



World archaeology

Archaeology: The Characteristics of Empire

Phil Perkins

Michael Smith, Professor of Anthropology at Arizona State University, is at the early stages of a new project in Mexico at Calixtlahuaca in the Taluca Valley. I asked him how he sets about discovering what changed when the area was conquered by the Aztec Empire in AD 1475.

Michael Smith

We have to establish an archaeological chronology that can distinguish the periods before and after the valley was conquered. Now, I worked for many years before this in the Mexican state of Morelos on just these issues, and I did work out a chronology, and we studied the effects of Aztec conquest in that area. In that area, Morelos, we found that there was not a great change after conquest by the Aztecs. There was some economic exploitation, standards of living declined a little bit, but it was not a dramatic effect on the hinterland settlements. Now, whether there was a greater effect in the Toluca Valley, that seems logical, but we won't be able to say for sure until we work out the chronology and have the excavations to show.

Phil Perkins

Here, Michael and his team are just beginning to piece together the archaeological story of what happened. But there is additional historical information as well. Combining the historical, or written, sources with the archaeological finds can reveal what happened after the conquest in 1475.

Michael Smith

Immigrants came in from the Valley of Mexico. Rulers were set up. And this was a little different from the way the Aztec Empire had operated in other areas or in previous times, because we think for the most part the empire used the strategy of indirect control. They rely on local kings. They didn't really mess around in local politics as long as the subject kings acknowledged that the empire was in charge, as long as they paid tribute, then they were left alone. And sometimes the Aztec Empire has been compared to a Mafia protection racket. Pay us your tribute and we will leave you alone to do whatever you want. And that kind of hands off, indirect control has been the general model for the Aztec Empire, but the Toluca Valley was a little different. They really exercised a lot more direct control, more direct administration of the area.

Phil Perkins

It would seem, then, that although some aspects of life may not have altered, the Aztecs do seem to have changed the political and economic organisation

of the valley. As we have heard, there were few changes to Pompeii in terms of the remains found before and after the Roman conquest. But other signs of development are apparent. Rick Jones.

Rick Jones

You do see changes in the economic structures which are part of the empire – that the peace and prosperity if you like, the economic growth, that the empire seems to bring is reflected in the trade patterns that Pompeii is connected in to. You see the changes in the supply of goods. In the first half of the first century AD, when regional supplies of oil and wine decline and they are replaced by long-distance trade, and that is part of a broader phenomenon. We see that Pompeii is part of a Mediterranean-wide trading system.

Phil Perkins

So the empire, once established, brought peace and prosperity. But is this what held the empire together?

Rick Jones

The paradox of the Roman Empire in my view is that it is created by force but is not held together by force. The army is out at the edges and controlling the periphery, but the areas immediately behind that are absorbed into the system, and there is some sort of trick to make the provincials participate within the empire management, if you like. So it's a devolved system. Of course it has things like common currency and of course it manages security quite well, because it stops wars and internal wars and therefore prosperity develops. But, for example, it's the provincial aristocracies who become military commanders, so somebody from one province turns up somewhere else as a military commander and that emperors, certainly from the end of the first century AD, you start to see the first non-Italian emperors – the Spanish and Gauls and then eventually Africans, and from anywhere – become emperor, because they are successful generals. So, the empire isn't as focused as the British Empire was. It's a much more inclusive approach, despite the fact that it's first of all conquered by, as the British general said, 'kicking the door in at various places around with very severe force'.

Phil Perkins

Can the same forces be seen to have kept the Aztec Empire together?
Michael Smith.

Michael Smith

I have argued that one of the forces that held the empire together was interaction among elites throughout the empire. The conquered elites, the kings and nobles, were invited to the imperial capital for feasts and ceremonies, and they were given lots of privileges. They were kept in power by the empire. And there is even some cases where local polities were allowed to continue expansion at the expense of their neighbours, even under the empire. So the empire gave benefits to the local kings and this is one of the things that ensured their co-operation and their continued payment of tributes. So there is interaction among widely scattered elites and that was one of the forces that held the empire together. The commonalities of material culture, the common styles of architecture, the common styles of sculptures

and other material objects, those styles were widely shared. They were closely connected to the elites and I think they provide evidence of this interaction among elites. The fact the king in Calixtlahuaca was building the same kind of palace as the kings in the cities of the Valley of Mexico suggests that there is a form of interaction and adherence to a common model.

Phil Perkins

As an imperial strategy then, could it be argued that architecture, for example, was a style that was projected out on to the imperial provinces?

Michael Smith

I am a little cautious about saying that cultural models were being projected out because most of these buildings were probably built before the development and expansion of the Aztec Empire. In fact, these styles we know from other sites in other areas that have been dated so far, that some of the Aztec style architecture long pre-dates the formation of the empire, and it's better to think about this as widespread central Mexican architectural style that the Aztecs participated in and that areas in provincial areas participated in, not because anyone was necessarily imitating anyone else or telling anyone else how to build their buildings, but this was a widespread process that a lot of areas were using, and in that sense it's interesting to compare this architectural style to the Incas in the Andes. Inca-style architecture is found in the imperial capital, Cuzco, and it's found at other sites throughout the Inca Empire. But in that case, we know that the Inca architectural style spread because the empire deliberately built cities, and deliberately built the kinds of buildings that they were used to, using the style of stonemasonry, the style of urban layout, and that Inca architecture is fairly widely distributed within the Inca Empire because, when the empire expanded, they deliberately built cities and they deliberately used cities as part of their imperial process. On the other hand, Aztec architecture when it's found outside of the imperial capital, it dates to long before the formation of the empire. So those similarities are based more on common cultural patterns and widespread interaction that predated the formation of the empire.

Phil Perkins

There are certainly similarities between empires, particularly in the role of an emperor. The dominance of an elite, the use of force, the wide territorial control and the economic interconnectivity between different regions of the empire. At least some of these features are shared by another people in Central America, the Maya. I asked Norman Hammond, Professor of Archaeology at Boston University, if there was ever a Maya Empire.

Norman Hammond

The Maya kingdoms seem to have been a mosaic of relatively small and very fractious communities, rather like Renaissance Italy or medieval Germany or even Classical Greece. They fought each other all the time. Their kings proclaimed their high status, their independence, and also their conquest of other cities. And the nearest that the Maya ever got to anything approaching an empire was between about AD 560 and 695, when the great city of Calakmul put together an alliance of other cities to try to surround its enormous rival Tikal, and to try to squeeze Tikal into submission. These

independent communities did actually combine on a fairly short-term basis into alliances, a bit like NATO joining up to try to contain the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

Phil Perkins

So there doesn't seem to be anything inevitable about the formation of empires. Some characteristics of empires were evident in the Maya, but there was not sufficient social cohesion and the concentration of power to enable the formation of an empire. But what about the other end of things? So far, we have concentrated on the establishment and maintenance of empires. What about the end of empires? Is there something about empires that means that empires inevitably fall?

Chris Scarre

It's easy enough to think about the Roman Empire as one example, or the Assyrian Empire, both of which broke up into their constituent parts after a certain period. But we could also consider the formation of the Chinese state, if you want to call it that, as an empire. That is to say, China, from the Great Wall down to Hong Kong and the sea, is today historically, and has been for two thousand years, very much regarded as a single political block. It has occasionally broken up, it's been larger and smaller at different times. But of course, all that came about initially through the conquest of the seven or eight major states of China in the third century BC by one of those states, and by the first emperor whose tomb is well known and the pottery army, of course, commemorates. But, in a sense, that is an imperial construct, which never really fell apart in the way, say, that the Roman Empire fell apart. So, I think we have different trajectories and different outcomes.