

It's a small world

Globalisation is nothing new – it began with Confucius 2,500 years ago, says historian **Michael Scott**



How we study history tells us as much about ourselves as it does about the past. Traditionally, we like to carve up the past into periods and geographical areas, around which we create school curriculum topics, university departments and research specialisms – to the extent that we often treat these individual sub-silos of human experience as isolated worlds.

While this helps make the vast tapestry of our past manageable as a series of bite-sized chunks, such an approach could not be further from the truth of how we experience the world. Looking at our globalised world today, we are told only too often about how what we do impacts on the other side of the globe and vice versa. And recent, very successful history books, such as Peter Frankopan's *The Silk Roads*, have shown us how, for long periods of our past, a vast geographical span has been firmly connected by pulsating arteries of trade and migration.

In my new book, *Ancient Worlds: an Epic History of East and West*, I'm interested in how this connected world came into being. What did it take for separate communities, strung out from the Mediterranean to China, to come into contact, develop a sense of global connection and thrive on it? Who were the key figures and forces in forging these linked ancient worlds? What were their driving goals? How does this momentous era of ancient globalisation continue to affect us today and what can we – should we – learn from it?

For me, there are three key moments in this

story. The first is one of simultaneous political revolution, when humanity's relationships were under the microscope. In the late sixth century BC, from the Mediterranean to China, new systems of governance were being born that not only defined their respective worlds, but are still major players in the 21st century: democracy in ancient Athens, republican government in ancient Rome and Confucianism in ancient China. Though they did not always know about, or interact with, one another, these political inventions portray these worlds at similar crossroads of societal development, facing the same organisational difficulties and demands, each searching for a solution that fitted their own culture.

'From the Med to China, we have always interacted with one another'

The second key moment is one of warfare across ancient worlds. Towards the end of the third century BC, Hannibal was crossing the Alps to take on Rome, just as central Asia was alight with territorial conflict. And in China the first Emperor of a unified China – he of the Terracotta Warriors – was articulating the boundaries of his world and in turn destabilising the nomadic tribes bordering his lands. As the

great generals and leaders of this era fought to keep their societies on top, and their own heads on their shoulders, they increasingly came to realise, and rely on, the giant interconnected global chessboard in which they were players. Within half a century, the historians of this period from East and West, for the first time in history, recorded the same incident: the military clash of Eastern nomadic tribes invading the Western community of Greco-Bactria in central Asia. From this moment onwards, ancient globalisation was a reality.

THE THIRD KEY moment I focus on is religious innovation and change on the back of the birth of this connected world. In the fourth century AD, as Christianity swept the Mediterranean, north Africa and parts of western Asia, ancient Hindu worship was being rearticulated by the ruling families in India and Buddhism was spreading from India, via the emergent Silk Roads, to become an established religion in China.





GLOBAL LINES DRAWN
 No man was an island in the time of (from left) the Terracotta Warriors, Hannibal, the Greek golden age, Confucius and Imperial Rome

Through the fervent work of missionaries keen to spread the word of their beliefs, and the zealous efforts of rulers to bolster their rule through alliance with these religious systems, the religious fabric of these ancient worlds was radically realigned, laying the groundwork for the nature of our world today.

Politics, war and religion: the story of *Ancient Worlds* is an important one, not only because it helps us understand how large parts of our world today came into being, but also because it reminds us how much we have always interacted with one another, and, critically, how much we owe to that interaction. We are today in an era of unprecedented globalisation, and whatever the result of the UK's decision in the EU referendum, that globalised world will still

be an indisputable part of our lives. As such, and especially since very recently becoming a father for the first time, I believe we need to do our best to prepare ourselves, and our children, for life in a global world. And thinking about the very ancient roots of global interaction is, for my money, a very good place to start.

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ANCIENT WORLDS: AN EPIC HISTORY OF EAST AND WEST
 BY MICHAEL SCOTT

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