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978-0-521-88730-4 - Roman Imperialism and Local Identities

Louise Revell

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ROMAN IMPERIALISM AND LOCAL IDENTITIES

In this book, Louise Revell examines questions of Roman imperialism and Roman ethnic identity and explores Roman imperialism as a lived experience based around the paradox of similarity and difference. Her case studies of public architecture in several urban settings provide an understanding of the ways in which urbanism, the emperor and religion were part of the daily encounters of the peoples in these communities. Revell applies the ideas of agency and practice in her examination of the structures that held the empire together and how they were implicated within repeated daily activities. Rather than offering a homogenized 'ideal type' description of Roman cultural identity, she uses these structures as a way to understand how these encounters differed between communities and within communities, thus producing a more nuanced interpretation of what it was to be Roman. Bringing an innovative approach to the problem of Romanization, Revell breaks from traditional models and cuts across a number of entrenched debates, such as arguments about the imposition of Roman culture or resistance to Roman rule.

A scholar of Roman architecture and Latin epigraphy, Louise Revell is lecturer in the department of archaeology at the University of Southampton.

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To the memory of my parents

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PREFACE

The book arises out of an interest in how a theorised exploration of social identity might be used to shed new light on Roman imperialism and the unequal power relationships at a local level. Typically, the provinces have been approached through the discourse of Romanization, centred around the idea of cultural change. Consequently, most work has concentrated on the evidence for that transformation, exploring the mechanisms through which such changes occurred, and largely dealing with the initial transitional period. Centred around a Roman-native polarity and the reification of *Romanitas*, this debate has assumed an idealised homogeneity between and within each of the resultant societies after that period of transformation. There has been less work on the variation within communities and the way in which the people of the empire might have experienced Rome after the initial period of annexation. The central question of this book is not ‘becoming Roman’ but rather ‘being Roman’: what it was to be Roman, to live and to interact on a daily level within that society. However, I do not want to present this as a homogenous, monolithic experience. There is a danger that we take our archaeological diagnostics of a ‘Roman’ site, such as glossy red pottery, masonry buildings and coinage, and map them directly onto the people of the past. Instead, by saying that ‘Roman’ has infinite expressions generated through the varying experiences of the individual peoples of the past, the question I wish to ask is how people lived their lives within the Roman period and how this then constructed a multiplicity of Roman identities.

This book aims to problematize the term ‘Roman’. As used to describe an archaeological culture, it has two meanings: one in the present and the other in the past. The majority of Roman archaeologists have concentrated on the problems associated with the former as part of the

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debate about the term ‘Romanization’ (e.g., Hingley 2000). However, as we problematize the present meaning of ‘Roman’, so we come to problematize it in the past. We use the term interchangeably to define a form of material culture, a time span, a geographical location, and a personal ethnicity. These are obviously inter-related, but they are not identical. This leads towards the assumption that there was a paradigm of ‘Roman’ which was static and unchanging. Instead of a fixed entity, we should think of ‘Roman’ as a discourse of possibilities, that it could have a myriad of potential interpretations. Yet at the same time, there were certain elements which were common to Roman societies. My aim in this book is to examine these common elements and the aspects of difference within them.

However, when confronting the work of Roman archaeologists, we do not come to the idea of ‘Roman’ without our own modern, academic preconceptions. The issue of being Roman is tightly bound up within the rhetoric of Romanization; the discourse and the agendas of that debate are so pervasive that they must necessarily provide a contextual framework for this topic. Edward Said has commented that the subject of Oriental studies has been dominated by a single topic: the question of orientalism (Said 1995: 3), and I would argue that in a similar way, Roman archaeology revolves around the subject of Romanization. The question of cultural change, its manifestation and the reasons for it, form a discourse at the heart of the discipline. Even when archaeologists ostensibly deal with an alternative subject, the research frameworks and even the vocabulary they use are already loaded with meanings derived from the Romanization debate. There have been fundamental changes in the theories used to interpret the material evidence, which might be broadly termed as the move from culture history to processualism to post-processualism. Nevertheless, the meta-narrative, or grand theory, of Roman archaeology has remained untouched. The concentration on the topic of Romanization within Roman archaeology has limited the discipline as a whole, leaving little space for the more recent agendas of post-processual archaeology (Laurence 1999a: 388). Thus, the emergence of identity as a research topic within the disciplines of both archaeology and ancient history (and the humanities in general) has been used within Roman archaeology as synonymous with ethnicity. The terminology may be taken on board, but the topics are subsumed within the models for cultural change. Structural properties are considered as part of the process of Romanization, and they are ignored as phenomena within their own right.

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This book represents a deconstruction of the term ‘Roman’. This term is central to the archaeology of the Roman empire, and yet, paradoxically, it is rarely defined or given meaning. Although both it and the abstraction of *Romanitas* are fundamental, the assumption is that as archaeologists/Romanists, we share a common understanding of the term. Therefore, I shall define how I shall use such terminology throughout this book. I propose to use ‘Roman’ in its very broadest sense of a person or the material culture of a person who lived within the confines of the Roman empire following the annexation of that area. I shall attempt to reject the concept of ‘native’, as this term is too value laden in modern studies; instead I prefer ‘pre-Roman’ or ‘non-Roman’. Likewise, the concept of *Romanitas* has a problematic meaning: the use of a Latin term brings with it the aura of authenticity, as though it had meaning in the Roman period (in the same way as *pietas*, *virtus* or *honor*). In fact, it was little used in the Roman period, and absent from works in which Roman authors explored what it was to be a Roman. In spite of this, the term has become pervasive as a term to define Roman culture, suggesting that it has more meaning in the present than the past. For this reason, I shall avoid it and use ‘Roman-ness’ in its place.

Using these definitions, I explore how the term ‘Roman’ was made meaningful in the past through some of the structures and ideologies which reproduced a shared understanding of the term. However, at the same time, I explore the tensions or ‘give’ in the system: how the paradigm breaks down between and within communities. A second theme is that of the relations between the centre and the provinces, and how ‘buying into’ Roman culture on the part of these provincial communities became one of the ways in which the Roman empire was maintained. My primary evidence is the archaeology of urban public buildings, drawing in the inscriptions and sculpture which adorned them. Consequently, it is not my intention to attempt an overarching narrative of being Roman but instead to concentrate on lives framed through the urban setting. The opening chapter presents a discussion of the background to the research: it expands the ideas presented in this preface, and introduces the material and the case studies. Thereafter, the book falls into two parts. The first examines what might be considered the structures of Roman society. Rather than talking about these as abstract entities, I explore how structures conditioned the activities of communities, and how they were in turn reproduced through the activities of social agents. I focus on ideology, encompassing urban ideology (Chapter 2), the rule of the emperor (Chapter 3) and religion

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(Chapter 4). From this I turn to aspects of identity which existed within the overall ethnic Roman identity, and how personal identity was not a given but something negotiated on a daily level through interaction with others of similar or different identities. In Chapter 5, I explore the nature of status, in particular the construction of the elite, adult male. Finally, in Chapter 6, I pull these disparate strands together. I make no claims for reconstructing the truth of any single experience of being Roman, only for how being Roman was always different.

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