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# Romanization: A Feminist Critique

*Louise Revell*

## *Introduction*

The question of gender studies within Roman archaeology has been integrally bound up with TRAC since its inception. It was one of the stated aims of Eleanor Scott in founding TRAC to challenge the androcentrism of contemporary approaches to the Roman provinces (Scott 1993). In the first conferences all looked good, and there was a flurry of papers deconstructing present approaches (Scott 1995; 1997) and looking for the evidence for the lives of women within the Roman provinces (van Driel-Murray 1995), or challenging assumptions about the gendered meaning of material culture (Allason-Jones 1995). Later conferences saw a reduction in the numbers of papers on gender, leading to Patty Baker's paper in the proceedings from Canterbury lamenting the fact that things were still no better (Baker 2003). In 2009, accounts of the Roman provinces are still marked by an unquestioned androcentrism; there are few practitioners who would dispute that the feminist critique is important, but this has not led to them integrating such approaches into their own reconstructions of the Roman past. This is in contrast with Ancient History and Classical Art History, which has generated a wide-ranging literature on the subject.

Nevertheless, it is not my aim in this paper to reiterate the call for more research into gender and other marginalised groups in the Roman provinces. The situation is starting to change; for example, in the last ten years there has been a growth in the question of the life-course within the Roman provinces (Gowland 2001). However, one danger is that this is becoming a ghetto area, studied by women and distinguished from the mainstream topics of cultural change, settlement and economics. Instead, I want to argue that gender studies have a part to play in our examination of these questions. At the moment, we generally either depopulate them, or repopulate them with an under theorised adult male (the simulacrum of the majority of researchers) (Scott 1998; Swift 2007). By keeping the question of people distinct, we hamper our understanding of the "big" questions. Without incorporating questions such as gender, age and family structures, we cannot hope to understand these topics fully. In this paper, I want to take the central topic of Romanization (or cultural change, depending upon your theoretical allegiance) and demonstrate how a feminist approach provides a new perspective on an old chestnut.

## *A feminist archaeology?*

During the nineteenth century, male-driven views of scientific history and the political context of the emerging nation-states led to historians and archaeologists concentrating on ideas of political organization, imperialism and historical narrative. Questions such as gender and childhood were considered marginal to 'proper' research. These limited agendas continued throughout much of the twentieth century, and, although from the 1970s onwards new theoretical ideas have challenged them, research into women, children and the family is still to some extent considered as a distinct sub-discipline. Gender is a question which has largely been ignored within Roman archaeology, particularly the archaeology of the western

provinces. This is in spite of the post-Foucauldian concentration on gender in Ancient History, and the growth of post-processual agendas within Roman archaeology. Structuration theory and the question of identity have provided new avenues for the study of imperialism and cultural change (for example, Barrett 1997; Gardner 2002; Revell 2009; Woolf 1998), but ethnic identity is still often assumed to mean adult male identity (Revell 2000 attempts to break down this homogenisation).

The idea that our reconstruction of the past has been carried out through male dominated agendas has been explicitly raised by a number of feminist archaeologists, anthropologists and historians. In their seminal article on the subject, Conkey and Spector explicitly sought to challenge androcentric agendas in Archaeology, based upon the growth of feminist approaches within Anthropology (Conkey and Spector 1984). They identified three distinct stages in the development of feminist theories:

1. Critiques of male bias
2. Studies of women's lives
3. Studies of the relationship between genders and the factors which structure them

These stages can be applied to the study of the Roman provinces. The primary stage of critiquing the androcentric epistemology can be seen in the work of Eleanor Scott (1995), who outlined ways in which women were marginalised from accounts of Roman archaeology. This has been continued by others such as Lindsey Allason-Jones and J.D. Hill (Allason-Jones 2001; Hill 2001). We are now at the stage where it is accepted that studies of the marginalised are a valid part of Roman archaeology and this has led to work within the second area: the studies of women's lives. For Roman Britain, we could cite Allason-Jones' *Women in Roman Britain* (Allason-Jones 1989; similarly Pelletier 1984). However, there is the danger that this is becoming a marginalised part of Roman archaeology. Shelby Brown has argued that following Sarah Pomeroy's (1975) groundbreaking study of women in antiquity, '[c]onsideration of women and supposed women's issues was often directed into a subfield called Women in Antiquity, which left the normal field of study as male' (Brown 1997: 25). We are in danger of developing a similar subfield entitled "Women in the Roman Provinces".

I would argue that we are at the stage where we need to integrate studies of gender into the dominant narratives of Roman Archaeology. One area where this can be accomplished is in the question of cultural change. Conkey and Spector (1984) identified this as one part of a feminist Archaeology, and work on other periods has demonstrated that we cannot assume continuity of gender roles across periods of cultural change. This was explicitly raised by Joan Kelly in her article *Did women have a Renaissance?* (Kelly 1984). She argued that, whereas the Renaissance is generally viewed as a time of positive social and cultural change, for women this was a time when the power and authority which they could wield during the Medieval period was removed, due to a new division between personal and public life and new ideas of the relationships between men and women. Kelly's work can be set alongside that of feminist archaeologists who have similarly questioned the role of women in cultural change. An early study was that by Hastorf (1991) of pre-Hispanic Andean communities. She argued that, as the area came under Inca control, there was a reduction in women's access to the production and consumption of certain foodstuffs, pointing to a reduction in their social authority. This raises the question of the impact of incorporation into the Roman empire on the gender relations of the provinces, and the possibility of an active role for women within this process.

Although there has been a renewed interest in the question of cultural change in the last twenty years, a review of the key works on this topic sees a distinct lack of consideration of gender. Millett's model of Romanization is based upon changes within quite specific social structures (Millett 1990a; 1990b), framed within the processual epistemology focussed on rank and status (Millett 2003/04: 169). Ironically, there is an implicit discussion of changing gender relations within Millett's work: he argues that the incorporation of the conquered elites into the administration of the empire led to their position being defined around their status as a magistrate rather than a warrior. At the same time as ideologies of rank were changing, so ideologies of masculinity were similarly being altered, with new forms of material culture being adopted to express this (Revell 1999). However, this consequence of Millett's argument has not been explicitly articulated either in his own work, or in the various responses to it. This idea that Romanization led to a redefinition of masculinity can also be seen in Woolf's *Becoming Roman*, which looked at the formation of a specifically regional cultural identity in the Gallic provinces: 'men literally came down from the hills, shaved off their beards and learned to bathe themselves' (Woolf 1998: ix). Woolf's gender specificity leaves the question of what the women were doing: were they left behind in the hill-forts, or did they similarly come down to the new Roman towns, learn elaborate new hairstyles, as suggested by the increase in hairpins, and take on new economic roles.

In an alternative approach, Mattingly's work on discrepant identities has sought to break down the idea of a homogenised response to Roman imperialism. This may seem more promising, but it sees the cultural changes as based upon economic exploitation, producing a tripartite division into urban, rural and military communities (Mattingly 2004; 2006). Although women and gender relations are more visible in his arguments, women are largely considered in relation to men, whether in terms of unbalanced populations within urban cemeteries (Mattingly 2006: 323–4, 344–5) or assumptions about male soldiers' need for female prostitutes (Mattingly 2006: 175–6). Ironically, the question of the impact of sexual interaction between Roman soldiers and native women is also briefly considered by Millett (1990a: 60), who argues that it could have led to women playing an active role in the acculturation of the rest of society, a possibility not subsequently pursued. Similarly, Nicola Terrenato has also argued for a more nuanced picture, with the co-incidence of change and conservatism in different elements of society within Roman Etruria (Terrenato 1998). This model allows for gender relations to play a different role within the process of cultural change, although it is not raised by Terrenato himself.

Whilst much of this review has focussed on the north-western provinces, and in particular Britain, this reflects archaeological studies of imperialism and cultural change elsewhere in the empire. If the current paradigms of cultural change are unsatisfactory, how do we write an alternative narrative? Whilst we do need new synthetic research which directly addresses the question of gender relations, it is also possible to reread some of the existing studies to raise certain issues which would have impacted on the way gender relations were structured. In the remainder of this paper, I want to take a series of published studies, and use these to both rethink what impact Roman conquest and the process of cultural change might have had upon family structures, but also to demonstrate that a feminist approach has more to offer Roman archaeology than the subfield of "Women in the Roman Provinces".

### *Regional variability in gender identities*

One of the current questions in the study of cultural change is that of regionality and regional variability. The idea of localised responses to Roman imperialism has been explored predominantly through artefact types, architectural styles, and settlement patterns. We can see the same regional variability in structures of age and gender, as expressed through (and in part constructed through) family roles. This has been most clearly demonstrated by Richard Saller and Brent Shaw for the Latin west (Saller 1987; Shaw 1987). In a series of inter-related studies, they looked at the question of age at marriage and who was named as the commemorator of the deceased, both of which have a bearing on the organisation of the family unit. Their solution to the low number of epitaphs from which it is possible to calculate age at marriage was to argue that the deceased was commemorated primarily by their parents until marriage, and then by their spouse. By calculating the average age at which the spouse took over from the parents as the most frequent commemorator, it is possible to estimate the average age at marriage.

Most of the variations shown in their results are quite subtle. For example, in both Northern and Southern Italy, age at marriage for women seems to be in their early twenties. However, for men, average age at marriage seems to have been their early thirties in Northern Italy, and their late thirties in Southern Italy. The differences are clearest in the case of Spain, where husbands do not become the dominant commemorators until women are in their late 20s and early 30s, and conversely for men the transition is even later, in their early 40s. In this case, I am doubtful whether this relates directly to age at marriage. Instead, it suggests that the change in primary commemorator did not occur at the same time as marriage, pointing to different notions of how parental and spousal families interacted with each other and the way in which parental authority and power was conceptualised. These differences are further reinforced in the patterns of who was named as the commemorator, which point to the relationship between the deceased and the person responsible for his/her memorial inscription. Any variation in the primary commemorator may relate to differences in the structure of the family unit, and in particular, the strength of the nuclear family. Again, there is a notable difference between the Iberian peninsula and the other western provinces. In Iberia, women are far more visible as the named commemorator: there are almost as many wives commemorating their husbands as vice versa, and far more mothers than fathers commemorating their children (Saller and Shaw 1984; also Edmondson 2005).

In both of these aspects of the process of commemoration, we can see regional variability in gender roles and family structures. This is not an isolated case-study, and there is mounting evidence that this variability can be seen in other aspects of the material culture (Revell in press). Mary Boatwright has argued for a difference between Pannonia and Rome in how interaction between children and parents is depicted pictorially (Boatwright 2005). In Rome, there is very little interaction represented, whereas in Pannonia there is much more, with images of the nursing mothers a distinctive Pannonian trait. Others have used the structure of the house to argue for regional differences in the family structures (Guijarro 1997; Smith 1997). This suggests that we cannot assume the adoption of the legal and social structure of the Roman *familia* within the provinces, and that the gender roles within the family reconstructed from textual sources at Rome were not necessarily replicated outside of the city.

### *Continuity in a changing environment*

So, if we have this regional variability in family structures and gender roles within the family, how do we account for it? Is this due to conservatism, or are there changes but on a particular, localised trajectory? The evidence suggests that there is no simple, single answer. In some places we can see possible continuity, and this is demonstrated in the analysis of the epitaphs from Tarquinia and Etruria (Revell 2005). Amongst the information given about the deceased within the epitaph may be the age at death. It has long been recognised that the pattern of age statements does not follow expected patterns of mortality, which suggests that their inclusion can be used to reconstruct ideologies of gender and age. The epitaphs from *regiones* 4–6 in central Italy show a marked emphasis on the commemoration of children and young adults, with over 80% of age-statements corresponding to those aged 30 and under (Fig. 1). This profile reflects an ideology of gender where the transition to adulthood was marked by taking up the roles of wife and mother for women, usually in the late teens, and magistrate and husband for men at age of 25. Death is seen as more poignant when the deceased has not yet made this transition. Age-statements for those whose deaths occurred in childhood and the years through to the early twenties are included because they point to this unfulfilled promise of the deceased. This echoes the forms of life-course which we see in the Roman textual sources (Harlow and Laurence 2002), and suggests that, in these areas, we are seeing a change in family and age structures to align with those at Rome itself.

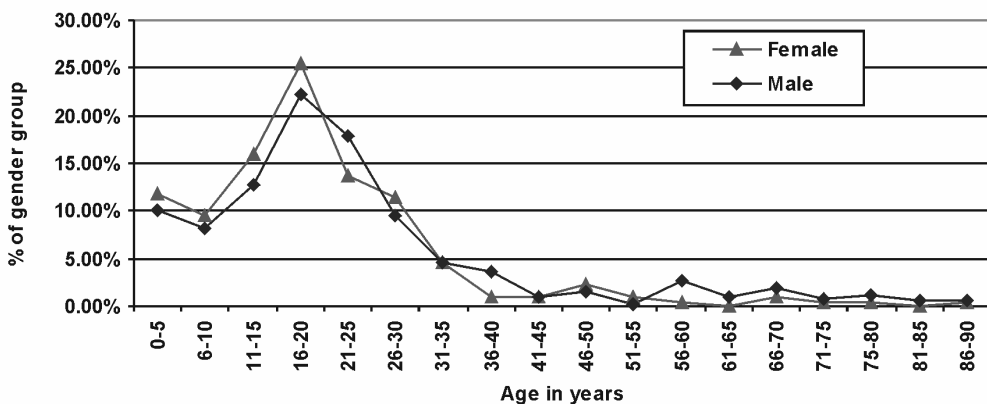


Figure 1: Distribution of age-statements on tombstones from regiones 4, 5 and 6 ( $n=634$ ; males=414, females=220).

In contrast, when we look at the evidence from Tarquinia we see a different pattern of commemoration which reflects a different ideology of age (Fig. 2). There is less concentration on childhood, and a more pronounced concentration on those in their 40s to 70s. The percentage of epitaphs commemorating those aged 30 years and under is much lower, at just over 30%, and we see a much higher proportion of age-statements referring to those in their 60s and above. This follows the pattern of the Etruscan-language inscriptions from South Etruria, which date to the fourth century B.C. (Nielsen 1989). Here there is a dual emphasis on those dying in early adulthood and old age. Nielsen has argued that this shows a respect for the

older generations and grandparents in particular. Whether this is the case or not, it demonstrates a certain level of continuity in age structures from the Etruscan to the Roman period in this area.

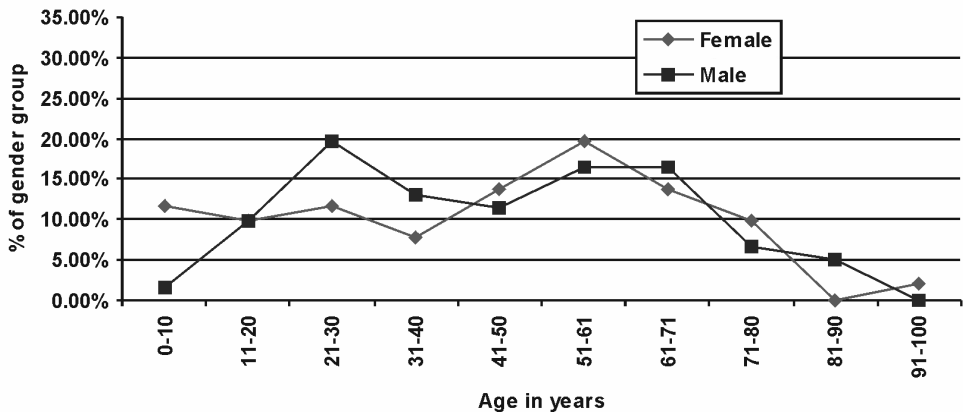


Figure 2: Distribution of age-statements on tombstones from Tarquinia (n=112; males=61, females=51).

Studies of other forms of material culture have also argued for continuity of family structures. J.T. Smith (1997) has argued that, in Britain and north-western Europe, villa layout points to a continuation of the extended family. Many of the villas in these areas have a feature of duality, such as reduplicated rooms and entrances, which alongside their size point to occupation by more than one nuclear family. He argues that prior to conquest, land was owned by kinship-groups, although not all member family units were necessarily of the same status. This organization continued after conquest, and is reflected in the design of villas, which can be divided into individual sections for each family. One part was often larger than the others suggesting that one family was considered senior to the others. Other studies have also argued for some continuity in Egypt, North Africa and Lusitania (Alston 2005; Corbier 2005; Edmondson 2005 respectively).

### *Potential disruption from Roman imperialism*

In these case-studies, we can see family structures and gender relations continuing through the process of wider cultural changes. However, in other areas we see potential disruption to family relations caused by the demands of incorporation into the Roman empire. This is true when we look at the case of the military. To return to the Saller and Shaw study, there is a different pattern of civilian and military commemoration (Saller and Shaw 1984), with marked differences in the patterns of commemoration between the military and civilian zones in Britain and Germany (Table 1). Within the civilian population, there are high levels of commemoration by the nuclear family, whereas, amongst the military population, the majority of named commemorators are drawn from outside of the family. However, in the case of the African provinces, the differences are less pronounced. This contrasts with the African provinces, where commemoration by the nuclear family is more frequent for soldiers. Even amongst the *milites* of Lambaesis, 77% of the deceased are commemorated by their nuclear family.

*Table 1. Commemoration by nuclear family, as a percentage of total relationships mentioned on epitaphs by region and social group; figures taken from Saller and Shaw 1984: appendix.*

<b>Province</b>	<b>Civilian (%)</b>	<b>Military (%)</b>
<b>Britain</b>	80	40
<b>Germania Inferior</b>	86	34
<b>Germania Superior</b>	89	34
<b>Africa Caesarea</b>	89	63
<b>Lambaesis</b>	91	81

Nevertheless, this does not mean that the military populations were men-only zones. The archaeological evidence from Hadrian's Wall points to a mixed community, with material culture indicating the presence of women and children in and around the forts. The sizes of the leather shoes found at Vindolanda and a number of German forts points to the presence of women and children (van Driel-Murray 1995), and epigraphic evidence shows that in some cases these were not only wives and children, but also unmarried sisters and widowed mothers, who were presumably the legal dependents of the soldiers (Allason-Jones 1989: 62–3). This suggests that the soldiers were forming family units with women and children based in the forts themselves and their environs, but that, for whatever reason, the strength and social pull of these relationships were less strong than the soldiers' relationships with their fellow soldiers. We can posit two alternative interpretations for this. Firstly that within the army unit as a community, the military ties were more important than familial ones. Because the soldiers were recruited from outside the immediate area, liaisons may have been formed with local women, and as these unions were not recognised in Roman law during the first and second centuries A.D. (Phang 2002), the women and children may have been left behind on their retirement. Alternatively, as the designated commemorator was to a certain extent a legal relationship and as many of the soldiers were non-citizen auxiliaries, their families' lack of standing in Roman law may have made them seem less suitable as a commemorator.

There is another side to the possible disruption caused by army recruitment, and that is the impact on family structure amongst those left behind. Any numerical figure given to the levels of recruitment from these areas must at best be an estimate, but calculations by Willems suggest that, in Batavia, each household may have contributed at least one man to military service (Willems 1984). The impact this had on family relationships is difficult to reconstruct, but it may have had the effect of giving women a more prominent role in the family. Carol van Driel-Murray has argued for family-based agricultural production, which ethnographic parallels suggest may have been run by women (van Driel-Murray 2002). This level of recruitment is not confined to Batavia, but can also be seen in north-western Iberia. It has been estimated that at least 15,180 men were recruited as auxiliary soldiers, and there is also evidence for recruitment from the local towns into the legions and the Praetorian Cohorts (Millett 2001). In contrast to Batavia, there is a strong likelihood that these men never returned home once discharged. This raises the question of precisely what impact the departure of this quantity of young men had on family relations and, in particular, the impact on the role of



women within the society. Perhaps, as suggested for Batavia, this gave women a more prominent role within the family or alternatively, as there would have been more women of marriageable age than men, this decreased their importance and status. Although we cannot answer these questions, the demands of Roman military recruitment had the potential to disrupt gender and family relationships and to produce a different form of social transformation to those in areas with lower levels of military recruitment.

### *Re-reading Romanization*

The aim of this paper has been to demonstrate how the integration of questions of gender can inform our wider reading of traditional questions of Roman archaeology. When we look at the question of gender identities and family structures, we can see many of the same issues central to current discussions of Romanization. We can see the way in which new forms of material culture, such as Latin epitaphs and house structures, were used in a dynamic and deliberate way. We can also see the way in which there were different, or discrepant, responses to the imperial context at a regional level. However, we can take this further. We concentrate on political participation and military service as ways in which the people of the provinces were incorporated into the empire. With these came new ways of defining masculinity as soldier or the active citizen through changing social structures. There was only a limited political role for women through priesthoods or benefaction, and this was only applicable to women of elite families (Hemelrijk 2004). Ideologies of female-ness and age may have remained substantially unchanged, although new ways learnt of expressing them. The alternative scenario is that ideologies of gender (for both men and women) may have changed due to the demands of a new imperial context, but that the changes were more complex than the wholesale adoption of the *familia* as defined by law and custom in Rome. By looking at whether or not there were changes in how gender and family relations were structured, Romanization takes on an added dimension. It serves to put the social structures where there was more substantial change into greater focus, and so allows a more nuanced understanding of the related phenomena of Roman imperialism and Romanization.

However, a feminist perspective has the power to add much more to Roman archaeology. The implications of this argument also have a more fundamental impact on how we frame research questions within Roman archaeology more widely. Other topics such as landscape, settlement, religion and the economy can be similarly reinterpreted using the question of how they were the product of, and at the same time created, different forms of identities. This requires new methodologies for interpreting the evidence in order to go beyond the uncritical reconstruction of people from the textual sources. It also calls upon us to do more than place the marginalised identities (women, children, slaves etc.) back into the archaeological evidence, and to problematize the normative model of the adult male. In this way, we can move beyond the sub-field of 'Women in the Roman Provinces' and truly begin to write a social archaeology of the Roman empire.

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