
TRAC Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference

www.trac.org.uk

Paper Information:

Title: 'Romanization - Imperialism' - What are we talking about?

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Pages: 8–14

DOI: http://doi.org/10.16995/TRAC1996_8_14

Publication Date: 11 April 1997



Volume Information:

Meadows, K., Lemke, C., and Heron, J. (eds) 1997. *TRAC 96: Proceedings of the Sixth Annual Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference, Sheffield 1996*. Oxford: Oxbow Books.

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2. 'Romanization – Imperialism' – What are we talking about ?

by P. Freeman

Introduction

In most academic treatments of the origins and evolution of imperial systems, a recurring, if unwritten, feature is the belief that empires are empires and imperialism is imperialism. It is assumed that the phenomena have existed as long as humans have felt the desire or need to dominate their neighbours. Out of such control results any number of consequences, all which essentially revolve around exploitation, whether it be for taxation and tribute, control of resources including land, access to (cheap or servile) labour as well as for sensual gratification etc. The forces which drive these urges and/or which have served to keep them in place, as well as justify them, are described as 'imperialism'.

From these basic observations, analysis of the reasons for, and methods of, control in a particular period or region can commence. This applies to those instances of empire in the modern world as much as the ancient world. The process of analysis can come from any number of directions, however, they can be summarised as principally coming from one of two origins:

(i) from analysis of original data pertinent to that period, which can be underwritten by a particular model or framework, one that is implicitly or explicitly derived from study of the more recent past. This approach can variously chart the evolution of attitudes and the vocabulary of empire, detect the presence and substance of that empire's 'imperial mission', as well as describe the rise and fall of that system.

(ii) by the use of comparative studies, for "...comparisons with various imperial systems at other times and in other places can often be stimulating" (Alcock 1993:5). This technique is frequently used because it is felt that the comparison may be instructive, shedding a fresh perspective on obscure or over worn primary material; and because empire is empire. Comparative frontiers is a particularly well-established mode of analysis, with its own periodic series of meetings and conference proceedings (e.g. Miller & Steffen 1977; Dyson 1985). Such is the attraction of the 'discipline' that it even has its own journal dedicated to the subject (cf. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*) if not its own methodology (the *Annales School*).

All these factors, trends or models in scholarship have, in turn, been applied to the cultural consequences of Empire, a theme which (academically) is currently highly fashionable (e.g. Alexander 1991; Alcock 1993; Said 1993). For these proceedings, the most obvious instance of this is the 'romanization' of the ancient western Europe.

Both imperialism and its variants, along with acculturation, appear to be issues of some importance to ancient historians and archaeologists. This is evidenced by the number of publications and conference sessions which have appeared on this theme since the late 1970s. The reasons for this upsurge can be explained by a number of developments; us living at the fag-end, so to speak, of the British Empire and thus being concerned with what has happened to former possessions; shifts in historical perspective and methodology and the publication of a number of works which at this time appear important. All of these factors, and others, have contributed to make imperialism etc. an area of lively scholarly debate. Yet for all this effort, what has actually come out of it? What has really been achieved? To put it another way, is there anything new that can be said about imperialism?

Terms like imperialism and acculturation, in all their forms, are now used in a multiplicity of ways, often in such bland or generalised terms that it makes the process of comparison easy. In a succinct summary of how modern studies have interpreted the nature and evolution of Roman imperialism, Garnsey and Whittaker recognised that imperialism had become in the post-W.W.II decades a "...term of abuse, implying unjust or oppressive rule or control" (1978:1). Likewise in his *War and Imperialism In Republican Rome*, William Harris offered a slight variation of one advanced by Zevin (1972): "...imperialism is activity on the part of any state which establishes or subsequently exercises and maintains qualified or unqualified rights of (power) beyond the previous boundaries within which such rights were exercised" (1979:4). Alcock in her *Graecia Capta* (1993) does not define the term but equates (Roman) domination with imperialism. Exploitation also is imperialism. The crux of the matter is control. Put another way, empire is about a sense, a feeling of power, of domination, whether exerted at the national and/or personal level. Such a definition safely accommodates the various types of empire and the ways in which they exert the forms of control that have been identified.

However, I would contend that the identification of such common features does not really add anything to our understanding of why they existed in the measures that they did in antiquity. I have argued elsewhere (Freeman 1996), that the subject 'imperialism' was a development of late nineteenth century economic theory, one which was picked up and manipulated by economists to make a point about the future development of Western capitalism which was then substantiated by reference to post-Middle Ages mercantile European history. Only then was it taken up and used by (ancient) historians who utilised contemporary explanations and theories. Hence, initially at least, the emphasis was placed on an economically-motivated empire, followed by debate over whether or not Roman expansion was defensive or even accidental – discussions which were equally shaped by the prevailing contemporary intellectual climate.

Of course, one of the problems with studying the dynamics of ancient imperialism, and indeed its more recent counterparts, is that a society rarely produces a justification, even a rationale, of an on-going socio-political situation. There is, instead, something of a time lag before the historical perspective allows the construction of critique. To use a well known example, Polybius in the late second century BC was able to write: "There can surely be nobody so petty or so apathetic in his outlook that he has no desire to discover by what means the Romans succeeded in less than 53 years in bringing under their rule almost the whole of the inhabited world, an achievement which is without parallel in human history". As we now know, Roman expansion still had another 200 years+ to go. Nor should this inhibit our attempts to understand why it occurred. But appreciation and autopsy are retrospective.

In the same way, the issue of the acculturation of the ancient world – its romanization – can be seen as more an academic construct than an incontrovertible reality. Often presented as the great consequence of the Roman domination of at least Europe, it can be argued with some credibility, that the origins of the subject lies more in the recent past, in this case the late European Renaissance, than in the world of antiquity. However, this is not the time or place for a detailed analysis of the origins of romanization studies.

With the Renaissance's rediscovery of the accomplishments of Classical antiquity, Renaissance scholars devoted considerable energy to cataloguing and describing certain aspects of material culture from the Greco-Roman period. For example, these scholars worked on the editing and publishing of definitive editions of Classical literature and examined inscriptions and coins as well as certain forms of ceramics and metalwork. Great corpora of data and the beginnings of museum collections start from this time. Also part of this trend was an interest in ancient art, including sculpture and architecture, as one measure of civilisation was the ability to appreciate artistic crafts and their achievements. An appreciation of the works of ancient art was another. The standards established in this respect were then applied to the past, to the cultural attainments of, first, Roman aristocrats, followed by the provincial ruling classes and finally the rest of the provincial population. From these sorts of trends, towards the defining and cataloguing of certain classes of high art, came the first steps towards estimating the degrees, forms and effects of Roman culture. To his contemporaries the first person to attempt to apply the results of this work was Mommsen in his *Provinces of the Roman Empire*, published in the 1880s. The *raison d'être* for Mommsen's conclusions have in turn to be seen as a product of their time. I have argued elsewhere (Freeman 1996), that it was this work, with its immediate effects on a number of key individuals, which has effectively defined an agenda for romanization studies which has never really been challenged. Romanization studies, therefore, were originally an off-shoot of art criticism, which itself developed for its own peculiar reasons. Such attitudes still pervade analyses of (British) Roman art in the twentieth century, where works are variously praised or dismissed by the standard of Classical art. In turn, discussions about how and why and the degree of acceptance and rejection of the process have evolved. Thus yet again, we are faced with an issue which so dominates Roman studies is a modern invention, one which is derived from contemporary criteria.

But to return to the methodology of comparative history, comparative analysis seems to be an approach which is limited to comparing principally the British Empire, and to a lesser degree the French, with the Roman. Conspicuously, drawing similar comparisons between the British and other post-Roman examples is not such a common occurrence. It is another disappointing fact that the propensity to draw comparisons seems to be a feature of English speaking, English trained, scholars. The preoccupation with the British Empire then becomes, in part, understandable. It is undoubtedly a reflection on my ignorance, but other than occasional (American) literature there appears to be a failure – or better expressed, a lack of interest – within scholarship of other periods and nations to use their own colonial experiences, to compare and contrast the Roman experience with their own. Where are the comparisons between the Roman Empire and German, Russian and Islamic counterparts as well as the various 'empires' of central Europe and Asia? It is true that German and French historians of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century could draw the same sorts of (favourable) comparisons between their own national and ancient systems that British writers did. But whilst French authors may have continued to do this into this century (cf. Mattingly 1996; Wells 1996), German scholarship has since been less prone to do so. This might be attributed to the sort of anti-theorism in historical explanation that has been identified in post-W.W.II German

archaeology (Trigger 1989; Klejn 1993). There is also the fact that the German (colonial) Empire was not an especially long-lived phenomenon. Nor are there comparisons with the 'imperial' systems of the ancient Near East, even though these worlds are frequently characterised as imperial (e.g. Knapp 1992). The only exceptions to this general trend is where the American historical experience is used, but with its particular reference to the (American) 'frontier' experience as defined by F. J. Turner a century ago. For instance, in 1977 John Eadie wrote on "the structure and function of frontiers in the RE and China under the Former Han Dynasty (202 BC – AD 8). [stating that a]n investigation of this sort is practicable in historical terms because the imperial ambitions of both societies disrupted existing tribal associations in the territories they occupied and precipitated long-term conflicts on their northern borders" (1977:216). More recently, Drummond and Nelson (1994) analysed the western frontiers of the Roman Empire in light of their familiarity with the American 'experience'. Somewhat earlier Mason Hammond (1961), in an essay on the relevance of ancient history to today, re-examined a number of earlier instances where contemporary American scholarship had looked at the Classical period for insights to problems in US society. The conclusions were not positive. A similar interest is evident in the indigenous (imperial) worlds of central and southern America, but usually without any reference to the Roman example, although Alcock (1989) applied the principle the other way round, Roman to Inca/Aztec/Maya.

The basis for many of the condemnatory assessments which result from comparative studies is the combination of the (negative) consequences seen in modern imperial systems (e.g. the literature of 'resistance') married to the (over-)reading of passages from literary sources which seem to condemn Roman attitudes/behaviour – e.g. passages of Tacitus and the idea of the noble savage and Roman degeneration in the face of the 'benefits' of empire. This is a particular theme which has an appeal to late twentieth century writers. But I believe that this approach misrepresents the messages behind the original passages. For instance, at face value Tacitus' *Germania* can be read as an attack on degenerate Roman society, corrupted by the benefits of empire. Superficially there may be something in this, but equally, it should be read as a warning of the threat of leaving an unconquered Germany, as a call for further imperial expansion in the name of self-preservation. The lesson is that it is an easy temptation to take the primary evidence out of context and make it start to do things for which it was not intended.

Similarly, just as Polybius could speak of the moral decline of Greek society, the literary *topoi* of the decline of Roman *mores* is a recurring feature in Latin (and Greek) literature from at least the times of Sallust. It tends to be a characteristic of conservative writers. Nor is it a tendency limited to ancient writers. The past has invariably always been seen as 'better'. Similarly, the juxtapositioning of degenerate Roman aristocrats with the noble (Gallic and Germanic) savages is known some one hundred years before Tacitus' version in the *Germania* etc. Instead of being used as absolute or defining statements, such opinions need to be taken as a reflection of the state of a society at a certain moment in time.

Whilst it has been said that comparative studies have not held much attraction to the Classical historian (Eadie 1977:215), in fact, the comparative approach seems to have a particular attraction for British historians and archaeologists of the Roman Empire. Why the propensity to draw comparisons? The most immediate reason is that in terms of size and extent, to British eyes at least, only the Roman Empire came anywhere near the British Empire. Superficially they shared other similarities, although again these are more usually in the eye of the beholder than in reality. These range from their supposed similar organisational structures, through to the ways that they were acquired. The two empires have, at various times been characterised as colonial in content and form,

and have been seen as being driven by a 'civilising' mission. Both empires have the advantage of an easily accessed literary base which facilitates their study. In addition to these features there is the matter of the imperial experience which verges on a sense of guilt – Victorian and Edwardian writers were keen to make (favourable) comparisons between their own and their Roman predecessors. In the end they were concerned to justify the British mission by reference to what they thought was the system *par excellence* – the Roman. The British education system, with its emphasis on the Classics and Greek and Roman history, encouraged a knowledge of an ancient phenomenon whose political and cultural achievements were profoundly admired. It was through this system of education that these values came to shape and dominate at least later British imperial attitudes. In turn this familiarity encouraged direct comparison between the British experience and the Roman model where the comparative lessons were used to construct favourable conclusions between the two. The parallels became self-supporting and self-justifying. More recently, however, certainly post-W.W.II, the use of comparison (e.g. as in post-colonial perspectives) has become the medium for more critical, frequently condemnatory, accounts of the Roman – British parallel. Yet again, the change of perspective might be attributed to a number of interlocking factors. These include the rise of independence movements, the weakening of the economic and so the political resolve of the Imperial power and the liberalising of the education system and so public attitudes to imperial control.

The contemporary climate may also explain the revived fascination in the collapse of comparative imperial systems, a phenomenon which goes back to Edward Gibbon and the late eighteenth century (e.g. Kennedy 1988; Tainter 1990). Again the Roman example is used as a model, or case-type for explaining the future. That said, this fails to note the illogical basis on which this type of approach is predicated: that the system collapsing is degenerating from something that was static, whereas it is easy to demonstrate that no system was ever so stable.

Conclusion

It has been said:

The treatment of a period of ancient ...history under a heading which belongs very much to the modern world requires something of a defensive introduction. The charge is easily made that simply by using the words 'imperialism' and 'empire' a host of complex and debatable issues are prejudged and cast into a misleading and inappropriate mould (Kemp 1978:7).

This statement was originally made in an assessment of the foreign policy of Pharaonic Egypt, however, it is as valid for any pre-Imperial systems.

I do not know where all this 'progress' is getting us, but I do know that this is, in part, a problem with historical methodology. What kind of history are we constructing when we apply paradigms constructed from today's experience to the remote past? This paper is not meant to be an attack on the use of comparative history, but refers to one of its problems. It is a thin divide between comparison and analogy. I am not denying that the approaches and issues which have been devised for the study of the Roman Empire have some validity. But I am not convinced that they actually add much to the study. The comparisons frequently made strike me as arbitrary to the point that they become meaningless. They seem to be predicated on the assumption that the phenomenon of human experience has remained largely unchanged through time and are thus constant, with only slight variations in pattern and expression. More specifically, it is a quirk of fate that we use the British

Empire model so heavily rather than there being any real insight to be derived from the comparison. At the same time comparative approaches miss the fact that imperialism as a process of academic study/justification is a recent phenomenon. Finally, any comparisons, by their nature, reduce to the point of superficiality, the generalisations of any one system compared to the one being studied. Comparisons also have the tendency to repeat the academic values and traditions and properties of the discipline from where the comparison is derived.

That said, the issues that comparative studies address, as well as the technique itself, are interesting in what they reveal about the person making the analysis. But this is normally more embedded than explicit in the analysis, masked under a veneer of alleged objectivity, validated by scholarship. Similar conclusions have been drawn about the condition of modern anthropology (e.g. Marcus & Fischer 1986). In fact, any writing on imperialism, and empire and acculturation, demands one adopting a position on the issues, whether it be one conditioned by personal perception and experience or else predicated on academic research. This has to be the response to the observation that even if it can be said that imperialism is an invention of modern scholarship, imperialism etc. has always existed, so it can be dismissed or ignored. True, however, what is required is a more explicit appreciation of where one, or the subject under study, is coming from. To repeat an old truism: one cannot divorce one's self from the past nor from the way that the perception of that past is socially conditioned. There is in this argument little part for comparative approaches, for we will never be comparing like with like. Instead there will always be more differences than similarities. The differences are caused by any number of factors, but include the historical evolution of periods/systems and the erroneous belief that comparisons actually compare the same phenomena at similar moments in time. Equally there is also the scholarly discipline out of which study of each imperial system has evolved, and this is before we begin to consider the origins of study of the systems, which as we have seen are very much nineteenth century phenomena.

It is for these reasons that I do not think that anything substantial has been added to our understanding of Roman imperialism in the archaeological dimension since the late 1970s – early 1980s. It could be said that I am looking for the sort of structuralist approach to the study of the Roman Empire taken by Harris in his *On War And Greed in the C2nd B.C.* (1971) and followed up in his 1979 *War and Imperialism*. If this the case, then I am not sure that this debate, for all the conferences that have been organised and all papers delivered at them, has actually advanced since Harris.

Acknowledgements

This contribution was originally prepared for the session 'Modelling Roman Imperialism'. The text presented here is a refined version of that delivered, one written in anticipation of some of the issues that the synopses that the other session speakers had provided in advance of the meeting. As such there is the minimum of referencing and footnoting. I am grateful, yet again, to Fiona Aiken as well as to my colleagues Antony Sinclair and Jen Lewis for comments concerning issues raised here.

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