Constructing Romanitas: Roman public architecture and the archaeology of practice

by Louise Revell

The interweaving of Romanization and public architecture has a long history within the discipline of Roman archaeology, but I would argue that in some ways this has become a rather stagnant relationship. The presence of Roman-style towns and buildings has been used predominantly as evidence that the process of Romanization has taken place; even in some of the most recent writings on the subject, this forms an underlying assumption to the approach taken (Potter & Johns 1992:80–4, 99–112; Wacher 1995). This then becomes the academic game of judging the progress of Romanization by counting the number and range of public buildings a community possesses, with the implicit assumption that the more signs of *romanitas* evident, the further that community has progressed along a fixed scale from 'native' to 'Roman'. This line of argument ignores the fact that buildings have a history that continues beyond the point of their completion, thus decontextualizing them from both the people who used them, and the activities carried out in them. Furthermore, it imposes a dichotomy of Roman and native which, at least for the Roman, is presented as homogenous and unproblematic. In contrast to this approach, this paper examines the lived experience of these buildings and how this relates to three specific themes: firstly, how Roman ideology was bound up within the city; secondly, some of the ways in which this architecture was then used in the creation, maintenance and display of identity, problematizing the idea of a single Roman identity; and thirdly the way the idea of Roman and membership of the Roman empire was incorporated into the daily lives of its subjects.

This approach is based upon structuration theory as outlined by Giddens in *The constitution of society* (1984). Society is not a reified entity, with a life of its own; rather, it is created and maintained through the actions of knowledgeable human agents, whose actions are in turn constrained by patterns of behaviour learnt and deemed appropriate within that society. This then sets up the duality of human agency and society: each one the product of the other. Roman public architecture is one of the locales where Roman identity is both learnt and expressed, and as such is not merely evidence that Romanization has taken place, but is implicated in the process itself. These buildings provide the frame for encounters that reproduce the institutions inherent within Roman society. Both the buildings themselves and the repetitive activities carried out within them become a form of communication, a discourse that should not necessarily be seen as only face-to-face interaction. Thus they become one of the means through which Rome and Roman power was presenced within the everyday lives of its subjects, and so one of the ways in which the Roman empire was maintained across a large time and space.

Giddens' duality of subject and structure thus empowers the members of any society. Instead of inanimate puppets with strings pulled by external forces, we are studying knowledgeable social agents with the capacity to understand their own actions at the moment of performance. This empowers the members of any society, whose actions must then be seen as meaningful within that given context. As Giddens writes:

> What agents know about what they do, and why they do it – their knowledgeability *as* agents – is largely carried in practical consciousness. Practical consciousness consists of all the things which actors know tacitly about how to 'go on' in the contexts of social life without being able to give them direct discursive expression
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> (Giddens 1984:xxiii)

As we study the processes of Romanization, we should remember that the buildings and inscriptions, which constitute our evidence, are not in themselves the objects undergoing this transformation. Rather, we are studying the Romanization of the people using them: only as the people undergo this cultural transformation will their material culture also change to reflect this. Such artefacts constitute the resources implicated in their ability to go on in a changing society. Thus for a society to be Romanized, it is not merely to have Roman buildings, but also for the members to know how to act and behave within them in a Roman manner; that is, the acquisition of practical knowledge as opposed to discursive knowledge. What to do in a forum, or in a baths, or in a circus, but not necessarily to be able to articulate why it is done.

Human action should not be seen as taking place within a vacuum; rather, it is set within a temporal and spatial context, with the expectation of some form of audience. The regionalization and routinization of such encounters gives meaning to this interaction, and so the details of the setting, frequency of practice and any artefacts used all become imbued with meaning and in turn reinforce the significance of these encounters (Graves 1995:47). Such encounters become the means and the medium of power: resources used to establish and maintain social structures and hierarchies. Thus the adoption and use of Roman material culture and the repetition of ritualised activities associated with it provides a new system of resources for the expression of different forms of social identity. However, this expression relies upon the presence of an audience with some knowledge of the rules of these social encounters. This need not be seen as a single audience, but may incorporate many differing audiences. For example, a member of the élite class of a civitas capital may express his élite, male, Romanized status to members of his own, local élite class, to those of lesser status within his own community, to élites from other civitas capitals and to officials representing Roman power. However, this exercise and demonstration of power should be seen as a two-way process, relying upon the acquiescence of these differing groups, who all possess some resources to change the system, at a minimum by withdrawing their consent.

Ideology becomes one of the means used by those at the top of a social hierarchy to justify and maintain their position, presenting inequality as part of the natural order of things. Much has been written recently about the ideological importance of the Roman urban centre (e.g. Parkins 1997), so I shall only deal with this very briefly here. To a Roman, life was ideologically centred around the city. This is clear from the literary sources, which emphasise that living in an urban community, playing an active role in the politics, administration, defence and religion of that city was the only civilised form of life (Cic. *de inv.*1.2-2.3; Strabo 4.1.5). It can also be traced through the language, with the contrast between *urbanus* and *rusticus* extending beyond their simplest meanings of dwelling. Thus *urbanus* incorporates the positive qualities of elegance, refinement and intelligence, whilst *rusticus* incorporates the negative qualities of roughness, simpleness and boorishness. This ideology had a profound effect upon the Roman response to ruling an empire. Many of the structures set in place by the Romans for their administration were based in the urban setting, and this is especially true from the time of Augustus onwards (Nicolet 1991). Thus the local magistrates, the taxation system, the judicial system and religious institutions such as the imperial cult were dependent upon some form of attachment to a central urban area. Judicial charters, such as the Flavian municipal charters from Spain, also indicate how far the Roman model of urbanisation was used to structure provincial towns (Gonzales 1986; Johnston 1987:62–7). We must acknowledge that much of this ideology was based upon the dominance of the adult, free male, with his superior access to magistracies, sources of wealth and priest-hoods. Other members of society, such as women or children, had a different position within this ideological worldview and so different experiences of being incorporated into this ideological system.

I shall use these theoretical assumptions to re-examine the forum-basilicas from two civitas capitals of Roman Britain: Caerwent and Wroxeter [1]. Neither building is without its problems as a case-study due to a lack of complete excavation and the uneven survival of remains;

nevertheless, through the examination of the minute detail of the surviving elements and their decoration, as opposed to generalised reconstructions of the entire building, each provides valid evidence for the application of these theories. They are both from the first half of the second century, and so provide the opportunity to examine the lived experience of these buildings during a fairly limited time-span: how Roman ideology might be written into the everyday lives of those using these buildings, how sections of the community might use the architecture as a technology – in the Foucauldian sense – for establishing their differing identities, and how the distant power of Rome became implicated in the everyday lives of those on the furthest reaches of the empire.

These buildings should not be seen as neutral entities, but as given meaning through their context. They are positioned at the heart of explicitly Roman urban agglomerations, which disrupted the previous patterns of settlement and introduced an alien form of settlement type, with street-grids, *insulae* and different building styles. The public buildings of this period contrast with the surrounding buildings, demonstrating an investment in them in preference to the domestic or commercial. At Caerwent, the street grid was not fully laid out until the end of the second century and the stone built forum contrasted with some of the surrounding structures, such as the large timber building in *insula* IX with its living quarters and workshop (Brewer 1993b:58–9). Similarly at Wroxeter, the street grid was extended at this time to substantially increase the size of the town, but the domestic buildings at Greyhound Yard and the area between Charles Street and Ackland Road still indicate predominantly timber-built structures (Wacher 1995:329). Whether they were constructed by the local élites or Roman military forces is a secondary issue; they demonstrate to an audience a distinction placed upon these buildings and the activities carried out within them, whether this is an audience of those using these buildings, or merely present within the town.

The ongoing investment in these buildings also indicates that they should not be seen as

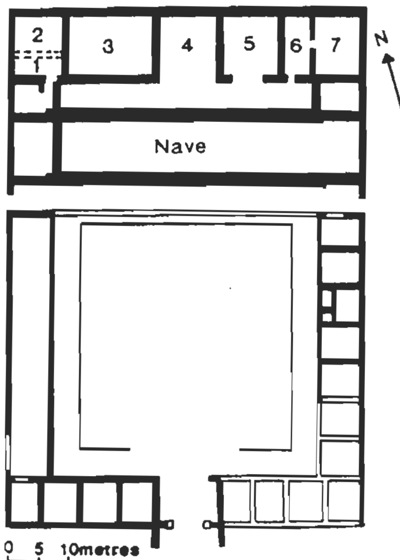

Figure 1. Caerwent forum-basilica (after Brewer 1993a)

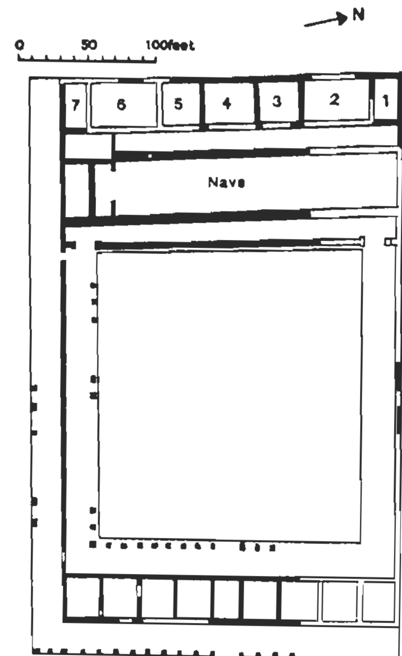

Figure 2. Wroxeter forum-basilica (after Atkinson 1942: plate 73)

one-off showpieces of imposed Roman values. For example, the front portico and range of shops in the forum at Wroxeter were rebuilt after substantial damage from fire in the 160s (Atkinson 1942). Within both complexes, there is evidence of minor work that cannot be accurately dated, but points to their continued use: for example the partitioning and repainting of rooms and reflooring with *opus signinum* or mosaics. These episodes all warn against the argument that these buildings have a single event, their construction, and that their small size, comparative dearth of decoration or even their possible construction by external agents all indicate an evident lack of Romanization. Instead, these buildings demonstrate a history of continued use within their urban environments. As the local inhabitants incorporated these buildings into their daily lives, they also actively incorporated an ideology of urbanism and reproduced through practice elements of Roman society. Work on patterns of villa distribution, showing a tendency to cluster around the civitas capitals, indicates the extent to which urban centres were becoming a dominant focus for certain members of society (Gregson 1987).

A consideration of some specific elements of these buildings allows us to explore in greater detail how some of these themes might operate. For this I shall concentrate upon the basilica itself; rather than an art-historical description, we should ask how specific features become resources implicated in social reproduction. The first area I shall discuss is the 'tribunal'. At Caerwent (Figure 1), there is one at each end of the central nave, but the one at the east end can be more accurately reconstructed. It is blocked off from the north and south aisles by walls and so is visually only accessible from a single direction. The area is highlighted by an engaged column at the east end of the north *stylobate* which was rendered with plaster and painted white (Frere 1991:225). It was separated from the rest of the nave by either a screen or balustrade as indicated by a 30 cm wide groove (Frere 1988:422). Whether this screen was of stone or wood, and how tall it stood, is unclear. The area was approximately 7 metres deep, with a raised tessellated floor contrasting with the *opus signinum* of the rest of the nave. Access was either from the nave or through a door from the north aisle. A hypocaust was later added, and there is evidence of two phases of wall painting. There is less evidence for the tribunals at Wroxeter (Figure 2), but these were apparently also differentiated from the rest of the nave (Atkinson 1942:98). The northern tribunal seems to have been set in a rectangular apse with a raised floor, and again separated by a balustrade with a second entrance from the east aisle.

Thus, these areas are delineated and accentuated through architecture: setting certain people apart within the gathering, but also controlling the encounters both physically and visually. Different groups of the community would be differentiated by their right to enter this area, their means of access, either through the nave itself or from the aisle, and the length of time they might be permitted to linger. The other parts of the basilica from which this area can be seen is restricted by the internal rows of pillars and the walls of the apses. Thus the appearance of those with access to this area is very controlled: the audience is only to the front of them which then limits the possible experiences of the encounter. This area would have been used by the imperial representatives for the dispensation of justice, the promulgation of official announcements and other public duties (Wacher 1995:42). In this way, the authority of the Roman empire becomes established and reinforced within a specifically Roman context. However, these ideas can be taken further; this area becomes a resource, or technology, through which a Roman imperial magistrate routinely creates his own identity. As a magistrate he is empowered in a way which sets him apart from other members of the community and his ability to become a magistrate constitutes a way of defining his gender and his membership of a certain age group. Within the Roman system, only men were eligible for such office and progress through the ranks was linked with age (Beard & Crawford 1985:52–4); the performance of magistral duties was therefore a constituent part of both masculinity and adulthood. Furthermore, this area would become imbued with a particular meaning which would then be recalled when others, the local civitas magistrates, also used it. For them, their social identity becomes maintained through a new Roman technology, this identity again reflecting hierarchies of status, gender and age. We also need to acknowledge that these two types of encounter

should not be separated, as the enactment of one becomes recalled and implicated in the enactment of the other, bringing added meaning to it. Within this approach, we have to acknowledge the role of the audience: the knowledge and the acquiescence on the part of other members of the community is central to this display of status.

For an imperial official, brought up within the ideology of Rome, the nature of such social encounters is constrained by ideas of theatricality. The works of Cicero (*De or.* 56.214, 59.220) and Quintilian indicate that there was an anxiety over the similarities between the activities of acting and oratory within élite circles, as the two were believed to be at opposite ends of a political and moral spectrum. Nevertheless, there were strict rules concerning the movement of the body during public speaking, and these were openly acknowledged as an important part of oratory. As Quintilian states:

> ... the arms may be extended in the proper manner, the management of the hands free from all trace of rusticity and inelegance, the attitude becoming, the movements of the feet appropriate and the motions of the head and eye in keeping with the poise of the body. No one will deny that such details form a part of the art of delivery, nor divorce delivery from oratory; and there can be no justification for disdaining to learn what has got to be done...
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> (Quint. *Inst.* 1.11.16–7)

Here Quintilian explicitly uses the terminology of *urbanus-rusticus* ideology: to deliver a speech in the appropriate manner allows a Roman magistrate to establish and maintain his identity within that set of values. The role of the audience and the idea of performance are also implicit: this identity is expressed through the performance using the correct posture and gestures in the presence of an audience also aware of these rules. The tribunals provide the stage for this enactment and the architecture of the building reinforces the theatricality of the event, thus perpetuating the ideology governing it.

The second element of the buildings I wish to discuss is the rear range of rooms. Neither Caerwent nor Wroxeter possess a complete range, but each adds something to our understanding of their possible role. At Caerwent, room 3 has been identified as a probable council chamber (Frere 1989:264). It could only be entered via an antechamber, rooms 1/2, initially a single room, later divided into two. Thus access is not only limited to certain people, but it is also physically and metaphorically distanced from the rest of the building and the community through this increasingly convoluted approach. The room itself possesses slots in the floor for benches and the base for a large dais at the furthest end. Once again, comparative status is articulated through the layout of the room, with the most senior magistrates presumably having access to this dais. The high status attached to the room as a whole is indicated through the two phases of painted plaster and the later mosaic floor (Ashby 1906:128, plate 19). The right to enter the curia as a member of the élite class or as a serving magistrate would be limited. In the absence of a charter for a civitas capital, we can only surmise the exact criteria for eligibility: whether it was based solely on Roman law or represented a compromise between pre-existing and native traditions. However, we might expect that the criteria might incorporate distinctions of wealth, gender and age. The right to enter the curia becomes a way of expressing these aspects of identity: as a person of high rank in an society where status is based upon wealth; as a man in an era when the genders are given specific roles, and finally as having reached a certain number of years, where access to power is graded by age. But this also constitutes a way of actively perpetuating and promoting the ideology behind this system, and the inequalities underpinning it, that of the superiority of the adult, wealthy male.

The finds from room 1 in the Wroxeter basilica include locks, padlocks, hinges and samian inkpots (Atkinson 1942:101–3, 220–1 no. 6). The metal finds suggest the presence of wooden chests or cupboards, and together these suggest a possible clerk's office or archive. Recreating the daily use of this room is more difficult, but presumably it was connected with the administrative requirements of the imperial system: for example, the keeping of records, the census and tax details. Thus both the physical presence of these buildings and activities such as

paying taxes, registering for the census or similar repeated practices routinely recreated the authority of Rome within the daily lives of its subjects, regardless of their legal status. The building becomes a visible manifestation of the fact that this town is now part of the Roman world and that its wider connections are with the imperial network. It serves as another way in which the inhabitants of any town were made aware of the changing social context from Iron Age to Roman, and recreates the ideology of attachment to an urban centre.

However, so far I have pointed to a somewhat one-way flow of cultural action: the unquestioning adoption of Roman ideology. Yet, it is clear that the experience of being Roman within these two towns was somewhat different from the experience of being Roman in other parts of the empire. Neither Wroxeter or Caerwent indicate particular emphasis placed on the forum as a setting for the imperial cult: at both, the middle room has been identified as an *aedes*, but there is little evidence of this area as a focus for activity (Brewer 1993b:63; Wacher 1995:366). Furthermore, at Caerwent there appears to be an absence of temples within the town during the first half of the second century: those we know of are either later or outside the urban centre. This would suggest that perhaps the adoption of urbanism in these areas did not include the equation of the political centre with religious centre (Millett 1990:72). Similarly, the lack of inscriptions from the civilian centres and the differing patterns of building patronage reinforce the impression that the form of urbanism adopted in Britain was slightly different to that in other provinces of the empire (Blagg 1990). This is not to repeat the argument that Britain was more native than Roman (or vice versa), but that in Barrett's words, the 'possibilities of being human' were different (Barrett 1994:5).

To sum up, I shall briefly run through the three themes I have explored throughout this paper:

(i) ideology the forum basilica becomes a locale where the ideology of urban dwelling is routinely recreated through the activities of the members of that community. The tribunal, the curia and the clerk's office all suggest how the activities of administration and local rule become located within the urban centre. As the inhabitants of these civitates incorporate the building into their daily routines, they demonstrate the practical knowledge of how to act in an ideologically Roman manner. They do not need the discursive knowledge of why being *urbanus* is better than being *rusticus*, or the ability to compose a satire on the merits of urban dwelling. In going to basilica to receive justice from the imperial magistrate, or to act as a local magistrate, or even to buy a mortarium from a stall in the front portico of the Wroxeter forum, they situate and reproduce Roman ideology within their daily lives.

(ii) identity the issue of creating identity needs to be taken beyond the level of an ethnic Roman/native dichotomy, and reframed in terms of creation of many different identities. The buildings become a resource for the expression of *romanitas*, but also of status, of gender and of age groups: access to privileged areas becomes a way of marking out the categories within these as a more complex matrix of social identity is created.

(iii) presencing Rome we need to question how social institutions become reproduced over a large spatial area. If we regard communication as more than just a face-to-face event, but as including the reading of a culturally significant material record, then we can explore the ways in which the presence of Rome was integrated into daily life. This can operate on a multitude of different levels, from the material culture of the building types and architectural decoration, to the physical presence of imperial magistrates, and the more abstract administrative requirements of the census and payment of taxes.

In 1939 Sutherland wrote of his dissatisfaction with the debate over whether imperial Spain was 'Roman' or 'native' (Sutherland 1939:203–4, 214). In spite of the post-colonial reassessment of Romanization, the discourse of cultural change is still often framed within the dichotomy of a Roman/native discourse. However, we ourselves have constructed *romanitas*, putting together a single set of identifiers of Roman culture, with a pseudo-Latin tag, and then using them as a goal for any society to reach (or not, according to each author's personal view).

This approach ignores the lived experience of being a member of such a community: the resources implicated in the necessity of going on in life. What I hope I have shown is how the adoption of Roman public architecture provides such a resource and, thus, the possibilities of acting within these conditions and the forms of social institutions, ideology and identity created.

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Endnote

[1] As the final excavation report for Caerwent is currently being written, information used here is taken from interim reports (Brewer 1993b) and notices.

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