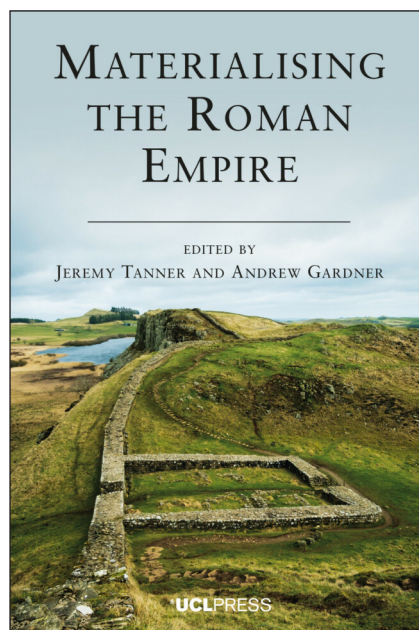


Book Review

Tanner, Jeremy and Andrew Gardner (eds). 2024. *Materialising the Roman Empire*. London: UCL Press; 978-1-80008-399-8 paperback £35 ebook Open Access.

How do you summarize the Roman Empire in a single volume? *Materialising the Roman Empire*, the new volume from UCL, does so by offering a suite of contemporary perspectives from insightful voices. The book is accessibly written and available open access. The work is thematic, with each chapter addressing a different major theme or area of scholarship, covering both tangible material culture and more abstract concepts. Most chapters serve as a useful, contemporary introduction to their subjects, whilst some present new ideas in compelling ways, and seem destined to become academic touchstones. For readers at multiple levels, this book is probably worth your time.

And yet, this is an odd book, often struggling for a purpose. Jeremy Tanner (Preface) outlines the volume's troubled genesis. This began as an ambitious bilingual conference exploring the Roman and Han Dynasty Chinese Empires in tandem. What is presented here is effectively just the Roman half of the original intended output, which was to include complementary chapters exploring the same subjects in the Han Dynasty, and reflective pieces by both Roman and Han Dynasty specialists. The choice to abandon the comparative element entirely when the original collaboration collapsed is disappointing. The conference itself went ahead, and many of the authors attended.



Some vestige of the reflective chapters, or a summary chapter by the editors capturing this experience, would have been appreciated. Whilst the causes of the breakdown appear to have been complex, and indeed would be unknown if not for the candour of the preface, one point deserves further comment. The suggestion that it would have been inappropriate to work with expat scholars 'heavily acculturated to Euro-American intellectual agendas and styles of research' (p. xxv) is a strange one, given that the prime cause of the breakdown appears to have been the lack of compatibility of Anglophone and Chinese academic traditions. The implication that UCL is better positioned to determine which academics are authentically Chinese than the academics themselves is also objectionable.

This has ultimately left the book as a series of chapters written around a linking thread that is now gone. In the search to find a new one, the editors land on two themes: Empire and Materiality. Andrew Gardner (Introduction) explores these themes in contemporary Roman archaeology, presenting a somewhat bleak interpretation of the theoretical landscape. Whilst ultimately accepting that the present plurality of approaches is inevitable and desirable as the scope of integrated enquiry expands, Gardner pines for a lost age of (contradictorily) either theoretical polarization or monolithic consensus (p. 1). In Chapter 11, David Mattingly provides a succinct outline of (and personal reflection on) the hugely influential concept of 'discrepant identities', and the wider post-colonial turn that has increasingly defined Roman archaeology since the 1990s. This is the model of theoretical triumph that Gardner opines over the loss of (p. 2). But can theories of Materiality and Empire become as ubiquitous as those of identity? Despite the claim that this book is an exploration of theory that happens to also provide an introduction to a variety of thematic subjects (p. 1), its genesis and tone suggest that it was the other way round. However, perhaps that makes it a more insightful window into how different sectors of the academy have variably engaged with these concepts.

Ray Laurence (Chapter 1) focuses on long distance Imperial roads, mainly within Italy, as practical and ideological elements of sustaining Empire. This is less focused on the roads themselves than the infrastructure (milestones, *mansiones*, beasts of burden) and ideology (journey markers, commemoration of journeys and road building) surrounding them.

John Pearce (Chapter 2) provides a broad summary of key scholarship themes in the archaeology of writing. Focusing on the north-western provinces, Pearce draws out changes over time, diversity between media, and the important role that literacy played in Imperial propaganda and organization.

Chris Howgego (Chapter 3) examines coinage, and the role of money. This chapter is structured around four themes (the structure and diversity of coinage and monetary systems, the use and control of money, coins as propaganda, and current debates in coin studies), focusing on the Augustan system, and contrasting the east and west of the Empire.

Andrew Wilson (Chapter 4) explores long distance, non-luxury trade. Focusing on the early Empire, this chapter uses examples of *terra sigillata*, olive oil amphora in Rome, and trade with India to illuminate different aspects of trade as part of Imperial policy and market enterprise. This chapter is especially useful as a clear and accessible entry point to post-Finley economic paradigms, focused on trade and technology.

Louise Revell (Chapter 5) uses the example of new towns in the Iberian provinces to explore urbanism. Though mostly concerned with the ideological and legal position of towns, this chapter also uses buildings as evidence of behaviours and ideas, utilizing both in tandem to explore how towns worked to create communities bound by place but differentiated through experience.

Rebecca Redfern (Chapter 6) provides a sobering exploration of slavery, highlighting the scale and pervasiveness of violence within the Roman system. This chapter takes an empathetic and experience-focused stance, providing a good introduction to the breadth of evidence in bioarchaeology, material culture, art and spatial organization, although sometimes glossing over the considerable uncertainty about much of it.

Astrid Van Oyen (Chapter 7) presents a wide-ranging look at craft production, anchored in a case study of Marzuolo, Italy. This chapter is a masterclass in materiality, examining how the rapid expansion in production across a range of industries allowed new material relationships across the social spectrum, making possible the types of identity construction that have dominated scholarship in recent decades. This is a less radical and thoroughly more persuasive interpretation of materiality than Van Oyen has presented in previous publications, resulting in an inspirational chapter that shows how the details of craft processes can be built up into models of economy, identity and experience.

Peter Stewart (Chapter 8) examines Roman art, focusing on Republican and early Imperial sculpture and mosaics. Stewart argues that art was a key force in constructing the nebulous position of 'Emperor' in the Principate and explores the agency of local populations in spreading Roman art styles to the provinces.

Ton Derks (Chapter 9) tackles religion. Although highlighting material evidence as a means to rebalance scholarship away from the institutional religion of Empire and towards personal and private devotion, case studies nevertheless proceed top-down.

Derks explores the Augustan Pantheon statuary and Ara Pacis as windows into contemporary politics, before discussing how provincial beliefs and histories shaped the architecture and dedications of imported Imperial and syncretic cult sites. A discussion of statuary and figurines as evidence of coming-of-age ceremonies is as far down the social scale as we descend.

Andrew Gardner himself (Chapter 10) explores the misunderstood world of frontiers and boundaries as an interdisciplinary theoretical movement, of particular relevance at a time of rapid 'rebordering'. Case studies explore Wales, Hadrian's Wall, and the Saxon shore as dynamic, changeable frontiers, variously geared towards internal and external threats, and fostering unique social dynamics which created new contexts for interaction both within and without the Empire. Despite Gardner's misgivings about the state of modern archaeological theory, this chapter demonstrates a reflective approach to the history of theory, acknowledging how many of the triumphs ascribed to theoretical movements have in fact been shaped (even caused?) by developments in data and methodology.

Engagement with the stated themes is highly variable; broadly speaking, most chapters deal either primarily with Empire or Materiality, rather than synthesizing the two perspectives. Those that focus on Empire feel the least satisfying from a theoretical perspective, and the Imperial focus feels more limiting than enabling. The bias of some chapters towards the early Empire, Mediterranean core and elites feels old-fashioned, despite the new perspectives offered on this material. A more decentred approach, exploring the effects of Imperial frameworks on less-obviously Imperial themes, the changing nature of Empire over time and space, and the bilateral nature of agency between different groups would have been appreciated. The chapters by Gardner (Chapter 9), Van Oyen (Chapter 7) and Redfern (Chapter 6) are best in this regard.

By contrast, the chapters which focus on material approaches display more bias towards the north-western provinces. Perhaps this is a reflection of the variable uptake of material culture studies and theorization, although the lack of non-Anglophone authors also limits the volume's scope (a point of some irony given their stance on Chinese academia). 'Materiality' defines a potentially wide range of theoretical trends within the humanities, which vary from simply engaging with physical (archaeological) evidence to radical redefinitions of agency. Much of the materiality displayed here leans towards the former, and some chapters still place most interpretive weight on documentary sources or the 'more interesting' ritual or symbolic actions surrounding 'mundane' processes. Nevertheless, Wilson (Chapter 4), Van Oyen (Chapter 7) and Gardner (Chapter 9) provide perspectives which deftly balance the more radical aspects of materiality theory with measurable evidence. These chapters show how the weight

of mass produced ‘things’ and the structure of settlements and fortifications acted not only to engage with Empire, but to create and shape it. This is a powerful reframing, creating nuance from the types of ‘mundane’ evidence recovered archaeologically. As presented here, there is reason to believe that ‘materiality’ could become a theoretical concept of greater importance than ‘identity’ in shaping future scholarship.

It is notable that, despite Gardner’s fiery introduction, his chapter is convincing precisely because of the measured tone and reflective stance that it takes. The same is true of Van Oyen’s chapter. Ultimately, the better parts of this volume show the value of a plurality of approaches, engaged with in a collaborative rather than competitive environment, whilst its genesis reminds us of the pitfalls of dogmatic practice.

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