Redefining Romanization: material culture and the question of social continuity in Roman Britain

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Romanization: An Overview of the Debate

The debate over the nature of 'Romanization' continues to be central to the deliberations of Roman archaeology, as the burgeoning number of publications on the subject amply demonstrate (e.g. Blagg and Millett 1990; Forcey 1997; Freeman 1993, 1997; Hanson 1994; Hingley 1993; Mattingly 1997; Metzler *et al.* 1995; Millett 1990a, b; Scott 1993; Webster and Cooper 1996; Woolf 1992). It is a crucial issue for Roman archaeology precisely because the interpretation we place on material culture from the Roman provinces depends on assumptions we make about the nature of Roman intentions towards subject territories and people. For this reason, the debate has turned on one key issue: the degree to which Rome actively pursued a 'policy' of Romanization in the provinces. There is disagreement over the role Rome played in creating provincial society and this argument has been most vociferous in the case of Roman Britain and for this reason the province of *Britannia* remains the focus here.

The two poles of the debate are usefully represented by the attitudes of Frere (1987) on the one hand and Millett (1990a, b) on the other. Frere assumes what we might describe as the traditional 'interventionist' line: Rome encouraged and educated the élite of the native British people to adopt Roman governmental institutions, language, beliefs, customs and manners. Along with these went material trappings of Roman culture resulting in steady, but inexorable Romanization.

Millett, on the other hand, is associated with what might be termed the 'non-interventionist' approach (1990b). He has argued that Rome did not consciously pursue a policy of Romanization because the concerns of Roman government were limited to the maintenance of internal and frontier security and the collection of taxes (cf. Garnsey and Saller 1987:189–203). Consequently, the Romanization of the provinces came about primarily through the active participation of the conquered population. Rome, like most empires, attempted to rule by devolving the functions of government to local communities and so encouraged élite groups in the provinces to participate in the empire in two main ways. Firstly, Rome allowed the existing élite groups to retain their dominant social position, and, secondly, Rome offered opportunities for individual social advancement. In exchange, Rome demanded loyalty and expected government to be undertaken according to Roman constitutional principles. The provincial élite voluntarily adopted Roman cultural attributes so as to signal their acceptance of the new order and to reinforce their social positions, by differentiating themselves from the remainder of society. The symbolism of the élite was then emulated by those further down the social hierarchy, thereby spreading the extent of Roman culture.

Social Continuity and Material Culture

Millett's views have come close to becoming the orthodoxy in Romano-British studies, but more recently the pendulum has swung against this *laissez-faire* approach to Romanization and arguments are once again being made for a more interventionist view of Roman power (e.g.

Forcey 1997; Hanson 1994, 1997). However, I do not wish to dwell on this issue, since I would argue that one factor can be identified as being common to both schools of thought. They both assume that pre-conquest society was *already socially stratified*. Indeed, Millett has argued that if Rome encountered a society without developed political institutions, her only recourse was to opt for direct military control (1990a:99–101). Without an élite through which to rule, the movement to a civil administration – the secret of 'government without bureaucracy' (Garnsey and Saller 1987:20–40) – simply could not take place. What is implied by this is that where a civil administration did take hold, it did so because there was social *continuity* from the pre-conquest period. In other words, the social organization (i.e. social 'structure') of native British society remained unchanged despite the Roman conquest.

However, if this was the case, it follows that cultural change in Roman Britain was *inauthentic*. By 'inauthentic' I mean that the adoption of Roman cultural attributes, including material objects, did not reflect a genuine change to society. Instead, a 'Roman' way of making statements about social identity just displaced traditional forms of display. The adoption of Roman culture was, therefore, merely a change in *style* and not *substance*. In effect, the native British élite simply 'dressed-up' as Romans (or what they perceived to be Romans) motivated by a cynical desire to obtain social advantage. Consequently, the employment of Roman cultural attributes by native Britons was merely an inauthentic mask that served to conceal the continuance of the pre-conquest social order. This idea has a long history in Romano-British studies. Indeed, it was Vinogradoff, writing in the early 1900s, who initially claimed that the Romanization of Britain was merely a superficial veneer that disguised a more authentic cultural experience (1911; Forcey 1997:16–7).

The consequence of this view for Romano-British archaeology is indeed profound. Although we may see substantial changes in the archaeological record these are more illusory than real, since they cannot be taken to imply a significant social transformation. This idea has found expression in the writings of a number of authors (e.g. Millett 1990a,b; Hingley 1990; Smith 1978), but perhaps the most succinct formulation comes in a recent paper by Clarke (1996). In a comparative study of *Corinium* (Cirencester) and *Glevum* (Gloucester), he argues we need to invert our traditional understanding of the 'success' or 'failure' of Romanization. Although *Corinium*, according to conventional wisdom, was the more highly 'Romanized' of the two towns, there was, Clarke believes, far less social change there than at *Glevum*, which was much less Romanized. This rather peculiar situation arose because a tribal élite was already present in the Corinium region at the time of the conquest that adopted Romanized forms of material culture in order to reinforce their existing position of social dominance. This was not the case at Glevum where the pre-conquest élite was partly, or wholly, replaced by military veterans and their descendants. Clarke therefore concludes that:

> It can .. now be shown that outward ('Romanized') trappings of provincial society may not be as important an index to social change as was once thought. Corinium and its region were ... highly Romanized. However, this veneer of Classical civilisation concealed the basic continuity of the ruling élite (1996:83).

If material culture is not an index to social change, it follows that 'society' can vary independently of the material conditions within which it exists. This drives a wedge between material culture and society, making material culture little more than 'set-dressing' for the 'drama' of social existence. If this conception of material culture can be substantiated then archaeology faces a grave, and possibly insurmountable, difficulty. Indeed, the existence of archaeology as a discipline is predicated on the belief that we can reach the social through the material. If the relationship between the social and the material is so arbitrary, then archaeology is in serious trouble.

Material Culture and Identity

Fortunately, this view of the relationship between the social and the material is at complete variance with theoretical developments in other branches of archaeology – most notably prehistory. Although Roman archaeology is in the process of becoming more theoretically aware, most theoretical thinking to date has been directed towards deconstructing the discourses on Roman imperialism and Romanization, using, in particular, the tools of post-colonial theory (e.g. Mattingly 1997; Webster and Cooper 1996). However imperative it may be to render explicit the assumptions structuring the discourses on Roman imperialism, this is primarily an *historical* not an *archaeological* issue. A consideration of the ontological status of material culture has been, with one or two exceptions (e.g. Barrett 1997), almost entirely absent from Roman archaeology.

The theoretical literature in archaeology is now vast (e.g. Barrett 1981, 1988, 1994; Hodder 1982, 1989, 1991, 1992; Hodder and Preucel 1996; Shanks and Tilley 1987, 1992; Tilley 1989, 1990, 1993) and to suggest that a unified theory of material culture exists to which all archaeologists adhere would be stretching the point. Indeed, there has even been some scepticism as to whether material culture forms a unified category about which it is possible to have 'a theory' (Hodder 1994:73). Nevertheless, archaeologists have come increasingly to the view that material culture is not an incidental product of society, but is rather integral to it. All forms of material culture are, quite obviously, made, used, manipulated, transformed, discarded and destroyed by human action. As social theorists have recognised, all human action is in essence social in that we, as human beings, are always part of a complex web of continually transforming social relationships against which our actions gain their meaning. Our 'location' within this network endows us with our individual *identity*: who we are, the range of prerogatives we may exercise, and the obligations we have are defined by our relationships with others.

Material culture is implicated in the process of identity creation in a number of ways. Firstly, those material objects concerned with the body and personal adornment obviously express identity. Who one is and with whom one belongs needs to be signalled to others. Material culture is therefore a form of non-verbal communication (Fletcher 1989) and works with other non-verbal signals like, gestures, attitude of the body, accent and dialect to communicate information about the self. However, we would be wrong to think that material culture is merely the outward expression of an inner, innate, identity. Identity is constructed and material culture is one of the media through which the formation and reformation of identity takes place. The writings of Michel Foucault are particularly relevant at this point (e.g. 1977, 1981). Foucault's thesis is that the body is not a naturally given object, but is created. How we adorn or mark the body constitutes who we are. If we change the way we adorn and mark ourselves, or if we are adorned and marked by others in a new way, then it changes who we are. As psychologists have shown (e.g. Erikson 1963), outward appearance is crucial to the sustaining of an inner sense of well-being. The close relationship between outward appearance and inner sensations of security means that identity cannot remain constant if appearance does not.

Identity, of course, is not just established through the adornment and marking of the body. To suggest this would be to imply that the creation of identity is a special form of activity that occurs in abstraction from other forms of social activity. If this were so, then identity would be analogous to a theatrical 'mask' that individuals 'wear' during the course of their daily lives. This is not so, for the constitution of identity is embodied in the very social practices in which we habitually engage. The activities we participate in, and those we are excluded from, shape

who we are. All social practices from domestic routines to public ceremonies are all integral to the constitution of identity. Material culture naturally plays a role in enabling social practices to take place. Indeed, all social practices have a range of equipment associated with them, without which they could not proceed.

The notion that material culture is 'active' in the creation of the human subject finds fullest exposition in the writings of Pierre Bourdieu (1977). Bourdieu's thesis is that as children we learn about the social and physical world into which we are born by engaging directly with it. By moving through the world we experience and, learning to manipulate the objects within it, we gain a practical understanding of how the world works and how to function within it as social beings. To borrow Bourdieu's metaphor the world through which we move is a 'book' by which we learn our vision of the world (1977:90). The logical extension of this argument is that if individuals are brought up in differing social and physical environments, their vision of the world will also differ. Identity becomes implicated because different visions of the world form the basis for the construction of gender, class, ethnic and other social differences. If the material world is so integral to the constitution of identity then a change to the material world must imply a change to the social practices through which identities are created.

Material Culture and Society

Enough should have been said for it to be clear that the social is inexorably bound-up with the material and *vice versa*. Social relations are not just made in a material context, they are dependant for their existence upon that context. We can therefore think of social relations as having both 'human' and 'non-human' (i.e. material) components, one not being able to exist without the other. From an archaeological perspective, what we recover is not the physical 'context' in which social relations were negotiated as such, but rather the material component of a past society. It follows that any change to that material component must indicate a social change as well. Such a change need not be dramatic. The appearance here and there of new material forms need not indicate a social revolution, but the presence of new forms of material culture will offer new possibilities for the negotiation of identity. Nevertheless, if the material conditions of existence do change substantially, then this must indicate a considerable social transformation.

In light of this conclusion, the argument that there was social continuity in Roman Britain from the pre-conquest period must be questioned. The dramatic changes to the material conditions of existence that we observe in the archaeological record must indicate a substantial social realignment in the post-conquest period. Indeed, new forms of material culture invaded almost every facet of life. The appearance of towns, villas and roads dramatically altered the physical contexts of life and new forms of material such as pottery, metalwork, coins, mosaics and wall-painting suggest a substantial change in lifestyle. Such material change cannot be credibly explained as a superficial 'veneer' that masked the persistence of native British society. Instead, we have to accept that the archaeological record shows that a substantial transformation of society took place in the wake of the Roman conquest.

This conclusion, however, leaves the debate over the nature of Romanization in considerable disarray. Obviously enough, if we cannot assume social continuity how are we to explain the adoption of Roman cultural attributes by the Britons? We can do so, I would argue, by changing the way we think about society. To use the term 'élite', with reference to native British society, suggests that it was organized as a social 'pyramid' with a small élite that had hegemony over a much larger non-élite. However, the term 'élite' is extremely vacuous and its employment in the discourse on Romanization implies a very naïve and uncritical perception of the dynamics of

human societies. The notion that society is stratified into unequal 'layers' has its roots in Marxist analyses of society. Individuals are treated as belonging to a particular 'class': society can therefore be perceived to have a certain 'structure', defined by the relationship (usually antagonistic) between its various classes. So influential have such structural-Marxist (e.g. Althusser 1977; Parsons 1971) approaches been that this pyramidal conception of social structure has been taken to be unproblematic.

However, this structuralist conception of society has been challenged by social theorists of whom Anthony Giddens (1979, 1981, 1984) has been one of the most vocal. For Giddens, society is a seamless web of social relations that do not end, but rather 'shade-off' in space and time. Each human being stands at the centre of a particular network of social relationships, which he or she must continually renew through social interaction. Without such interaction social bonds just fade away. Social relationships cannot therefore be reduced to mere structural connections, since by doing so they lose any content or meaning. Although it may be perfectly true to say that x has a certain relationship to y, this does not give us any clue about how these two individuals actually 'get on' with one another. Since how we relate to others lies at the heart of the social bonds we create and sustain, structural descriptions of social organization ironically discount that which is most important to us as human beings.

Of course, we need to avoid the opposite extreme and see society as composed of nothing but individual social relationships, without any institutions that serve to 'structure' them (a position known as methodological individualism). Giddens does this by arguing that the social institutions which have power over us, can only exist in and through our actions. The reason is that certain individuals in society are more able to create and sustain a wider range of social bonds than others. In this way, these individuals become 'nodes' in a network of social relations and give it a definable structure. Such individuals are able to exploit their preferential position in the social network in order to dominate others. The purpose of domination is exploitation and this exploitation allows those individuals who are already powerful to further reinforce their social positions. Herein lies the origins of structured social inequality. If the prerogatives and obligations of the powerful can be passed on to subsequent generations, the 'structure' of society appears to take on a more 'rigid' form and social inequality becomes institutionalized. Because humans are always socialized into a world that they did not create, they accept the social institutions and power relations they confront as entirely 'natural' and so are therefore far less likely to question them. Consequently, structural stability can emerge out of what is ostensibly a contingent network of social relations. However, this apparent stability belies the fact that the institutions of society are still ultimately dependent upon the actions of individuals for their existence.

Giddens' concern is for how the institutions of modern society reproduce themselves and so he only discusses pre-modern (non-capitalist) societies in passing. However, he notes that pre-modern societies were less institutionalized than contemporary capitalism and even more dependent upon personal bonds. Bourdieu's interest, however, is precisely the opposite. He is specifically interested in analysing the modes of domination that exist in non-capitalist societies. Bourdieu observes that without the institutionalized forms of domination characteristic of modernity, inequality can only be created through, 'the direct domination of one person by another' (1977:190).

This can obviously be achieved by the use or threat of violence against those to be dominated. However, as Bourdieu has pointed out, physical violence can be disruptive to society and so has to be 'euphemized' so that it is not recognisable as such. Violence, according to Bourdieu, can also be 'symbolic' and he accounts for the operation of symbolic violence in the context of gift exchange in Kabyle society. To give a gift is understood as an act of

generosity, but in doing so a debt is created that binds the receiver of the gift to the giver. By donating a gift, the giver forces the receiver into a situation where he or she has an obligation to the giver. Not to fulfil this obligations would bring public shame on to the receiver and so an overt act of generosity veils the constitution of an asymmetrical relationship of power. The capacity to give gifts (to possess, in Bourdieu's terms, 'symbolic capital') consequently forces individuals to act according to the will of the giver without recourse to physical violence, while, at the same time, disguising the act of violence as one of generosity.

In other words,

> They [the dominators] cannot appropriate the labour, services, goods, homage and respect of others without 'winning' them personally, 'tying' them – in short creating a bond between persons (Bourdieu 1977:190)

As Bourdieu's discussion of gift-exchange shows, 'winning' individuals personally cannot be done without there being a certain degree of *reciprocity*. Although the dominators may be able to dominate others, they cannot just appropriate labour, services, etc., from the dominated without giving something in return. Furthermore, unequal relationships are not just 'set-up' and then left; they have to be continually remade, or they will simply 'fade away'. This is especially true of new relations of inequality and, as should be apparent, the burden of ensuring that such relations are sustained falls on the dominators and not the dominated. As Bourdieu notes, the dominators, "have to work directly, daily [and] personally to produce and reproduce conditions of domination'. It is only when such relations become institutionalized that the dominators can afford to take their hands off the reins and, 'let the system they dominate take its own course" (1977:190).

Redefining Romanization

The argument I wish to advance here is that Rome did not rule through pre-existing tribal élites, as has been so often claimed, but through *people*. Since it has been argued that changes to the material conditions of existence are inexorably bound up with the creation of new identities, the establishment of new social relations between conqueror and conquered would have inevitably resulted in the appearance of new forms of material culture. The *assumption* that Rome could not rule unless the society she encountered possessed the appropriate social structure depersonalizes and objectifies social relations. The result is that Roman rule in Britain is conceived of as the articulation of Roman governmental institutions with native British social structure and not as the constitution of relations between people. By conceptualizing Roman rule in institutional terms the debate has naturally centred on whether Rome had a 'policy' of Romanization or not. However, what neither the interventionist, nor non-interventionist approaches recognize is that imperialism is not policy, it is *practice*: it is *how* relations of dominance are established that matters. That Rome's intention was to 'rule' and not just to 'conquer' seems clear enough. This distinction is important since the notion of ruling implies instituting and maintaining social dominance over others for an indefinite period. What mechanisms, then, did Rome possess with which to achieve this objective? Rome's military power was one such instrument, but as we have seen domination by physical violence does have its disadvantages in that it destabilises society. Subtler forms of domination were required. The replacement of Roman military power by a civilian government based on quasi-autonomous communities centred on towns has rightly been seen as central to the establishment of Roman rule in parts of Britain. However, because the move to civilian government has been conceived of as an institutional change, the question has been, 'Did the native Britons actively and willingly adopt this mode of government, or did they have it imposed on them?' However, this

question is misplaced, because it neglects to specify the mechanisms through which this change was enacted.

If compulsion was not a suitable option, how did Rome establish a civilian government? The answer, I would suggest, is that agents of Roman power acted, directly, daily and personally to establish social bonds between themselves and those they had conquered. These actions, however, were not driven by 'policy'. Instead they were the predictable reactions of those who lived in a society where social reciprocity was central to the creation and maintenance of the social order. Although Roman society did have institutionalized aspects, the reciprocal exchange of favours and services underlay most social relations. As historians of the ancient world have long recognised, personal patronage acted as a cohesive force in a society ridden with inequality and provided, "many of the services for which today we turn to governmental or private institutions" (Garnsey and Saller 1987:148; Saller 1982; Wallace-Hadrill 1989). Indeed, patronage was the secret of, 'government without bureaucracy'. However, as Bourdieu has shown, such social reciprocity does not alleviate inequality, but rather serves as the foundation for its construction. In other words, Roman society was one where powerful individuals were predisposed to sustain and enhance their social positions by binding others to them through the giving of 'gifts'. These gifts took a variety of forms and included money, favours, honours, advice and other services. Social power was consequently established, in Bourdieu's terms, by 'winning' others 'personally'. This is what I mean by the statement, 'Rome ruled through people'. The creation of personal bonds was the only mechanism open for the exercise of domination in a society where so much still depended upon personal relationships rather than governmental institutions.

By recognising the personal and reciprocal nature of social power new light can be shed on one of the most discussed and controversial passages from the ancient literary sources relating to Roman Britain. This is, of course, the excerpt from Tacitus' *Agricola* and although it is familiar to Romanists, it is important enough to quote again:

> ... Agricola gave private encouragement and official assistance to the building of temples, fora and private mansions. He praised the keen and scolded the slack, and competition to gain honour from him was as effective as compulsion. Furthermore, he trained the sons of the chiefs in the liberal arts ... (Tacitus, *Agricola* 21).

This often cited passage, I would suggest, is an example of an agent of Roman power working to construct and reproduce the conditions of domination. It is notable from the passage how much Agricola takes a personal interest in the affairs of the native Britons: *he* gave private encouragement and official assistance; *he* praised the keen and scolded the slack; *he* trained the sons of the chiefs; and competition was to gain honour from *him*. We could be tempted to dismiss this as mere rhetoric by Tacitus to glorify his father-in-law, but to do so would be to misunderstand the personal nature of Roman society. Because we have become used to 'faceless' governmental institutions, staffed by professional civil servants, we tend to assume that all forms of government must be similarly impersonal. However, we should not read this passage as 'evidence' for an official 'policy' of Romanization (e.g. Hanson 1997:75); nor should we understand it as a cynical attempt by the Roman governor to take the credit for a social transformation that was undertaken largely by the native Britons without Roman intervention (e.g. Millett 1990a:69), but rather it is an account of a *social discourse* – albeit from a Roman point of view.

Agricola's actions are perfectly explicable in terms of social reciprocity. Tacitus does not tell us how the native Britons responded to Agricola's actions, but we can make an informed guess. After the violence of the conquest, to rule without facing constant rebellion would have

meant the agents of Rome giving 'gifts' to influential figures from the conquered communities (e.g. tribal elders) so as to 'win' them personally. Tangible objects would have undoubtedly played a role in the process of gift-giving, but Roman gifts could have also taken the form of intangibles such as personal liberty, respect, honour and esteem. Agricola's actions can be understood as giving the native Britons the means with which to participate in the Roman social order. Such 'gifts' would have placed the onus on to the receivers to respond in a positive manner; especially as lurking behind the 'gift' was the threat of Roman military power. Not only would it have been imprudent not to have responded, but also unwise to have provoked Roman wrath. The gift given in return could have taken the form of political support, homage, goods, labour or other services. A positive response from the native British communities would have made it necessary for the agents of Roman power to respond with counter-gifts, which would have required further gifts from the native Britons. Such social reciprocity would have helped establish a permanent set of relations that would have bound conqueror and conquered together in an on-going social discourse. Alternatively, some native British leaders may have made overtures to the Romans, perhaps offering loyalty, support or tribute in exchange for Roman backing. The onus would then have been on the agents of Roman power to respond in kind and 'win' the native Britons, or risk a destabilising revolt.

The argument here, then, is that agents of Roman power, like Agricola, altered native British society through their unsurpassed capacity to give 'gifts'. By doing so, they established bonds of patronage and clientage which resulted in the creation of more stable and lasting asymmetries of power between Roman and Briton. Those Britons who were in receipt of Roman patronage would have, in turn, been able to create their own relations of inequality by providing gifts in order to obtain their own clients. This action would have secured their social positions and resulted in the emergence of structured inequality and a more enduring social hierarchy. This social hierarchy would have gradually become institutionalized, leading to the development of a permanent élite class. In other words, an élite was *created* by Roman actions, but this was not a conscious objective of policy. Rather, it was the unintentional outcome of the process of establishing social bonds between rulers and ruled. We should not, therefore, see Roman government as simply adding another level to the top of the already existing native British social pyramid.

As we have seen, a transformation in the material conditions of existence would have been bound up with this social realignment and because Rome was the dominant partner in the social discourse, we should not be surprised that the material conditions of existence in Romano-British society took on a notably Roman hue. However, the changes we see in the archaeological record are not the result of Roman 'domination' or native 'resistance', but rather document the social politics of Roman Britain. Now that we understand this, we can begin to 'read' these documents so as to gain access to the content of that social discourse.

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