar to us from the ethnic history of Europe.⁷¹ Many royal cities in India had their divine myths of foundation (as late as Vijayanagara, 1340), and virtually every dynasty claimed a divine origin. No one, however, ruler or people, claimed anywhere at any time that God chose them or gave them a land or provided them guidance or enabled them to conquer other peoples or lands.

Matters are, again, entirely different in Rome, where evidence of the divine guidance founding the *imperium romanum* is vast. “There are few Roman poets,” as Momigliano noted, “who have not something to say on the providential nature of the Roman State.” Indeed, it was in this that P. A. Brunt found what was most novel in the Roman attitude to their empire: “the belief that it was universal and willed by the gods.” The expressions of poets and thinkers were no mere courtly flattery—there seems little reason to accept Momigliano’s argument that no one really believed this idea given that no developed political theology ever emerged—but rather a constituent element of Roman thinking from the end of the third century BCE. When Cicero wrote that it was “by the will of the gods that we have overcome all peoples and nations,” he was expressing an idea long and widely resonant in the minds of Romans—and one that would have been entirely unintelligible to his contemporary political thinkers in India.⁷²

The providential nature of the empire was no simple heavenly mandate, however. It was something actually embodied in a divine emperor himself. The temples in which copies of Augustus’ *Res gestae* were placed throughout the empire were dedicated to his wor-

⁷¹ The place of ethnification in Jasper’s theory of the Axial Age is noted at the beginning of this essay.

⁷² Momigliano (1987), 144; Brunt (1978), 162 and 165.

ship (the *augusteion*), and cities competed keenly for the honor to build them (though of course nothing of the evangelism is found of the sort that would characterize the Christian empires that succeeded Rome). Historians who address the important if vexed question of the cult of the emperor speak typically of a Roman strategy of deploying the emperor's divinity and the imperial cult—the subject of annual celebration “in every city and province and army camp of the empire”—for the purposes of legitimization of the political order and the consolidation and pacification of the populace.⁷³ Such notions as “strategic deployment” or “political legitimization” may be entirely apposite in the Roman context. For understanding the thought-worlds of premodern southern Asia, however, I have serious doubts that the categories make any sense at all, universalizing Weberian presuppositions notwithstanding.⁷⁴

One final and in some ways the most telling difference between these two empire-forms lies is the ethnicization, if that is the right word, of the *populus romanus* and its construction as a unitary political subject. (That the grounds of inclusion in Roman citizenship widened during the Principate is important but beside the point here.) Such ethnicization seems to be in evidence first in the early Republican period, after hegemony was attained in the western Mediterranean with the defeat of Carthage; the formula (in inverted form) *populus senatusque romanus*, for example, is attested first in 189 BCE. This sort of collective political subject is unknown in South Asia, as, a fortiori, was the will-to-power that it embodies. And the kind of sentiment describing this subject, found so often in Latin literature—for example, at the start of Cornelius Nepos’s *Life of Hannibal* (c. 50 BCE): “No one doubts that the Roman people (*populus*) are superior in virtue to all peoples (*gentes*) . . . that they take precedence over all peoples (*nationes*) in courage”—was rarely if ever enunciated of any political collectivity in premodern South Asia.⁷⁵

⁷³ On the imperial cult see Sherwin-White (1973), 402–408; the quote is from Woolf (2001), 321. See also Lendon (1997), 168–172 and the mammoth study of Fishwick (1987–2002).

⁷⁴ First thoughts on a critique of legitimization as the universal solvent of political theory are offered in Pollock 1996.

⁷⁵ On the formula, see Klein, ed. (1966), 105. Nepos’s *Hannibal* begins: *Si verum est, quod nemo dubitat, ut populus Romanus omnes gentes virtute superarit, non est infiandi Hannibalem tanto praestitisse ceteros imperatores prudentia, quanto populus Romanus antecedat fortitudine cunctas nationes*. For two recent collections on ethnicity and power in the Roman world see Webster and Cooper (1996) and Mitchell and Greatrex (2000).

8. Conclusions

It is an arresting, if actually a curious, fact that a new way of organizing political power should have been invented in southern Eurasia in the course of the first millennium BCE. The rise of a form of polity that seeks to gather in its embrace not just the *populus* or the *demos* or the *janapada* (the “people-place” of early India) but vast transregional space is hardly self-explanatory. The continual reproduction of this form across world-regions is striking, and suggests that the problem of the political should occupy a more central place in axial theory than it now does. The relative historical coherence of the empire-form does not, however, necessitate a single causal explanation, for if some regularities and patterns may be discerned they share no single logic, and are not amenable to subsumption under a single covering law, whether ideational (an axial breakthrough in spiritual consciousness, for example), or material (such as the control of nomadism). Not all are equally universalizing empires, and consequently they require no analogous universalist or transcendentalist ideas to provide their agents with a conceptual framework in order to produce similar political structures.

Another explanation might lie in political imitation informed by historical memory. One line of remembering how to be imperial connected the Maurya, Kuṣāṇa/Śaka, Gupta formations—with variations in accordance with local sensibilities—if not quite as transparently as another line, with its increasingly explicit conception of a *translatio imperii*, connected the Roman (which looked backward to Trojan grandeur, too), Carolingian, and Ottonian (or, yet another, the Hellenic and Byzantine), with both traditions of memory variously adopting formative elements from the Achaemenids.⁷⁶ People can take up venerable uni-forms, but fill them with very different bodies. This I think can be clearly perceived in the case of Rome and India, and it has been as important to me to capture what differentiates them (in terms of territoriality, governance, transcendence) as to figure out what unites them (imperial literary culture) if we are to understand what each was. Let me end by trying to summarize just how profound are the differences of the empire-form in these two cases. I want to do this again by way of two texts—this

⁷⁶ See also Duverger (1980), 21.

time literary texts, indeed, two “foundational fictions”—that offer the most concentrated expressions of their respective imperial thought-worlds.⁷⁷

At the beginning of the *Aeneid* Vergil “sings of arms and the man,” the flight from Troy to Italy, the origins of the Latin people (*genus latinum*), the high walls of Rome, and *imperium sine fine*, power without limit, universal empire. In the *Raghuvamśa* Kālidāsa bows down to the mother and father of the cosmos, who are “fused together like sound and sense,” in order that he might more deeply understand sound and sense when he tells the story of quasi-universal kingship—*diganta rājya*, power to ends of the four quarters of space—and the dynasty of the mytho-poetic Raghus.⁷⁸ Two visions of imperial, or even cosmo-politan order are offered here, but differing profoundly. First, consider the character of the *polis* they project. The one is comprised of a particular people, whose historical origins are of fundamental concern to the narrative of the poem, who are clearly placed in time and space. The other is centered not on a particular people but on a lineage of a mythic status so inclusive that half the kings of India could and did claim descent from it (the *sūryavamśa*, or solar dynasty), while the place (Ayodhyā), if a real piece of land in eastern Uttar Pradesh, was also just as easily thought to be located in central Thailand (Ayutthaya), where kings traced their lineage, at least nominally, to the solar kings, especially Rāma.

Second, observe how different is the frame of reference of the *cosmos* held to be meaningful for human life: In the one case, it is the *urbs* of Rome as this was expanded to the *orbis (terrarum)*—as Ovid was to say, *romanae spatium est urbis et orbis idem*, “the space of the city of Rome is the space of the world.” The expansion of this frame happened by the will of God: the divine proclamation is made explicit when Jupiter declares “I have granted empire without end” (1.279), and granted it to a fully ethnicized political community (*romanos, rerum dominos, gentemque togatam*, “Romans, masters of the world, the people of the toga” [1.282]). In the other, the frame is instead “all that moves with life” (*jagataḥ [pitaraū vande]*), where the father and mother of the universe choose no one people for rule over others, and where, in historical fact, no ruler justified his rule by proclaiming an ethnic identity. Also perceptible are two markedly different con-

⁷⁷ The following elaborates on Pollock (2002), 28-29.

⁷⁸ See *Aeneid* 1.1 ff. and *Raghuvamśa* 1.1 ff..

ceptions of how literary culture was thought to function in relation to power. In the one case, it works as a verbal instrument for celebrating power: the *Aeneid* is clearly mapped against the imperial present, and the text is virtually addressed to Augustus. In the other, literature is a celebration of the power of the verbal instrument itself, and accordingly the historical present of the imperial Guptas peaks through the veil of allegory only on the rarest of occasions.

As these two texts make clear, imperial power in antiquity did not recapitulate a theology of transcendence everywhere in the same way. Transcendence and empire may certainly exhibit a direct causal connection in some places—among the Achaemenids, the Romans, and especially in what some have called the “confessional empires” of late antiquity—but not elsewhere. And “empire” may not be amenable to any reductive typology. In early South Asia *diganta rājya* is not, like *imperium sine fine*, about world conquest, the absence of geo-logical limit on power, or legitimating transcendence, but about something very different, the construction, not of “nation”—a concept that as normally understood has no conceptual foundation at this time and in this place—but of a political formation that must not be reduced to any pre-given form by some implicit, mechanical sociology. It was a formation where culture and power stand in a rather different relationship to each other, too, so that ideas like “strategic deployment” of royal cults and the “legitimation” of rule seems less pertinent. And perhaps, too, it is about the recognition that the world does not work the same way everywhere, and should not be made to.

A comparable measure of difference is visible in the regional worlds that superseded these imperial formations. An exercise in comparative vernacularization would show us that, while the new polities brought into being across much of Eurasia as a result of the break-up of the classical ecumenes may look formally similar, their political and cultural contents are radically different, as are the implications of their histories for political and social theory.⁷⁹ Yet a further comparative exercise in the early-modern empire form would show that—by a process of historical imitation comparable to what is widely visible in the account I have provided—Western European colonialism drew sustenance from the model of world conquest perfected in Rome, whereas visions of *diganta rājya*, in sixteenth-cen-

⁷⁹ See Pollock (1998), (1999).

tury Vijayanagara, for example, or among the Marathas in the seventeenth, were shaped by inherited limits that had their own specific logic.

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