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978-1-107-04374-9 - Globalisation and the Roman World: World History, Connectivity
and Material Culture

Edited by Martin Pitts and Miguel John Versluys

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PART I

INTRODUCTION

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GLOBALISATION AND THE ROMAN WORLD: PERSPECTIVES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Martin Pitts and Miguel John Versluys

We should push the globalization analogy harder, applying to the ancient Mediterranean the same tough questions that scholars ask about connectedness in our own time.

(Morris 2005, 33)

INTRODUCTION

Through a collection of essays, this book explores the value of globalisation theory to foster better understandings of the Roman world and its material culture. Why is such an exploration worthwhile? We believe globalisation theory has the potential to add significantly to several crucial debates in Roman archaeology and history. In taking this stance we are not alone: after a jolting start, the concept of globalisation has appeared with increasing frequency in publications addressing very different aspects of the Roman world.¹ However, using a term because it is currently fashionable will not suffice. Why *should* this concept be used, and what can it *add* that current conceptual and methodological apparatus lack? To answer these questions we must critically examine the current state of globalisation theory to determine if it is fit for purpose. Indeed, many Roman archaeologists and historians evoking the concept have arguably done so suggestively, without detailed attention to the theoretical debate that constitutes globalisation studies, or for the consequences that ‘globalising the Roman world’ implies for our understanding of antiquity.² This evocative approach, centred on what may be described as a buzzword, has been severely criticised by other scholars, and sometimes justifiably so.³

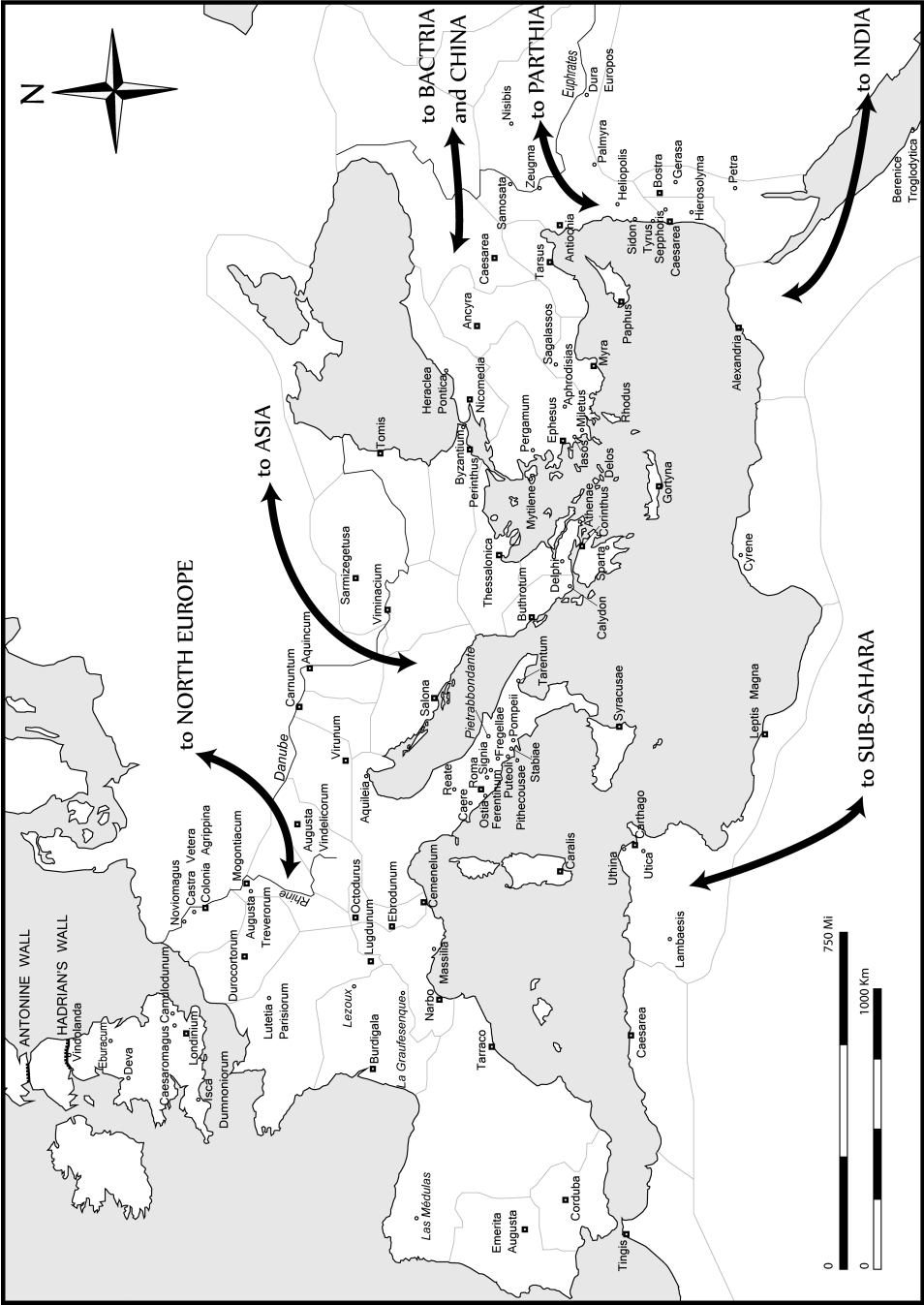


Figure 1: The Roman world in the second century AD, with additional places named in the text relating to other periods. Drawn by Antonio Montesanti.

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It is crucial, therefore, to resolve whether we *can* use globalisation theory to understand the Roman world, and to determine if there is enough value in the theory to use it in an applied fashion. To address these questions we discuss the various definitions of globalisation, the principal themes in globalisation research and how the concept has been applied to other historical periods, as well as to the Roman world. Although we invariably identify potential problems and dangers, our answer is confidently positive. Not only is it methodologically sound to use globalisation theory in the study of Roman history and archaeology, but there are also many compelling reasons why it should be used and added to our theoretical toolbox.

FROM CULTURES TO CONNECTIVITY: BEYOND ROMAN AND NATIVE

There is no going back to the fantasy that once upon a time there were settled, coherent and perfectly integrated national or ethnic communities. (Greenblatt 2009, 2)⁴

In recent decades, Roman history and archaeology have been tremendously successful in deconstructing several of their fundamental premises. The development of the Romanisation debate testifies to this, as does the fact that Romanisation is presently one of the central research themes in both disciplines.⁵ From this deconstruction no new dominant paradigm has arisen. In some respects this is healthy and timely, demonstrating increased self-reflexivity in Roman archaeology as it moves away from the theoretical archaeologists' caricature as an atheoretical sub-discipline dependent on ancient texts.⁶ However, in other respects, the conceptual vacuum created by the discredited concept of Romanisation is discomfoting.

This state of affairs was clearly illustrated by many essays and discussions at the (Theoretical) Roman Archaeology Conferences held in Oxford in March 2010 (RAC IX/TRAC XX) and in Frankfurt in March 2012 (RAC X/TRAC XXII). In most cases, Romanisation was referred to as the main social, political and cultural process driving continuities and changes in material culture. However, few scholars were willing to use the word, instead preferring phrases such as 'Romanisation-between-inverted-commas' or 'what we used to call Romanisation'. This situation undoubtedly stems from the impact of predominantly Anglo scholarship, which regards the paradigm of Romanisation as 'defective' and 'intellectually lazy'.⁷ However, if there are good reasons to abandon Romanisation instead of reformulating

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it, Romanists should be able to come up with alternatives. This has been tried in the past, especially by scholars working within post-colonial studies, but none of their proposals, such as ‘creolisation’, have found wide acceptance.⁸ Building on these approaches, a similar buzzword, ‘identity’, has gained popularity in recent years, yet the use of identity as an analytical paradigm has all too often reverted to using the old terminology of Romanisation.⁹ And this brings us to the present discomfiting situation. Many scholars working in the field are aware of the pitfalls of Romanisation as used in the traditional sense (as acculturation),¹⁰ and most try to understand the Roman world from a perspective that goes ‘beyond Roman and Native’.¹¹ So far this has mainly resulted, however, in more ill-defined terminology. The most common formulations surmise that the Roman world was diverse and multicultural, due to its immense connectivity. While there is nothing wrong with this standpoint, it should be a point of departure rather than a conclusion in itself. The emptiness of much commonly used terminology in archaeological and historical studies becomes especially clear when the processes and mechanisms underlying such phenomena must be articulated. For example, it is common to encounter terms such as ‘inter-culturality’, ‘crossroads of cultures’, ‘hybridity’, ‘confluence’ or, popular in the French tradition, ‘*transferts-culturels*’ or ‘*métissage*’ – most of the time without an adequate explanation of what these concepts exactly mean or imply, especially for the interpretation of material culture.

In summary, the Romanisation debate has come to an unsatisfactory impasse. Most scholars are aware that they should not think in terms of the binary opposites of ‘Roman’ and ‘Native’, most crucially regarding the interpretation of material culture, but since no dominant alternative has arisen, and fruitful debates on the alternatives seem to have stopped, Romanisation remains the default framework for interpretation (even if it is less explicit). Scholars seeking alternatives to Romanisation seem to take two directions. On the one hand there are those favouring the post-colonial view, developing approaches that tend to focus on illuminating indigenous trajectories of change and identities. Although this remains useful, the subtle irony is that post-colonial perspectives often maintain the Roman–Native dichotomy (bad, imperialist Romans versus good, authentic Natives), and moreover, in privileging narratives of colonialism and imperialism in fact *strengthen* the dichotomy.¹² On the other hand there are those exploring notions of ‘connectivity’, but not always addressing its implications, as we have described above. The popular designation ‘hybrid’ is a case in point: what in the Roman world was *not*, in one way or another, a ‘hybrid’? One might well ask. The explanatory value of the term as a label therefore seems extremely limited.¹³

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WRITING ‘ROMAN’ HISTORY

Until not so very long ago almost all history was *national* history, an approach that has been usefully characterised as methodological nationalism.¹⁴ It is within this intellectual framework that Area Studies first developed and flourished.¹⁵ Methodological nationalism was born in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and is directly connected to the emergence of the nation-state. As such it replaced the cosmopolitan, universalistic approach that characterised much of the eighteenth century.¹⁶ Methodological nationalism had an immense impact on historical disciplines, which are now widely using globalisation concepts to develop new ways of thinking. However, it is arguable that the impact of methodological nationalism on archaeology is even greater owing to the very establishment of the discipline in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. From its inception, archaeology had a distinctly local perspective and was effectively engaged in the practice of ‘doing area studies’ through the collection and description of material culture. This perspective has only changed slowly, and has bequeathed the continued dominance of ethnic labels and interpretations of material culture.¹⁷ The fact that we still use the framework of *provincial* Roman archaeologies – as if Britain, France, Spain, Syria, Egypt, etc. would be useful historical categories to understand Roman material culture – is another case in point. Archaeologists, to paraphrase Appadurai, are good in mistaking particular configurations of apparent stabilities in material culture for permanent associations between space, territory and cultural organisation.¹⁸ It is in this sense that much current conceptual apparatus, rooted in nation-state-thinking and Area Studies, is insufficient.

Within Roman archaeology and history, we argue there is an urgent need to transcend post-colonial approaches and a general concern with identity, and to engage more seriously with concepts of connectivity.¹⁹ Writing ‘Roman’ history should move beyond methodological nationalism, especially where it concerns the understanding of material culture. We believe that globalisation theory is eminently suited to do this. While notions of hybridity and cultural mixing still form an essential part of this approach, the important questions remain: how and why? Globalisation offers a series of paradigms that might provide answers. These paradigms are especially relevant because, as we outline below, one of the main strengths of globalisation theories is that they concern ‘a world of disjunctive flows [which] produce problems *that manifest themselves in intensely local forms but have contexts that are anything but local*’ (our emphasis).²⁰ Through an emphasis on understanding differences in the context of larger

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processes, globalisation theories have the potential to help Roman archaeologists and historians transcend oft-criticised dichotomies such as Roman–Native, core–periphery and Italy–provinces, dichotomies that nonetheless feature prominently in the structure of current understandings of the Roman world.

BEFORE GLOBALISATION: WORLD SYSTEMS THEORY AND ITS APPLICATIONS

Before concepts of globalisation gained currency, there was world systems theory. World systems (or world-systems) theory derives from Immanuel Wallerstein's *The Modern World System*, a neo-Marxist analysis of the origins of modern capitalism.²¹ A world system unites very large populations, spread over wide distances, through either political means (world empires) or economic ties alone (world economies). World systems theory is relevant to the discussion of globalisation for several reasons. Although they are in fact strictly separate concepts, world systems analysis and globalisation have become increasingly intertwined. World systems analysis might be best characterised as a specific methodology for studying globalisation as a historical phenomenon, but focusing on the themes of macro-economics and political integration alone.²² World systems theory began as a means of addressing the unique historical circumstances of modernity, but like theories of globalisation, its application quickly acquired greater time-depth. While Wallerstein acknowledged the existence of pre-modern world systems, he regarded the present capitalist era as special because it constituted the first world economy stable in the long term (i.e. 500 years) that did not disintegrate or become converted into a world empire.²³

For those wishing to make a direct link between globalisation and capitalism, Wallerstein's date for the first world economy is often taken as the benchmark for the origins of globalisation: AD 1500. This view was challenged by Andre Gunder Frank and Barry Gills in the early 1990s for its Eurocentric stance, and failure to consider broader system connections before AD 1500. In their edited volume *The World System: Five hundred years or five thousand?*, Frank and Gills argued that the present (single) world-system was 5000 rather than 500 years old, largely on the basis of the existence of long-distance trade relations.²⁴ Wallerstein's rebuttal to this critique reveals the main points of difference between the two camps.²⁵ Rather than being Eurocentric, Wallerstein claimed his position merely exoticised Europe, highlighting the unique historical scenario that led to the development of capitalism.²⁶ Wallerstein's position stressed a

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substantial break, rather than continuity or a shift in the character of a pre-existing world system. Wallerstein pointed out that the long-distance trade connections cited by Frank and Gills were not underpinned by a single division of labour with integrated production processes. Furthermore, he stressed that such trade was in luxury goods between largely separate systems, and did not involve the exchange of bulk goods and necessities as would be expected within an integrated system. While not denying the existence of long-term interconnectedness, Wallerstein's argument for multiple waxing and waning world-systems before AD 1500 rather than a single world system (note missing hyphen) is compelling. Frank and Gills' insistence on a single 5000-year-old world system driven principally by capital accumulation is not sustainable from current evidence, especially given the prevailing view that the predominant mode of exchange in pre-modern tributary empires (or empire-systems) was socially embedded rather than based on 'free' market or profit-driven principles.²⁷ Crucially, neither position rules out the possibility of pre-modern globalisation.

Following Wallerstein, the principles of world systems theory have been attractive to archaeologists and historians working on pre-modern periods and realising the fundamental importance of connectivity.²⁸ Significant works applying the logic of world systems analysis to the Roman world include Keith Hopkins' *Conquerors and Slaves*,²⁹ and Barry Cunliffe's *Greeks, Romans and Barbarians*.³⁰ Building on the fundamental world systems structural opposition between core and periphery, such studies illustrate how asymmetrical flows of raw materials, goods and manpower from outer provinces to Rome were able to sustain urban populations and the military machinery of empire. Under the late Republic, the system was thought to be underpinned by territorial expansion borne of continuous successful warfare. When the empire acquired more stable boundaries, the essential inequality of the former system was maintained through the imposition of taxes, which guaranteed equivalent flows of resource from the provinces to the centre. Taxes collected in rich provinces such as Spain, northern Africa and Egypt were spent on provisioning frontier armies and other essential state infrastructure. This in turn was thought to encourage inter-regional trade as the core provinces sought to recoup their losses to pay further taxes. In newly acquired territories lacking monetised economies, taxes could be levied in kind in the form of surplus agricultural produce, which could in turn be converted into money through sale in urban markets. Thus, the impetus for the origins of urbanism in areas lacking cities before Roman conquest was seen as state driven and top-down, in order to guarantee the effective exploitation of new territories.³¹

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Although effective in explaining how the Roman economy may have been integrated through politically determined means (i.e. taxation) as opposed to market forces,³² the application of world systems models to the Roman world has not been without controversy. In the first place, the model as articulated by Hopkins makes several assumptions that have yet to be historically proven. For example, the degree of mutual *dependency* between Rome and the western provinces/periphery is unclear, both for the inward supply of raw materials and slaves to the ‘core’ on the one hand and the outward flow of luxury goods to the ‘periphery’ on the other.³³ Likewise, the extent to which taxes encouraged economic integration has been cast into doubt.³⁴ A second major criticism of the approach is that it privileges economic and political forces at the expense of the cultural and social.³⁵ World systems models implicitly assume cultural homogenisation over time (if culture is addressed at all), promoting a macro-scale view that is too unwieldy to explain regional and localised variations in material culture. Moreover, the models strengthen centre–periphery thinking that research on identity and memory sets out to undermine. It is for that very reason, from the mid-1990s onwards, when identity and memory developed into key concepts, that world systems models fell out of fashion. This is in some ways unjust as, despite their weaknesses, the models addressed the grand narrative of history head on, directly harnessing the potential of archaeological evidence as well as written sources, and developing ways of thinking beyond ‘methodological nationalism’ (see above). Building on world system approaches, the significant challenge is to address the universality of structure and practice in the Roman world, while simultaneously explaining the dialogues and divergences that defined local experience.

WHAT IS GLOBALISATION?

From the early 1990s, the use of the word ‘globalisation’ grew exponentially, from academic obscurity to mass-media ubiquity. In popular discourse it is a buzzword invoked to account for a variety of phenomena: global economic recessions, the relocation of Western manufacturing facilities to ‘developing’ countries, the erosion of local heritage in the face of capitalist consumer culture, and the future consequences of unchecked global warming. Globalisation is often linked to transnational corporate capitalism in the public imagination, aka the ‘globalisation project’,³⁶ which has led to a range of ‘counter-globalising’ political movements, ranging from international terrorism to anti-poverty protests and ethical consumerism.³⁷ In short, globalisation is seen by many as inevitable, unstable and uncontrollable; an ever-looming spectre of large-scale