***Translatio Imperii:* the emergence and**

**evolution of empire as a discourse**

*Russell Foster, FRGS*

*Newcastle University*

[*russell.foster@newcastle.ac.uk*](mailto:russell.foster@newcastle.ac.uk)

Our quest for European Empire begins in what might at first be thought an unusual place. We commence not in the gleaming glass conference halls of the European Parliament, where elected officials applaud our Unity in Diversity. Nor in the conspiratorial corridors of Queen Victoria’s Colonial Office, where bewhiskered bureaucrats dissect their maps and wipe out nations with the stroke of a pen, all in the apparent name of civilisation. Nor even in the treacherous marble atriums of the Roman Forum, where patricians pontificate on the privileges of *patrocinium*, blissfully unaware that their dying Republic will soon be trampled beneath the heels of Julius Caesar’s coming legions. Our story, the genesis and evolution of *empire*, begins in a rather more unexpected place.

We find ourselves in a gaudy, over-decorated room in the Blachernae Palace of Constantinople on a sweltering Saturday afternoon in the summer of 968 AD, where two high-ranking officials are engaged in a furious shouting-match over a word neither of them seems to quite understand. One man is the Frankish bishop, Liudprand of Cremona, on temporary secondment as ambassador from Otto I of the Holy Roman Empire. The other is the princely Leo Phocas, Master of Ceremonies for the court of Constantinople and brother of the Byzantine emperor Nicephorus II. The argument in the emperor’s palace that day was recorded in a long, sycophantic diary kept by Liudprand to show to his monarch back in Germany, and it is worth investigating in full. For the episode casts light upon the very essence of a single, monumentally troublesome word over which our contemporary politicians, pundits, and scholars tirelessly replicate the same fierce argument of that angry afternoon in Constantinople; *empire*.

*On the fourth of June we arrived at Constantinople, and after a miserable reception, meant as an insult to yourselves, we were given the most miserable and disgusting quarters. The palace where we were confined was certainly large and open, but it neither kept out the cold nor kept in the heat. Armed soldiers were set out to guard us and prevent my people from going out, and any others from coming in. This dwelling, only accessible to us who were shut inside it, was so far distant from the Emperor’s residence that we were quite out of breath when we walked there – we did not ride. To add to our troubles, the Greek wine we found undrinkable because of the mixture in it of pitch, resin and plaster. The house itself had no water and we could not even buy any to quench our thirst. All this was a serious “Oh dear me!”, but there was another “Oh dear me” even worse, and that was our warden, the man who provided us with our daily wants. If you were to seek another like him, you certainly would not find him on earth; you might perhaps in Hell. Like a raging torrent he poured upon us every calamity, every extortion, every expense, every grief and misery that he could invent. In our one hundred and twenty days not one passed without bringing to us groaning and lamentation.*

*On the fourth of June, as I said above, we arrived at Constantinople and waited with our horses in heavy rain outside the Carian Gate until five o’clock in the afternoon. At five o’clock [Emperor] Nicephorus ordered us to be admitted on foot, for he did not think us worthy to use the horses with which your clemency had provided us, and we were escorted to the aforesaid hateful, waterless, draughty stone house. On the sixth of June, which was the Saturday before Pentecost, I was brought before the Emperor’s brother Leo, Marshal of the Court and Chancellor; and there we tired ourselves with a fierce argument over your imperial title. He called you not “emperor”, which is* Basileus *in his tongue, but – most insultingly –* Rex*, which is “king” in ours. I told him that the thing meant was the same though the word was different, and he then said that I had come not to make peace but to stir up strife. Finally he got up in a rage...*

Liudprand of Cremona

*Relatio de Legatione Constantinopolitana* I-II[[1]](#footnote-1)

It would be difficult to disagree with the historian John Julius Norwich’s assessment that more than a thousand years after his death, Liudprand still deserves some retrospective sympathy for his especially bad day.[[2]](#footnote-2) But discounting for the moment a wry smile, let us consider the intriguing circumstances of Liudprand’s complaint and what his troublesome journey reveals about the essence of empire.

Upon arrival into the capital city of an emperor who looks down upon Western Europeans as presumptuous, conceited barbarians, Liudprand is by his own admission thirsty, cold, exhausted, far from home as he has travelled the breadth of the world known to Early Medieval Europeans, soaked to the bone after spending the whole day lingering pointlessly outside the city walls in a torrential downpour, incessantly harangued by the hellish concierge of his wretched accomodations, and when refreshment finally arrives it comes in the form of a wine cocktail that would make even the most courageous connoisseur think twice. Yet what is most curious in Liudprand’s litany of woe is that the gravest offence – in his own words ‘most insultingly’ – comes not from any of these physical hardships, but from a dispute over the correct form of address for his monarch.

This critical aspect is easily overlooked given the almost comical catalogue of doom which Liudprand subsequently records during his depressing sojourn in Constantinople.[[3]](#footnote-3) But the initial spat between Liudprand and Leo, easily dismissed as just another example of the Byzantines’ legendary belligerence over single words,[[4]](#footnote-4) or merely one of many of the characteristic diplomatic squabbles sparked by Frankish braggadocio and the Byzantines’ self-anointed supremacy, is invaluably important.

Exasperated, Liudprand records that he and Leo argued to the point of exhaustion over how to refer to Liudprand’s superior; the recently-crowned Otto I of the Holy Roman Empire, referred to in the West using the Latin word *imperator*. This word had once designated a military rank in the Roman Republic, but as we shall see later the term morphed into one of several titles bestowed upon Roman rulers in Late Antiquity. Meanwhile the monarch of Constantinople, Nicephorus II, also referring to himself as an emperor by using the approximate Greek term *basileus*,[[5]](#footnote-5) rejects Otto’s equivalent title. When the Byzantine Chancellor refers to Otto as a lowly *rex* (king)rather than a full *imperator*,Liudprand’s vitriolic response is to claim that *basileus* and *imperator* have the same meaning despite being different words, and that he will not suffer to refer to his *imperator* Otto as a mere *rex*. The Chancellor, as we are reliably informed, storms away in a huff, refusing to acknowledge Otto as an equal to Nicephorus who, as *basileus* of Constantinople, is the rightful – and only – *emperor* of the *Roman Empire*. This may appear little more than an amusing aside into the intricacies of difficult diplomacy between two equally unhelpful ambassadors, but in fact it illuminates the very nature of *empire*.

In their room at the Blachernae Palace, Liudprand and Leo are squabbling over a word. Although the two men are shouting at each other in Greek,[[6]](#footnote-6) the word causing so much trouble is Latin. This is the word *imperator*, a derivative of *imperium.* Liudprand and Leo’s argument over the use of *imperator* is not mere pettiness. The word *imperium* is the root of our modern word *empire* and its equivalents in all contemporary Romance, Scandinavian, and Baltic languages; the word over which modern scholars replicate Leo and Liudprand’s shouting match. And disagreements over the use of the word had long preceded Liudprand’s arrival in Constantinople. Indeed the origin of our fluid word “empire”, and its existence as a discourse rather than a specific term, is found not in the writings and proclamations of classical Rome but yet again in the Early Middle Ages, spawning numerous episodes exacerbating the already tense international politics between Franks and Byzantines in which “empire” emerged. To illustrate, let us examine a later extract from Liudprand’s diary:

*To increase my calamities, on the day of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary the holy mother of God, an ill-omened embassy came from the apostolic and universal Pope John with a letter asking Nicephorus “the emperor of the Greeks” to conclude an alliance and firm friendship with his beloved and spiritual son Otto, “august emperor of the Romans”. If you ask me how these words, and manner of address... did not cost the bearer his life, I cannot answer...“The audacity of it!” they [the Byzantines] cried, “to call the universal emperor of the Romans, the one and only Nicephorus, the great, the august, ‘emperor of the Greeks’! And to style a poor barbaric creature ‘emperor of the Romans!’*[[7]](#footnote-7)

As Liudprand records, the Byzantines of the tenth century were not exactly happy at treating the Frankish monarch as an equal to their own emperor, considered to be God’s regent on Earth;[[8]](#footnote-8) nor were they overjoyed at being expected to share the title of Emperor of Rome. For ‘a jumped-up barbarian chieftan [who] was now calling himself Emperor’[[9]](#footnote-9) – in Byzantine eyes – was not only a grotesque insult but an affront to political propriety; for it was Constantinople, and not Rome, which was the continuation of “Rome”. This is an invaluable point, so let us examine it further.

Nicephorus is in a rage at the Pope’s letter, and as the nearest Western European within earshot, Liudprand is now being harangued by Byzantine courtiers who rant that the city of Rome is a ruin inhabited only by ‘vile slaves, fishermen, confectioners, poulterers, bastards, and prostitutes’, under a ‘silly blockhead of a Pope’.[[10]](#footnote-10) The real “Rome”, the Byzantines proclaim, is not an Italian town – for in their eyes, the Eternal City is nothing more than a slum inhabited by savages and squatters. Further, “Rome” is not, in the Byzantines’ eyes, even Constantinople as a city. Instead, it is Byzantium as inheritor of an *ideal*. For while the Italian city has, in their eyes, fallen into chaos, it is Constantinople which continues the *ideal* of what Rome *used to be* ­– in their imagination – and indeed what it *should be*.[[11]](#footnote-11) The concept that Rome is a malleable *idea* rather than something fixed in a particular space and a particular time, is the very essence of empire as a discourse. The angry courtiers insulting Liudprand over Pope John’s letter shed light on this subtle yet essential distinction. Empire – for them the *Imperium Romanum –* exists not in space or time, but in the collective consciousness. It is a discourse. This is tricky, so in order to clarify the argument being made let us return again to the past; this time, to the very origin of empire as a discourse.

Our scene shifts from a Bosphoran summer in 968 to an Italian winter over a century and a half earlier. It is Christmas Day, 800 AD, and we find ourselves amidst a small huddle of bishops and nobles shivering in the gloomy Romanesque nave of the old St. Peter’s Basilica, in the heart of Rome. At the altar, Pope Leo III is hiding a crown randomly rummaged from the Vatican’s treasury while mentally rehearsing a Latin translation of the Byzantine rite for proclaiming a new emperor, waiting to begin Mass. Meanwhile the ageing Frankish warlord Charlemagne, King of the Franks and conqueror of the largest single polity in Western Europe since the days of the Caesars, paces up the aisle to pray. The scene is recorded by two scholars; Charlemagne’s friend Einhard, and eight decades later by the chronicler Notker the Stammerer:

*Thus Charles [Charlemagne] travelled to Rome to restore the state of the Church, which was extremely disturbed, and he spent the whole winter there. It was at this time that he received the title of Emperor [Imperator] and Augustus. At first he disliked this so much that he said that he would not have entered the church that day, even though it was a great feast day, if he had known in advance of the Pope’s plan. But he bore the animosity that the assumption of this title caused with great patience, for the Roman emperors [the Byzantines] were angry about it*.

Einhard

*Vita Karoli* Ch. XXIX[[12]](#footnote-12)

*As Charles stayed in Rome for a few days for the sake of the army, the bishop of the apostolic see [the Pope] called together all who were able to come from the neighbouring districts and then, in their presence and in the presence of all the counts of the unconquered Charles [Charlemagne], he declared him to be Emperor [Imperator] and Defender of the Roman Church. Now Charles had no guess of what was coming; and, though he could not refuse what seemed to have been divinely preordained for him, nevertheless he received his new title with no show of thankfulness. For first he thought that the Greeks would be fired by greater envy than ever and would plan some harm against the kingdom of the Franks.*

Notker the Stammerer

*Gesta Karoli*,Ch. XXVI[[13]](#footnote-13)

What is the relevance, it might be asked, of this moment when Pope Leo – by all accounts – both surprised and annoyed Charlemagne by bestowing him with the title of *Imperator Romanum*? The answer is not that the spontaneous act could have aggravated the Byzantines – which it evidently did[[14]](#footnote-14) and continued to do so for the remainder of Byzantium’s existence – but that in bestowing the title *Imperator* on Charlemagne and proclaiming *Imperium*, Pope Leo committed two acts. The first was to declare to Byzantium that the Franks were not those same barbarians who had fought over the carcass of Rome in the twilight of Antiquity, but were now civilised possessors of equal prestige, dignity, privilege, legitimacy, and authority as the self-styled *Romoiao* in Byzantium. The subsequent tension explains why, one hundred and eighty-six years later, Liudprand of Cremona found himself an unwelcome guest in Constantinople, as ambassador from a Westerner who perceived himself to be the equal of the monarch in the East. The Pope’s second act, though, was of infinitely greater importance. For on Christmas Day 800, Pope Leo manufactured an imaginary history and a self-anointed status of “civilisation”, and insodoing unwittingly created a discourse which, over the next twelve centuries, would evolve into the concept over which so much ink is angrily spilled today.

In St. Peter’s in 800, Blachernae Palace in 968, and innumerable other episodes in which Franks and Byzantines competed for the privilege, legitimacy, authority, and prestige afforded by recognition as defenders of civilisation and order, the word causing so much tension remained the same. This was *imperium*; the *Imperium Romanum* which Constantinople’s medieval rulers claimed to have inherited, in an unbroken chain, when Constantine the Great moved the capital and thus the essence of “Rome” from a dying West to the vigorous East; and the rival *Imperium Romanum* which Pope Leo resurrected in defiance of Byzantium. It is little wonder that, as Liudprand records, he and Prince Leo spent a whole day arguing over which word to use – for *imperium*, the root of all modern words for *empire*, is one of the most discussed yet ill-defined terms in politics.

***Empires of the Mind***

Europe is no stranger to empire. Following the gradual fading-away of the Roman hegemony, the continent ‘divided into so many independent and hostile states’,[[15]](#footnote-15) miniature empires or phantoms of *imperium*, legitimising their own existence through overt connections back to Rome. Nor has Europe only *been* empires, it has *had* empires: a critical conceptual distinction.[[16]](#footnote-16) The Age of Discovery took Europe’s imperial squabbles to the rest of the world, carving up the Earth in a scramble for exploitable colonies to fuel imperial rivalry at home. It is only in the last half-century, following the cataclysm of two world wars driven in part by aggressive imperialist ambitions among European states, that the continent has settled. Yet this is not to say that Europeans have abandoned empire in the murky mists of history.

In recent decades, academia, journalism, and popular commentary have seen a renaissance in discussions of empire. Much of this has been directed at the world’s last surviving hyperpower and its geopolitical, cultural, and economic activity since the end of the Cold War.[[17]](#footnote-17) The quantity of literature on modern post-Cold War empire suggests that the imperial phenomenon is far from dead. We may not go as far as John Darwin in stating that empire remains alive to the extent that we live in Tamerlane’s shadow,[[18]](#footnote-18) but the point remains pertinent. We do not face only the legacies of empire, but its continued existence in new incarnations. However, scholars are visibly divided in their perceptions of empire, and not all currently projected models of empire are applicable to the European Union.

Framing the European Union as an empire has obvious implications because, as Stephen Howe unequivocally reminds us, *empire* and *imperialism* are ‘inherently immoral or illegitimate’ concepts in the modern world.[[19]](#footnote-19) *Imperial* is an undesirable tag, one with inevitable connotations of monopolistic violence and unequal social relations inevitably manifest as racial or gender-based dichotomies favouring one group at the expense of another. It is understandable why governments deny this imperial label with such vehemence, and why the use of the term causes controversy when applied to the European Union.

*Empire* is a similarly undesirable word; invoking those political anachronisms which ‘ought to remain buried in the marble and sepia pasts’.[[20]](#footnote-20) And for good reason. As Michael Ignatieff asserts, ‘nobody likes empires’.[[21]](#footnote-21) Yet this is far from an obituary of empire. Amongst the rich diversity of states seeking to establish and reinforce new identities in a world simultaneously undergoing globalisation and regionalisation, perhaps none are as unusual, and as difficult to categorise, as the European Union. This ‘somewhat strange hermaphrodite’[[22]](#footnote-22) exhibits the traits of many polities. It has features of a nation-state, indicators of a federation, and – as a growing body of International Relations theorists posit – characteristics of empire.

Of the countless essentially-contested concepts in both human geography and political science, perhaps none is as hotly debated – and as unclear – as empire. As a mere word, empire means different things to different scholars, empire is both specific and vague, it is *ad hoc* and remarkably flexible in its definitions. This is both a strength and a weakness for the critical researcher – empire is adaptable and its characteristics can be seen in many geopolitical forms, but at the same time empire is a vague and slippery concept, eluding even the most basic of definitions. If we are to examine whether the European Union is an empire, and how the Union constructs the benevolent imperial imagination among its citizens required for empire’s survival, it is necessary first to examine just what is meant by empire.

It is perhaps ironic that although the concept of empire has existed in European intellectual thought since Thucydides, arriving at a definition for the word is tantamount to unravelling the Gordian Knot. A cursory glance at academic literature from only the last decade reveals that empire defies all efforts to restrict it to a bounded definition – a pattern seemingly constant throughout intellectual history. Empire means different things to those who build it; imaginations of empire are influenced by the historiography of chroniclers writing at their own time;[[23]](#footnote-23) public perceptions of empire oscillate over time between adoration and embarrassment – as perceptions of Britain’s empire in the last century so aptly demonstrate.[[24]](#footnote-24) In light of such erratic interpretations of what empire is and should be, an examination of its characteristics must proceed with intellectual caution.

The reason for this prudence is that empire is not a simple word. What *is* empire? This is a simple question asked by a broad spectrum of scholars, many of whose works begin with the same inquiry.[[25]](#footnote-25) Yet as is the case with so many terms which overlap the boundaries of academic research, “empire” is a contested word. The immediate problem facing scholars of empire is to construct a plausible definition, a neat term which encompasses the core theories, concepts, and characteristics of the word within well-defined and clearly-delineated terminological borders.

It is not surprising that such a positivist approach – a conceptual hangover from the well-intentioned but misguided days of objective geography and political *science* – is unsatisfactory. Empire is a slippery concept, which like its historical and theoretical cousins globalisation, modernity, and postcolonialism, defies attempts to fix a standard definition. Empire is everything and nothing, a concept perhaps only understandable in the context of the similar terms in which it is bound up. Stephen Howe acknowledges this tendency to understand empire only as one aspect of a broader project involving such terms as ‘informal empire, sub-imperialism, cultural imperialism, internal colonialism, Postcolonialism, and many more’.[[26]](#footnote-26) Yet this is equally unsatisfactory.

Literature on the nature of empire is vast, intersecting interdisciplinary links and creating chronological connections across the history of the humanities and social sciences. As such, a comprehensive survey of academic works discussing the nature of empire will not be presented. There are three reasons for this.

Firstly, tackling the volume of academic literature on empire as a labour worthy of Hercules. This is not to say that a thorough and rigorous review of the literature is impossible, but rather that a clear focus must be maintained on European understandings of empire. The majority of academic discussions of modern empire focus on the United States, with only cursory mentions of Europe: if at all. Much of this literature is itself bound up in discussions of ‘Might and Right’ in military and diplomatic terminology,[[27]](#footnote-27) while even recent polemics on historical empire cannot escape explicit connections with the purported imperialism occurring in our own time. We are not interested in this vast literature as it has no connection to discussions of the European Union, whose military impotence and virtual absence of American-style jingoistic and self-righteous nationalism disqualify the EU from being considered an empire under the criteria laid out by scholarly discussions of post-Cold War “American Empire”.

Secondly, much of the literature on empire explicitly focuses upon, or implicitly leans heavily upon, empirical examples from human history. Europe certainly has no shortage of empirical imperialism, but only one case study is to be examined – the European Union. Attempts to link the European Union with historical themes and even specific polities will be examined, but only in such that these links are explicitly stated by scholars. It is not necessary to sift through the countless examples of empire – few if any of which concur on definitions – in order to construct an arbitrary and arguably pointless link between the contemporary European Union and one of the spectres of Europe’s imperial past.

Thirdly, an exhaustive review of thoughts on what empire *is*, will not lead us towards our ultimate goal. It is not our intention to construct an imperial framework through which we can perceive the European Union – pointing to the policies and actions of Brussels in search of an imperial agenda. This itself is not feasible for two reasons. One is that such a positivist approach to empire, seeking to identify clear and unique characteristics, is fundamentally flawed. Empire defies categorisation – every crime laid at empire’s feet and every imperial virtue praised by its supporters, exists in the context of other forms of government from the city-states of monarchical Mesopotamia to the stumbling nation-states and emergent regional blocs of the democratising, Digital Age world. Another is that, as Philip Pomper makes clear, ‘states fulfilling the formal definitions of empire are not to be found’.[[28]](#footnote-28) This is not to say that empires have vanished, but rather that the term “empire” is no longer a word which is triumphantly and publicly proclaimed. In order to understand Europe as an empire, we must first – in light of the above – understand how different scholars interpret empire.

Empire, as the editors of the *Dictionary of Human Geography* suggest, is commonly understood in its classic sense as ‘an extensive territory and polity, encompassing diverse lands and peoples, that is ruled, more or less directly and effectively, by a single person’.[[29]](#footnote-29) This would appear to be a model answer, yet the editors attach an immediate qualifier to this statement: ‘Empire has taken diverse forms and eludes a single meaning or definition’.[[30]](#footnote-30) It is with this problem that we begin, as it is critical to understanding empire.

Empire means many things to many writers. Bernard Porter highlights this semantic difficulty by reminding us that not only the meaning, but the interpretation and perception, of “empire” and its semantic sibling “imperialism” has shifted significantly over time, with the result that identifying empire becomes a near-impossible task. Much existing literature only exacerbates this problem, by stretching the definitions of the word until empire can mean anything we want it to, based upon a variety of characteristics and grounded in different, sometimes contradictory, epistemological and philosophical frameworks. While it is an ironic imperialism of categories to impose one person’s organisation upon an existing system, a form of order is necessary if we are to make sense of conceptual chaos. As such, the literature examined below is grouped into two categories based upon their fundamental answers as to what empire is. These are: empire as a historical phenomenon; and empire as defined by characteristic(s).

Empire is, as John Darwin argues, frequently perceived as a recent historical phenomenon rooted in European territories and European attitudes, a Modern Age expression of economic avarice and systemised social prejudice in which the non-industrial world became subordinated to Europe’s squabbling hegemonies in a quest for resources, power, and vainglorious pomp.[[31]](#footnote-31) Building upon the distinction between *being* and *having* empire, Darwin acknowledges that appropriative empire – in which resources and peoples are expropriated for the benefit of a static core – is perhaps understandable as a European invention of recent centuries. Similarly, a Marxist interpretation of empire is historically based. While Marx himself had remarkably little to say on empire,[[32]](#footnote-32) Vladimir Lenin’s hypothesis interprets empire and imperialism as the inevitable consequence of the capitalist mode of production and capitalism’s quest for new markets.[[33]](#footnote-33) Thus, empire in this sense emerges only at a particular period in the historical dialectic, as part of a distinct economic and geopolitical teleology.

Two problems emerge with this chronological approach. First is the confusion between *empire* and *imperialism.* Tarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey remind us that the two may be related, but are distinguishable and not necessarily mutually inclusive.[[34]](#footnote-34) It is possible – as human history demonstrates – for an ethnically heterogeneous ‘empire’ to reject an ‘imperial’ policy of actively annexing territory and assimilating other populations. The self-acknowledged, pre-capitalist empires of Early Modern Europe, in particular the Holy Roman Empire (HRE), bear witness to empire’s ability to remain geopolitically fixed.[[35]](#footnote-35) Simultaneously, it is equally possible for a ‘non-empire’, for example a relatively homogeneous nation-state, to pursue a foreign policy few would hesitate to dub ‘imperial’. The jingoistic colonialists of late nineteenth-century Europe – particularly France – demonstrate this tendency towards democratic, nationalistic imperialism;[[36]](#footnote-36) the antithesis of empire’s purported polyculturalist assimilationism. Thus, without wishing to obfuscate the issue, it is necessary to separate empire and imperialism as *polity* and *policy*. The *policy* of imperialism can be, and has been, pursued by all manner of political figureheads from Pharaohs to Presidents,[[37]](#footnote-37) and does not necessarily occur contemporaneously with, nor even exclusively to, empire.

The second, related problem, is dialectically interpreting *empire* as the inevitable chronological consequence of economic forces. We may be tempted to concede that *imperialism* is a relatively recent by-product of capitalism. A term perhaps even more contested than empire,[[38]](#footnote-38) imperialism – as Andrew Erskine reminds us[[39]](#footnote-39) – did not enter the modern geopolitical lexicon until the early twentieth century. Is early meaning, established by Lenin and Hobson, stressed economic forces.[[40]](#footnote-40) It was not until Joseph Schumpeter that *imperialism* came to acquire a meaning of hard military power, which even then was still inextricably bound up in the context of military power to pursue economic ends.

But this monocausal approach does not fit, even in the late-Victorian heyday of imperialism. Jonathan Hart points out the spectrum of factors which contributed to imperial expansion – the desire for prestige, *mission civilatrice*, geopolitical rivalry, and the actions of individuals expanding empire without consulting their governments[[41]](#footnote-41) – of which economic forces are only one factor.[[42]](#footnote-42) Indeed, given the extraordinarily low levels of colonial trade and investment which characterised non-British Victorian imperialism,[[43]](#footnote-43) the Marxist approach to viewing empire and imperialism as the product of commercial interests, is negligible.

Interpreting empire as a chronological phenomenon can only go so far. Yet the second category of literature, treating empire as a quantifiable phenomenon based upon its characteristics, is even less satisfactory. In seeking to identify an imperial ontology, Charles Maier asserts that empires share fundamental features, that ‘no matter how they differ in culture and governance, they reveal many common characteristics’.[[44]](#footnote-44) But scholars who identify empire as the expression of a particular combination of characteristics, rarely – if ever – agree on the nature of said features. In the absence of a more negotiable structure, we shall examine examples of “quantified empire” in two categories. These are: empire as defined by geopolitical features, and empire as defined by violence.

Perhaps the most common characteristic cited in identification of empire, is the existence of what Howe describes as ‘a large, composite, multi-ethnic or multinational political unit, usually created by conquest, divided between a dominant centre and subordinate, sometimes far distant, peripheries’.[[45]](#footnote-45) This combination, or an approximation thereof, forms the basis for a number of mainstream interpretations of what an empire is – including in the European context.

Ulrich Beck and Edgar Grande adopt such an approach in their European ‘Cosmopolitan Empire’; an entity defined by ten quantifiable characteristics ranging from asymmetrical political order through to emancipatory cosmopolitanism.[[46]](#footnote-46) While such features are recognisable in the European geopolitical structure, no convincing explanation is given as to why such features render the Union an empire *per se*. Yet, as many of the scholars who use it fairly acknowledge, it is an inadequate explanation.[[47]](#footnote-47) Broad territorial holdings, territorial integrity or continuity, and the existence of a multi-cultural populace, can be applied to any number of polities including nation-states and federations who vociferously deny any link to empire.

Territorial integrity aside, another frequently-cited and apparently definitive characteristic of empire is violence. Charles Maier – who goes so far as to assert that blood is the foundation of empire[[48]](#footnote-48) – argues that ‘the ambition of empire, its territorial agenda, and its problematic frontiers create an intimate and recurring bond with the recourse to force’;[[49]](#footnote-49) and indeed, Richard Drayton perceives empire as little more than ‘the subordination of one community to a power that has the monopoly on legitimate violence within a frontier’.[[50]](#footnote-50) This characteristic of monopolistic violence is perhaps applicable to some examples of empire, and propositions of ‘American Empire’ – a hegemon reliant on its unparalleled military machine to wage a perpetual war on ‘barbaric threats to civilization’[[51]](#footnote-51) – but this feature is neither definitive of empire nor is it pertinent to the EU. The nature of the State itself is that the State alone has the authority and legitimacy to perpetrate acts of violence against its component peoples, and this remains a constant in all political combinations. To claim that force is exclusive or definitive may be true for imperialism, but not empire. Manifest violence is a feature found in all manner of polities, while even structural violence is far from exclusive to the imperial format.

As Maier points out, attempting to conclusively apply or reject the *imperial* label to any polity on the basis of its characteristics inevitably traps the argument in a theoretical loop, whereby the conclusion compels readers to return to the definitions of empire offered at the beginning.[[52]](#footnote-52) No single model which claims to define empire – be it through monopolistic access to violence, cultural heterogeneity, or geopolitical size – is either universal or satisfactory at distinguishing an empire from a modern nation-state. Empire is a conceptual chimera, a philological phantom which eludes all attempts at definition. It is as futile to establish a check-list of imperial characteristics as it is to construct links – and distinguish them from other political forms – between the purported empires of Victorian Europe, medieval China, or Sargon of Akkad.

Maier himself acknowledges this resulting in a perpetual loop of interpretation and re-interpretation, with little or no progress possible. Charles Porter sees the same problem when stating that empire ‘is only a word. You can use it any way you like (so long as you make that definition clear)’.[[53]](#footnote-53) This is empire’s greatest strength and most vulnerable weakness – the word is flexible and nuanced, but can so easily become vague or inappropriate. It is neither necessary nor possible to examine the manifold ways in which empire has been interpreted even in recent years. Much contemporary discourse on empire surrounds the United States – which is not relevant – while even in a specifically European context, arguments are constructed upon a critical examination of the EU’s policies and activities. This is equally irrelevant to the study. However, a review of existing imaginations of European Empire is necessary. In order to gain a greater understanding of the conceptual issues at the heart of imperial discourse, it is necessary to examine competing models of empire and their ‘different, fiercely contested meanings’[[54]](#footnote-54) in relation to the EU. It is thus to this point that we turn, in order to provide a firmer conceptual foundation for an interpretation of empire not as a quantifiable or chronological phenomenon, but rather as an imagination embedded and perpetuated within discourse.

The history of Europe is inextricable from the history of empires. Indeed, John Darwin argues that the two are so closely entwined that we can only understand empire – and reactions to it – in a European context.[[55]](#footnote-55) A number of contemporary scholars perceive empire in Europe’s current political structure, and it is possible to identify links between the categories examined in the above section, and the theories outlined below. It must be stated at the outset that it is not the intention of this section to construct a quantifiable list of imperial characteristics. Indeed, this is the antithesis of the segment’s purpose. Rather, a review of existing literature on European Empire allows us to identify two critical themes which bring us closer to understanding empire. These are: inequality; and the manifestation of inequality in discourse. These terms will be examined in greater detail in the next section, and for now, a critical review of contemporary thought is warranted.

***Colonising Europe***

We will examine theories of European Empire both chronologically and thematically, as this approach enables us to construct a logical approach leading towards the next section’s discussion of empire as a discourse. This first segment therefore addresses the earliest reference to Europe as Empire in the scholarly literature; József Böröcz’s claim of neo-colonialism and economic empire.

József Böröcz highlights the Union’s Eastern Enlargement as the defining feature of European Empire, a modern continuation of Western Europe’s historical role as prime advocate of an imperial-colonial teleology.[[56]](#footnote-56) Böröcz’s argument that the Union considers itself to be *the* Europe to the exclusion of non-EU Europe, and that the Union enforces this through a conscious policy of exclusion, is perhaps the dominant characteristic of this imperial model.

Like Behr, Böröcz interprets the Union as an exclusionist polity which pursues a somewhat haphazard and *ad hoc* approach to empire-building: a trait reflective of nineteenth-century European empires in general.[[57]](#footnote-57) Of particular relevance is the issue of whether Eastern Enlargement reflects not only an imperial policy of territorial expansion, but whether this also reflects a desire to establish a visible boundary between the empire and the ‘wild zones’ beyond the eastern frontier. This runs in direct contrast both to Zielonka’s claim that the EU requires a blurred and fluid external boundary and against Behr’s assertion that the critical boundaries of the Union are internal, between strong and weak members. Furthermore, Böröcz’s claim that the Union defines itself through a policy of *“inequality, marginalization, and exclusion”[[58]](#footnote-58)* relates not only to this issue of the external frontier, but also to Böröcz’s own assertion that the European Union perceives itself to be *the* Europe and deliberately excludes non-Union states. Secondly, what Böröcz terms *“claims of European universality”[[59]](#footnote-59)* partly reflects Behr’s assertion that the EU seeks to homogenise its component members by requiring adoption of European standards.

Böröcz’s theory is classically Marxist, and is ultimately defined by economic inequality.[[60]](#footnote-60) While Böröcz does not actively use a Marxist framework in his concept, the internal colonialism model implies a strong economic motivation behind EU expansion; namely that the Union expands in order to monopolise markets and impose its own economic hegemony on an area. Further, Böröcz’s contention that the EU deliberately maintains the East in an economically inferior position in order to benefit the West, has strong Marxist connotations. It may be possible to conceptualise the Union, therefore, as a specifically territorial manifestation of Hardt and Negri’s *Empire*: an entity defined by economic rather than political force, and yet an ‘empire’ in that it is territorially limited and seeks to expand its control for the benefit not of the whole, but a privileged group (i.e. the Western EU). Hardt and Negri’s thesis was one I initially discounted as being irrelevant to EU Empire, but it now appears pertinent to Böröcz’s – and possibly Beck and Grande’s – economic imperium. A critical reading of Lenin’s theory of imperialism as an inevitable consequence of capitalism, may enable a re-evaluation of Böröcz’s model in order to identify a materialist, foundationalist basis for the pretexts of unequal EU cartography.

This Marxist interpretation of European Empire contrasts significantly with the next theme, that of neo-medievalism. Yet there is one significant similarity. This is the inequality inherent to European Empire, and it is with this concept that an analysis of Europe as medieval empire begins.

***Sacrum Imperium Europeaum***[[61]](#footnote-61)

Jan Zielonka perceives the EU not as a conglomerate of dominant states pressuring their weaker neighbours, but rather as a ‘neo-medieval’ empire built on a blurred and decentralised structure, a system of inherent inequality; yet one in which all members are equally unable to gain dominance.[[62]](#footnote-62) In his discussion of the difficulties of establishing a homogenised European culture, centralised power, and pan-European institutions with defined roles and parameters – a goal made more difficult with the incorporation of Eastern European members – Zielonka equates the current EU with the medieval incarnation of the Holy Roman Empire.

For Zielonka, the medieval *Reich* is the logical equivalent of the EU; a polity defined by ‘multilevel governance… of concentric circles, fuzzy borders, and soft forms of external power [predating] the rise of nation states, democracy, and capitalism’.[[63]](#footnote-63) Zielonka’s Europe is defined by ‘overlapping authorities, divided sovereignty, diversified institutional arrangements, and multiple identities’ co-existing in a single loose organisation.[[64]](#footnote-64) This concept posits that the European Union is held together not through political coercion but through a sense of common identityas ‘Europeans’, enabling Zielonka to equate the pluralistic EU with the loose alliance of the pre-Westphalian Holy Roman Empire – two universalising entities which define themselves through contrast to a constructed and artificially enhanced Other, and which have multiple layers of relatively limited political or economic control organised in a decentralised structure.

These are bold claims which run in direct contrast to the theories of Böröcz and Beck and Grande, who perceive the Union as one of hard borders and an overt capitalist mission. We do not need to delve into Zielonka’s policy-based critiques in order to assess the value of his argument, as this is neither relevant to the research nor necessary, as three critical concerns are raised immediately.[[65]](#footnote-65)

Our first concern is the nature of the Holy Roman Empire, and particularly the late-medieval version with which Zielonka equates the EU.[[66]](#footnote-66) As Peter Wilson makes clear, the Holy Roman Empire was a highly complex, frequently contradictory entity which went through many territorial and policy shifts.[[67]](#footnote-67) As Thomas Blanning observes, ‘the only way to approach [the HRE] is to love anomaly, as the Empire did not fit any recognized pattern’.[[68]](#footnote-68)

As an example, Zielonka does not specify historical parameters. Due to its inherently anomalous nature, the *Reich* of the Late Middle Ages changed with remarkable speed and frequency. From a reading of Zielonka it cannot be inferred just which particular permutation of the Empire he is examining, [[69]](#footnote-69) and his version resembles an ahistorical pastiche of different temporal characteristics which did not exist contemporaneously.[[70]](#footnote-70) This is not mere nitpicking – as Wilson reminds us, the Empire underwent drastic constitutional and territorial changes between the Papal Bull of 1356 and the *Reichstag* of 1495;[[71]](#footnote-71) both dates fall within Zielonka’s vague timeframe but demonstrate the theory’s inability to reflect the complex and rapidly shifting nature of the Empire. Zielonka is right to call the European Union an ‘unidentified political object’,[[72]](#footnote-72) but so was the entity with which he compares it. It is not entirely satisfactory to equate the European Union with a polity whose very nature was as confusing and contradictory to its own subjects[[73]](#footnote-73) as it is to us.[[74]](#footnote-74)

The second, related critique to be raised is the historiographic concern. Our interpretation, understanding, and knowledge of the *Reich* are inextricably caught up in an epistemological web of historiographical problems. Zielonka interprets the Holy Roman Empire in a particular way, and ultimately arrives at a model of the *Reich* which is cobbled together from anachronistic characteristics and themes. The Holy Roman Empire of Zielonka’s imagination did not exist in its stated form, at any single moment in time. And while it could be argued that it is the *themes* of the Empire which Zielonka wishes to examine, rather than the empirical evidence of *policy and practice*, these themes themselves shifted substantially during the Empire’s long and very confused lifetime.[[75]](#footnote-75)

The third critique is that Zielonka falls victim to the same desire for quantification as Beck and Grande, by comparing the Holy Roman Empire and the European Union on a quantitative and quantifiable basis. His chapters make extensive use of comparative charts to contrast features of the ‘Westphalian model’ against the ‘Neo-medieval model’;[[76]](#footnote-76) an admirable effort but one which is hampered by his medievalist model’s shaky foundations built upon an artificial and anachronistic model of the Empire, and a historiographic interpretation which does not take into account the remarkably complex, self-contradictory, and perpetually shifting political nature of the medieval *Reich*. Further, by constructing a model of the Holy Roman Empire against which he can positivistically compare the Union, Zielonka’s thesis becomes caught up in a circular logic – the European Union *is* a neo-medieval empire, simply because it fits the criteria of neo-medieval imperialism that he sets out at the beginning. This is precisely what Stephen Maier warns us of – that examining empire based upon its characteristics is perfectly acceptable if “empire” is defined at the outset, but that a definition of empire which relies on quantifiable phenomena will simply ‘compel readers to return to the beginning’.[[77]](#footnote-77)

However, this is not to say that Zielonka’s model is without use. Reading Zielonka has obliged us to examine the nature of the Holy Roman Empire, and the imaginative discourses in which this unusual state remains wrapped.[[78]](#footnote-78) This will be returned to later in the paper.

One significant characteristic of a neo-medieval model is the curious and self-contradictory status of European universalism. Holy Roman Emperors, as Wilson points out, were frequently guided by a concept of Universal Monarchy; a medieval Manifest Destiny of ‘pan-European pretensions’ of multinational or even global sovereignty.[[79]](#footnote-79) Many Emperors ‘claim[ed] to represent the secular arm of a single Christian Europe... with an assumed pre-eminence over all European rulers’; when combined with ‘the empire’s pan-European pretensions, and the fragmented nature of [its] sovereignty with its diffusion of political authority and overlapping jurisdictions’, a curious similarity is drawn out.[[80]](#footnote-80) A fundamental characteristic of the Empire was evidently its pretensions to European universality, with the executive office perceiving itself to be ‘the direct continuation of the universal ideal of Rome’[[81]](#footnote-81) This hearkening back to Rome is crucial for two reasons. Firstly, it establishes discourse – this will be addressed later in the paper. Secondly, it links Zielonka’s model on a conceptual level with the next chronological imagination of European Empire – one which similarly identifies a continuation of an imperial discourse. This is the thesis posited by Hartmut Behr.

***Fortress Europe***

It was identified above that a recurring theme in discussions of empire is expansion. Indeed for Edward Gibbon, expansion was critical to maintaining the stability of empire – and in the absence of either the motive or method to broaden imperial frontiers, empire will inevitably disintegrate.[[82]](#footnote-82) In the context of the EU, it is certainly possible to see expansion. The Union has enlarged significantly and selectively in the last decade, absorbing new territories in Eastern and Southern Europe while consolidating its presence in existing member-states. Yet according to the interpretations of our first category, Europe pursues an external policy which is far more exclusionary than inviting. This is *Fortress Europe.*

Hartmut Behr perceives the European Union as an empire embedded in nineteenth-century ‘Standards of Civilization’; a political entity whereby members of a civilized Core project their standards onto an ‘unmodernised’ Periphery. [[83]](#footnote-83) This occurs, arguably, on both the internal level between EU members and also on an external level, between the Union and non-Union European states. Of particular interest is Behr’s assertion that the Union’s external frontier is continually strengthened while internal borders dissolve, establishing a ‘Fortress Europe’ of shared civilisation defined against the Eastern Other, and that the Union constitutes a Core with ‘potential imperiality’[[84]](#footnote-84)surrounded by and pushing outwards to absorb a Periphery of prospective members. In a continuation of what we have identified in Böröcz and Zielonka**,** the value ofBehr’s imperial image is not that it offers a conglomerate of quantifiable characteristics, but that it rests upon a discourse – in this case, ‘Standards of Civilisation’.

Ernst Kantarowicz underlines the singularity inherent to empire; the notion that the laws and customs of the empire – and *only* the empire’s – were valid universally.[[85]](#footnote-85) The concept that the Holy Roman Emperor was the one and only source of *necessitas, justitia,* and *providentia* – justice, truth, and destiny[[86]](#footnote-86) – anointed by the grace of the Pope, became a defining feature of the Holy Roman Empire. We see the same pattern in the Union; the Union’s laws and customs, and *only* those of the Union, are considered valid and universal. Behr’s investigation of the Union is indistinguishable from Kantarowicz’s summary of the Holy Roman Empire – only the standards of the *Imperium* are considered valid. All others are deviant, and it is the *Imperium*’s duty and destiny to triumph over them.

These self-proclaimed standards do not exist in isolation but are themselves grounded in a historical imagination of European norms. These norms form a discourse traceable to an entity and an idea which not only forms a model of European Empire in its own right, but connects the primary discourses of Böröcz, Zielonka, and Behr, and forms a foundation for our ultimate understanding of empire as a discourse. This is the entity which later societies sought to emulate, insodoing creating the discourse of empire. This road leads to Rome.

***Senatus Populesque Europaeum***

‘The reader of any Latin text’, asserts Niall Rudd, ‘is likely to encounter some words which have no exact equivalent in English’.[[87]](#footnote-87) There is perhaps no term of which this is more true, than the word “empire”. The very word is an etymological evolution of the Latin term *imperium*, a sophisticated word with no exact equivalent in modern linguistics, and which is an ineffective translation of the Latin term.[[88]](#footnote-88) The Latin *imperium* is frustratingly difficult to translate as the manifold concepts encompassed by the word cannot effectively be condensed into a single term, and the Roman word can be roughly translated as ‘rule’, ‘sovereignty’, ‘power’, ‘government’, ‘command’, ‘mandate’, ‘order’, ‘administration’, ‘authority’, ‘reign’, ‘instruction’ or ‘dignity’. All of these can exist in either the civilian or military form – or both at once – and most, if not all, of these terms are themselves essentially contested concepts; further frustrating our understanding.

*Imperium* is obviously a very complex term, and at first glance, this variation only intensifies the exasperating vagueness of the word. It is one problem to use a word whose meaning is debated, but it is quite a different problem altogether to rely upon a twenty-century-old loan word from a long-dead language, the terminological intricacies and subtle complexities of which have not survived two thousand years of linguistic evolution. Instead, these nuances have been condensed into an awkward word which is both overly narrow and overly vague – “empire” – a word which woefully fails to capture the many meanings of *imperium*. What, then, can be done to enhance our understanding of the concept of empire?

The answer to this lies not only in the colossus of Roman political philosophy – Marcus Cicero – but the historiographic and political discourses in which *empire* has been interwoven since Cicero’s day. Of course, Cicero did not coin the term *imperium* – a pre-existing word which, as has been identified, embraced a variety of related but separate concepts. The value of Cicero’s writings is that they make a clear distinction between the subtleties contained within the concept and establish two distinguishable – and manageable – terms. In *Contra Verres*[[89]](#footnote-89) and *De Officiis*,[[90]](#footnote-90) Cicero distinguishes two related yet theoretically separate ideas essential to a greater understanding of empire. These are the twin concepts of *imperium* and *patrocinium*. Both of these ideas are crucial to our understanding of empire, yet both have been neglected in the imperial discussions of the post-Roman world. In order to appreciate the geographical and political subtleties of the term, it is necessary to engage in a more theoretical dissection which leads us to a novel conclusion.

In his polemics on the Roman state, Cicero speaks of two forms of empire – *imperium*, and *patrocinium.* The first, *imperium*, Cicero defines as the ‘power’/‘government’/‘rule’/sovereignty’ of Rome – the *imperium populi Romani* necessary to establish Rome’s ‘dominance’/‘command’/‘government’ over its non-Roman neighbours.[[91]](#footnote-91) This use of *imperium* creates an *Imperium* – an empire characterised by hard force, which Cicero identified with the early stages of Rome’s expansion. Clearly, this is a concept far too intricate to condense into the single (in)convenient word ‘empire’, not least because the very word *imperium* has conflicting meanings. And as J.S. Richardson reminds us, *imperium* has very different meanings depending upon its *domi* (domestic governance) or *militiae* (provincial governance) contexts.[[92]](#footnote-92) Such *imperium*, as Cicero identifies, is not solely brute force used for the nefarious purposes of conquest and brutal coercion to create an *Imperium*, but rather a combination of different policies of control necessary for the establishment of what Cicero sees as the essence of empire: *patrocinium*.

Like *imperium*, *patrocinium* is a difficult word; particularly as, unlike *imperium*, it has not morphed over the centuries into a vaguely-related modern descendant. However, it does share some relations with other words – most notably *patronage* and *paternalism* – which offer insight into its normative characteristics. *Patrocinium*, while difficult to translate, is somewhat easier to define. Hartmut Behr places the word into its context as a distinct and manageable concept: ‘an international commonwealth’[[93]](#footnote-93) of shared interests and shared power, a *patrocinium orbis Terrarum*.[[94]](#footnote-94) This is what Cicero defined as a ‘government [which] could more accurately be called a protectorate of the world rather than an empire’.[[95]](#footnote-95) This distinction between the two terms is critical – *patrocinium* is the end goal, the polity, while *imperium* is (one) means of reaching such a goal, the policy.

Thus we immediately see a conceptual distinction in Cicero’s work between the two distinct, yet interwoven, aspects of empire. It is clear that the European Union – a benign and benevolent entity – does not pursue anything like the hard-power *imperium* which Cicero identifies as the defining characteristic of Rome’s expansion. Equally, it is impossible to ignore the not-insignificant paternalistic attitude demonstrated by the Union’s institutions. Behr, Böröcz, Zielonka, and Beck and Grande all acknowledge the paternalistic influence of the Union in that prospective applicants are required to remodel their political constitutions, legal frameworks, economic infrastructures, and social institutions to match those of the Union. It may well be argued that this is no bad thing; the link to Cicero’s *patrocinium* is unmistakeable.

It might be asserted at this point that the essence of empire has been identified. Empire, when viewed through the conceptual lens of Marcus Cicero, is a benign commonwealth defined by unequally shared power and shared sovereignty, under the paternalistic guidance of a core authority. We could cease our investigation here, and begin searching for these themes in European cartography. Yet in the same vein as the already-examined scholars of European Empire, Cicero suffers from flaws which ultimately fail to answer just what empire is.

Cicero spoke of Rome as a harmonising, universalising power whose self-anointed status of “superiority” justified expansion into neighbouring territories. Yet while Cicero believed that:

‘our Senate is the harbour and refuge of kings, tribes, nations… [seeking] to obtain the highest praise from this one thing – the guarding of the interests of our provinces and our allies by equity and good faith.’[[96]](#footnote-96)

this did not sway his simple, concrete conviction that ‘the government of Rome [is] superior to that of all other states’.[[97]](#footnote-97) Much of Cicero’s writing on the Roman state is highly normative – which we do not need to examine, as we are not interested here in the rights and wrongs of a long-dead realm – which starkly reveals Cicero’s somewhat schizophrenic attitudes on empire. This is not the only concern.

Firstly, as expressed in his *Treatise on Commonwealth*, Cicero entertained a belief in natural law as the moral foundation of establishing empire. This is not only an outdated concept in the modern world, but is also ambiguous – Caroline Steel[[98]](#footnote-98) consequently perceives Cicero as ambivalent in his political writings, wherein the statesman’s blurred boundaries leave his ultimate concept of empire an unresolved admixture of *imperium* and *patrocinium*. Second, it might be plausibly argued that Cicero’s writings are less of a treatise on the mechanisms and nature of empire, and more a collection of various polemics written with an explicit political purpose in mind – that Cicero did not seek to understand the nature of the imperial form, but simply wrote in order to defend and accuse his various contemporaries during Rome’s slide from an oligarchical Republic to a totalitarian military dictatorship. Third, as stated at the outset it is not the purpose of this paper to identify empire based upon quantifiable characteristics or parallels with any of human history’s universalising polities. Turning to Cicero may be useful, but ultimately amounts to a checklist of patrocinial characteristics which is as unsatisfactory as any other positivist approach.

We have so far reviewed existing literature on the nature of the European Union as a latter-day empire, yet our study already appears to have become bogged down in a quagmire of positivist foundationalism. Invaluable concepts have been identified and tantalising avenues of research await potential investigation, and in so doing we have identified two distinct, but related, problems. The first is ontological – what is an empire? The second is an issue of epistemology – how can we know what an empire is?

The first problem has been approached by numerous scholars who have sought to identify the characteristics of an empire. This broad interpretive strategy is sometimes frustrating, but as Bernard Porter fairly points out, it is acceptable to interpret empire in any way we wish – so long as we make our definition clear.[[99]](#footnote-99) This enables an initial separation of those scholars who use “empire” in a vague and undefined way, and those who at least offer a reasonable explanation of what is meant. Yet this is not wholly satisfactory. Literature belonging to the first group is overly vague, while the second category suffers from the perpetual problem of attempting to quantify an unquantifiable concept. A definition of “empire” cannot be fixed. There is no single authority to set a definition, and we would face the insurmountable difficulty of justifying which of human history’s infinitely broad polities and policies can be considered empires, and which cannot. In the context of specifically European Empire, this problem is even more pronounced. For an analysis of what defines European Empire, what have we learned?

Firstly, we have identified the inadequacy of quantifiable quests. Empire defies attempts at categorisation and while constructing a list of traits to define empire may be acceptable in isolated studies, it is wholly inappropriate for a study of the European Union as empire. We are not interested in only one view, and as has been seen, the existing conceptions of European Empire – those of Behr, Böröcz, Zielonka, Beck and Grande, and my own earlier interpretations based on Cicero – do not tally together. If the EU *is* an empire, it cannot be the empire imagined by all of these writers. Böröcz and Zielonka are mutually exclusive; Cicero’s universalism and Behr’s exclusionism are diametrically opposed; Beck and Grande’s list of imperial traits seem arbitrary and incompatible with similar lists.

Secondly, we have identified that empire is a concept even more slippery than was first imagined. Empire is nothing new. But when does a state *become* an empire? As has been argued, there is no quantifiable threshold. A state does not become imperial simply by acquiring a certain amount of territory, adopting a particular style of government, or applying selective policies. Yet as a way of bringing an order to the otherwise chaotic complexity of diverse peoples and their politics, state-empire apparently predates any other form of political organisation, yet is frequently so interwoven with other forms of social ordering that empire becomes indistinguishable.

Faced with these seemingly unsatisfactory findings, we might be tempted to abandon this line of research and settle for what Stephen Maier acknowledges as the only universal characteristic of imperial study – creating an *ad hoc* definition of empire to act as a framework. This is not a bad approach. As Maier rightly reminds us, it is perfectly acceptable to construct a unique vision of empire which suits the study in question, because empire is such an elusive concept.[[100]](#footnote-100) Yet this method is unfeasible here, as the existing interpretations of European Empire can be only roughly synthesised into an imperial framework which is at best an impromptu and unstable framework, at worst a weak conceptual strawman.

However, the preceding review has highlighted one avenue of research which remains as-yet unexplored, and a direction which can lead to a far more thorough understanding of what empire is. This avenue ties together the existing theories of European Empire based upon an unusual shared feature. This approach begins with the theories we examined last – Cicero.

As has been seen, it would appear on the surface that Cicero cannot provide a solution to the lack of an imperial ontology, and that the foremost politician of *the* archetypal empire leaves us in just as much of a quandary as anyone else. Yet there is one invaluable inroad which a study of Cicero offers. While *imperium* in his own lifetime – and that of the Roman state itself – may not have referred to a method of state organisation, the word quickly came to stand for the archetypal “civilised” state, in spite of its original meanings. But returning to the origins of the term itself, is not as fruitful an avenue as might previously have been thought.[[101]](#footnote-101) As Andrew Erskine reminds us, our understandings of Roman ideology is determined to a significant degree not by what the Romans themselves thought, but how we perceive them. Our own understanding of Rome is so influenced by the international relations of our own time, by the experiences of empire that we have endured, that we cannot be certain just what the Roman system of *imperium* was.[[102]](#footnote-102)

Even returning to Cicero in search of the original meanings and implications of the word is insufficient. Cicero did not coin the words *imperium* and *patrocinium*, and even if he had, we cannot peer into his mind to extract the meaning he gave to them. Relying upon his surviving writings to construct a definition can only go so far as Cicero’s own views on Rome and her hegemony fluctuated to a significant degree.[[103]](#footnote-103) As a man who oscillated between philanthropic paternalism and benign universalism, but also a rhetorical cocktail of scathing snobbery and fierce municipal patriotism,[[104]](#footnote-104) Cicero’s approach to patrocinial empire is confusingly muddled. Furthermore, attempting to peer back into the past to search for truth – or at least verisimilitude – is not a viable strategy.

However, this does not mean that nothing useful can be extracted from these findings. Quite the opposite. The problems identified in the preceding sections – the lack of academic consensus on empire; the ontological and epistemological dead-ends; the problem of shifting meanings and individual interpretations are all evidence of empire existing as a discourse. And to appreciate the discourse of empire, we return to where we began. Not Rome as it existed in space and time, but “Rome” as it existed in the imaginations of Greeks and Germans in the Early Middle Ages.

***Translatio Imperii***

*‘Who may hear, without being upset, the question being debated among these learned fellows, whether the Roman* imperium *be in Rome? With the kingdoms of the Parthians, Persians and Medes located among the Parthians, Persians and Medes, are we then to believe that the* imperium *of the Romans will wander around?Who can stomach such vile stuff? Who would not rather heave it up from the very pit of his being? If the Roman* imperium *is not in Rome then where, I ask, is it?’* [[105]](#footnote-105)

Petrarch

*Liber Sine Nomine* IV

The concept of *translatio imperii*, it appears, is not to every scholar’s taste.Petrarch’s rhetorical rescript in *Liber Sine Nomine* is written as a condemnation of the by-then established idea that the mission of Caesar and Augustus had been appropriated by newcomers.Writing the above passage in the autumn of 1352, the words of a fourteenth-century Italian poet whose pride was chafing from his friend’s recent arrest by the imperial authorities of the *Heiliges Reich*,[[106]](#footnote-106) are not so dissimilar from Liudprand’s diatribe nearly four centuries previously. For just as the Italian Liudprand had complained about sharing *imperium* with the Greeks, the Italian Petrarch complains at having to share it with the Germans.Yet in his bitterness, Petrarch asks a rhetorical question to demonstrate that Roman *imperium* is still solely in Rome, despite what the Teutons claim – but his question, for us, is literal. By the time of Petrarch in the fourteenth century, Rome was virtually powerless in the face of the crumbling “Rome” of the Greeks and the stagnant “Rome” of the Germans. If *imperium* is really not in Rome, where is it? The answer, as we shall see here, is that empire exists purely in the mind.

We began this paper by eavesdropping on Liudprand and Leo’s angry argument over who, and what, may legitimately claim to be “empire”. It appears on the surface that limited progress has been made towards answering this question. By analysing those imaginations of European Empire prevalent in academic writing, some useful themes have been drawn out. But by rejecting quantification, the investigation has seemingly become bogged down in loose conceptions which are only vaguely related to one another. József Böröcz argues that a model of European Empiremust begin with a minimalist concept,[[107]](#footnote-107) and while Anthony Pagden is correct in stressing the limited utility of simple definitions for so broad a concept as empire,[[108]](#footnote-108) a foundation is required. But have we come any closer to reaching this foundation? Can we identify European Empire? The answer is yes – albeit not by constructing a quantifiable check-list of characteristics which render a state an empire, but by identifying the issues which lead us to propose that *empire is a discourse.*

In a Foucauldian understanding,[[109]](#footnote-109) a discourse is, quite simply, ‘a specific series of representations and practices through which meanings are produced.’[[110]](#footnote-110) Rather than empire being conceived of as an entity which exists independently of us, empire may instead be considered as a constructed “reality” produced through our perception of the concept. Imagining empire as a discourse is not entirely novel. Erskine reminds us how the idea of Rome is more powerful than the truth of Rome – regardless of the polity’s actual nature. And Richardson explores how, in all of its manifestations from ‘Charlemagne to the Tsars, from British imperialism to Italian Fascism’, the imaginative paraphernalia of the Roman Empire ‘have been essential elements in the self-expression of imperial power’.[[111]](#footnote-111) This meme of replicating Rome is what Michael McCormick terms ‘*imitatio imperii*’,[[112]](#footnote-112) a common phenomenon in Early Medieval Europe[[113]](#footnote-113) which formed part of the emerging discourse alongside *translatio imperii*.

A state, a society, a civilisation, does not become imperial when it reaches a geopolitical and structural critical mass, a stage at which sufficient quantifiable factors – acquisitions of territory, a diversified population, the existence of multiple monarchs serving an emperor – fuse together, transforming a vague association of polities into an Empire. Sargon of Akkad did not become an empire-builder when he had conquered a particular number of neighbouring towns.[[114]](#footnote-114) Rome did not transform from patrocinial Republic to corrupt, decaying Empire immediately upon the Senate’s declaration of Octavian as *Princeps Senatorum et Imperator*.[[115]](#footnote-115) Instead, it is through the invocation of the word, the appearance of “empire” in the discourses surrounding a polity or policy, which renders an entity imperial. To explain this, let us return not specifically to Cicero, but more broadly to that archetypal empire which remains a perennial pillar of geopolitical scholarship – the Roman state.

As the archetypal empire – the state with which medieval,[[116]](#footnote-116) Early Modern,[[117]](#footnote-117) Victorian,[[118]](#footnote-118) and even twentieth-century polities[[119]](#footnote-119) attempted to link themselves – returning to Rome offers a potential solution to this quandary. Erskine asserts that ‘no empire is the same, but all this makes Rome good to think with and shows too that imperialism often defies easy categorisation’.[[120]](#footnote-120) This latter statement is patently true. The former claim – that Rome is a good model with which to examine empire – is accurate for the wrong reason. We have identified the manifold interpretations and uses of *imperium*, a word connoting much to do with the Roman state. Yet it is curious to note that the Romans themselves did not refer to their state using this word. It is this apparent piece of trivia which sheds light upon empire as a discourse, and as such a historical examination of this discursive development is warranted.

We have established that “empire” is a word fraught with difficulty – our solution to this is to trace the evolution of empire not as a polity, but as a discourse. And to begin, we will continue our etymological analysis. *Imperium* clearly appears in the original Petrarch; unsurprisingly, as it is, after all, a Roman word. Yet its use by the Romans was markedly different from how we use “empire”. Similarly, we must avoid the word *imperialism*. Not only did the Romans lack such a word, and indeed the very concept,[[121]](#footnote-121) but *imperialism* only appears as a word in late nineteenth-century Europe. Moreover, since its inception *imperialism* has been bound up in specific historical metanarratives such as those of Hobson, Lenin, and Schumpeter; and questions of political morality to the point whereby it has become a catch-all word applied indiscriminately to any unsavoury political project.[[122]](#footnote-122)We have already seen how Cicero sought to explain the term politically – we shall go a little further, and investigate its crucial origins.

*Imperium*, as Craige Champion and Arthur Eckstein identify, derives from *imperare*, “to command”.[[123]](#footnote-123) It was from *imperare* that *imperator* developed. ‘When any great victory worthy of a triumph had been won,’ wrote John Zonaras in his ancient chronicle of Rome, ‘the soldiers immediately hailed the general as *imperator*’.[[124]](#footnote-124) Several centuries later, we see *imperator* used alongside such titles as *Dominus,* *Augustus, Princeps Senatus, Pontifex Maximus*, *Pater Patriae, Caesar,* and various other titles to signify the Roman head of state; bestowed upon or chosen by the one hundred and forty-seven men who historians consider “Roman Emperors”;[[125]](#footnote-125) the wielders of *imperium.* Hence from the verb *imperare* and the noun *imperator* emerged *imperium*.

As Craig Champion outlines, *imperium* originally designated command of a military unit, ‘and by extension, the geographical area where such a command would be obeyed’.[[126]](#footnote-126) From this, the word evolved further. Richardson identifies that as early as the second century AD, *imperium* had shifted in meaning from a word signifying the authority wielded by certain individuals, to a word signifying authority itself – and the government apparatus with which it was associated.[[127]](#footnote-127) Indeed for Roman writers such as Cassius Dio, *imperium* had already acquired several meanings all at the same time.[[128]](#footnote-128) By the time the Senate declared Octavian as *Princeps et Imperator*, effectively ending the Republic and ushering in the moribund period of Roman “Empire”, the word was already vague. This trend merely continued. By the early fifth century, with the Roman state collapsing, we see the first possible use of *imperium* to designate space. In *Civitas Dei*,St Augustine refers to *imperium* as *affiliated*, but not *synonymous*,with a territorial area,[[129]](#footnote-129) but as the word still had a variety of meanings it is unclear.

*Imperium*, as we have seen, meant many things during Rome’s long lifetime, and as with any word the meaning of this Latin term evolved during Roman history. Yet despite its manifold meanings, at no point did *imperium* refer to the state as a political unit.[[130]](#footnote-130) Harriet Flower demonstrates that the Romans lacked our modern concept of the “State”, and used the term *Res Publica* to signify the community formed from the city of Rome, its various classes, its vast hinterlands and provinces around the Mediterranean, and gradually coming to also signify the concept of government. Yet this is still a far cry from labelling Rome as an “empire”. In historical documents, what we would term “State” simply did not exist, and any hints of a State apparatus are described simply as *Res Publica*, *Communem Libertatem* (shared political community) or *Senatus Populesque Romanus*; the people as a whole represented by their political leadership.[[131]](#footnote-131) *Imperium Romanum* (or variations thereof) did exist as a phrase,[[132]](#footnote-132) but as Andrew Erskine points out, this referred linguistically to the concept of the collective power of the people as represented by the Senate (or Emperor) – not power as represented by a State. This pseudo-democratic façade was maintained long after Rome’s transition to military dictatorship and *de facto* (if not *de jure*)absolute monarchy,[[133]](#footnote-133) and even by Late Antiquity and the fracturing of the unified Latin state into a patchwork of squabbling fiefdoms, *Imperium* *Romanum* stilldid not refer to the polity. As Timothy McDermott reminds us, even the late use of *Imperium Romanum* still referred to the *concept* of power (particularly normative power) rather than a specific polity.[[134]](#footnote-134)

Thus we see that the Romans, the archetypal empire-builders, did not refer to their own realm as “empire”; an irony of political scholarship. Yet it is precisely the Roman state which forms the basis of so much historical and contemporary appropriation of empire. A potential explanation for this is offered by Richardson, who suggests that the Romans viewed their world not in terms of bounded political spaces as we do but rather as networks of cities linked by conduits.[[135]](#footnote-135) When writing of their realm, Roman chroniclers referred to the *corpus imperii*; the body politic as a community of people wielding, possessing, and indeed being, *imperium*; rather than *imperium* as a specific, bordered polity.

Although the formal end of a single Roman state in the West came in the fifth century, *imperium* survived. Holland writes that while the Emperor’s other titles vanished, *imperator* and *imperium* survived the fall of Rome due to their connotations of conquest; the Franks who were later bestowed by Pope Leo with the status of *imperium* were warriors defined not by *pax*, *pontifex*, or *patrocinium* but by the savage reality of military combat.[[136]](#footnote-136) Hence *imperator*, ‘a Latin title of portentous ambiguity’,[[137]](#footnote-137) became the sole term employed by the West to signify their supreme temporal sovereign. This was not novel, as the Romans themselves had multiple levels of meaning for the word. Consider the explanation given by Gibbon in *Decline and Fall*:

‘Those modest titles were laid aside [during the Classical era]; and, if they still distinguished their high station by the appellation of Emperor, or Imperator, *that word was understood in a new and more dignified sense*, and no longer denoted the general of the Roman armies, but the sovereign of the Roman world’.[[138]](#footnote-138)

Indeed, even before the Roman Republic had ended the Romans themselves were aware of the word’s ambiguity. As Cassius Dio records:

‘[Julius Caesar] assumed the title of *imperator*. I do not here refer to the title which had occasionally been bestowed, in accordance with the ancient custom, upon generals in recognition of their victories... but rather the title in its other use, which signifies the possession of the supreme power’.[[139]](#footnote-139)

It was thus during the Classical period that *imperium* and *imperator* acquired an association with the head of state and thus the concept of the community itself,[[140]](#footnote-140) but it must be borne in mind that *imperator* was merely one of several titles used to denote the inconsistent, extraordinarily vague office that we retrospectively term “Roman Emperor”.[[141]](#footnote-141) And as we have identified, the Byzantines abandoned *imperator* along with other vestiges of Latin protocol when Heraclius changed the official language from Latin to Greek.[[142]](#footnote-142)

Further,Susan Mattern highlights that *imperator* was the only Roman title given twice in the “Roman Emperor”’s designation, and indeed was adopted as a personal name from Octavian onwards. Similarly *imperator* was the title most recorded on Classical Roman statues, monuments, and coins.[[143]](#footnote-143) It is reasonable to conclude that by the Early Middle Ages *imperator* and *imperium* were the words most closely associated with the classical Romans and the dignity of the imperial office. The plethora of other titles awarded to the Caesars disappeared – from Charlemagne onwards, the only word required for the expression of power, soveriegnty, superiority, legitimacy, and authority was *Imperium*.

This brings us back to St Peter’s Basilica on Christmas morning, 800 AD. The resurrection of *imperator* and *imperium* by Pope Leo was on the one hand not particularly important – the words had already existed for centuries, and apparently passed with only peripheral acknowledgement from contemporary observers. And as we see from the records of Einhard and Notker the Stammerer, *imperator* was only one of multiple titles awarded to Charlemagne both in 800, and following the Byzantines’ gritted-teeth acknowledgement of his imperial title in 812.[[144]](#footnote-144) Yet Charlemagne’s other pseudo-Classical titles – *Augustus*,[[145]](#footnote-145) *Caesar*,and the Greek approximations *Basileus*, *Autocrator*, and *Sebastocrator* – were short-lived. The only title which continued into the High Middle Ages was *Imperator*, and with it *Imperium*. Crucially, this established the discourse of *imperium* over which Leo and Liudprand, and Franks and Byzantines more broadly, were soon arguing furiously; and which contemporary and later rulers claimed in order to justify their pretensions of legitimacy, authority, and superiority as the self-anointed guardians of civilisation.

We need no Voltaire to remind us that ‘this entity which called itself, and continues to call itself, the Holy Roman Empire, was, and is, neither Holy, nor Roman, nor an Empire.’[[146]](#footnote-146) Voltaire is referencing the eternal squabbles of the Middle Ages between Emperors and Popes, but his point is equally applicable as a comment upon the discourse. The *Imperium* proclaimed in 800 bore no resemblance to classical Rome in terms geographical, liturgical, political, ecclesiastical, or indeed any other form. The only connection was the word used to describe it.

A host of speculations exist as to Leo’s reasons for proclaiming *imperium*. We are not particularly concerned with trying to peer into the Pope’s mind, but a brief overview is necessary. Kantarowicz argues that in medieval eschatology, not only had Rome been merely suspended in the West rather than ended (hence Charlemagne was not the inheritor of a new *imperium*, but merely a classical Roman emperor following an interregnum), but also that Rome had to exist in order to fulfill a Biblical prophecy of holding the devil at bay; whose predicted imminent arrival was a cause of some not-inconsiderable concern among Europeans approaching the first millennium.[[147]](#footnote-147) Meanwhile, Matthias Becher points to a variety of international incidents which contributed to the events of Christmas Day. Dwindling Byzantine military and administrative power in Italy; the rise of the Lombards as a threat to Rome and the emergence of the Franks as a major – and closer – potential ally to the Pope; the convenient discovery of the (forged) *Donatio Constantino* in which the eponymous ancient emperor had conceded control of the West not to the Eastern Emperor but to the Pope; the increasingly hostile relations between the Pope of Rome and the Patriarch of Constantinople; emerging theological disputes and iconoclasm in the centuries leading up to the Great Schism; rival factions at the Byzantine court seeking to manipulate the Franks by dangling an imperial title in front of them; Pope Leo’s immense unpopularity – to the point that the Pope had been badly beaten up by a mob in the streets of Rome – and not least the occupation of the Byzantine throne in 797 AD by Empress Irene, an act which led Western bishops and warlords to legally conclude that the throne was technically vacant.[[148]](#footnote-148) The reasons are only marginally significant, and it is unlikely that we will ever know for what reason(s) the Pope resumed *imperium*. What is of significance is not why Leo spoke the word, but what subsequently occured – the establishment of *translatio imperii*, and discourse.

We must be careful not to stray too far into the diplomatic delicacies of the Early Middle Ages. Our focus remains the European Union, not the fiefdoms of the Franks and the belligerence of the Byzantines. There are, though, some essential points to consider when discussing the resuscitation of ancient titles, as it is in this murky medieval morass that we find *empire*.

From Einhard’s account, it might be wondered why Charlemagne was reluctant to accept the imperial title. His apparent unease was possibly a literary convention of the time[[149]](#footnote-149) or possibly real, but nevertheless it must be asked; what did he have to fear? Charlemagne was already *Patricius Romanum*, and the Byzantines – who had far bigger problems than ‘this boorish Frank in his ridiculously cross-gartered scarlet leggings, speaking an incomprehensible language and unable even to sign his name except by stencilling it through a plate’[[150]](#footnote-150) – already recognised this title. We know also that aside from a later war between the Franks and Byzantines over control of southern Italy (not over the imperial title),[[151]](#footnote-151) Charlemagne spent the remainder of his life pursuing fruitless alliances and marriage proposals with the Byzantines in hope of uniting West and East, rather than encouraging a rivalry with Byzantium. Moreover, Charlemagne had been throwing his weight around with the Byzantines and the Papacy for years; even setting up the rival ecumenical Council of Frankfurt when the established Council of Nicea disagreed with his personal beliefs.[[152]](#footnote-152) At the time, this tension between East and West was considered far more significant than a brief and barely-attended ceremony in which the Pope dusted off an old crown and plagiarised a Byzantine liturgy.

Additionally, the resurrection of old titles was not even new. Less than thirty years after the abdication of the last Western Emperor in Rome, the Eastern Emperor named the Frankish warlord Clovis as *consul.* And half a century before Liudprand’s journey, Charlemagne’s father Pepin the Short had been proclaimed *Patricius Romanum* – “Protector of the Romans” – by Pope Stephen II.[[153]](#footnote-153) On the surface, it is little wonder that the events of December 25th 800 are barely even mentioned by Einhard, Notker the Stammerer, and the anonymous scribes of the Royal Frankish Annals. Yet while the incident may have been peripheral at the time, the bestowing of *imperium* and *imperator* grew steadily in influence over the coming decades and centuries. This is the *translatio imperii* – the transference of “empire”.

Conceiving of empire as a discourse is novel, but not entirely without precedent. The medieval concept of *translatio imperii* provides a framework upon which we may assemble an expanded theory. The idea of empire as a transitory concept – a status defined by civilisation, superiority, sovereignty, and legitimacy; a status which is not tied to any particular geopolitical construct but rather passes from one to another through time – is well-attested in medieval and even late Classical thought. In *Civitas Dei*, St Augustine follows Eusebius of Caeserea, Orosius, and Saint Jerome in outlining Biblical eschatology;[[154]](#footnote-154) he perceives Rome to be the natural successor to Alexander the Great, Persia, and Babylonia; for such late Classical scholars, Rome was the fourth and final realm of civilisation outlined in the Book of Daniel.

Jacques Le Goff identifies that by the beginning of the second millennium, *imperium* had become conceptually separated from *sacerdotium*; while the latter concerned the realm of theology and spiritual power, the former acquired a distinctly temporal, political meaning. This division into sacred and profane, Le Goff argues, defined *imperium* and the *translatio imperii* in the Early and High Middle Ages; ‘in profane history the theme was that of the transfer of power. The world in every age had one heart; the rest of the universe lived according to its rhythm and impulse alone’.[[155]](#footnote-155) This concept, the *translatio imperii*, ‘proceeded at a double level, that of power and civilisation’.[[156]](#footnote-156) The idea that there could only be one ‘heart’ goes some way to explaining the Pope’s actions on December 25th 800 – *imperium*, the essence of being the heart of the world, was to be wrought from the seemingly ineffective Byzantines and invested in the West; insodoing publicly proclaiming the West (and by extension, *imperium*)as the realm of order, civilisation, legitimacy, and superiority by deliberate association with a manufactured past.

This is not a case of presentism; imposing a modern concept upon history. The concept of *translatio imperii*, and of *imperium* as a concept embodying certain ideals, existed at the time. Medieval chroniclers including Otto of Freising, Chrétien of Troyes, and Richard of Bury adopted the idea in order to justify the *Heiliges Reich*, the Kingdom of France, and the Kingdom of England, respectively, as the sole inheritor of Rome and the self-anointed defender of civilisation – the heart to whose beat the rest of the world moved.[[157]](#footnote-157) This ‘nostalgia for Rome’[[158]](#footnote-158) influenced the evolution of the discourse and the awareness of the self as the defender of civilisation. ‘We are dwarves mounted on giants’ shoulders’, as Bernard of Chartres declared of the Kingdom of France, ‘but we see further than they did’.[[159]](#footnote-159) Contemporary scholars were well aware of the discourse of superiority that was “empire”.

What is critical about that moment in St Peter’s is that *translatio imperii* was initiated through the use of the term *imperium*. This was not only a severe snub to the *Basileus* in Constantinople, but also a deliberate hearkening back to a false imagination of a Rome which never existed. It was not until 812 that a new *Basileus*, eager to sign a peace treaty with the Franks in order to focus Byzantium’s dwindling forces against the encroaching Muslim Caliphate, sent ambassadors to Charlemagne to offer an insincere acknowledgement of him as *Imperator* of the West, with Aachen the equivalent of Constantinople.[[160]](#footnote-160) Both were now “Rome”; the ideal of a continued Roman *imperium* rather than its historical reality. This acknowledgement of *imperium* in the West – the *Pax Nicephori* – had become null by the time of Liudprand’s journey to Constantinople a hundred and sixty years later, as Charlemagne’s *Imperium Romanum* had long since crumbled and claimants to the title in the West did not possess any legitimacy as *imperator* in Byzantine eyes.[[161]](#footnote-161) Charlemagne’s realm by 968 had instead been replaced by a distinctly smaller *Sacrum Imperium Romanorum*; one which Liudprand’s hosts evidently considered unworthy of the word *imperium*.

This is the context of Liudprand and Leo’s argument with which we began. *Imperium* – an imagination – had been resurrected by the Pope in 800 as, amongst other reasons, a snub to the Byzantines and a demonstration of the legitimacy, authority, and power of Frankish sovereignty. Yet by the time of Liudprand’s grim journey, the term was losing any connection to a historical reality of Rome, and even less so to a spatial, territorial, geographical area. *Imperium*, a vague word to begin with, had become even less precise; now a term signifying an *idea*, an *imagination*; a perception of legitimacy and authority bestowed upon one political order which was perceived by its inhabitants as inherently superior to the rest of the world; a beacon of civilised light amidst the savage darkness. Ultimately, *imperium* was initiated in 800 as a discourse – a discourse of superiority, legitimacy, and destiny.

Before Liudprand’s journey to Constantinople, the discourse was already rapidly evolving. We identified above that *imperium* and *imperator* already had varying meanings as recorded by Cicero and Cassius Dio, and this etymological shift continued apace. Notwithstanding the medieval theory that the *Imperator* (i.e: the Holy Roman Emperor) possessed supreme sovereign power over the other political figureheads of the world – including the Byzantine *Basileus* – and that the *Imperium* exercised the rights of Universal Monarchy over the world,[[162]](#footnote-162) contemporary political leaders deployed the word in order to justify their dissention from the Holy Roman Emperor. Thus among the fractured states of Saxon England, Aethelstan, Edgar, and Cnut declared themselves Emperors while in Spain, Ordoño II, Alfonso III, and Ferdinand I adopted imperial titles for themselves and their realms. *Imperium*, by the beginning of the High Middle Ages, was already losing whatever specific and exclusive meanings ascribed to it by Pope Leo and was evidently morphing into a word implying civilisation, sovereignty, legitimacy, and superiority; what Otto of Freising identified as ‘*auctoritas ad quam totius orbis spectat patrocinium* – an authority to which pertains the protection over the whole world’.[[163]](#footnote-163) *Imperium* was clearly a discourse appropriated by persons other than the succession of Germans prostrating themselves before the Pontiff in medieval Rome, and from the Middle Ages onwards, the disourse evolves even further.

It is in the Humanist movement, spanning the extraordinarily vague transition from the Late Middle Ages to the Early Modern Period which we awkwardly term “Renaissance”, that we see the flowering of the imperial discourse. Let us dwell for a moment on a single example. It is 1492, in a Europe about to be irrevocably changed as Columbus sails back east with reports of a New World; and the distinguished scholar Conrad Celtis is addressing the faculty of the University of Ingolstadt; at the heart of the *Heiliges Römisches Reich*:

‘Emulate, noble men, the ancient nobility of Rome. You who have taken over the empire of the Italians should cast off repulsive barbarism and seek to acquire Roman culture. Do away with that old disrepute of the Germans in Greek, Latin, and Hebrew writers; who ascribe to us drunkenness, cruelty, savagery, and every other vice bordering on bestiality and excess.’[[164]](#footnote-164)

Conrad Celtis

Ingolstadt, 1492

In his empassioned speech to the learned savants, Celtis appeals to a reinvigorated discourse. Europe is, in the Humanists’ eyes, casting off the shackles of the medieval mind and seeking a new path. The *Heiliges Reich*, in Conrad’s eyes, should seek a transcendence – where once the Teutons were perceived by Romans and Byzantines as the savage nemesis of civilisation, they ought now consider themselves to *be* civilisation; and indeed, its guardians. The *translatio imperii* has been passed, as Conrad suggests, from Italy to Germany; from Romans to Holy Romans. This is a far cry from Liudprand of Cremona, snubbed and slighted by the haughty aristocrats of Constantinople. Now the *Reich* is, in Conrad’s eyes, the sole and legitimate successor to Rome; the sole guardian of civilisation whose duty it is to transcend. Crucially, Conrad urges, the Holy Romans should look backwards to an imagined history; a legitimisation of the present by appropriating the past. Conrad is clearly aware that his world is very different from that of Caesar and Augustus, but the principle of a single upholder of civilisation, remains. And yet in contrast to Conrad’s appeal for the Holy Romans to take up the sceptre of *imperium*, the Germans of the Renaissance were not alone in their claim.

Our scene changes and we find ourselves, only a few decades later, in a draughty scriptorium in Henry VIII’s palace at Richmond-upon-Thames. It is the spring of 1533; eighty years have passed since the fall of Constantinople, and more than half a millennium has transpired since Liudprand made his difficult journey. *Imperium*, the imagination of power, authority, superiority, and legitimacy, has been appropriated by new self-anointed *imperatorii*. In the Grand Duchy of Muscovy, Vasily III calls himself *Caesar*, and Moscow the ‘Third Rome’; claiming authority via his father Ivan the Terrible’s marriage to the last Byzantine princess fleeing the death of her ancient city, and written recognition of his imperial status from the Holy Roman Emperor.[[165]](#footnote-165) In Central Europe, another *Caesar* *Augustus* rules over his bloated *Heiliges Römisches Reich*, justifying his title through his coronation by the Pope and his grandparents’ purchase of the legal rights to the word *Imperium* from the exiled, bankrupt nephew of the final Byzantine *Basileus* cut down in Constantinople.[[166]](#footnote-166) And in that city, now the glittering jewel in the Caliphate’s crown, Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent has declared himself *Kaysar-i-Rûm* – Caesar of Rome.

The actual city of Rome is now a derelict town of squatters and shacks overshadowed by the new merchant capitals of northern Europe and Mediterranean Asia, and is utterly inconsequential.[[167]](#footnote-167) Instead, three “Rome”s and three self-styled Emperors now exist; one Catholic, one Orthodox, and one Muslim. Yet this is apparently not enough, for in London a fourth monarch, who has broken from the Church of Rome, now lays claim to the dignity, supremacy, superiority, legitimacy, and authority which only *imperium* can provide:

‘Where by divers sundry old authentic histories and chronicles it is manifestly declared and expressed that this realm of England is an empire, and so hath been accepted in the world, governed by one supreme head and king having the dignity and royal estate of the imperial crown of the same...’ [[168]](#footnote-168)

Statute in Restraint of Appeals

Henry VIII, 1533

Let us set aside the turbulent politics of Renaissance Europe and consider the evolution of the discourse. Suleiman the Magnificent of the Ottomans styles himself *Kaysar*, Charles V of the *Heiliges Reich* is *Kaiser*, while Vasily III of Rus’ is a *Czar*. Each man is an *Imperator*. But not one of these three men has more than the vaguest of connections to the broken-down Italian city in their contemporary sixteenth century, and none whatsoever to the ancient marble metropolis of Caesar, Cicero, and Suetonius. Instead, each adopts the title as evidence of their self-anointed status as the defender of civilisation, the supreme order with authority over all other temporal rulers, the rightful inheritor of the mantle of Roman *imperium*; ultimately the one and only *Imperium Romanum*. At this point Henry VIII, ruler of one of the petty, peripheral kingdoms surrounding the power-centres of Germany, Spain and France, formally breaks from the Church of Rome and justifies his action by declaring his realm of England to be an *empire*.

As we saw in the writings of Richard of Bury, this is not the first time that an Englishman has declared himself to be an emperor. Yet it starkly illustrates how far the discourse of *imperium* has evolved. Like all who came before him, from Charlemagne and Constantine Palaeologos to Suleiman and Ivan the Terrible, Henry VIII is appealing to an imagined history, a concocted community which never existed but which gives legitimacy to his present-day actions. The appeal to imagination confers *legitimacy* upon his momentous decision to secede from Catholicism. He declares England to be not only a supreme sovereign – a superior partner in the caesaropapist squabble that has upset the medieval union between church and state – but by extension the *sole* arbitor and authority of civilisation.

As we move yet closer to the present day, we see a similar pattern. Our scene changes again; this time to the interior of Nôtre-Dame de Paris on the morning of 2nd December 1804 where, against a backdrop of wobbly cardboard sets[[169]](#footnote-169) and hastily-manufactured relics unconvincingly claimed to stretch back to Charlemagne,[[170]](#footnote-170) in the presence of an angry Pope dragged against his will from the Vatican,[[171]](#footnote-171) Napoleon Bonaparte places a Roman-style laurel wreath upon his own brow and proclaims himself *Empereur* of *L’Empire des Français*.[[172]](#footnote-172) It is no coincidence that Napoleon’s imperial coronation preceded his dismembering of the Holy Roman Empire two years later and it is even less coincidence that, as Valérie Huet identifies, Napoleon’s coronation and subsequent monarchy were saturated with symbols borrowed from the iconography of Classical Rome and Charlemagne’s coronation.[[173]](#footnote-173) Napoleon was simply continuing the *translatio imperii*; declaring himself to be the sole and supreme inheritor of the *idea* of Rome[[174]](#footnote-174) – a discourse which further evolved in France’s Second Empire.[[175]](#footnote-175)

One last time our scene changes; this time to a cluttered reception room in Buckingham Palace in 1876, where the wily leader of the Conservative Party, Benjamin Disraeli, is conferring upon Queen Victoria the title of *Kaiser-i-Hind*; Empress of India.[[176]](#footnote-176) Thus commences a brief British craze for all things classically Roman and a short-lived tradition of the British monarch being styled as *Rex et Imperator* – King and Emperor – in an unambiguous public statement of imperial Britain’s self-anointed status as guardian and defender of civilisation. And even as Europe’s stranglehold on the world began to crumble, two totalitarian tyrants seek to legitimise their hastily-constructed regimes by appropriating the symbolism, iconography, and visual and verbal language of Ancient Rome to declare that the Italian Fascists and the Nazi Party are rightful and sole inheritors of supreme sovereignty, authority, legitimacy, and power; defined by their proclaimed superiority over all others. By the time Europeans emerged from the ashes of the subsequent Armaggeddon and began the mismanaged dissolution of their colonial conquests, the discourse of *empire* was no longer something to be admired but instead to be abhorred. Yet still the discourse remains – the supremacy of one people, once society, one group who declare that *We* have the right and obligation to rule over *Them*, because *We* are better.

In all of these examples we see the same precise pattern. Empire, Emperor, Empress, *Imperium, Kaiser, Czar, Kaysar* – all are complete fabrications, yet all have a common root. The root is that Christmas morning when the Pontiff proclaimed *Imperium*, setting in motion the subsequent evolution of the discourse.In the examples we have examined, all invocations of *imperium* seek the same things; to proclaim superiority over others; to confer legitimacy upon the present by appealing to the past; to construct an imagined community which justifies the present as a continuation of the ancient past, expressing a history not as it *was* but *how it should have been*. The Rome which existed in the minds of medieval and modern monarchs was not the Rome which really existed, but the Rome which ought to have been, and which *had* to have been for their feudal fiefdoms and Enlightenment empires to have legitimacy.

This has continued since. Indeed, Andrew Erskine outlines the trend throughout European history of rulers and governments seeking to legitimise their imperial ambitions, by referring back to the Roman state.[[177]](#footnote-177) The discourse has spent much of its history as a popular one, and while it has shifted in the previous two centuries – uneasily balanced between the exemplar of order and a model for progressive states to emulate, and the epitome of violence, discrimination, and atrocity which deserves, as Robert Cox asserts, to be abandoned to ‘the marble and sepia pasts’[[178]](#footnote-178) – the discourse of empire has remained prevalent in the imagination. Ronald Reagan’s 1983 labelling of the Soviet Union as an ‘evil empire’, and more recently Donald Rumsfeld’s assertion that the United States is ‘not about empire’, demonstrate the flexible nature of the imperial discourse. *Empire* can be adapted with remarkable ease to fit a wide variety of circumstances both favourable and unflattering. This is because rather than an entity, empire is a thought.

From the early days of European expansion in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, to the heyday of Europe’s jingoistic imperialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, empire was a discourse to be admired. As with Pope Leo and Charlemagne, “empire” hearkened back to an imagined era of civilisation, dignity, unity, and strength. Thus Henry VIII was able to proclaim his realm an empire, as it conformed to this image of *imperium*. Thus Voltaire was able to quip that the Holy Roman Empire was ‘neither Holy, nor Roman, nor an Empire’, as the *Reich* in his time was more a fractured and fading federation than the strong unified unit of the imperial imagination.

Empire has always been a fluid discourse, and it is this unique ability of empire to be moulded for a variety of projects which confounds its meaning. Consider, as an example, the words of Hugh Henry Breckinridge, ardent opponent of Britain’s empire in North America, following the American Revolution:

‘You are now citizens of a new empire: an empire, not the effect of chance, not hewn out by the sword; but formed from the skill of sages, and the design of wise men... You have acquired superior strength; you are become a great people.’ [[179]](#footnote-179)

It may seem incongruous, perhaps even ridiculous, that a people so recently freed from the shackles of one empire would appropriate the word to describe their consciously anti-imperial project. And yet it is in this example that we see a remarkable trait of empire. It is evidently not a political unit, neither in the mind of Breckinridge nor that of Thomas Jefferson’s ‘empire of liberty’, but rather is an imagination to aspire to. It is a discourse, a word which summarises a collective interpretation and a hearkening to something better.

At the same time as its appropriation in the public sphere, empire became embedded as a discourse of intellectual life – it is in the nineteenth century that we see historians naming the civilisations of the ancient world as “empires”, imposing an imagination of order, strength, and dignity upon the past in precisely the same way as Pope Leo had done a thousand years previously.[[180]](#footnote-180) The consequence of this was, as Mackenzie argues, a mass mobilisation of the general public in support of empire – empire not as an ontology, but as an idea of honour, dignity, and civilisation; an idea towards which the nation could collectively strive. The discourse of empire is at present something to be avoided, yet the values we assign to this discourse are not always the same and are very susceptible to manipulation through the vehicles via which the discourse is expressed. And the discourse is still alive.

Examining the geographical, political, and historiographical literature on empire, we see an intellectual domino-effect taking place. Today we discuss what Michael Cox terms ‘America’s imperial temptation’ based on our interpretations of Europe’s imperial activity a century ago. Yet the imperialists of yesteryear were themselves influenced by a desire to link their order with that of the Romans and establish their rights against the universal pretensions of the Holy Roman Empire – an entity which was itself grounded in Pope Leo’s long-forgotten desire to confer legitimacy and dignity upon his protector Charlemagne, by invoking an imagination of the past. Empire is, to use the terminology of Raimundas Lopata and Nortautas Statkus, more a practice of ‘imperiography’, writing empire, than a visible phenomenon.[[181]](#footnote-181) To essentialise: empire is an extraordinarily powerful discourse – one which has been embedded in European civilisations since Pope Leo placed the *Reichskrone* upon Charlemagne’s head – but ultimately, empire is simply a product of the imagination.

Those who proclaim themselves to be the self-anointed guardians of civilisation are proclaiming empire; the laudatory announcement that *We are better than Them*, because *We* are a single, indivisible people, because *We* have formed a community which is greater than merely the sum of its parts, and because *We* have an authority and legitimacy which none may rightfully resist and which none can truly match. Many have claimed their lineage as descendants of Rome – *Rhōmaiō*, *Rûm*, *Römisches* – and thereby have perpetuated the *translatio imperii*; what Robert Folz describes as ‘the fragmentation of the idea of empire’.[[182]](#footnote-182) Yet as Jacques Le Goff reminds us, ‘although it could be partial, the idea of empire was always connected to the idea of unity, however fragmentary’.[[183]](#footnote-183) The idea that there was, and is, only one legitimate sovereign of the civilised world, whose duty and destiny it is to defend order against chaos, is what defines the discourse. It matters not that the Union does not consciously resuscitate the language of Rome, for the discourse has evolved beyond the need for clumsy, sledgehammered insistences pedaled to the people. In today’s European Union the essentials remain – a publically declared sense of superiority, legitimacy, and an imagined community; the very essence of *empire*.

**Russell Foster**

Newcastle University

March 2013

1. John Julius Norwich, *A Short History of Byzantium* (New York: Random House, 1997) pp. 193-194; F.A. Wright (trans.) *The Works of Liudprand of Cremona: Antapodosis, Liber de Rebus Gestis Ottonis, Relatio de Legatione Constantinopolitina* (New York: EP Dutton & Co., 1930) pp. 235-236 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Norwich, *Byzantium*, p. 194 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The additional *fifty-four* chapters of Liudprand’s diary are an increasingly bitter narrative of ghastly dinner parties, constant arguments with Nicephorus over trivial matters, and perpetual insults levelled at him by haughty Byzantine courtiers. The account ends with a bankrupt and sickly Liudprand being expelled from Constantinople – but not before the esteemed bishop has time to scrawl a rude poem about Emperor Nicephorus all over the palace walls. See F.A. Wright, *The Works of Liudprand of Cremona*, p. 270. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The Byzantines’ rejection of the *filioque* – the inclusion of a single Latin word meaning “and from the Son (of God)” in the Nicene Creed – split the Eastern and Western churches in 1054 and continues to do so today, a political squabble which pushed the West and the East further apart from each other in the Middle Ages, even as Byzantium faced growing threats to its existence while lacking support from the rest of Christendom. Norwich, *Byzantium*, p. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. At this time, *basileus* (king) and *autocrator* (Greek equivalent of *imperator*)were interchangeable in Byzantine court protocol. Norwich, *Byzantium*, p. 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. F.A. Wright, *The Works of Liudprand of Cremona* p.5 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. F.A. Wright, *The Works of Liudprand of Cremona*, p. 263 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press) p. 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Norwich, *Byzantium*, p. 120 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. F.A. Wright, *The Works of Liudprand of Cremona* p. 265 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Indeed as Tom Holland makes clear, the Byzantines were fully aware of themselves as continuers of Rome. For while we refer back to them as “Byzantines”, the Byzantines themselves always – up until the last minutes as the Emperor rallied his final troops for their last stand in the Forum in 1453 – called themselves the *Romoai*, under an *Imperator* representing the *Senatus Populesque Romanorum*; the Senate and People of Rome. See Tom Holland, *Millennium* (London: Abacus, 2009) pp. 37-38; also Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Vol.V Ch.LIII, p.416 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Einhard, *Vita Karoli* in *Two Lives of Charlemagne* (London: Penguin Classics, 2008) p. 38 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Notker the Stammerer, *Gesta Karoli* in ibid.,p. 77 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Norwich, *Byzantium,* p. 94 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, p. 15 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Geoffrey Hosking, quoted in Charles Maier, *Among Empires: American Ascendancy and its Predecessors* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2007) p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. John Darwin, *After Tamerlane* pp. 505-506. Barry Gills, (ed.) *The Global Politics of Globalization: “Empire” vs. “Cosmopolis”* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Darwin *Tamerlane’s Shadow.* [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Stephen Howe, *Empire: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) pp. 1-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Michael Cox, ‘The Empire’s Back in Town: Or America’s Imperial Temptation – Again’, *Millennium* 32:1 (2003) p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Michale Ignatieff, *Empire Lite: Nation-Building in Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan* (Toronto: Penguin*,* 2003) p. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Volker Bornschier, ‘European Processes and the State of the European Union’, Paper presented at

    *“European Processes, Boundaries and Institutions”*, Third European Sociological Association Conference

    on *“Twentieth Century Europe: Inclusions/Exclusions*, University of Essex, 27-30 August 1997. p. 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Gibbon *Decline and Fall*; St Augustine *The City of God Against the Pagans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Niall Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (London: Penguin, 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Christian Jacob, *The Sovereign Map: Theoretical Approaches in Cartography throughout History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); James Akerman, *The Imperial Map: Cartography and the Mastery of Empire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Howe, *Empire*, p. 9 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Robert Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography: What the map tells us about coming conflicts and the battle against Fate*. (New York: Random House, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Philip Pomper, ‘The History and Theory of Empires’, *History and Theory, Theme Issue* 44 (2005) p. 6 [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Derek Gregory et. al, *Dictionary of Human Geography* (Malden MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009) pp. 189-190 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid., p. 190 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Darwin, *After Tamerlane*, p. 22 [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *Empire and Emancipation* (London: Pluto Press, 1990) p.186 [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Tom Bottomore, *Dictionary of Marxist Thought* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1983) p.223 [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. However, in the absence of a more appropriate adjective, *imperial* is used herein purely as an adjective form of the noun *empire*. SeeTarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey, ‘Retrieving the Imperial: *Empire* and International Relations’, *Millennium* 31:1 (2002) p. 111 [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. While the HRE’s borders were only officially demarcated under the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia, the Empire itself ceased to expand following the imperial *Reichstag* of 1495. This ‘territorial absolutism’ fixed the Empire in space. Subsequent territorial expansion was undertaken in the name of client kingdoms of the Empire – particularly Austria, and later Prussia – but this was not an official policy pursued by individual emperors in the name of the Empire itself. See Peter Wilson, *The Holy Roman Empire 1495-1806* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), pp. 65-69 [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Douglas Perch, *Wars of Empire* (London: Cassell, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. In the absence of a more suitable term, this thesis uses the term *imperial* purely as an adjective form of *empire*, referring to the polity and not to the policy. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Howe, *Empire*, p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Andrew Erskine, *Roman Imperialism: Debates and Documents in Ancient History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Ibid., p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Perch, *Wars of Empire.* [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Jonathan Hart, *Comparing Empires: European Colonialism from Portugese Expansion to the Spanish-American War* (London: Palgrave, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Porch, *Wars of Empire*, pp. 36-38. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Maier, *Among Empires*, p. 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Howe, *Empire:* pp.15-31 [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Ulrich Beck and Edgar Grande, *Cosmopolitan Europe* (New York: Polity, 2007) pp.62-72. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Leo Blanken, *Rational Empires: Institutional Incentives and Imperial Expansion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Maier, *Among Empires*, p. 20 [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Ibid.,p. 19 [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Richard Drayton, ‘Why do empires rise?’, chapter in Harriet Swain (ed.) *Big Questions in History*,

    (London: Vintage, 2005) pp. 59-60 [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Dalby, ‘Warrior Geopolitics: *Gladiator, Black Hawk Down*, and *The Kingdom of Heaven*’, *Political Geography* 27 (2008), pp. 439-55. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Maier, *Among Empires*, p. 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Bernard Porter, *Empire and Superempire: Britain, America, and the World* (Malden MA: Yale University Press, 2006) p. 2 [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Howe, *Empire*, p. 9 [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Darwin, *After Tamerlane*, pp. 20-22 [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Böröcz, ‘Empire and Coloniality’. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Douglas Porch, *Wars of Empire* (London: Cassell, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Böröcz, ‘Empire and Coloniality’; József Böröcz and Mahua Sarkar, ‘What is the EU?’, *International*

    *Sociology* 20:2 (2005) pp. 153-156 p. 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Ibid., p.7. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Böröcz and Sarkar ‘What is the EU?’ p.154. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. The official title of the Holy Roman Empire (c.800-1806), Europe’s longest-lasting pan-continental state, was *Sacrum Imperium Romanorum* or *Heiliges Römisches Reich Teutscher Nation* (after 1512). Beck and Grande (p. XX) remind us of the danger of invoking the word *Reich* in relation to the European Union. The word is used herein simply as a complementary term to the cumbersome *Holy Roman Empire* *of the German Nation* or its abbreviation, and not to associate the EU with the nefarious twentieth-century misappropriation of the word. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Jan Zielonka, *Europe as Empire: The Nature of the Enlarged European Union* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) pp. 1-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Ibid., p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Ibid., p. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. It must be stated that a critique of Zielonka’s understanding of the Holy Roman Empire, is itself restricted by the relative lack of English-language scholarship on the *Sacrum Imperium Romanorum*. Wilson, *Holy Roman Empire*, pp. 3-4 [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. It is necessary to establish a distinction between Early- and Late-Medieval. Not only did European societies experience significant social and economic developments between the pre- and post- 1350 period, but these were inherently qualitative rather than quantitative changes. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Wilson, *Holy Roman Empire*, pp. 2-5 [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Peter Wilson, *Europe’s Tragedy: A New History of the Thirty Years War* (London: Penguin, 2010) p. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Zielonka’s first (pp. 1-20) and final (pp. 164-189) chapters contain the most explicit links between the HRE and the EU, but there is not a single reference to a historical event, institution, or theme which could enable us to pin down even a vague approximation of his perceived time parameters. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. For example, in his first comparative chart between ‘Westphalian superstate’ and ‘Neo-medieval empire’, Zielonka describes some characteristics of Empire as ‘soft border zones in flux’ and ‘divided sovereignty along different territorial lines’ (Zielonka *Europe as Empire*  p. 12). These are not only vague, but atemporal. The Holy Roman Empire did have soft border zones until the Golden Bull of 1356 (a side-effect of which was to cease expansion in the name of the Empire itself), but not afterwards. Likewise, the Empire also had sovereignty divided along distinct territorial lines, but only after the *Reichstags* of 1495 and 1519 (Wilson *HRE* pp. 40-42). These two characteristics are examples of how Zielonka picks elements which did admittedly exist in the Empire, but did not exist at the same time – and in this case, contradict one another. It is not possible to have sovereignty divided along territorial lines when those territorial lines are ‘fuzzy’ or non-existent! [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. The Golden Bull of 1356, intended to regulate the imperial electoral process, had the side-effect of establishing the territorial margins of the Empire and effectively prevented the *Reich* from expanding. While component states of the Holy Roman Empire were free to pursue their own territorial agendas, the Empire as a whole became fixed in space. The meeting of the Imperial Aulic Council, or *Reichstag*, in 1495 initiated an imperial reform movement which saw executive power shift significantly from the Emperor to the constituent princes – an early anticipation of the 1648 Westphalian peace accords. See Peter Wilson, *The Holy Roman Empire 1495-1806*, pp. 20-21 [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Zielonka, *Europe as Empire*, p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Wilson, *Holy Roman Empire*, pp. 2-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Ibid., pp. 4-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Wilson, *Europe’s Tragedy.* [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Zielonka, *Europe as Empire*,p. 12, 93, 120, 153. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Maier, *Among Empires*, p. 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Wilson, *Holy Roman Empire*, pp. 4-8 [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Wilson acknowledges that by the Early Modern period the ideal of Universal Monarchy had shifted, and that while the theme had become little more than an archaic pretext appropriated by individual emperors as justification for their dynastic squabbles in Europe, the concept remained grounded in the pre-Habsburg, medieval notion of the *Imperium Romanorum* as defender of Christendom (*Defensor Ecclesiae*) and the continuation of Caesar’s and Charlemagne’s (imaginary) unified Europe. See Wilson, *HRE*, pp. 22, 38-39, 71 [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Ibid., pp. 2-3 [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Ibid., p. 6 [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, Vol. I. Ch. I. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Hartmut Behr, ‘The European Union in the Legacies of Imperial Rule? EU Accession Politics

    viewed from a Historical Comparative Perspective’, *European Journal of International Relations*

    13:2 (2007) p. 239. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Herfried Münkler, *Empires: the logic of world domination from Ancient Rome to the United States*

    (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007) p. 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Frances Yates, *Astrea: The Imperial Theme in the Sixteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 1999) p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. Ibid., pp. 6-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. Cicero, *The Republic* and *The Laws* [trans. Niall Rudd] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. # While French and English use “empire”, and Germanic languages use formulations of “Reich” or “Rijk”, Scandinavian and Baltic languages still use “imperium” (Danish, Norwegian), “Impērija” (Lithuanian), “imperija” (Latvian). However, even these etymological continuations do not capture the complexities of the Latin *imperium.*

    [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. *Against Verres* (II, 5) in Cicero, *On Government* [translated by Michael Grant] (London: Penguin Classics,

    1993) [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. *De Officiis* in Cicero, *The Republic and The Laws*. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. Hartmut Behr, *A History of International Political Theory: Ontologies of the International* (London: Palgrave, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. J.S. Richardson, ‘Imperium Romanum: Empire and the Language of Power’, *Journal of Roman Studies* 81:1

    (1991), pp. 1-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. Behr, *Political Theory*, p. 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. S.E. Smethurst, quoted in Behr, *Political Theory*, p. 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. Cicero, *On Moral Duties* II:8. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. Cicero, *On Moral Duties*, in Behr, *Political Theory* p. 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. Cicero, *Treatise on the Commonwealth*, Book I.23. [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. Caroline Steel, *Cicero, Rhetoric and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) pp. 1-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. Porter, *Empire and Superempire*, p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. Maier, *Among Empires*. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. Russell Foster, ‘Tege Imperium! A Defence of Empire’, *Global Discourse* 1:ii, pp. 1-23. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. Erskine, *Roman Imperialism*, pp. 3-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. Behr, *Political Theory*. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. Grant, *Cicero’s Defence Speeches* pp. ii-ix. [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. Petrarch, *Liber Sine Nomine* IV, in Norman Zacour, *Petrarch’s ‘Book Without A Name’. A Translation of the Liber Sine Nomine* (Toronto: The Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1973), pp. 46-48. Also cited in Frances Yates, *Astraea*, p.14 [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. Zacour, *Book Without A Name*, pp. 44-45 [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. Böröcz, ‘Empire and Coloniality’, pp. 16-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. Pagden, ‘Imperialism’, p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials* (London: SAGE, 2011) pp. 144-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. Gregory et.al, *Dictionary of Human Geography*,p. 166. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. Richardson, *Imperium Romanum*, p. 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. Michael McCormick *Eternal Victory: triumphal rulership in late antiquity, Byzantium, and the early Medieval West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) p.10. [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
113. Ibid., pp. 1-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
114. Howe, *Empire.* [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
115. “First Speaker of the Senate” and a title roughly equivalent to “Commander-in-Chief”. Since Antiquity, historians have pointed to Octavian’s concentration of power as the bridge between Republic and Empire. Yet in recent decades, historians have stressed the far more numerous continuities than changes between the two apparent eras, with the Roman system of governance gradually evolving over the centuries and remaining, right up until the fall of Constantinople in 1453, a *de facto* Republic. [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
116. Wilson, *The Holy Roman Empire.* [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
117. Wilson, *Europe’s Tragedy.* [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
118. Porch, *Wars of Empire.* [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
119. Atkinson and Cosgrove ‘Urban Rhetoric and Embodied Identities: City, Nation, and Empire at the Vittorio Emanuele II Monument in Rome’, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 88:1 (1998) pp. 28-49. [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
120. Erskine, *Roman Imperialism*, p. 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-120)
121. Craig Champion, *Roman Imperialism: Readings and Sources* (New York and London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2003) p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-121)
122. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-122)
123. Ibid. p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-123)
124. John Zonaras, *Epitome* 7.21. Cited in Champion *Roman Imperialism* p.92. [↑](#footnote-ref-124)
125. This number does not of course include the ninety-four men and women who ruled from Constantinople both before and after the fall of the West. See Norwich, *Byzantium*, pp. 384-387. [↑](#footnote-ref-125)
126. Champion, *Roman Imperialism*, pp. 1-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-126)
127. Richardson, ‘Imperium Romanorum’, p. 2 [↑](#footnote-ref-127)
128. Ibid., p. 3, 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-128)
129. Ibid., p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-129)
130. Erskine, *Roman Imperialism*, p. 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-130)
131. Christopher Kelly, *The Roman Empire: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-131)
132. JS Richardson highlights how the phrases *Imperium Romanorum* and *Romani imperii* appear in the early-imperial era writings of Pliny the Elder and Tacitus (Richardson *Imperium Romanum* p. 1 [footnote #2]). However as Erskine points out, this did not refer to the concept of a state apparatus but rather the sovereignty of the populace and Senate. [↑](#footnote-ref-132)
133. Dio, *Roman History,* Book LIII, Ch. 17: pp. 235-236. [↑](#footnote-ref-133)
134. Timothy McDermott (ed.) in *Summa Theologiae: A Concise Translation* (New York: Christian Classics, 1997) pp. 3-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-134)
135. Richardson, ‘Imperium Romanorum’. This is supported by Roman cartography such as the *Tabula Peutingeriana*, which depicts Rome’s civilisation as towns (including non-Roman cities) connected by roads, rather than as bounded shapes on a map. [↑](#footnote-ref-135)
136. Holland, *Millennium,* pp. 66-67. [↑](#footnote-ref-136)
137. Ibid. p. 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-137)
138. Gibbon, *Decline and Fall,* Vol. I Ch.XIII p. 225 (blue version) – emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-138)
139. Dio, *Roman History*, Book LII Ch. XLII, v. III. [↑](#footnote-ref-139)
140. Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, Vol.I Ch.III identifies how, in the early “Imperial” period of Classical Rome under the first “emperors”, the terms *imperator*, *augustus*, and *caesar* – the latter two being an honorific title and a family name, respectively – became ‘inseperably connected... with the Imperial dignity’ and were subsequently adopted by ‘Romans, Greeks, Franks, and Germans’. [↑](#footnote-ref-140)
141. Dio *Roman History,* Book LIII, Ch. XVII, v.VI. [↑](#footnote-ref-141)
142. Norwich, *Byzantium,* p. 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-142)
143. Champion, ‘Imperium Romanorum’, pp.186-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-143)
144. Holland, *Millennium,* p. 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-144)
145. From the adjective *augusta*, or “reverent”. Dio *Roman History* Book LIII ch.XVI, v.VIII. [↑](#footnote-ref-145)
146. ‘Ce corps qui s'appelait et qui s'appelle encore le saint empire romain n'était en aucune manière ni saint, ni romain, ni empire’ in Voltaire, *Essai sur les moeurs et l’esprit des nations (IV)* Ch.70 (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2011) p. 41 [translation author’s own]. [↑](#footnote-ref-146)
147. Jacques Le Goff, *The Medieval Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) pp. 67-77. [↑](#footnote-ref-147)
148. Matthias Becher, *Charlemagne* (Malden MA: Yale University Press, 2005) pp. 81-97. [↑](#footnote-ref-148)
149. Gibbon, *Decline and Fall* Vol.V Chap.XLIX. [↑](#footnote-ref-149)
150. Norwich, *Byzantium*, p. 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-150)
151. Becher, *Charlemagne*, p. 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-151)
152. Ibid., pp. 89-92. [↑](#footnote-ref-152)
153. Becher, *Charlemagne*, p. 83 Charlemagne was not a *Holy* Roman Emperor – that title was coined a century and a half later for Otto the Great, under whose instruction Liudprand made his journey to Constantinople. [↑](#footnote-ref-153)
154. St. Augustine, *City of God*, pp. 484-485 [↑](#footnote-ref-154)
155. Jacques Le Goff, *Medieval Civilisation 400-1500* (Cambridge MA: Blackwell, 1991) p. 171. [↑](#footnote-ref-155)
156. Ibid.,p. 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-156)
157. Le Goff, *Medieval Civilisation*, pp.171-172. [↑](#footnote-ref-157)
158. Ibid., p. 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-158)
159. Ibid.,p. 173. [↑](#footnote-ref-159)
160. Norwich, *Byzantium*, pp. 125-126. [↑](#footnote-ref-160)
161. Robert Folz, *The* *Concept of Empire in Europe from the Fifth to the Fourteenth Centuries* (London: Greenwood Press, 1980). [↑](#footnote-ref-161)
162. Le Goff, *Medieval Civilisation*,pp. 265-267. [↑](#footnote-ref-162)
163. Ibid., p. 267. [↑](#footnote-ref-163)
164. In Toby Lester, *The Fourth Part of the World: The Race to the Ends of the Earth* (London and New York: Simon and Schuster, 2009), pp. 329-330. [↑](#footnote-ref-164)
165. Folz, *Concept of Empire*, p. 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-165)
166. Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, Vol.VI Ch.LXVIII. [↑](#footnote-ref-166)
167. Ibid., Vol.VI Ch.LXXI. [↑](#footnote-ref-167)
168. Yates, *Astrea*, p. 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-168)
169. The sets used for Bonaparte’s coronation were borrowed from Parisian theatres, causing French wits to remark that the temporality of the setting would reflect the impermanence of Napoleon’s *imperium.* See Alistair Horne, *The Age of Napoleon* (London: Modern Library, 2006) p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-169)
170. Vincent Cronin, *Napoleon* (London: Harpercollins, 1995) pp. 247-248. [↑](#footnote-ref-170)
171. Horne, *Napoleon*, pp. 37-38. [↑](#footnote-ref-171)
172. As Vincent Cronin highlights, Napoleon’s coronation was immediately proceeded by a salutation of “*Vivat Imperator in Aeternum*”. The links with what he imagined Charlemagne and Rome to be, could not be clearer. Cronin, *Napoleon*, p. 252. [↑](#footnote-ref-172)
173. Cronin *Napoleon* pp. 247-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-173)
174. Wilson, *Holy Roman Empire,* pp. 71-72. [↑](#footnote-ref-174)
175. Alistair Horne, *The Fall of Paris: The Siege and The Commune 1870-71* (London and New York: Penguin, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-175)
176. Porter, *Empire and Superempire.* [↑](#footnote-ref-176)
177. Erskine, *Roman Imperialism*, pp. 4-5 [↑](#footnote-ref-177)
178. Cox, Michael, ‘The Empire’s Back in Town: or America’s Imperial Temptation – Again’, *Millenium* 32:1 (2003) pp. 1-28 [↑](#footnote-ref-178)
179. Maier, *Among Empires*, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-179)
180. Edward Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1787) of course predates the nineteenth century, yet Gibbon’s critical interpretation of Rome rests on its policies and emperors rather than its structure as a holistic state. Rather, it is with the mid-nineteenth century explosion in scholarly history – prompted by mass literacy, Rankean methods, and a desire to link the present with an imagined past – that previous political systems acquire the “imperial” moniker. Thus for example, while twenty-first century scholars refer to Ancient Egypt as divisible into three ‘Kingdoms’, Victorian historians wrote of three ‘empires’; while the Aztec, Mughal, Qing, and even Zulu polities – to name but a few – acquired imperial status in the minds of contemporary scholars as indicators of strength and dignity. This is a curious by-product of Victorian scholarship and nineteenth-century *weltanschaung*, yet it further suggests the discursive nature of empire. It is not a phenomenon, but a thought. [↑](#footnote-ref-180)
181. Ed White, *Early American Nations as Imagined Communities,* American Quarterly 56:1 (2004) pp. 49-81. [↑](#footnote-ref-181)
182. Folz, *Empire*, p. 228. [↑](#footnote-ref-182)
183. Le Goff, *Medieval Civilisation*, p. 267. [↑](#footnote-ref-183)