

After thousands of years of demographic growth and technological progress that had drawn ever-larger numbers of people into ever-larger social and political networks, the third millennium BCE witnessed the emergence of “empire.” Conventionally defined as a type of state that managed to extend military power, political rule, ideological influence, and economic exploitation across cultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious boundaries, empire was capable of physical expansion on an unprecedented scale. During the following millennia, a growing share of humanity came under the control of ever-fewer states. 2,000 years ago, the Roman and Han Empires between them laid claim to half of all people on earth. Yet despite empires’ prominence in the early history of civilization, there have been surprisingly few attempts to study their dynamics in a cross-cultural or comparative fashion. As “modern” specialization in historical scholarship has stifled approaches that sought to transcend the specifics of particular regions or periods, the contributions of historical sociology, from Max Weber to Shmuel Eisenstadt, have failed to have much impact on the historical study of early empires. Particular empires tend to be studied in isolation, with little or no dialogue or cross-fertilization between discrete bodies of scholarship devoted to the study of different periods or parts of the world. This is extremely unfortunate given that only comparisons with other civilizations make it possible to distinguish common features from culturally specific or unique characteristics and developments, help us identify variables that were critical to particular historical outcomes, and allow us to assess the structure and performance of any given empire within the wider context of pre-modern world history. At the end of the day, it is very hard to find out what “mattered” in the history of one empire unless we also know about others. For the past ten years, ancient historians at Stanford have promoted comparative work on early empires by bringing together experts on different areas from the Mediterranean to the Middle East and China, inviting them to identify and explore shared problems, and encouraging joint projects and future collaboration. My presentation will highlight the benefits and challenges of this approach.