

“Romanization”? or, why flog a dead horse?

Andrew Merryweather and Jonathan Prag

‘I admit that I have come to detest the word "Romanization"...’¹ Nonetheless the bibliography continues to grow. The word itself encompasses a host of well-rehearsed historiographical problems. In an attempt to avoid these, scholars define the term ever more broadly (and weakly).² As a result, the word comes to describe a debate which embraces a continually growing range of subjects. And this despite claims that part of the word’s value lies in the convenient way in which it signposts the debate. The horse still breathes.

Rather than trying to define the term itself, it seems more important to define the area of the debate with which one is concerned. As so often, in the post-modern era, the grand narratives are being re-evaluated. At the heart of this process is an emphasis on the local, on context, on patterns of heterogeneity (an oxymoron which seems to encapsulate the problem of Romanization). But this focus also generates uncertainty as to how new syntheses might be achieved. We offer ‘yet another’ conference on the R-word, firstly in the belief that there are areas which remain understudied; and secondly because we are struck by the curious degree of repetition, even stagnation, within the debate.

Romanization studies have tended to focus upon either the conquest of Italy,³ or the transition to Empire around the turn of the millennium.⁴ Despite stress upon the need for comparative study of not merely different Italian cases, but provincial contexts also,⁵ the provincial emphasis almost always falls back upon the most visible moment of change, the C1 BC onwards. Equally, despite attempts to break down the divide between East and West,⁶ the division persists. The ideas that a) Romanization (= cultural change) did not take place in the West before the C1 BC, and b) Romanization (= cultural change) did not take place in the East at all, both remain commonplace.⁷ By defining our area as the pre-Augustan period, without geographical limits, we seek to break down both the geographical barrier and the mind-set which over-emphasises the link between visible material change and meaningful cultural change. The mind-set is certainly not universal,⁸ nor is the subject unstudied.⁹ But

¹ S. E. Alcock (2001), "Vulgar Romanization and the dominance of élites", in S. J. Keay and N. Terrenato (eds.) (2001a) *Italy and the West: comparative issues in Romanization*, (Oxford: Oxbow) 227.

² S. J. Keay and N. Terrenato (2001b), "Preface", in S. J. Keay and N. Terrenato (eds.) (2001a) ix.

³ Cf. E. Curti, E. Dench and J. R. Patterson (1996), "The archaeology of central and southern Roman Italy: recent trends and approaches" *JRS* 86: 185-8.

⁴ See, e.g., G. Woolf (1995), "The formation of Roman provincial cultures", in J. Metzler, M. Millett, N. Roymans and J. Slofstra (eds.) *Integration in the early Roman west: the role of culture and ideology*, (Luxembourg: Musée National d'Histoire et d'Art) 9-18; G. Woolf (1997), "Beyond Romans and natives" *WA* 28.3: 339-50.

⁵ S. J. Keay and N. Terrenato (eds.) (2001a).

⁶ S. E. Alcock (ed.) (1997), *The Early Roman Empire in the East*, (Oxford: Oxbow).

⁷ Most recently, R. MacMullen (2000), *Romanization in the Time of Augustus*, (New Haven – London: Yale University Press), and the review by D. Kennedy, *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*, 2002.06.37.

⁸ E.g. R. Häussler (1998), "Motivations and ideologies of Romanization", in C. Forcey, J. J. Hawthorne and R. Witcher (eds.) *TRAC 97: proceedings of the seventh annual Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference*, (Oxford: Oxbow Books) 11-19.

such local, contextual studies and their explicit comparison are relatively rare for the mid- to late-Republican period. The archaeology of identity¹⁰ may underlie the recent re-evaluation of local contexts; the extent to which this particular 'gaze' might be brought to bear upon this 'curious gap'¹¹ has not yet been fully explored.

But the archaeology of identity is only one approach. The great variety of approaches which the post-modern perspective entails is a gain, not a loss, and this is no less true for Romanization. This multiplicity of approaches is in its turn matched by a multiplicity of perspectives – the move away from dichotomies and monolithic views of societies.¹² One area in which Romanization studies have been particularly beneficial has been in raising awareness of not only multiple ancient perspectives, but multiple modern perspectives. This is most obvious in the contrasts between, e.g., British, French, Dutch, and Italian approaches to the subject itself – and such studies have not simply highlighted the variation but encouraged introspection and deconstruction of those perspectives.¹³ A repeated mantra, not just in Romanization studies, has been that explicitness and self-awareness are key to the productive application of the specific approach.¹⁴

Of course, being clear about the limitations of the evidence and the approach is good scholarship, not a theoretical position. New analytical tools do not necessarily mean new evidence; rather they redefine the possibilities of what one can do with the available material (old and new). One of the attractions of Romanization is precisely the richness of the evidence. It is no surprise that identity has become a hot topic within Romanization – quite apart from the fact that the approach it encourages deconstructs the very notion of Romanization in its original culture-history sense. This is a period of 'complex societies' which offers the range of data sets which make the archaeology of identity more feasible.¹⁵ The same would seem to be

⁹ See, e.g., N. Terrenato (1998), "*Tam firmum municipium*: the Romanization of Volaterrae and its cultural implications" *JRS* 88: 94-114; M. Mazzei and E. Lippolis (1984), "Dall'ellenizzazione all'età tardo-repubblicana", in M. Mazzei (ed.) *La Daunia antica. Dalla preistoria all'altomedioevo*, (Milan: Electa Editrice) 185-252; S. J. Keay (1992), "The 'Romanization' of Turdetania. Resistance to cultural change in the Lower Guadalquivir Valley between the late third century BC and the first century AD" *OJA* 11.3: 237-315; S. J. Keay (2001), "Romanization and the Hispaniae", in S. J. Keay and N. Terrenato (eds.) (2001a) 117-144; P. van Dommelen (1998), "Punic persistence: colonialism and cultural identities in Roman Sardinia", in R. Laurence and J. Berry (eds.) *Cultural identity in the Roman Empire*, (London-New York: Routledge) 25-48.

¹⁰ Cf. S. Jones (1997), *The archaeology of ethnicity: constructing identities in the past and present*, (London: Routledge).

¹¹ C. E. W. Steel (2001), *Cicero, rhetoric, and empire*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press) 8.

¹² D. J. Mattingly (ed.) (1997), *Dialogues in Roman imperialism: power, discourse, and discrepant experience in the Roman Empire*, (Portsmouth, RI: JRA suppl. 23).

¹³ See, e.g., R. Hingley (2000), *Roman officers and English gentlemen. The imperial origins of Roman archaeology*, (London-New York: Routledge); M. Bénabou (1976), "Résistance et Romanisation en Afrique du Nord sous le Haut-Empire", in D. M. Pippidi (ed.) *Assimilation et résistance à la culture Gréco-Romaine dans le monde ancien*, (Bucharest-Paris: Editura Academiei-"Les Belles lettres") 367-76; J. P. Vallat (2001), "The Romanization of Italy: conclusions", in S. J. Keay and N. Terrenato (eds.) (2001a) 102-110; J. Andreau (2001), "Reflections on a one day conference 'Italy and the West: comparative issues in Romanization'", in S. J. Keay and N. Terrenato (eds.) (2001a) 231-233; R. Brandt and J. Slofstra (eds.) (1983), *Roman and native in the Low Countries: spheres of interaction*, (Oxford: BAR IS 184); D. G. Yntema (1995), "Romanisation in the Brindisino, southern Italy: a preliminary report" *BaBesch* 70: 153-77; M. Torelli (1999), *Tota Italia: essays in the cultural formation of Roman Italy*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press).

¹⁴ E.g. S. E. Alcock (2001) 227.

¹⁵ Cf. J. M. Hall (1997), *Ethnic identity in Greek antiquity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

true for those approaches based around issues of ideology. But while these offer new and potentially more subtle ways of thinking about the evidence, it is noticeable that the questions we pose continue to focus upon élites (still rarely defined), élite urban settings, or the urban-rural distinction. Perhaps rightly so. Such a focus, however, may be unavoidable given the inherently élite-biased nature of the material. If new tools (and new jargon) do not necessarily bring new evidence, we must acknowledge that the existing body of evidence continues to encourage the same biases in interpretation which ultimately lay behind previous, ‘discredited’ approaches.

We come back to the uncertainty about the bigger picture, mentioned above, apparently arising out of an increased emphasis on the study of local situations and perspectives. As Romanization expands, the fundamental idea behind the very word should not be forgotten: we are talking about the creation of the Roman Empire. And here again, a sense of *déjà vu* strikes when looking at the debate. Romanization becomes ‘negotiation’, or ‘integration’, or ‘incorporation events’, or ‘the conquest of Italy’. One is tempted to recall the variations on the imperialism theme, from psychopathic aggression, through defensive imperialism, to the acquisition of empire in a fit of absent-mindedness. And although it hides in a different approach each time, ‘resistance’ will not go away. Any meta-narrative can be deconstructed. Any specific case is always going to deviate from some idealised model. But we still seek to understand how the Mediterranean world moved from the situation of 500 BC to that of 100 BC, AD 100, or AD 400. Local case studies must be the foundation for any broader analysis, but from the theoretical perspective the problem area at the moment seems to be the middle ground. We find ourselves facing that classic historical problem: how to move between the fragments that we can recover (and from which we choose our ‘facts’), the almost infinitely varied local picture in which these belong, and the grand narratives that are no less vital a part of the writing of history.

Romanization is an ideal forum in which to pursue this problem: rich veins of data of all varieties; a fine set of meta-narratives built up over millennia. We envisage a structured day of discussion based around a series of individual case-studies of the Republican period. Explicit contrasts and comparisons can then be drawn, in the hope of elucidating the difficult middle-ground between short- and long-term, locale and region, case-study and context. The Romanization debate is, when it comes to writing the past, not quite ready for the knacker’s yard, and well worth another crack of the whip.