

Romanization: between dead ends and future directions?

OSCAR BELVEDERE & JOHANNES BERGEMANN, *IMPERIUM ROMANUM. ROMANIZATION BETWEEN COLONIZATION AND GLOBALIZATION* (Palermo, Palermo University Press 2021). Pp 345, figs. 100. ISBN-13: 978-88-5509-275-3.

Since the early 1990s, the debate over ‘Romanization’ continues to occupy pride of place as one of the most hotly contested subjects in Roman archaeology and history, variously involving questions of agency, historical and material outcomes, definitions, alternative concepts, a growing body of archaeological evidence, and the legacies of early modern colonialism and imperialism. While the debate has waxed and waned in recent decades, the contents of *Imperium Romanum. Romanization between Colonization and Globalization* underline why a concern with Romanization is unlikely to go away soon, despite forceful pleas to abandon the term altogether.¹ The collection of essays edited by Oscar Belvedere and Johannes Bergmann promises to bring two novel perspectives to the debate. The first, implied by the volume’s title, is to re-evaluate Romanization in the light of calls to re-think many of the changes taking place in the Roman period – including, but by no means limited to the impacts of Roman imperialism – as instances of ancient globalizing processes.² The second innovation of the volume is to present a pan-imperial view of how Romanization (or globalization) worked in different regions of the Roman world, elucidating both the diversity of past experience and how researchers from different national traditions have approached the issue. In the foreword, O. Belvedere draws a distinction between a northern European tradition (essentially British and Dutch) that increasingly focused its efforts in understanding the Roman provincial countryside and the material culture of peasant and ‘native’ groups, and Central/Southern European approaches, which continue to privilege more critical understandings of the role of local elites in processes of

¹ Mattingly (2004) provides one of the most systematic and persuasive cases, arguing that the concept of identity provides a better framework to analyse many of changes (and more) typically associated with processes of Romanization.

² Versluys 2014; Pitts & Versluys 2015; Witcher 2017.

Romanization. By bringing together scholars from these apparently diverging national traditions to evaluate the value of globalization ideas in different parts of the empire, the volume aims to move the Romanization debate forward.

One feature that makes this volume so distinctive and interesting from the point of view of the historiography of the Romanization debate is its distinguished list of contributors, many of whom actively shaped the Romanization debate in the 1990s or shortly thereafter. Readers who have followed the discussion over the years will no doubt be curious to see how the perspectives of these prominent scholars have changed (or not). However, the list of contributors, who were first invited to discuss their ideas at a conference at the Villa Vigoni near Lake Como (Italy) in November 2019, is unusual in an age when issues of inclusion and representation have become ever more pressing. The volume's contents page, listing very few early career scholars, and being overwhelmingly white male (only two of eighteen full contributions are written by women) represents a missed opportunity to broaden and diversify the voices in the debate. This unbalanced line-up is ultimately a poor fit with the aims of the volume, albeit with some exceptions. Many regional overview contributions fail to meaningfully engage with the extant literature on globalization, archaeology, and the Roman world at all, let alone critically appraising what might be gained by asking new questions and exploring the potential of alternative perspectives. The lack of diversity in contributions is also matched by a high degree of conformity in (traditional) materials of study. Since most papers deal with archaeological evidence typically associated with the study of political and military history or the world of elites – ancient written sources, monumentality, urbanism, settlement, architecture, visual culture, epigraphy, and macro landscape analysis – it is hardly surprising that several contributors express little discomfort discussing 'processes of Romanization' without caveat or apology. To be clear, the problem is not that these understandings of Romanization are wrong. Models of 'elite negotiation', such as Martin Millett's original explanation of trickle-down emulative behaviour,³ remain highly

³ Millett 1990a.

persuasive in certain contexts and circumstances. The problem, then, is that Romanization studied from this perspective presents a disproportionately and shrinkingly *partial* picture, privileging a narrow subset of society, and failing to make sense of the much wider array of archaeological evidence now at our disposal. One wonders why studies of small finds, pottery, zooarchaeology, archaeobotany, and human remains received so little attention in *Imperium Romanum*, especially given their prominence in recent studies that have lifted the lid on the complex and multifaceted processes by which identities in the Roman world were articulated and elaborated.⁴ Another structural problem is the absence of any papers dealing in-depth with regions outside or bordering the conventional frontiers of the Roman empire. One of the great merits of looking at the Roman world through the lens of globalization is that it promotes the study of phenomena that did not respect ancient political boundaries or modern national research traditions, a perspective missed by many contributions here.

Despite headline weaknesses in the balance and coverage and the contributors' inconsistent engagement with the forward-thinking agenda of the editors, *Imperium Romanum* nevertheless adds numerous thought-provoking perspectives on the Romanization debate. The introductory section is especially illuminating, with the contributions by Greg Woolf and M. Millett providing refreshing self-critique of their influential 1990s monographs,⁵ and Miguel John Versluys responding to more recent criticism on the perceived weaknesses of globalization as a paradigm for Roman studies.⁶ The self-critical points of G. Woolf and M. Millett could easily be applied to many of the following contributions in the volume: both underline a greater need to question the reach of Roman imperial power in their past work, especially within highly complex processes of identity formation and the transformation of cultural practices; M. Millett underlines the limitations of not giving sufficient agency to non-elites, whereas G. Woolf laments the lack of agency ascribed to material culture,

⁴ e.g. Eckardt 2010; 2014; Hales & Hodos 2010.

⁵ Millett 1990b; Woolf 1998.

⁶ e.g. Gardner 2013; Fernández-Götz, Maschek & Roymans 2020.

highlighting the fundamental difference between the roles of objects in conscious display versus the unintended consequences of objects *acting en masse*. The introductions serve to bring into focus three substantial areas of contention: Does globalization offer a constructive way forward? How should the divisive issue of Roman state and military power be handled in interpretations? And what role and status should material culture have in the Romanization debate?

Globalization

Imperium Romanum delivers mixed messages on globalization. Several contributors provide critical discussions of the potential of approaching the Roman world from a globalization perspective (G. Woolf, M.J. Versluys, K. Lomas, and G. Schörner), and others offer straightforward (if occasionally cautious) acceptance of using or applying the term (J. Bergemann, A. Rizakis, and R.J.A. Wilson). The rest, however, engage with it sparingly, dismissively, or barely at all. For G. Woolf, who offers the most useful overview of recent developments in the Romanization debate, globalization ought to work best in suggesting novel perspectives for understanding the ancient world, with terms like ‘glocalization’ offering aides to the interpretative imagination. M.J. Versluys clarifies this standpoint, reaffirming the view that globalization was not intended by him and others as a master explanatory narrative or even an alternative to Romanization; instead, the concept deals primarily with questions of connectedness, and should therefore offer valuable alternative frameworks for drawing attention to how objects, settlements and practices (etc) are to some degree dependent on wider ‘global’ connections – a realisation not fully explored previously in the Romanization debate. Building on these perspectives, K. Lomas provides a thoughtful application of globalization ideas to a pair of case-study areas from southern Italy. L. carefully disentangles the complexities of how communities in Naples (Campania) and Velia (Lucania) simultaneously placed selective emphasis on ideas of Hellenism located within the contemporary globalised Roman cultural *koine*, their older lineages of engaging with Greek culture, and the display of imperial patronage – with different contrasting outcomes. This case-study works well as an *exemplum* serving to underline the value of globalization

in placing connectivities at the centre of analysis, bringing out the multifaceted interplay of changing cultural influences, local traditions, and geo-politics. In this vein, as G. Schörner explains (281), one of the main benefits of globalization is precisely that it does not pre-suppose specific socio-economic processes (imposed or otherwise), structures or mechanisms. In other words, it is well-suited to examining phenomena that are more routinely missed by placing the analytical focus on imperialism, and perhaps providing the missing balance to the Romanization debate called for in the introductions by G. Woolf and M. Millett.

Power

Can globalization deal with the ramifications of shifting power dynamics brought about by the impacts of Roman imperialism, as well as matters of cultural connectivity? This question occupies the text of several contributors, not to mention the more vocal critics of applying neologisms like globalization to the Roman world.⁷ In the introduction by M.J. Versluys, the metaphor of ‘friction’ is deployed to show that globalization is well-equipped to meet the analytical challenge of dealing with hard power, drawing on the anthropological work of Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing.⁸ As V. points out, power is hardly absent from the more numerous and extensive approaches to globalization in the social sciences, so there is no inherent obstacle for the same happening in Roman archaeology and history. Why then, do some Romanists perceive globalization to be a ‘soft culturalist perspective’ (Versluys, 37) that misses unequal power relations? The answer probably has something to do with the circumstances in which globalization started to gain ground in Roman studies in the 2000s. At the time, issues of hard power were catered for in structural terms by approaches to the Roman economy, and in human terms through the influence of post-colonial studies, as well as the growing popularity of identity studies. Globalization may well have contributed incrementally to these areas of research, but it had far more potential to transform other areas, namely the study of material culture. Questions concerning the immense diversity and vastness of the ever-increasing corpus of Roman period objects

⁷ Naerebout 2006/7; Gardner 2013; Fernández-Götz, Maschek & Roymans 2020.

⁸ Tsing 2005.

were being asked by archaeologists, ancient historians and even prehistorians concerning matters of object biography, genealogy, visual style, cultural *koine*, mass consumption, and standardization, and bricolage etc,⁹ yet these themes were poorly served by the bluntness of existing explanatory frameworks in which hard power loomed large. Globalization was advocated to provide a more sophisticated framework to conceptualize these subjects and data,¹⁰ and as such ought to have complemented post-colonial approaches dealing with the impacts of power on human experience, rather than being set up in opposition as some kind of new master narrative.

Zooming out, in many respects the ongoing anxiety over ‘power’ reveals a selective amnesia on the part of some scholars of the historiography of the Romanization debate, with discourse coming full circle since the 1990s, when precursors of globalization thinking such as World-Systems Theory (hereafter WST) were debated.¹¹ Unlike the ideas of globalization being advocated for Roman studies in the 21st century (including by some of the contributors in the present volume), WST advocates a formal structural macro-scale analysis of power and economy in historical empires, and its influence continues to be seen in the modelling of bigger picture phenomena like taxation and imperial connectivity.¹² It is worth noting that many archaeologists were originally reticent in their adoption of WST because they felt it was poorly equipped to deal with the cultural dimensions of connectivity.¹³ Post-colonial approaches overcame many of the over-generalizing tendencies of WST by placing the emphasis back on the local experiences of societies and individuals.¹⁴ Hard power was already well dealt with in Roman archaeology, if not entirely satisfactorily. As G. Woolf argues, post-colonial studies implicitly risk ‘making empire the centre of a totalizing narrative, a master-context that provides the answer to every question and the ultimate cause of all major changes’ (21). In W’s

⁹ e.g. Gardner 2003; Eckardt 2005; Gosden 2005; Pitts 2015; Versluys 2015.

¹⁰ Pitts and Versluys 2015.

¹¹ Woolf 1990 for the definitive discussion on applications to the Roman world; cf. Wallerstein 1974.

¹² e.g. Hopkins 1980, Scheidel 2014.

¹³ Some suggested partial ways of overcoming this lacuna for the Roman empire, for example, through ‘World Symbols’ (Woolf 1990)

¹⁴ Webster 2001.

view, ancient empires had much less agency to transform societies with the same brutal thoroughness than their early modern counterparts.¹⁵ The implication that allowing room for scenarios other than intervention (invasion) and response (alone) offers more scope for balancing narratives, putting imperial power in its place, but without ignoring it altogether. The case for such balancing of narratives is arguably made in the contribution by Lisa Fentress, who interprets the remodelling of pre-existing city centres in N. Africa at the time of the fall of Carthage as ‘brutal urbanistic transformation that erased both religious and civil sites and their memories’ (165), preferring French colonization over globalization as an analogous explanatory model. This is a valuable and forceful contribution that reminds us of the sheer violence practiced by Roman colonial populations – especially non-elite colonists who apparently had little interest in integration and cultural sharing. However, this contribution also underlines a major disconnect with what different scholars expect from paradigms like Romanization or globalization. On the one hand stands the fundamentally geopolitical analysis put forth by L. Fentress, and with much less ‘shock and awe’, by many other contributors to the volume, which at their heart take aim at reforming traditional narratives in Roman history – essentially military-political history, that is. And on the other hand, there are the group of scholars with the primary aim of making sense of the ever-growing corpus of ‘big data’ of material culture from the Roman world, in all its immense complexity and diversity. While there may be some overlap in the aims and memberships of these two crudely characterised interest groups, they are clearly not always striving for the same thing: not all variability in material culture is central to the analysis of Roman power, and likewise, privileging power alone can only partially account for the complexities of changing artefacts and worlds made up of human-object entanglements. A single conceptual framework cannot work effectively for both camps.

Material culture

¹⁵ Cf. Gosden 2004.

As L. Fentress concedes, her powerful analogy between the impact of Rome on the cityscapes of N. Africa and the effects of French colonization has its limits, not least its inability to comprehensively account for changes in material culture, which ‘undergoes in Africa a far less obvious transition than elsewhere’ (174). Indeed, the changes she observes, by which ‘African ceramics in the Roman tradition... quickly took over the Mediterranean’ (ibid.) seem much more easily explained and studied as globalizing phenomena, in which processes of the ‘universalization of the particular’ are commonplace, but only (at best) indirectly relatable to the machinations of power and empire. On this issue, G. Woolf helpfully reminds us that continent-wide changes involving material culture with standardized features occurring hand-in-hand with localized adaptation also happened in prehistory (e.g. Linearbandkeramik pottery, and the Beaker Phenomenon), and crucially without any assumptions drawn by prehistorians of the existence of political conquest or imperialism (26-7). Globalization provides fruitful possibilities for interpreting material culture in such situations, especially when a strong degree of trans-regional connectivity is primarily manifest in object-worlds. The failure to confront material culture more critically and directly in relation to loosely defined notions of imperialism and ‘Romanness’ is a recurrent leitmotif of the Romanization debate,¹⁶ an observation that applies to many contributions to *Imperium Romanum*. In this respect, the recurring yet limited treatment of pottery in the volume serves as a case in point. For several contributors, old-fashioned ‘representational’ understandings of pottery are presented in which objects stand as proxies for more complex human phenomena,¹⁷ without much critique or accompanying analytical detail. For example, J. Bergmann links the presence of Italian *terra sigillata* on the Athenian Agora with the openness of Athenian society to western cultural models (55); Peter Attema views the presence of amphorae in the Pontine countryside as an indicator of affluence (103); whereas O. Belvedere is more cautious about viewing ceramic imports in Roman Sicily as simple indicators of acculturation, as opposed to general evidence of Mediterranean connectivity (342). More provocatively, Nicola Terrenato asserts that ‘reliably telling apart a local vase from a Roman one turned out to be much

¹⁶ c.f. Van Oyen 2017.

¹⁷ For critique of representational readings of material culture, see Van Oyen and Pitts 2017.

harder in 3rd century BCE Campania than in 1st century CE Britain' (78). While helpfully alluding to the essential complexities missed by many scholars in applying cultural labels to objects, Terrenato's concern is mainly with the impreciseness and vague usage of cultural labels in scholarship (e.g. 'Roman'), and much less how these challenges can be practically dealt with in the analysis of material culture.¹⁸ In the end, the absence of further discussion on the complexities of analysing and interpreting material culture (especially that which falls outside the traditional remit of 'Classical archaeology') significantly undermines *Imperium Romanum*'s core aim in attempting to move the Romanization debate forward, despite the presentation of summaries of recent research from across the Roman empire and multiple national research traditions.

Like many volumes before it, *Imperium Romanum* raises the seemingly perpetual questions of what the Romanization debate is for, and (more recently) whether globalization is fit for purpose to drive research on the Roman world forward. On the matter of globalization, K. Lomas makes the insightful observation that it is perhaps easier to adapt globalization for the study of material culture than ancient history (125). There is certainly a strong case that globalization offers more value for advancing the study of material culture, especially in contrast to ideas of Romanization and imperialism. But if the aim is to develop and update traditional narratives of ancient political and military history, globalization has perhaps less to add. This is not as some have claimed, because globalization cannot deal with hard power, but rather because it offers far less innovation in the area of traditional historical narratives than its potential to transform understandings of 'objects in motion' in a connected Roman world, placing it in its wider Afro-Eurasian context.¹⁹ In contrast, the model of Romanization as 'elite negotiation' still works for the kinds of traditional ancient history informed primarily by ancient written sources and inscriptions, however partial such explanations have proven to be. Why then has

¹⁸ In fact, recent research inspired by globalization ideas demonstrates the complexity of pottery genealogies in first century CE Britain, and that so-called 'Roman' pottery designs had often undergone a myriad of cultural transformations before and after arriving, resulting in an eclectic and changing bricolage of objects spanning multiple provinces (Pitts 2019).

¹⁹ Versluys 2014.

globalization been taken up with most enthusiasm by colleagues in Britain and the Netherlands as opposed to other national archaeological traditions? The answer has little to do with the ancient context of Britannia and Germania Inferior as L. Fentress claims (175), and probably much more to do with the prominence of theory and interdisciplinary approaches in the respective national traditions of Roman and Classical archaeology. After all, globalization ideas are just as much as likely to be applied by British and Dutch scholars to any region in world archaeology.²⁰ At least, this is the impression one gets reading the contributions to *Imperium Romanum*. A more diverse and representative group of contributors may well have presented a different picture. In the end, *Imperium Romanum* reminds us that one of the reasons there is a Romanization debate at all is because of the requirements of individual scholars with different research priorities who ask different questions. Accepting such diversity as a point of departure, the answers to individual needs are not to be found in the blanket application of fashionable concepts, but rather in the creative re-working of new and old paradigms to provide novel perspectives and interpretations.²¹

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²⁰ As demonstrated by Hodos et al. 2017, which features a preponderance of British and Dutch contributors.

²¹ As one global sociologist puts it: ‘...scholars often expect too much from paradigms, as if they could be an all-purpose elixir to serve their needs and wishes. Change the paradigm, say from Romanisation to globalisation, and the problems do not disappear, they just relocate... Thus, using paradigms means reworking them in the process’ (Jan Nederveen Pieterse 2015, 237).

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