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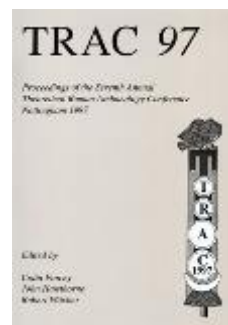
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# The Romanization of Italy: global acculturation or cultural *bricolage*?

by Nicola Terrenato

## *Introduction*

The Romanization of Italy has held a very peculiar place within the context of the research on the expansion of Rome in the provinces. Most syntheses carried out at the empire-wide level, and especially in those concentrating on the centuries from the late Republic onwards, are underpinned by a basic assumption: that Italy, as a result of complex military and political events, was a unified entity inhabited by Romans (e.g. Garnsey and Saller 1987). Indeed, in much of the discourse concerning the provinces, Italian basically equals Roman for purposes of cultural analyses. One often has the impression that the adjective Italian is simply a synonym used to avoid repeating the word Roman. When we come to the literature specialising on Italy, the situation is in part different: there has been some awareness that ethnic and regional differences strongly characterised different parts of the peninsula. In most cases however, this cultural variability is seen as a trait inherited from the Iron Age, rapidly melting away, as it were, as a result of the conquest. In line with this view, the format of most literature of the Romanization of Italy has been simply that of describing the timing and the circumstances of the disappearance of pre-Roman characters (e.g. David 1994). The strong assumption here is that, even if specific local characters existed, by the end of the process, Roman culture completely pervaded the incorporated communities; in this way, a new, compact and uniform nation was brought into existence. Moreover, this process of global acculturation was largely felt (even if only implicitly) as a positive forward step on a unilinear path toward modern civilization and rationality.

It is only in comparatively recent times that the approach to the Romanization of Italy sketched above has come into question (perhaps one of the earliest attempts can be traced in Vallat 1987). One influence may be the literature on the western provinces, in which new ideas on Roman imperialism date to an earlier period (for a review with bibliography, see Woolf 1993). This debate has now led to a questioning the usefulness (and even the political correctness) of very term Romanization (Barrett 1997, Woolf 1997; incidentally, the term is used in this paper simply in its weakest sense, as a convenient denomination covering the events involved in the creation of Roman Italy, with no cultural implications taken for granted). A healthy post-colonial stance has prompted a critical revision of many basic aspects of the traditional literature on the Empire (e.g. Mattingly 1997; Webster and Cooper 1996). This innovative thinking has not yet had the impact it should on Italy, perhaps because of the historical divide between provincial and *tout-court* Roman Archaeology (and certainly because of the tendency to parochialism not uncommon among Italian classicists). What should be a high priority on our agenda now, is the production of more reflexive studies and an intensification in the exchange of ideas between the archaeology of Italy and that of the provinces. The present paper strives to make a modest contribution in both directions.

## *A brief retrospective survey*

To understand in detail the formation of the concept of Roman Italy, the literature produced on

the subject in the last century and a half would have to be subject to a full deconstructive analysis, a task that obviously goes far beyond the scope of this contribution. Still, some crucial steps in the emergence of the modern approach can be identified here. In particular, perhaps the most conspicuous change of attitude seems to take place during the nineteenth century. It is only with the Romantic period, in fact, that the idea of Rome's mission to unify and civilise Italy became dominant (Gabba 1989). Previously, and especially in the eighteenth century, what was positively emphasized was rather the long tradition of small independent Italian states (or even city-states). In this trend, that has been termed municipalism, Roman Italy was seen as a federation of autonomous communities and the continuity between Roman *municipia* and medieval communes was stressed and seen as a trait characterizing the whole history of Italy (Venturi 1984). A crucial role in the creation of the new image of the Romans as the unifying and civilizing agents was played by German and Italian scholars: one of the earliest and most influential works includes the new political ideas in the *Roman History* by B. G. Niebuhr (1811–12). Without entering into the culture-historical details of the process, it seems very likely that the idea of Italy as a nation created out of regional diversity by means of the natural spread of a superior, or better, Roman culture could represent a convenient edifying picture for the two young nation states (for a full deconstruction of the scholarship of this period, see the brilliant analysis in Linderski 1984; also Frézouls 1983). It is worth pointing out that one of the main problems that Italy and Germany were facing at the time was precisely that of compacting very heterogeneous communities (the role of the Roman past in the *Risorgimento* is examined in Chabod 1962:179ff). In this perspective, it has to be remembered that the classical world had (and still to an extent has) a large share in German and Italian education programs, beginning with elementary schools. As an extreme outcome of this new ideological trend, the rhetoric of the superiority of Roman culture climaxed in Italy during the Fascism, when the whole history of Rome was seen as a prologue to the glorious future that the dreams of an Italian empire were announcing (Lepore 1989; Quatemaine 1995).

According to recent post-colonial literature, our perceptions of ancient and modern empires are culturally-interrelated in many complex ways and at many levels. For present study, the most relevant of these phenomena seems to be the creation, in the second half of the nineteenth century, of an image of Roman Italy suitable to be used as a role-model for the new-born states and would-be empires of Germany and Italy. The aspects of homogenization and centralization brought about by the Roman conquest were clearly overemphasized to justify the new post-Risorgimental order. Ironically, in the equation between Roman Italy and the Italian (or German) national state, both terms ended up being vastly misrepresented to conform to their idealised counterpart. Italian Italy never really functioned as a modern unified nation like Britain or France (as its twentieth century history shows) and Roman Italy was probably never meant to be anything other than a part of a larger federation of communities, with no concern whatsoever for the creation of a national culture. In order to support this implicit ideological discourse, the making of the Roman Empire had to be described as the irresistible and pervasive triumph of a higher culture. Consequently, in archaeological terms, great attention was paid to those data sets (such as urban layout, public monuments and élite manifestations in general) which conformed to the expected pattern of cultural diffusion. It is as true for these works, as Philip Freeman (1996) has observed for British examples, that explicit comparisons between ancient and modern times are very rare in the works of established ancient historians, while they are much more common in popular literature or contemporary political writings (Quatemaine 1995). If clear evidence for the connection between ancient and modern empires is lacking, this may be due to the exceptional reluctance that classical scholars have had (and perhaps still have) for any kind of comparative argument. Any comparison, with the exception of the canonical one

between Greece and Rome, was felt as simplistic, cheapening and ultimately challenging the uniqueness of the classical world. It does not follow, however, that the contemporary situation was not playing a large role, implicitly shaping the basic belief that Roman culture was pervasive, and was so because it was more rational, more politically and technologically-advanced, more tasteful, more economically productive, in a word, better. The strong idealistic framework of all this is clear: the influence of the idealist philosopher Benedetto Croce has been probably the strongest single one on Italian classical scholarship (d'Agostino 1981). More than anything else, Roman Italy was perceived as a perfectly homogeneous entity, one in which the chaos of ethnic peculiarities and primitive traits had vanished to be replaced by a new political, social and ethical cosmos which encompassed law, literature, art, and all the higher manifestations of the human spirit. In this respect, it represented an ideal similitude to negate the regional diversity with which Germany and Italy were struggling at the time, and which is (at least for Italy) no longer deniable today.

After the War, the pendulum of philosophical fashion swung towards materialist historical analyses, and especially Marxist ones. In the comparatively simplified versions of this explanatory framework which were applied to Roman Italy, cultural manifestations were felt to be determined by economic factors. Without entering here into the intellectual details of these innovative works, it is enough, for the purposes of this paper, to point out that Romanization was again perceived as a progressive and uniform phenomenon, almost mechanically resulting from the large-scale productive integration of the peninsula. Indeed, the fundamental event, in these analyses, is represented by the introduction of a new mode of production, which is closer to modern capitalism (and thus a step ahead in the long march towards the eschatological finale). Archaeological support for this new global model was now sought and found in the mass production of artefacts such as amphorae or fine ceramic wares. The ubiquitous distribution of these indicators of intensive agriculture, specialized crafts and long-distance trade seemed to support the concept of Italy as a uniform economic system.

Such modernist views on ancient economy show, even more clearly than in the previous idealist period, the powerful influence that the industrial European world has had on our perceptions of Roman Italy. Explicit comparison were now drawn, for instance, between Roman and American slavery (Carandini 1985). What concerns us more here, is that again this perspective needed to make strong assumptions about the homogeneity of the phenomenon it was observing: basic Marxist assumptions concerning the formation of prices or the existence of a global market were necessarily taken to be valid for the entire peninsula, and the economic trends were always described at least at the level of large macroregions (e.g. central Tyrrhenian Italy; Carandini 1979; 1988). The well-known problem of Marxism in dealing with ethnic identities is clearly exemplified there: local cultural peculiarities, as part of the superstructure, should have quickly adapted to structural economic changes. The problem is that the persistence of traditional and local socio-ideological systems, which were occasionally observed, seemed to display a marked reluctance to conform to this prescription. The epitome of all this scholarly work (whose lasting value in advancing the debate is not questioned here) is represented by a series of volumes produced by the Istituto Gramsci in Rome (Giardina and Schiavone 1981) and published by Laterza, ironically (or perhaps significantly) the same company brought into existence and enormously influenced by Benedetto Croce himself. Similar problems are perceivable in the very few works adopting processualist tools (which are almost entirely unknown to Italian classical archaeology; but see Van Dommelen 1993): ethnicity is simply not easy to tackle in any materialist or positivist framework.

Throughout the period synthesised here, a parallel branch has been represented by regional studies: these have always tended to point out local differences and peculiarities, if only to

justify their own existence. Consequently, they have also tended to demonstrate greater continuity, given their diachronical point of view, since they could see more clearly the persistence of pre-Roman characteristics after the conquest (e.g. for Etruria, Torelli 1969). The relative scarcity of comprehensive studies of this kind, however, has probably to do with the disciplinary divisions prevailing in Italian academia, where Roman studies are kept separate from pre-Roman and pre- and proto-historical ones. In any case, at the level of large scale reconstructions, examples showing the existence of peculiar traits have tended to be treated as exceptions and ultimately ignored. Only very recently, have the importance of these case-studies been realised: it is precisely on their basis that the received wisdom on the Romanization of Italy has been put in doubt and its shortcomings revealed. Recent work in several areas of the peninsula is showing both the strong diversity of outcomes to the process of Romanization and also a far greater role for ethnic identities than previously assumed. The global acculturation model seems to work only for a handful of exceptional situations, if even that; indeed, there is a growing realization that many large-scale trends described in the 1980s (such as the one towards economic intensification) can only be applied to limited parts of Italy (Terrenato, forthcoming).

In conclusion, when we look at the present situation it seems fair to say that we are just beginning to see an awareness of issues such as the possible persistence of ethnic identities after incorporation, or detailed analyses of the heterogeneities in the patterns of diffusion of Roman culture, in the literature on the Romanization of Italy. This seems a rather backward picture when compared with Roman provincial archaeology of the last ten or fifteen years. The only possible advantage is that in this way the debate has not been reduced and ultimately bogged down in the false dichotomy opposing continuity and acculturation. As Greg Woolf (1997) has underlined recently, the dynamic creation of new cultural identities is the most frequent outcome of the interaction between Roman and Native cultures. Indeed, a new season of work on the Romanization of Italy could build on the insight that the result of contact can be a new composite cultural entity (or, even better, a constellation of graded entities) more often than simply the replacement of one culture with another or the integralist preservation of the traditional one. No ethnic culture can survive incorporation in a larger state unaltered, just as no central power can ever hope to iron out completely local peculiarities. The metaphor that our generation can perhaps propose for Romanization then is that of *bricolage* (in line with some recent work in literary criticism; Moretti 1996: 16–22). This may be an appropriate term to describe a process in which new cultural items are obtained by means of attributing new functions to previously existing ones. For instance, the archaic system of élite alliance and interaction was transformed and made to serve a new purpose with imperial integration of the Italian aristocracies (Keay and Terrenato, forthcoming). As a consequence, the result of the process resembles a *collage*: that is a complex patchwork made of elements of various age and provenance: some of them are new, but many others are old objects, refunctionalized in new forms and made to serve new purposes within a new context.

### *New perspectives*

After having very briefly, but critically, reviewed some of the past approaches to the study of the Romanization of Italy, it would be unfair not to advance oneself as a potential target for criticism. In the remaining part of this paper some general theoretical ideas about the process in question will be floated. These are meant simply as a contribution to the wider debate, with no claim of completeness or priority. There is, however, a paradox with which one is immediately faced at this point: that of attempting a broad synthesis after having claimed the inadequacy of uniform descriptions and general trends to represent the complexity encountered in the peninsula. The only way out of this impasse seems to be that of exploring the variability of the

phenomenon, keeping an eye out for possible recurrences. This is not an easy task, but it seems more appropriate an approach than having to force the evidence in the straitjacket of an overarching normative model. A possible methodology at this point might consist in a description of the range of different behaviours observed in each community with regard to a set of specific issues. In other words, to explore the dimensions of the diversity and, if possible, to identify typical associations of characters recurring in different spheres. In concrete terms, a first step in this direction might be represented by the definition of some subsets of society which seem to be relevant in the understanding of the process of Romanization (table 1).

élites	commoners
urban	rural
lowland	upland
public	private
external	internal
man	woman
living	dead

*Table 1. Examples of some spheres within local communities that tend to be affected in different ways by Romanization. In general terms, those listed on the left hand side appear often to be perceptibly more impacted than those on the right.*

This rather Levi-Straussian set of oppositions is meant to illustrate some aspects of the diversity of response to Romanization that can be observed within a local community. It would appear that stronger interaction with Roman culture tends to be concentrated in the spheres listed in the left hand column. This table is offered simply as a first schematization of a very complex phenomenon. Nor is it suggested that the pattern is identical for all communities. At the same time, it would seem that whenever a differential impact of incorporation is observed, the diversity tends to occur along one or more of these divisions, and the more strongly affected groups tend to be those on the left. This simple model is based on several recent regional studies on Romanization. However, providing the examples that seem to justify each of these oppositions would go beyond the scope of the present paper (but see Curti, Dench and Patterson 1996; Terrenato forthcoming; and especially Key and Terrenato, forthcoming). If we accept this perspective, besides the spatial heterogeneity in the impact of Romanization discussed above, there is an entire new dimension of variability, which is not working at the level of geographical regions, but at that of different groups within the same community (classes, genders etc.) or even within the same individual; this last is illustrated by a few privileged cases in which it is possible to compare the way of life and the burial ritual of the same member of a local élite: Roman fashions are often emulated more closely in the house rather than in the tomb. The image of *bricolage* works at different scales: not only communities, but also individual cultural sets can be composed of different parts, some old, some new, some local, some coming from outside.

Returning now to the level of the comparison between communities, another observation is that the differences in the outcome of contact can hardly be described in simple terms: e.g. by stating (as one frequently reads) that a given region is more or less acculturated than another by the end of the process. There is more than one scale on which the impact of the conquest can be assessed: reactions at the community level display very often a composite nature. As we have seen above, even within the same group, some behaviours may be affected, while others might not be. Especially in the case of local élites, they often appear to play a dual role, interacting with Rome and with their own community at the same time (Terrenato, forthcoming). As a

result, the ingredients of their new cultural makeup should be carefully analysed, rather than talking simply of strongly or lightly Romanized aristocracies. The crucial implication of this approach is that no single indicator can be used to measure a 'degree of Romanization'. The very word can probably be used only in its weakest meaning, as argued above; and the new cultural entity, resulting from the interaction, must rather be investigated by asking a wide range of questions which could help explore its nature. Not all of them are diagnostic, however. The presence of orthogonal city layouts, public monuments built according to Roman architectural styles, or the diffusion of Roman artistic tastes or Roman ceramic imports (to mention only some of the most commonly invoked 'evidence for Romanization') are far too widespread and superficial fashions to be really significant. In all likelihood, for each context a different group of relevant issues should be worked out. This is equivalent to saying that each researcher of Romanization will have to set his or her own research agenda, without relying on any cookbook recipe.

As a contribution to this potentially unlimited range of approaches, what follows is a list of research questions which could be found to be particularly useful in some case studies of Romanization in central Italy: do the native élites survive (and, above all, do they maintain their social status, at least in part)? Do they have a role as negotiators/spokespersons for the whole community? At the level of the commoners is there a maintenance of traditional cultural characters (in terms of vernacular architecture, cults, folklore)? What is the social status of the same commoners? Are there signs of their pauperization? Is there an introduction of new elements in society (or of new groups, such as chattel slaves)? Is there an intensification and/or specialisation of production? Are new crafts, new modes of production introduced? Are new field boundaries or new forms of control created in the landscape? Is there a maintenance of traditional social bonds? Or are Roman law and Roman forms of dependence thoroughly adopted? These are kinds of questions that are slightly more specific and context sensitive than those traditionally asked in the literature on the Romanization of Italy. Whatever the answer to any of them, it would be unwise to jump to the conclusion that the community in question was or was not Romanized. A lot of indicators may be relevant, but none is diagnostic in isolation. Our limited experience seems to show that each community behaves differently with regard to each issue, each time producing a different *bricolage*. Different because the pre-Roman situation was different, and different because the impact of Roman culture is variable. We seem to have to tackle a universe of variability with many dimensions, where the only hope seems to be that of putting our finger on recurring patterns: sets of responses which (even granted some background noise) seem to frequently occur together within the same community.

In a particular case-study, I have made an attempt at analysing the reaction of an Italian community to incorporation into the Roman state (the Etruscan city of *Volaterrae*, Terrenato, forthcoming) stressing the association of negotiated incorporation, economic stability, residential villas occupied by élites of native origin and not involved in the slave economy, farmers with surplus and cultural and social continuity. This type of reaction (which we could label socially conservative) may seem to be analogous to that of other central Italian communities (such as *Volsinii* or *Arretium*) but radically different to that of cities neighbouring *Volaterrae* such as *Populonia* or *Pisae*. Further research may allow the mapping of patterns of different response to incorporation across Italy.

In more general terms, the heterogeneity of Roman Italy in itself seems to have fascinating implications: it entails a different notion of how the empire was formed, and, above all, kept together. It has been observed that in comparison with other empires, what made Rome's unique was the ability to retain its conquests, far more than its making them (Mann 1986: I, 251). If Italy was still an composite entity long after the conquest, this clearly means that the strategy

adopted by Rome was far more flexible (and based upon an *ad hoc* approach) than has previously been surmised. Instances of massive impact on native cultures are probably to be seen as rather exceptional. Areas where the pre-Roman culture was distorted beyond recognition were probably a minority, but no community remained unaffected. As crucial role in this process of convergence is probably played by Hellenization, (recently argued by Curti, Dench and Patterson 1996). This term refers to the spread of new cultural characters (mostly of Greek origin) which climaxes in the third and second centuries BC. In many regions this period also witnesses major changes in urban and rural settlement patterns: the enormous diffusion of farms, for instance, may be connected to both social, economic and productive transformations concerning vast areas of urbanized lowland Italy (e.g. Barker 1995: 181ff). This, which may well be the real turning point in the development of Roman Italy, may be seen as the event that tips the balance in favour of those Italians who see large-scale integration as a positive development: sedentary communities interested in stable boundaries, mutual defence, infrastructures for communication and exchange (the establishment of common official language, a unified system for coinage, measures etc.). In this perspective, what really kept Roman Italy together was this long-term process of increased cultural compatibility. Rome simply acted as the catalyst of the transformation by offering a widely acceptable package containing items such as light administrative control, pacification, moderate economic intensification and above all a highly flexible incorporative ideology (Giardina 1994).

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the perception that our generation will probably have of the Romanization of Italy is likely to be less influenced by nationalist ideology and the need to negate the long-term vitality of ethnic identities. If we also, being no better than those who have preceded us, have any modern influence to acknowledge, it will be rather more connected to the post-Cold War resurgence of ethnicities (with the occasional chaos and fragmentation caused by them), as well as by the new ideal of the European Union, wishfully imagined as a tolerant empire of diversity, making national states obsolete (on the impact of post-Cold War politics on our perception of Roman Italy, see also Gabba 1994).

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