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Studies in Universal and Cultural History

Robert Rollinger · Julian Degen  
Michael Gehler *Editors*

# Short-term Empires in World History



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Robert Rollinger · Julian Degen · Michael Gehler  
Editors

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## Preface

This volume assembles the papers presented at the international conference “short-term Empires in World History: Decapitated or Defective?” convened at Blankenheim/Eifel, Germany, June 21–23, 2017. The meeting had the character of a symposium that intended to focus on a very specific form of empire and its characteristics. It is part of a larger project on the history of empire that tries to approach the phenomenon of empire through the lens of ‘universal history’. Thereby, it intends to overcome the simplistic and Eurocentric arrangement of world history into ‘pre-modern’ and ‘modern spheres’<sup>1</sup>. This multiperspective approach was and will be achieved on five different levels<sup>2</sup>:

- In a chronologically broad and general way: the *longue durée* of Empires;
- Remembering forgotten Empires;
- Short-term Empires;
- Declining, eroding and imploding Empires;
- Restructuring and transforming Empires.

Apart from the conference at Blankenheim four international conferences have been organized so far the results of which are either already published or are about to be published soon<sup>3</sup>.

The meeting at Blankenheim focused on a comparative level on a specific group of states that can be characterized as “short-term empires” by adhering to a global and universal dimension in empire studies. Geographically it attempted to take into account the entire globe, chronologically all epochs from antiquity through the very present time. This

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<sup>1</sup>For a detailed discussion of the problems involved by such an artificial division see Gehler/Rollinger (forthcoming 2020). See also Gehler/Rollinger 2014.

<sup>2</sup>For details see the next fn.

<sup>3</sup>Gehler/Rollinger (eds.) 2014; Gehler/Rollinger (eds.) (forthcoming 2020); Gehler/Rollinger/Strobl (eds.) (forthcoming 2021). Nickel/Rollinger (eds.) (forthcoming 2021).

approach voices an explicit dissociation of any Eurocentric focus and includes a confession to place empire studies within a world history perspective. Within this perspective the volume gathers 13 contributions. The papers express a broad chronological and geographical range that starts with examples of the ancient Near East and ends with two striking examples of 20th and 21st centuries European history. They cover various regions and epochs from the western Mediterranean across the Black Sea through Iran and Central Asia. The studies are supplemented by an introduction of the editors, which intends to provide some general conclusions and observations that resulted from the conference.

As always, this conference would not have been possible without generous support from different organizations and persons. Max Otte not only hosted the conference in Blankenheim and provided an enjoyable and pleasant framework but also contributed considerably to the general funding. This also applies to the University of Innsbruck with a generous allowance by the Vice Rector of Research Ulrike Tanzer. Without this assistance the conference would not have been possible and we are very grateful for this. Finally, we hope that the contributions of this volume will meet many interesting readers inside and outside the flourishing field of comparative empire studies.

Robert Rollinger\*

Julian Degen

Michael Gehler

\*Editing of this volume as well as writing of the two contributions have been finalized during my stay at the Getty Villa as Getty Guest Scholar for which I would like to express my gratitude.

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# Approaching Short-Term Empires in World History, a First Attempt

Robert Rollinger, Julian Degen and Michael Gehler

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## 1 The Outset

Empire studies and the imperial turn are flourishing in the last decades.<sup>1</sup> This development started with Paul Kennedy at the end of the 1980s followed by Alexander Demandt, Niall Ferguson, Herfried Münkler, Ian Morris, Walter Scheidel among others.<sup>2</sup> Empires have been evaluated from different perspectives and scrutinized by using different methods and approaches. However, there are still major shortcomings and lacunae in previous studies that have to be addressed. The classifications and definitions so far proposed are still debatable and the selection of what is regarded to represent an “empire” is rather unsystematic. Comprehensive structural connections that transcend epochs and historical periods are only partially taken into consideration. This is often due to a lack of concrete questions and concepts and an only recently arising awareness of different types

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<sup>1</sup>For an overview see Gehler/Rollinger 2014. Gehler/Rollinger 2020.

<sup>2</sup>Kennedy 1987; Demandt 1997, 2007; Ferguson 2003; Ferguson 2004; Münkler 2005; Morris/Scheidel 2009; Scheidel 2009.

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of empires through all periods. And last but not at least, recent empire studies still tend to be mainly focused on the modern and contemporary era. As a consequence they are not only chronologically concentrated on the last centuries but are also prone to a Eurocentric perspective.

The papers of this volume intended to focus on a specific group of states that are commonly labelled as “empires” and that we encounter through all historical periods. At the zenith of their power, these “empires” had an enormous geographical reach multiplying their economic and military power as well as their political influence within an inter- and trans-continental scope in a very short time (few years or decades). A weak ‘international’ framework constituted a power vacuum with disrupted entities and fragmented structures, an important precondition for the emergence of short term empires rising fast and collapsing swiftly. Their historical beginnings very much resemble with what we know from successful and well established empires. They are commonly based upon a vigorous and ruthless conqueror, who leads his armies to distant regions. Undeniably, they share a belligerent attitude and war is a characteristic element of their political self-conception. However, although they are very successful at the very beginning, like most empires are, this success is very ephemeral and transient. The era of conquest is never followed by a period of consolidation. Collapse and/or reduction to much smaller dimensions run as fast as the process of wide-ranging conquest and expansion. In general, these states do only exist to a maximum of three generations, i.e. no longer than about 90 years, some of them collapse even considerably earlier.

Observing these scenarios all over the world through the centuries, the contributors of this volume were asked to address some fundamental questions in their papers. They refer to two different and opposite angles on a wide-ranging scale of possible answers. The first one focusses on a deficit of structure, the second one on historical circumstances and agents.

Is the ephemerality and early collapse/reduction of these states due to structure, i.e. are they, seen through the lens of comparative empire history, wrongly conceived and defective from the very beginning? And if so, does their short life-span as well as their focus on war, conquest and predation reflect a specific type of “would-be” empire that had to fail because of its internal organisation? This perspective includes an entire set of additional questions: Do exceptionally charismatic and successful leaders lack strong and dynamic successors? Does the failure to establish succession and continuity beyond a second and third generation generate a *diadochi*-phenomenon when rivals challenge the recently established empire? In any case, the successful establishment of a dynasty appears to be the major problem of short term empires thus lacking continuity and sustainability.

The second possible answer draws the attention to what may be characterized as historical circumstances and a recovering ‘international framework’. This points at another explanation highlighting specific developments and the agents of these states. What we face in this case does not represent a specific type of “would-be” empire but much more

an “embryonic” empire with the capacity for further development. Early collapse and reduction are not due to misconstruction but rather to external factors like omnipotent rivals or simply contingency. As a consequence, what we observe are just the characteristic beginnings of any known empire. However, targeted development was cut from outside (or even from inside) and the prospective empire was just decapitated. Thereby, the question of acceptance, justification and legitimation of these types of empires has to be raised. Lack of conviction and missing missions are further reasons for the emergence of unsatisfied and resisting opponents.

Finally, the question of reception has to be addressed. Short-term empires can be ‘successful’ in a way as they, or at least some of them, produced long term effects in terms of regional and global history. They might have existed for only a short time but nevertheless generated a tremendous and vigorous afterlife. Thus, short term empires became the objects of imperial historiography and historical reflection. Whether this reception is rather negative than positive is an interesting question.

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## 2 Results

Nearly all of the case studies under scrutiny in this volume share some general characteristics of empire as they have been defined by recent research.<sup>3</sup> This is true, of course, with the exception of a prolonged duration. Conquest plays a major role. They hold sway over large areas of land, or at least claim to do so. Their subjects exhibit a multi-ethnic and multicultural background with multi-layered traditions. The paraphernalia of rule clearly demonstrate imperial claims that are outreaching and charged by prestige and history. They do not build upon a unique founding act. More or less clearly defined borders do not exist. The opposite is true with the claim of “Plus Ultra”.<sup>4</sup> What is more, although these empires are literally short-term, their history of reception is chronologically far-reaching indeed. As it is true for all empires in world history, they continue to exist even after they have collapsed. This ongoing ‘existence’ is, of course, a different one. They become part of historical and political discourse, are referred to as exempla and show-cases and are used in social and political argumentation and remembering. One even gets the impression that due to their meteor like shape they have received a special and exceptionally long-lasting place in historical memory. However, there are also peculiar specifics that these short-term empires share. They are abundant and have to be highlighted. The peculiarities already start with the already addressed issue of historical memory as we will see immediately. What follows is the attempt to gather and discuss some key

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<sup>3</sup>Cf. Gehler/Rollinger 2014. Gehler/Rollinger 2020.

<sup>4</sup>Kohler 1999.

issues of the outstanding characteristics these empires share often separated by centuries and localised in very different parts of the Euro-Asiatic continent.<sup>5</sup>

### Sources and Historical memory

It is true that many of these empires loom large in historical memory. This memory, however, does not mainly originate from ‘inside’. It is productive primarily from ‘outside’. Relevant historical information does not particularly emerge from the main agents of the empire but is driven by an outside perspective that not uncommonly has become part of the commemorative culture of the victors over the short-term empires. This means that, from a modern perspective, one has to distinguish strictly between what tradition believes to know about these empire and how much we moderns give historical credit to that very knowledge. Or to put it another way: reconstruction of the histories of these empires is sometimes very tedious and much more complicated than generally believed to be due to the fact that any modern historian seriously dealing with these empires often faces a considerable source problem. There are illustrative examples of these difficulties, as the short-term rule of the Medes, the histories of Hannibal, Mithradates VI, Attila, and Mahmud of Ghazna demonstrate.<sup>6</sup> With slight exceptions this also applies for the Hephthalites and the Latin Empire of Constantinople.<sup>7</sup> Only careful and critical approach is able to reveal what we know and what we do not know, what we hypothesize and speculate about, and what is more about story-telling than historical analysis. It is also to decide which types of sources can provide us with convincing answers about the end of short term empires not to speak about the problem how to weigh the factors and reasons of their erosion and implosion.

### Duration

As already mentioned, the empires under discussion here share a comparatively short duration of a few (2–10) decades with one to three generations at maximum that makes all of them short-term empires. The most extreme example of this, is probably the so-called “Tausendjähriges Reich” which survived only for 12 years.<sup>8</sup> One could take this as a perfect illustration for the complex effects of dynamization and acceleration experienced in more contemporary history. However, there are also other examples that stand and fall with one single conqueror. Hammurabi of Babylon and Shamshi-Adad of Assur are very early examples for this phenomenon, Hannibal, Mithradates VI of Pontus, Attila, Mahmud of Ghazna, Nader Shah and Napoleon as well as Mussolini and Hitler

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<sup>5</sup>Whereas some contributors render personal names by their scientific transliterations, this essay makes use of the more common and established forms, thus Mahmud of Ghazna for Maḥmūd of Ghazna, Nader Shah for Nāder Šāh, Genghis Khan for Chingiz Khan/Chinggis Khan, etc.

<sup>6</sup>Cf. the contributions of Rollinger, Ruffing, Müller, Heather, and Reinfandt in this volume.

<sup>7</sup>Cf. the contributions of Mitsiou, and Wiesehöfer/Rollinger in this volume.

<sup>8</sup>Cf. the contribution of Suppan in this volume.

represent more recent ones.<sup>9</sup> This also reveals the fact that most of these empires are tremendously related to historical figures that somehow personalize ascent, climax, and collapse. This is even true when decline took place with slight delay, as, e.g., with Timur who, with Shah Rukh, had a successor of respectable format. Ostrogothic rule did not collapse immediately after Theoderic's death but it obviously ended to be an empire by his death.<sup>10</sup> There are, however, also examples where an 'outstanding' founding figure appears to be absent at all. This might be due to the difficult source situation and our serious lack of information. Yet, although in these cases the Latin Empire of Constantinople did not exist longer than 60 years, the empire of the Hephthalites not more than 90 years, which appears to be the absolute maximum of the examples collected in this volume.<sup>11</sup> For the Medes we have an outstanding founding hero with Cyaxares, but we have only meagre information about his immediate successors. For the European Union only the future will tell whether its treatment in this volume was justified or not.<sup>12</sup>

The times of heroes seem to have come to an end especially with regard to the EU. Only three politicians were appreciated as "European Citizens of Honour" by a unanimous decision of all heads of states and governments of the European Communities and the European Union: Jean Monnet (1976), Helmut Kohl (1998) and Jacques Delors (2015).<sup>13</sup> The latter acted as a President of the European Commission (1985–1995). This was more than two decades ago which is further proof for "the end of the heroic age". What the European Communities achieved from the 1950s to the 1990s is their lack of today. There are also three important points to add:

(1) The generations of World War I and II experienced politicians ended in the 1980s and 1990s at the latest. (2) None of the just mentioned three key figures had a charismatic profile, but they used their influence and power in order to create new institutions and political structures. (3) Two of them (Kohl and Delors) enjoyed substantial backing and support from the domestic political sphere (stable coalition government and a strong state president like Mitterrand). Monnet was a special case. He hardly appeared in public, but served as an initiator and think tank providing successful mid-term concepts and long lasting durable strategies. Are think tanks and behind-the-scene agents seminal for longer lasting empires?

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<sup>9</sup>Cf. the contributions of Van de Mierop, Richardson, Ruffing, Müller, Heather, Reinfandt, Rota, and Suppan in this volume. Unfortunately, the paper of Johannes Willms on Napoleon ('Napoleon oder das ufer- und planlose Reich') could not be included into this volume.

<sup>10</sup>Cf. the contributions of Manz, and Schäfer in this volume.

<sup>11</sup>Cf. the contributions of Mitsiou, and Wieschöfer/Rollinger in his volume.

<sup>12</sup>Cf. the contributions of Rollinger, and Gehler in this volume.

<sup>13</sup>Gehler 2018, 185, 199, 202, 363.

## Charisma

Nearly all founders of the empires dealt with in this volume can be defined as charismatic. This is at least true from a contemporary perspective, but by far not only so. Many of them were treated as heroic figures by tradition, although in these cases an up and down of their evaluation can be observed. In any case, the charismatic aspect not only explains the power of mobilization and conviction that these persons generated but also applies to the already mentioned fact how much ‘person’ mattered in the rise of these states. All of them are men which is telling as such although there might exist counter-examples, yet not treated in this volume.<sup>14</sup> Suppan highlights Hitler’s charisma which he rapidly lost after Stalingrad. But he nevertheless profited from the ongoing ‘Hitler Myth’. This was demonstrated by the British historian Ian Kershaw on a very broad basis of sources.<sup>15</sup> Until the very end in April and May 1945 the majority of Germans still believed in the ‘Führer’ and were convinced that other Nazi leaders were responsible for the defeats and losses.<sup>16</sup>

Van de Mieroop refers to the ‘personal achievements’ of Hammurabi and Shamshi-Adad.<sup>17</sup> Hannibal, Mahmud of Ghazna, and Timur appear to be paradigmatic hero figures,<sup>18</sup> and the same, depending on perspective of course, can also be said of Napoleon. All of them are also examples of warhorses. This is definitely true for Timur, Nadir Shah and Napoleon.<sup>19</sup> Bonaparte also profited from a kind of leader myth when starting his “Government of the 100 Days”. Thereby, he became ruler of a ‘meteoric empire’ within a short term empire. Cyaxares became a conqueror figure at least in tradition.<sup>20</sup> The connection between military engagement and charisma is revealing, as it is for an alarming attitude towards gambling and an appalling willingness to put all one’s eggs into one basket. It also relates to an ostentatious lack of legitimization that these persons shared from the very beginning of their careers.

## Lack of legitimization

This appears to be an outstanding characteristic and a decisive impulse for military over-engagement. There are, however, different facets of this aspect. One is the lack of appropriate (mostly royal) descent. This results in ad hoc solutions but also in genealogical manipulations. Shamshi-Adad becomes part of the lineage of Assyrian

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<sup>14</sup>One might think about legendary figures like the Assyrian queen Semiramis and, of course, Jeanne d’ Arc. However, it is questionable whether they were related to short-term empires. A better example might have been Zenobia of Palmyra. The editors of this volume tried hard but unfortunately were not successful in receiving a contribution on this interesting topic.

<sup>15</sup>Kershaw 1987.

<sup>16</sup>Kershaw 2011.

<sup>17</sup>Cf. the contributions of Suppan, and Van de Mieroop in this volume.

<sup>18</sup>Cf. the contributions of Ruffing, Reinfandt, and Manz in this volume.

<sup>19</sup>Cf. the contributions of Manz, and Rota in this volume.

<sup>20</sup>Cf. the contribution of Rollinger in this volume.

rulers, Mithradates VI a relative of Alexander the Great and Darius I, Timur's tribe of Barlas is attached to the line of Genghis Khan and Nadir Shah has to be 'persuaded' to become Khan by a public assembly, convened as a *quriltāy* derived from Mongolian tradition.<sup>21</sup> Marriage alliances with established houses play an additional role (Timur, Nader Shah) as puppet rulers from these very houses are installed for a certain while (Timur, Nader Shah).<sup>22</sup> This manipulative aspects are accompanied by extraordinary activities on some other fields. Gigantic building programs are initialized (Timur) and the court is transferred into a center of culture and education. This becomes especially manifest with Timur and his successors, but it is also true for Mahmud of Ghazna. The latter also consciously played with legitimization strategies that made use of religion as a tool for the justification of his rule. Thus, he became a prototype of a *ghazi*.<sup>23</sup> This was a perfect camouflage for justifying raiding and looting and therefore for multiplying income and resources. Persecution of Shiis and staging as an orthodox Sunni was also part of the program. All this could only gain effect, of course, if the new discourse was shared and accepted by the relevant elites and followers. This was not only the personal entourage for there was the necessity to reach the ruling classes in general. If this failed major problems arose. This becomes especially evident with the Latin Empire of Constantinople where from the very beginning local Greek elites were excluded from the newly established state. It represents an extreme, but very illustrative example of a super-imposed rule from outside that, from the onset, was charged with a congenital effect.<sup>24</sup>

Napoleon as well as Mussolini and Hitler failed with successors. Napoléon II. ended as Duke of Reichstadt and "King of Rome". These were powerless positions with meaningless titles. The 'Duce' and the 'Führer' had no sons (according to our knowledge), in any case not known to contemporary public and historical research.

### **Military over-engagement and its consequences**

It has already been mentioned that a considerable number of the founding figures addressed in this volume were outstanding conquerors, or at least stylized themselves as such. The extraordinary importance of conquest had many reasons. Lack of legitimization was one motive indeed, but there was additionally a boundless greed for land and booty and an unruly tendency towards megalomania. Partly, this was due to the 'imperial' desire to rule the world, or at least of what was thought to represent the world.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21</sup>Cf. the contributions of Van de Mieroop, Müller, Manz, and Rota in this volume.

<sup>22</sup>Cf. the contributions of Manz, and Rota in this volume.

<sup>23</sup>Cf. the contributions of Reinfandt, and Manz in this volume.

<sup>24</sup>Cf. the contribution of Mitsiou in this volume.

<sup>25</sup>Cf. the contributions of Suppan, and Van de Mieroop in this volume. For Timur the world was clearly defined as the 'islamic world' (Manz, this volume); for Hannibal and Mithradates much depends on the weight given to their alliances with Philipp V of Macedon and Sertorius (Ruffing and Müller, this volume).



This primacy of conquest and military engagement had considerable consequences. Conquest tended to be over-ambitious, too fast and too much outreaching which resulted in military over-stretch. This appears to be obvious with Hitler, Napoleon and Mahmud of Ghazna.<sup>26</sup> However, this challenge was astonishingly well-mastered by Timur. This might have been due to the fact that he renounced to directly control all those areas where he had been campaigning.<sup>27</sup> In any case, a crucial issue was the establishment of local loyalties towards the new rule, a task where many of these conquerors dramatically failed or had only limited success for a very short time (Hitler, Napoleon, Mahmud of Ghazna, Hannibal, Mithradates VI, Latin Emperors of Constantinople).<sup>28</sup> This failure was due to the new rulers' ideology or simply to their boisterous greed for resources. Exploitation and over-taxation created resistance. Opposition was additionally triggered by an extremely brutal warfare with massacres, mass executions, and genocides (Mithradates VI, Mahmud of Ghazna, Timur, Hitler).<sup>29</sup>

Giorgio Rota also highlights the importance of psychological aspects. Waging war all the time may have resulted in dramatic repercussions on the psychological stability of these conquerors and post-traumatic stress order might have played a certain role as well.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, the former heroes became more and more isolated and feared, decision making became irrational and opaque and any kind of balance was successively lost. Whether these 'heroes' were, at least at the beginning, military geniuses, is another point, although it appears to have been the case for at least some of them.<sup>31</sup> In any case, it is plausible that transformation of mental condition resulted in an overestimation of one's own capabilities and at the same time in an underestimation of the opponents.<sup>32</sup> That some of the figures under scrutiny committed suicide may complete the picture (Hannibal, Mithradates VI, Hitler). Astonishingly, they rarely became victims of a murderer (Nader Shah, Mussolini).

### **Lack of loyalty in a mid-term perspective**

It has already been stressed that lack of loyalty was a major issue. This, however, did not always become evident immediately. The ruler's charisma and short-term success as well as fear of severe punishment may have been responsible for this delayed impact. But it mattered and became obvious immediately when the 'hero' holding together everything in person had left the scene. One issue was the lack of a timely installation of a competent successor. Attila, Timur, and Nader Shah appear to be perfect examples for

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<sup>26</sup>Cf. the contributions of Suppan, and Reinfandt in this volume.

<sup>27</sup>Cf. the contribution of Manz in this volume.

<sup>28</sup>Cf. the contributions of Suppan, Reinfandt, Ruffing, Müller, and Mitsiou in this volume.

<sup>29</sup>Cf. the contributions of Müller, Reinfandt, Manz, and Suppan in this volume.

<sup>30</sup>Cf. the contribution of Rota in this volume.

<sup>31</sup>Cf. the contributions of Ruffing, Reinfandt, Manz, Rota, and Suppan in this volume.

<sup>32</sup>Cf. the contributions of Ruffing, Müller, Mitsiou on the Bulgars, and Suppan in this volume.

this failure.<sup>33</sup> The point, however, is what ‘competent’ means in this case. For this is not only an issue of what is supposed to be ‘reality’ but also of discourse and staging. If the fathers presented themselves as super-heroes and were generally accepted to meet this kind of qualification it was nearly impossible for the successors to follow in their footsteps. Seen through this lens, the inherent problem is also one of acceptance that became even more dominant if the successor was still a child when the father had passed away. Also in this case, the new ruler’s shortcomings were less based on his missing capabilities, but on the fact that it became difficult to achieve the acceptance of a considerable majority of the relevant elites. Balancing the elites is a major challenge for any empire due to the fact that an empire’s elites do not represent a homogeneous group concerning wealth, status and influence. Sustaining competition within this group is important for any ruler to optimize and expand authority and rule, but this only works if the system is kept in balance without creating open strife and resistance. With a new successor with a much lower ‘profile’ the possibilities to achieve more influence and power increase considerably for major representatives of the elite. This is, at least, true on a theoretical level since the reactions of the peers towards such ambitions play a decisive role. Thus, the question whether these ambitions become relevant or not, whether they are able to unfold in unbridled ways or whether they can be harnessed and integrated in existing frameworks bears important information about the stability of a given system. The consequence of instability and missing consolidation is a coup d’état and civil war with ongoing lack of legitimization. This is evidently the case with Attila and Timur.<sup>34</sup>

Wars of this kind imply an incredible loss of authority, credibility, and resources. Exploitation and plundering, conquest and destruction in one’s own land dramatically minimize acceptance. Such a development not only endangers the former power center but also threatens the existence of the elites as a constitutive group of a given empire. Apparently, the successful establishment of a successor is a multi-layered process that tests an empire’s stability in various ways and along various steps. Some of the rulers under discussion even did not come into the position of electing a successor, others did, but didn’t do it in a resounding way,<sup>35</sup> yet others like Timur even neglected to do so. The lack of a tradition accepting primogeniture as with the Mongols might have played a certain role, but again, it is acceptance that matters.<sup>36</sup> The lack of acceptance may reveal insufficient consolidation but also the failure to gain the hearts of the subjects. Nazi Germany is an extreme example for total failure in this respect, but it appears to be also true for many others, from Attila to the Latin emperors of Constantinople, from Mahmud of Ghazna to Nader Shah.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, permanent warfare resulted in brutalization and

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<sup>33</sup>Cf. the contributions of Heather, Manz, and Rota.

<sup>34</sup>See the contributions of Heather, and Manz in this volume.

<sup>35</sup>Nader Shah disposes his already installed son and has him blinded (Rota, this volume).

<sup>36</sup>Cf. the contribution of Manz in this volume.

<sup>37</sup>Cf. the contributions of Suppan, Heather, Mitsiou, Reinfandt, and Rota.

even a ‘fear of peace’.<sup>38</sup> It is a truism that permanent campaigning is simply not enough for the successful establishment of an empire.<sup>39</sup> Thus, it was a rocky road towards the sustained installation of a dynasty, and whether this was successful or not did not become evident with the second but only with the third and fourth generation.<sup>40</sup>

### Structure

It has been demonstrated that the failure to install a successor as well as lacking acceptance of such a regulation, before and especially after the former ruler’s death, is not only a failure to take an appropriate decision at the right moment but is also related to insufficient structure. This, however, is a broader phenomenon with deeper cause that only becomes apparent at the very moment of a change of leadership. Exploitation of the subjects instead of a balanced rule is a major issue in this context. Extensive deportations, confiscation of land, heavy taxing, and extraordinary service obligations become synonyms for unjust regimes an increasing majority wants to see an end of.<sup>41</sup> The situation accelerates if an atmosphere of fear and suspicion takes place combined with a total loss of confidence. Again, it is mainly the imperial and local elites that matter in such a development.<sup>42</sup> The execution of “theatrical violence” may result in short-term success, but is does not solve the underlying problems.<sup>43</sup>

If there is a possibility for change it is the elites who are prepared to change sides. Mahmud of Ghazna and Timur are obvious examples for this failure, but they also invested considerably in infrastructure, architecture, and culture. The Latin emperors of Constantinople did none of this. They plundered a city of about 225,000 inhabitants that shrunk within 50 years to a ‘necropolis’ of only about 3000 people.<sup>44</sup> With Venice as a state within the state there was a very specific situation anyhow. Corruption compared with over-taxation became epidemic, but this is also true for the states ruled by Mahmud of Ghazna, Timur and Nader Shah.<sup>45</sup> However, the existence of bureaucratic structures was also a prerequisite for imperial success and the absence or nearly absence of such structures was a problem as well.<sup>46</sup> So again, keeping the balance was a central issue to

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<sup>38</sup>Rota, this volume.

<sup>39</sup>See the contributions of Heather, and Manz in this volume.

<sup>40</sup>See Rollinger 2020. There are, however, always exemptions to this ‘rule’. Thus, the Roman empire was successful for a very long time without establishing a permanent dynasty. Also in this case, it was acceptance that mattered. Yet, at least the official names of the emperors, not the individual ones transmitted by the historiographers, created the impression of continuity and similarity in a pseudo-dynastic framework.

<sup>41</sup>Cf. the contributions of Suppan, and Van de Mieroop in this volume.

<sup>42</sup>Cf. the contribution of Reinfandt in this volume.

<sup>43</sup>Cf. the contribution of Manz in this volume.

<sup>44</sup>Cf. the contribution of Mitsiou in this volume.

<sup>45</sup>Cf. the contributions of Reinfandt, Manz, and Rota in this volume.

<sup>46</sup>Cf. the contributions of Rollinger, and Heather in this volume.

guarantee sustainability. Short term empires often suffered from a lack of balance between the challenge of consolidation in times of peace and the permanent pressure to go to war. They were forced to ever win battles and wars in very short periods of time, which led to exhaustion and overstretch in the end. This can also be true for an openness towards necessary reforms, since too much of change and transformation was threatening as well. Nader Shah's intended religious reforms in order to unify Sunnis and Shiis were ambitious and open-minded and had a touch of ingenuity, but they created unrest and insecurity and finally failed.<sup>47</sup> It is the circumstances, stupid. This understanding leaves the historian somehow helpless. One may wonder about the role 'contingency' plays in this context.<sup>48</sup> These reservations concerning the effects of reform and change also apply to any other measures of integration towards the ruled. At least the local elites should share the imperial agenda if it is supposed to be successful. There have to be attractive and profitable offers and they have to be communicated in appropriate ways. Integration by force does not guarantee success.<sup>49</sup> Right now, all these issues gain momentum in very recent debates about the future of the European Union, which is still an open-ended process.<sup>50</sup>

## Resources

Resources matter, this is a truism. But they matter especially in over-ambitious and far-reaching imperial agendas. The Nazi empire had a serious problem in resources from the very beginning that not only drove its incredible expansionism but also prompted its rapid collapse.<sup>51</sup> Mahmud of Ghazna's empire faced an increasing tendency towards allocation of land towards followers which guaranteed short-term mobilisation but meant loss of resources on the long run.<sup>52</sup> The Latin empire of Constantinople suffered from the very beginning from military and economic shortcomings and a lack of human men power. Serious financial problems were omnipresent. But this was a very special case, an imperial city state without hinterland.<sup>53</sup> Giorgio Rota hypothesizes on the comparable economic weakness of the Iranian highland, in the long run insufficient to sustain

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<sup>47</sup>Cf. the contribution of Rota in this volume. While Mussolini started a policy of reconciliation with the Holy Sea, which led to the Lateran Treaties in 1929 (Pollard 2005; Kertzer 2014), Hitler (Besier 2001) and Stalin (Döpmann 1981) began a cultural fight against Christianity. The Red Tsar destroyed the Russian Orthodox Churches while Hitler allowed to persecute and execute priests of the Roman Catholic Church. Both actions endangered the dictators' public acceptance. The threat of weakening their power basis forced them to reconsider a stop of these policies, not at least to legitimize their wars against each other.

<sup>48</sup>Cf. the considerations of Van de Mieroop, Ruffing, Mainz, and Rota in this volume.

<sup>49</sup>Cf. the contribution of Heather in this volume.

<sup>50</sup>Cf. the contribution of Gehler in this volume.

<sup>51</sup>Cf. the contribution of Suppan in this volume with a special reference to a lack of oil.

<sup>52</sup>Cf. the contribution of Reinfandt in this volume, also referring to the source problems related to the introduction of the *iqṭā'* system which has to be seen as a continuous process.

<sup>53</sup>Cf. the contribution of Mitsiou in this volume.

an empire. Similar considerations have also been put forward recently.<sup>54</sup> Extensive campaigning and plundering may offer a short-term relief, but in the long turn it does not help to solve the rising problems.<sup>55</sup> The biggest problem of the European Union is the lack of mobilizing its own resources. A sort of ‘European Tax’ is still missing. The right to raise taxes is due to the EU member states. This is the major reason for the Union’s limited capacities.

### **Superior opponents, contingency, and a historian’s aporia**

Facing superior opponents sounds to be a plausible explanation for any empire’s failure. But it is also a somehow superficial one, for it immediately addresses the question why a given empire might be superior to another one. Nevertheless, it is an explanation that has some value, for there existed empires that were never challenged by any competitors. The Nazi empire faced a whole range of opponents.<sup>56</sup> In the end the Wehrmacht fought against the whole world when its allies (Bulgaria, Hungary, Italy, Finland, Romania) had surrendered, changed sides and the neutrals (Ireland, Spain, Turkey, Switzerland) had defected to the Anti-Hitler-coalition in the last years, months and days of WWII. Hannibal failed at Rome’s power of resistance,<sup>57</sup> the Ghaznavids lost position against the Seljuks,<sup>58</sup> its the Timurids and Napoleon saw attacks from neighbours and coalitions on all sides,<sup>59</sup> the Bulgars mattered for the collapse of Attila’s empire,<sup>60</sup> Nader Shah had to struggle with Russia and the Ottomans,<sup>61</sup> and the Median confederation had nothing to gain against the new power emerging from Anshan.<sup>62</sup> For Mithradates VI Rome was an almost unassailable competitor, as it was Justinian for the Ostrogoths,<sup>63</sup> and the Turk Khaghanate for the Hephthalites.<sup>64</sup> In this illustrious group the European Union appears to be the exception for its strongest opponents appear to attack from the inside.<sup>65</sup> But also in recent times outside criticism, opposition and hostilities towards the EU are growing: The EU customs union partner Turkey with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan<sup>66</sup> disregarded

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<sup>54</sup>Cf. the contribution by Rota in this volume, and see Payne 2016.

<sup>55</sup>Cf. the contribution by Heather in this volume.

<sup>56</sup>Suppan, this volume.

<sup>57</sup>Ruffing, this volume.

<sup>58</sup>Reinfandt, this volume.

<sup>59</sup>Manz, this volume.

<sup>60</sup>Heather, this volume.

<sup>61</sup>Rota, this volume.

<sup>62</sup>Rollinger, this volume.

<sup>63</sup>Schäfer, this volume.

<sup>64</sup>Wiesehöfer/Rollinger, this volume.

<sup>65</sup>Gehler, this volume.

<sup>66</sup>Akyol 2016.

common European law and values, the Russian Federation's President Vladimir Putin<sup>67</sup> supported financially EU sceptical and hostile political parties while US President Donald Trump called the EU "an enemy" acting on the brink of a trade war against the Europeans. However, it is also constellation and alliances that play a considerable role. Nazi Germany is once more an extreme example for lack of any diplomatic skills and bad planning.<sup>68</sup> Parthian inaction may have missed the chance to ally with Mithradates VI (or vice versa) and to push back Roman advances in Asia at a very early stage.<sup>69</sup> Obviously, constellation and negotiating skills are important parameters that matter. At least, Hammurabi and Theoderic appear to have been true masters in this respect.<sup>70</sup> But was this the clincher to determine success or failure of a given empire? Presenting definite answers to these questions is indescribably difficult and not satisfying at all. This *aporia* towards explanation was already felt by the ancients. Timur's claim to be the 'lord of the fortunate conjunction' (*ṣāhib qirān*) reveals an emic perspective that appears to concede that success or failure have only little to do with measurable performance.<sup>71</sup> It was *fortuna* that ruled, or 'the force of circumstance' like Orosius put it (*Or. hist.* 2,1,3–6).<sup>72</sup> Modern historians would prefer to speak about contingency.<sup>73</sup> This is an important observation because it has grounds for modesty in any modern historian's capability to entirely explain why things happened and why they didn't. So what is the conclusion of this final sort of *aporia*?

### **Moving beyond *aporia* towards multi-faceted empirical explanations**

To confess a certain amount of uncertainty in our explanations of historical events must not be confounded with an inability to address empirical and plausible explanations. Source oriented, data-based empirical research in a comparative framework is just what historical analysis is about. This has, hopefully, been demonstrated by the contributions of this volume. Since every empire, like everything in history, is specific but takes place in comparable frameworks with agents sharing comparable motives, answers can neither be simple-minded nor straightforward. Each historical example has to be thoroughly checked (as has been done by the contributions in this volume) and to be compared to each other in a diligent way (what has been attempted by this essay). What becomes apparent is a combination of coefficients that matter and are shared by many examples but not by all of them. However, the categorization and determination of these

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<sup>67</sup>Skawa 2008.

<sup>68</sup>Suppan this volume.

<sup>69</sup>Cf. the contribution of Müller in this volume.

<sup>70</sup>Cf. the contributions of Van de Mierop and Schäfer in this volume.

<sup>71</sup>Cf. the contribution of Manz in this volume.

<sup>72</sup>Cf. the contribution of Ruffing, this volume.

<sup>73</sup>Cf. also the contribution of Rota in this volume who compares Frederick the Great with Nader Shah concluding that the first one appears to have been just more fortunate.

coefficients is an important part of the explanation and the points addressed by this essay endeavoured to grasp some of the essential ones. We conclude, once more, with a reference to an ancient source. When Velleius Paterculus described Mithradates' VI (short-term) success he did not single out one specific aspect but addressed an entire bundle of them (Vell. 2.18.1).<sup>74</sup> He was characterized as 'most energetic at war' (*bello acerrimus*), 'of exceptional bravery' (*virtute eximius*), 'the greatest, sometimes in fortune, but always in spirit' (*aliquando fortuna, semper animo maximus*), 'a general in strategies' (*consiliis dux*), and 'an active soldier' (*miles manu*). This description would fit for most of the 'heroic figures' addressed in this volume.

However, despite this combination of outstanding qualities, Velleius and his readers were well aware of the fact that Mithradates VI failed. Obviously, impressive as they were, these outstanding qualities were nevertheless regarded to be insufficient to guarantee permanent success. For Velleius the reason for this was more plausible than it might be for us: it was the superiority of the Roman empire that made Mithradates' ambitions fruitless. But this is just one interpretation, of course. Giorgio Rota concluded his contribution with a very general consideration about any success and failure of empire building. According to him failure was much more likely and therefore much more common than success. Seen through this lens, the empires introduced in this volume might represent the rule and not the exception in world history. Whether this might have satisfied Mithradates VI is another question.

We close this introduction with two afterthoughts, one on very recent, one on more ancient history, both somehow summarizing the specifics and problems involved when historians talk about short-term empires in world history.

When in 1997 the 40 years anniversary of the signing of the Rome Treaties (25 March 1957) was celebrated the EU Commission's President Jacques Santer (1995–1999) argued "that the EU once a time could become a victim of her own success". What did he intent to express? The Communities successfully set landmarks with the establishment of the Costum's Union (1968), the Single Market (1993), the common currency 'Euro' (1999, 2002) and the Eastern Enlargement (2004/2007). After these major achievements one may have believed that everything had already been accomplished and there was then nothing to be done anymore. Seen through this lens, becoming the victim of one's own successes may also be the fate of short term empires. However, the EU has not yet collapsed: The Bank- and Capital Union, the Digital Union, Energy Union and a Transport Union as well as a Social Union could be promising future projects that bear the potential to hold the EU together and to boost its further development, but the "Brexit" in 2020 signiefies a severe break.

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<sup>74</sup>Cf. also the contribution by Müller in this volume.



### What about Alexander III (the Great) and his “empire”?

Considering the characteristics for short-term empires as just outlined above, one may wonder why this volume does not include a paper on Alexander III (the Great). At first glance, Alexander’s realm appears to be a first-class example for a short-term empire. The main-narratives of modern historiography present his realm as an empire with an ultra-short duration emerging from military conquest, which was achieved by one of the most charismatic rulers ever, who subdued nearly the whole inhabited world as a *homo triumphans*.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, the conquest itself and thus the crucial phase of formation of this empire is characterized as an over-engaged enterprise of Alexander, rushing his already demoralized troops to the allegedly unknown borders of the world. Even after he had seized the largest empire of his time, the Macedon’s desire for conquest was still not satisfied. While having defeated all his opponents in combat, only mutiny rendered his unlimited ambitions impossible wherefore he was unable to capture the remaining parts of the inhabited world.<sup>76</sup> Within the conquered lands the young ruler’s authority was troubled by disloyal indigenous elites and Macedonians, which caused structural changes in both exercise of power and structuring the army. The entire process of conquest caused a mutation of Alexander’s personality from a charismatic leader to a hubristic despot. When Alexander died only two years after he had officially proclaimed the end of the conquest, he was up to his next campaigns which would have led him to Arabia and far into the Mediterranean West. However, his sudden death at the age of 33 rendered his plans impossible. After he terminated his final breath, the whole empire fell to pieces and self-proclaimed successors fought endless and futile wars.

This master narrative of the history of Alexander’s empire created by modern scholars, literally screams out for attesting it a role as *the* prototype of a short-term empire in world history. However, this narrative is the product of a specific perspective based on Greek and Roman sources and thus shows a bias towards Eurocentrism. This becomes apparent when the preconditions for the rise of Alexander’s empire, namely the imperial structures of the Achaemenid-Persian empire, are ignored or are reduced to play the role of a voiceless object of the Macedonian conquest.<sup>77</sup> Thus, giving this ancient Near Eastern empire a voice of its own does not only challenge the modern narrative but also question the character of Alexander’s empire as a short-term empire.<sup>78</sup>

What we face is a major problem of sources. Not a single account written during or shortly after Alexander’s reign survived to our times.<sup>79</sup> The main difficulty of modern reconstructions is the critical examination of the doubled distorted image of the historical

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<sup>75</sup>The most influential biographies—or at least biographical treatments—on Alexander in the last years are: Müller 2019; Wiemer 2015; Worthington 2014; Nawotka 2010; Cartledge 2004.

<sup>76</sup>On the alleged mutiny at the river Hyphasis see Howe/Müller 2012.

<sup>77</sup>For critics among modern scholarship see Bowden 2014.

<sup>78</sup>Cf. Degen 2019; Briant 2010; Briant 2002.

<sup>79</sup>Collections of fragments in translation are Gilhaus 2017 and Pearson 1960.



Alexander created by our sources.<sup>80</sup> Both the lost accounts of the so-called “primary authors” and the works of the so-called “secondary authors” which survived to our times did not aim to give a neutral account on Alexander. All these authors lived in times of specific political situations and pursued certain aims, which rendered a neutral “report” of the Macedon impossible.<sup>81</sup> We do not have access to one single comprehensive account about Alexander originating from his own time; exceptions are only some epigraphical sources and coins which provide important but limited insights into the structure of Alexander’s empire.<sup>82</sup> The ancient Near Eastern perspective still remains silent, due to a nearly total absence of sources mentioning Alexander.<sup>83</sup> Hence, as a consequence, “story-telling” and critical reconstruction go hand in hand in scholarship. Nevertheless, new approaches shed different light on so-called “scholarly myths” and view Alexander’s reign from new perspectives.<sup>84</sup> These recent studies on Alexander underline the continuity of local structures and ideas of empire by viewing Alexander’s realm in the larger context of ancient Near Eastern empires of the first millennium BCE. It is therefore much more appropriate to characterize Alexander’s realm as an empire in transformation than to feign entirely new structures of very limited duration. This leads us finally to the important aspect of time as the essential point of definition for a short-term empire.

Ascribing an empire the attribute “short-term” defines its duration measured in relative time as key. The fact, that Alexander’s reign only lasted twelve years, appears to be a proper qualification to define his rule as a short-term empire. However, a closer look immediately reveals certain problems. They start with determining the exact date when Alexander is supposed to have decisively defeated the Persian empire and started to transform military supremacy into the establishment of a new power structure (331, 330, 327 or 325 BCE).<sup>85</sup> Anyhow, the short period of time from the official end of his campaign in 325 to his unexpected death in 323 matches the idea of a consolidated empire. Do these two years suffice to speak of an empire of its own?

In the last two years of his reign Alexander may have consolidated his power, but due to his young age the question of succession remained unsolved. Although, after his death the Argead dynasty continued to rule *de iure* over the “Macedonian” empire for a short period of time, *de facto* Alexander’s former generals and friends exercised power which finally caused the empire to fall to pieces. However, it may be appropriate to extend the empire’s duration from Alexander’s death to the year 306 or even to the battle of Ipsus in 301, when each of the so-called successors claimed legitimate rule over the former empire

<sup>80</sup>Nawotka/Rollinger/Wiesehöfer/Wojciechowska 2018; Müller 2014.

<sup>81</sup>Howe/Müller 2012; Wiemer 2011; Spencer 2002; Roisman 1984; Rosen 1979.

<sup>82</sup>Epigraphical sources: Rhodes/Osborne 2003 esp. 76; 83; 84; 85; 86; 101; Hatzopoulos 1997; Heisserer 1980; Numismatics: LeRider 2003.

<sup>83</sup>Van der Spek 2003; Nawotka/Wojciechowska 2016.

<sup>84</sup>Müller 2019, 221–236; Anson 2013; see now also Degen 2020; Rollinger/Degen 2020.

<sup>85</sup>Nawotka 2012; Fox 2010; Muccioli 2004.

from Macedon to the Punjab in its entirety.<sup>86</sup> Nobody would deny that distinctive parts of Alexander's former realm became political entities with imperial ambitions of their own at the end of the 4th century BCE, but the idea of a cohesive empire survived, at least, for twenty years after the death of its founder.<sup>87</sup> This observation characterizes Alexander's empire rather as an "imaginative empire" than a "short-term empire" *per definitionem*.<sup>88</sup>

Alexander's empire remained and imaginative point of reference for the Hellenistic Age and far beyond. A similar example of such an imaginative empire is the *Sacrum Imperium Romanum* of Early Modern Age (16th–19th century), whose rulers claimed to be successors of the Roman emperors although their empire neither included the ancient capital Rome itself nor the vast eastern parts of the ancient empire. Also in this case, the idea survived and the claim of power was exercised by a "successor-empire" localized in a border region of the former "mother-empire". Neither the empires of Alexander's successors, nor the *Sacrum Imperium Romanum* were as successful as their imaginative role models.

Our sources portray Alexander as a charismatic ruler and a true military genius, who crashes the enemy's rows ahead of his troops and never suffers defeat in any of his battles. In some cases, Alexander even successfully persuaded his exhausted troops to continue the campaign. The literary portrayal of his person underwent a mythologization due to his own as well as his successors' propaganda.<sup>89</sup> Modern research highlighted a couple of literary role models such as Xenophon's fictitious Persian king Cyrus the Great, on which ancient authors heavily relied to portray the young king as a successful ruler. However, modern scholars analysed the different steps of the conquest which provoked a new interpretation of Alexander's role as conqueror.<sup>90</sup> The success of the Macedonian campaign was merely the merit of Macedonian generals and magnates.<sup>91</sup> From the very beginning of Alexander's reign there was considerable opposition against the young ruler among his entourage. Scholarship happens to qualify the executions of Philotas, Parmenio and Cleitus the Black as great "catastrophes" of Alexander's reign. Nevertheless, the transformation of the traditional Macedonian court through the partial adaptation of Achaemenid court structures marked the beginning of a new system of power, which propelled the opposition of formerly influential Macedonian aristocracy against Alexander.<sup>92</sup> Seen through this lens, it is plausible to state that Alexander's conquest was rather the success of an experienced military network than the work of a single military genius. The extraordinary charisma of Alexander is, therefore, in all probability

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<sup>86</sup>Hauben/Meeus 2014.

<sup>87</sup>Strootman 2014; Meuus 2014.

<sup>88</sup>Bichler 2014.

<sup>89</sup>Müller 2014; Stewart 1993.

<sup>90</sup>Bosworth 1988.

<sup>91</sup>Müller 2019; Heckel 2012; Müller 2003.

<sup>92</sup>Müller 2014, 187–246; Müller 2003.

an invention of both his propaganda and later authors and glosses over the importance of his father's entourage.<sup>93</sup>

Be that as it may, opposition against Alexander provokes a reconsideration of the extent to which his rule was accepted within his empire and the extent to which a lack of legitimacy can be ascertained. One of the reasons why Alexander was so successful in conquering the Achaemenid empire was the multicultural character of the latter. According to Pierre Briant this is the reason why Persian rule could have been easily substituted by Macedonian rule.<sup>94</sup> At least, one Greek revolt and two Persian aristocrats as would-be kings are attested for Alexander's reign. Already from the reign of Artaxerxes III (359–338) onwards, local elites gained more and more power within the Achaemenid empire. It appears that Alexander overcame the former lack of legitimization by combining indigenous conceptions of power with Macedonian kingship and by coming to arrangements with local elites.

Dealing with the character of Alexander's empire, one could easily state that a critical analysis of the structure of the Macedonian conquest results in the conclusion that his empire was no short-term empire by definition. Nonetheless, two objections should be raised. First, although his realm emerged from a conqueror-state to an empire of ultra-short duration, it survived as an imaginative empire after it had fallen to pieces. On this basis, it is rather appropriate to attest the two decades after Alexander's death the character of a "saddle time" than to define Alexander's empire as being short-term.

Second, one could rather see the late-Achaemenid time from the reign of Artaxerxes III to Alexander and his successors as a coherent period, in which the transformation from Achaemenid to Hellenistic rule did emerge.<sup>95</sup>

In the end, both the duration of an empire seen as process and its impact on the entangled history of empires are key for the characterization of a short-term empire. In this case it is convenient to refer to Fernand Braudel's description of historical processes. The French historian defined historical processes by determining their different qualities of impact on later times as *courte durée* (e.g. politics of the day), *moyenne durée* and *longue durée*.<sup>96</sup> Adapting these concepts for the description of imperial structures, we clearly need to distinguish Alexander's empire from the short-term empires in this volume. While the political impact of a short-term empire comes to an end with its existence, the empire of Alexander still existed for about 20 years as an imaginative reference point. But that does not mean, that Alexander's empire was totally different from the empires discussed in this volume. Its collapse caused the emergence of a couple of short-term empires. However, it is both a matter of perspective and sources when we decide to qualify a state as short-term empire. Neither the conquest of Alexander nor the wars of

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<sup>93</sup>Zahrnt 2016a; Zahrnt 2016b; Anson 2013, 83–120.

<sup>94</sup>Briant 2002, 817–871; Briant 2006.

<sup>95</sup>Briant 2009.

<sup>96</sup>Braudel 1990.

the successors had a dramatic effect on the Mesopotamian idea of ongoing kingship. For this reason, we should also consider the cultural peculiarities and individual cultures of memories when we talk about short-term empires.

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