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Beyond Romans and natives

Greg Woolf

Abstract

Revisionist studies of Roman imperialism and Romanization continue to show the traces of modern debates on imperialism and colonialism, in particular a tendency to analyse cultural change in terms of the interaction of two ethnic cultures. An analysis of the changing unities and diversities of cultures in Gaul (modern France), and of the transformation of Roman culture during and as a result of imperial expansion, suggests a new view of the nature and genesis of Roman imperial culture.

Keywords

Romanization; Gaul; Roman; imperialism; colonialism; acculturation.

Changing perspectives on Roman imperialism

Traditional accounts of Roman imperialism and its cultural consequences in the West told the story of the expansion of one civilization at the expense of its neighbours. Roman conquerors and rulers were credited with disseminating styles of art, technologies, cults and customs which were imagined to be already widespread within the Greco-Roman Mediterranean, replacing or marginalizing pre-Roman forms in the process. This pattern of cultural change was referred to as Romanization, a term now used in various senses (Freeman 1993), but then understood in its simplest form as the spread of what was Roman at the expense of what was not.

'Romanization' might be compared to 'westernization' or 'modernization', as concepts denoting a progressive movement through which communities and individuals advanced towards a higher level of civilization or development, by shedding the least desirable features of 'traditional' society. If this paradigm resembled some more recent imperial and colonial ideologies (Hingley 1994), it also owed much to the accounts of empire and civilization formulated in classical Latin literature and Roman art and rhetoric during the late Republic and early empire, that presented the empire as divinely sanctioned with a mission to civilize the barbarians (Woolf 1995). The success of that mission seemed confirmed by the ubiquity, on European sites, of artefacts and structures resembling finds from the Mediterranean world.

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Shifts in perspective became apparent from the 1970s. To begin with, attitudes to ancient imperialism became markedly less sympathetic, writers focusing on exploitation and maladministration of various kinds. These attitudes are evident, for example, in many of the contributions to Garnsey and Whittaker's (1978) collection of studies of ancient imperialisms. At the same time, more and more emphasis came to be placed on the role of Rome's subjects, especially local élites, in the Romanization process (e.g. Brunt 1976; Millett 1990a). Up to a point this emerged from a realization of the severe limitations imposed on the power of any ancient empire by pre-industrial technology and communications. At the same time a more systematic archaeology was revealing the importance of the provincial production of Roman style artefacts relative to imports of Mediterranean manufactures. Yet new perspectives also reflected a presumption that Roman imperialism was driven almost wholly by a desire to maximize revenue and reduce the operating costs of empire, with glory valued mainly for its convertibility into political success with its consequent material rewards. 'Self-Romanization' was likewise regarded as a strategy employed by local élites in order to win a share of the proceeds of empire (e.g. Blagg and Millett 1990; Millett 1990a). It is difficult not to see in this rigidly materialist approach, which eschewed any sympathy with the experiences and ideals of either conquerors or local (collaborative) élites, traces of post-colonial sentiment. Explicit comparisons also became common. Studies such as Bartel (1980) and Dyson (1985a; 1985b) made use of analogies drawn from modern colonial situations. Others made use of concepts derived from the anthropology of colonialism such as acculturation theory (e.g. Okun 1989 and several of the papers gathered in Brandt and Slofstra 1983 and Barrett et al. 1989) and dependency (world systems) theory (e.g. Nash 1987; Cunliffe 1988).

The aim of this survey is not to engage in a critique of these developments, which were in any case largely beneficial. Nor would it be fair to criticize these ideas for reflecting the circumstances in which they were first formulated and seemed convincing. If neither acculturation nor dependency theory remain central in current anthropological debate, the former because of the view of cultures it entails, the latter for a variety of reasons (Woolf 1990: 45), both made important contributions to the debate. But it is also true that these new approaches shared a fundamental assumption with the more traditional approaches they attacked, in that both tacitly accepted the contention of classical writers that what we have to deal with is a conflict between two peoples, and both added to that the gloss – only possible after the birth of nationalism (Gellner 1983) – that a conflict between peoples entails a conflict between cultures.

It is, of course, characteristic of revisionists to invert the paradigms they attack without challenging their overall shape. The same is true of the rather different revisionism presented in Marcel Bénabou's (1976) study *La Résistance Africaine à la romanisation* which insisted on the Africanization of Roman culture running alongside the Romanization of African, a process exemplified in cultural continuities and military resistance alike. The difficulty with Bénabou's argument is not the notion of resistance, which seems fairly close to that described by Kempf when he writes that 'Resistances can be understood as tracing hegemonic power relations, since power and resistance are reciprocally related; they bring about and pervade each other. There is therefore no space independent of power for resistance to occur in' (1994: 110). The problem emerges from where Bénabou has drawn the contour of the hegemonic relations which resistance traces, that is between Romans

and Africans. For much of the early empire the cultural life of Roman Africa was maintained and modified by an élite group who thought of themselves as Romans, but who bore little resemblance to modern expatriates or creoles. Born, brought up and educated in Africa, they looked to no metropolitan centre as 'home' and were separated from those they lived among by wealth and the education and lifestyle that it brought. That Good Life was shared in many features with that of similar élites throughout the Roman west and indeed the empire. Bénabou's analysis elevates a social cleavage not felt by contemporaries (Roman/African) above the real and felt economic and social divisions within Romano-African society (Whittaker 1995).

In fact, a truly 'de-colonized' analysis involves rejecting both traditional views of Romanization and the revisionist ones that have replaced them, and requires us to subject their common presuppositions to critical scrutiny. The argument of this paper is that, rather than conflict, competition or interaction between two cultures, we have to do with the creation of a new imperial culture that supplanted earlier Roman cultures just as much as it did the earlier cultures of indigenous peoples.

Some preliminary clarification is necessary. Roman imperial culture was not uniform. But it is only culture-historical approaches like acculturation theory that need to isolate a common, defining core of a culture in relation to which local variants can be assessed as very, more, less, or hardly Romanized. It is more productive to see Roman imperial culture as a structured system of differences that was highly differentiated, by region, class, social locale, age and gender among other dimensions of variability. Such an approach enables us to admit both the unity and the diversity of imperial culture (Woolf 1992). One advantage of this view is that it invites us to look for the structuring principles, the cultural logic of empire. Naturally, too, it is not to be denied that Roman imperial culture was created in the context of the extension of the domination of one state over its neighbours. The point is rather that the hegemonic relations created in that process were not equivalent to the subjugation of the culture of one ethnic group or national community to that of another. In what follows an approach based on these lines will be applied to the creation of Roman culture in the Gallic provinces. This huge region displayed considerable cultural diversity (and some unity) before its incorporation into the empire, and a different kind of unity-in-diversity afterwards. In addition, because of the timing of its conquest, it provides a convenient illustration of a key stage in the transformation of imperial culture as a whole during the formative period of Roman imperial society (cf. Woolf 1995).

Unity and diversity before and after conquest

The region bounded by the Mediterranean, the Pyrenees, the Atlantic, the Rhine and the western slopes of the Alps seemed a unity to the Romans: Gaul, between Spain and Germany, and between the Ocean and the Inner Sea. Eventually the inhabitants, like many later colonial subjects, accepted the conquerors' view as one basis of their identity (Goudineau 1983; Woolf 1996). But in the late iron age the region was culturally diverse and not in any sense culturally bounded, with various 'Gallic' groups having strong links with groups beyond Rome's eventual administrative frontiers, and all sharing some features of a wider iron age European culture that is undeniable yet difficult to define. One

basis of that common culture was a series of shared technologies including metallurgy, architecture and warfare. Linked to this was a common set of agricultural practices based on grains and livestock raising and owing a good deal to iron tools (Champion et al. 1984: 297–321). Technology and agriculture naturally evolved: iron production increased steadily in volume over the last half millenium BC, resulting in the near complete replacement of flint in agricultural tools; the potter's wheel spread slowly northwards; and so did various species of cultigen. Equally, there were regional variations partly for ecological reasons – olives do not grow far outside the Mediterranean basin, dry-stone construction is more practical than raised earth in the south – and partly because innovations took time to spread throughout Europe. Much the same applied to a series of broadly similar cultic and aesthetic traditions (e.g. Bradley 1990; Megaw 1970). Late prehistoric Europe was not a large if vaguely defined cultural (and certainly not ethnic) unit, but it was a region within which societies had much in common, especially with their immediate neighbours.

Yet in other respects iron age cultures were very diverse and not always because of distance-decay effects. Coinage provides a convenient illustration (Allen and Nash 1980; Haselgrove 1988). Like the potter's wheel, literacy and wine drinking, coining was adopted from the Mediterranean world and in general southern societies produced coin earlier and the most northerly societies never produced their own coin. Second, some diversity reflects the emergence of regional consensuses and style, for example the preference for gold in the more northerly part of Europe and silver in the south, or the emergence of various weight standards. But, in addition, there is a level of diversity that is very local indeed, exemplified by choice of motifs, choice of whether or not to add legends and, if so, in what script and even the choice of whether to mint at all. At the most local level, coinage shows iron age societies selecting from a common range of technical and artistic possibilities to create an original and usually very localized formulation. That kind of diversity can be exemplified in medium after medium. In some cases the initial pattern of innovation moved not south to north so much as east to west. The spread of some artistic motifs and techniques is a case in point (Megaw 1970; Taylor 1991). But a better example – because so different from coinage – is monumental architecture. A tradition of building immense and elaborate enclosures out of wood and raised earth can be traced back to the origins of sedentary communities in Europe, intermittent in most areas but preserved throughout late prehistory in some regions (Audouze and Buchsenschutz 1989). The end of the European iron age coincided with a period of hillfort building that resulted in some of the largest and most elaborate manifestations of this tradition (Woolf 1993a). Sites like Manching, Mont Beuvray and Stradonice had multiple ramparts that might extend over several kilometres in total, be held together with timber frameworks fixed together with hundreds of thousands of long iron nails, be fronted with stone facing walls and/or deep ditches, and be equipped with monumental entrances that compared with later Roman arches in size and elaboration. These structures appeared first in Bohemia and southern Germany and spread gradually westward. As with coinage local traditions can be identified, for example, in gatehouse type, the nature of the timber frame or the mean area enclosed (Collis and Ralston 1976). Yet, again like coinage, there is also a final level of diversity, the local. In Burgundy and the Limousin the population concentrated a good deal of energy on their largest sites, while in the Berry a series of smaller forts were constructed (Ralston 1988). Local diversity did not only result from different decisions

about what use, if any, to make of innovations. Most La Tène finewares can be classified within a relatively narrow range of forms with little decoration, but a handful of localities, scattered across Europe, revived or preserved the painted pottery traditions of the early iron age. Similar points might be made about burial, where wagon burials in the early iron age tradition crop up now and again against a background of broadly similar cremation rites (Collis 1977) or ritual, in which the same broad sacrificial tradition is manifested only in highly localized variants (Hill 1992).

What formulation best describes the unity and diversity of iron age cultures? The two key components are the broadly common cultural vocabulary from which each society drew and the highly local scale of the groups that chose their own selection and combination from that range. Europe was a place in which innovations and information about them spread relatively easily but in which no systems of power – political, economic, ideological – existed extensive enough to impose a cultural order over how innovations (or tradition) were to be used. Europe was like a series of rockpools over which waves crashed, from different directions, but left tiny local micro-environments, the same in broad features, but each unique in detail. Explaining the cultural Balkanization of prehistoric Europe is beyond the scope of this study, but key factors must have been difficulties of communication within the continental interior and the socio-political carrying capacity of iron age polities.

That picture contrasts strongly with the kinds of diversity and unity evident in the culture of Roman Gaul by the middle of the second century AD. Once again there were broad uniformities of style. A single coinage was now in use, most of it produced either at Lyon or in Rome. The capitals of the administrative units were equipped with much the same kinds of monuments. Grid plans organized a street network that had at its centre a forum, usually flanked by a basilica and equipped with temples, and most also had an amphitheatre and a separate theatre. Beyond the city limits cemeteries were laid out along the major roads. The material culture of Roman sites, more abundant and diversified than on iron age sites, is broadly similar throughout Gaul and beyond it. Again, there are regional styles. The south-west and the Mosel valley had strong local traditions in funerary relief sculptures, Mediterranean Gaul now produced olive oil and wine surpluses and wool production seems to have become more important in the north-east. Not all regional variants are explicable in terms of ecological variation. Cults also reflect these patterns, that of the Matres being popular in the Rhineland and eastern Gaul, while large rural sanctuaries were characteristic of Picardy and Poitou. Some of these patterns certainly reflect pre-Roman regional traditions, others were new. In general very localized variants seem less common, but a few examples are known – the distinctive culture of the Vosges hill villages, for example, or the highly localized cults of the Pyrenees valleys or tribal deities like Mercurius Dumias of the Arverni. So far, the patterning resembles that of iron age Gaul, but there are significant differences.

Two differences in particular seem significant. First, it is difficult to see examples of local groups selecting from the new culture vocabulary to create distinctive local combinations and cultural forms. Second, much of the patterning of culture now seems to reflect the structure of the empire as a whole. Cultural diversity in Gaul, in other words, had come more and more to reflect an imperial geography of power.

Demonstrating the increased cultural conformity of local groups is difficult, since it involves proving a negative. One suggestive example, however, is the extreme reliance of the earliest Gallo-Roman monuments on North Italian models (Ward-Perkins 1970).

Another approach is to compare patterns of consumption before and after the conquest. A number of iron age groups imported Mediterranean products but the range selected was very narrow and the uses to which they put these goods – even wine – was very variable from one locality to another (Fitzpatrick 1989; Woolf 1993b). After the conquest the range of imports increased enormously and the uses became more standardized. Information (about proper styles of use) now accompanied goods, in other words. One might go further and say that local variation, where it occurred, was restricted to areas of culture where it was licit in Roman terms, for example the worship of local gods.

That observation introduces the second theme, the imperial patterning of cultural diversity in Gaul. This is evident at different scales. Roman inscriptions provide a convenient example. Epigraphy was used for a variety of purposes in the Roman world, funerary, votive and honorific inscriptions being the main categories. Gaul may be conveniently divided into three zones in terms of epigraphic styles: the south, in particular the Rhône valley but also other centres such as Nîmes and Narbonne; the Rhineland; and the rest. Most inscriptions occur in the first two zones, but their epigraphies are very different: funerary inscriptions are common everywhere, but while the epigraphy of the south contains numerous honorific inscriptions characteristic of civic life, and is concentrated around the main urban centres, that of the Rhineland is widely dispersed and consists mostly of votives and some military tombstones. The distinctions reflect not so much the provincial divisions of Gaul, to which they roughly correspond, as varying levels of urbanization and the existence of quite distinct frontier cultures in the north-east (Whittaker 1994). The distinction between the more urbanized south and the interior might equally be traced in terms of the number of monuments, size of cities, or the proliferation of classical statuary. Naturally some centres within the interior resemble southern cities more than others, but in general these are cities known to have been in some sense or other politically privileged or important, such as Autun, Lyon and Saintes. More localized kinds of patterning tend to be taken for granted. Whether or not iron age *oppida* are considered as urban or proto-urban, there is no question of any separate urban culture existing in terms of consumption or architecture. Roman Gaul, on the other hand, was characterized by an increased division between town and county and among towns between those that were the capitals of tribal communities and those that were not. Rural settlements too became more differentiated with the development of *villae* in areas of dispersed settlement and larger central houses in areas where the village remained the norm.

If we are to contrast iron age cultural patterning in Gaul with the Roman one that succeeded it, what appears is not the replacement of diversity with uniformity so much as the replacement of a diversity generated by local choice with diversity ordered by imperial power. It remains to ask how Roman imperialism ordered Gallo-Roman culture in such a way.

Imperialism and complexity

It is evident that, as a result of the extension of Roman power over Gaul, local societies there were drawn into a much more complex imperial world. Romans were more differentiated from one another in terms of wealth, occupation, experience and status than

were Gauls who mostly lived in locally circumscribed societies ruled by warrior and religious élites and were mostly full-time agriculturalists. Yet the effects of Roman expansion were not limited to recruiting new members to a more complex society. Roman expansion also resulted in a complexification of Roman society itself.

The process can be traced through the evolution of the nature of Rome's empire as it expanded over Gaul (and simultaneously on all fronts). Roman Republican activity in southern Gaul can be traced back to the third and second centuries BC but for much of that period it was restricted to minor military actions and diplomacy designed to support campaigns in Spain and in the Ligurian Alps. Only at the end of the second century were more major campaigns undertaken, first in the Rhône valley and then elsewhere as part of attempts to protect Italy from large-scale migrations. By the beginning of the first century BC a colony had been founded at Narbonne; a road, the *Via Domitia*, was laid out across the coastal plain; garrisons had been established in key positions; and from then, or a little later, aristocratic generals began to be sent out on a regular basis as governors. The infrastructure of a province had been established controlling the entire Mediterranean coastal plain and the lower Rhône valley, with its hinterlands. Sporadic warfare is recorded in and around this province but the remainder of Gaul was not conquered until Caesar's campaigns in the AD 50s. Even then, it was a generation before Gaul as a whole was pacified and the first emperor established the imperial administrative framework of provinces, subdivided into tribal states each ruled from a city, assessed for taxation through censuses, and grouped together for cult purposes. A number of colonies were founded in this period, mostly in the south, and the whole of Gaul was largely demilitarized by the end of the millennium. The system, as it then stood, endured for 300 years with minor adjustments, of which the most important was the separation of the military zones along the Rhine into two German provinces (Drinkwater 1983).

The progressive conquest and incorporation of Gaul could be paralleled by countless examples from elsewhere in the empire, and so exemplifies the development of Rome from a conquest state, to head of a loosely controlled Mediterranean hegemony and finally to a fully instutionalized empire. Archaeologically, the contrasts are striking. No trace remains of Roman imperialism in Gaul before the creation of the Republican province. Trade is, of course, attested but was never limited to areas under Roman control and was neither ubiquitous nor uniform within them, nor closely linked to conquest or warfare (Woolf 1993b). Even after the province was established, the only evidence of Roman rule are milestones from the *Via Domittia* and the land divisions surrounding the colony of Narbonne, until the middle of the last century. At that point, some indigenous settlements – Ambrusson and Glanum for example – show signs of Roman architectural influence. Not until the 20s BC or even later, do cities, monuments, Roman style ceramics and so forth appear and then the transformation was rapid. A slight time lag can be observed between change in the south and similar developments in the north, but even in areas which imported little Roman ceramic and were unable to produce it themselves, local potters imitated classical forms and styles as well as they were able, showing the spread of a taste for Roman goods before the capacity to satisfy it. That same trend and chronology can also be exemplified in architecture and cult. By the middle of the first century, cities were under construction throughout Gaul and by AD 100 the period of rapid change was everywhere complete.

It is easy to see how such a pattern might be conceived in terms of the diffusion of

'Roman style' over Gaul in the wake of conquest, but several considerations raise problems for that formulation. To begin with, analogous processes took place at much the same time throughout the provinces *irrespective of the date of their conquest* (Millett 1990b; Woolf 1994, 1995). Mediterranean Spain and much of the Greek world had both, like southern Gaul, been under effective Roman control for generations before any cultural changes took place, yet change, when it came, took place in much the same way everywhere. Second, the 'Roman style' that spread was itself in continual transformation. The red-gloss ceramics that are the hallmark of early imperial sites were only developed in Italy in the last years of the Republic and the monumental cities of the south drew on Italian styles of urbanism developed around the same time and which only became widespread in Italy in the last half of the last century BC (von Hesberg 1991). Seen in proper imperial perspective, Gaul was not recruited to a new cultural order, so much as convulsed by a cultural revolution that also affected Italy and all the provinces in this period (Hopkins 1978: 1–98; Wallace-Hadrill 1989).

The modalities of this change were naturally complex. At one level a shift may be seen in the way Romans profited from military success, from the extraction of booty and glory, to the control of territory for colonization and security, to the imposition of a fiscal structure and the more precise means of control that were necessitated. It is also possible to trace a changing ethic of imperialism in the ways wars were justified – from individually just to collectively divinely ordained – and in a growing imperial and civilizing vocation. That latter ethic, combined with the need imposed by the new administrative order to recruit local élites to administer the empire, provides one of the preconditions for cultural change. Others were the profits to be made by Romans who assisted locals to civilize themselves, and the willingness of many western élites to join in a new order which elevated them further above their local subordinates than ever before. Essentially, Roman power acted to differentiate the Gauls in ways which benefited the new Gallo-Roman aristocracies and their rulers alike.

If we return to the contrast with iron age cultures, several general observations may be made. To begin with, the range of styles from which choices might be made was widened by confrontation with Roman culture, itself not only different but also more differentiated. Those Gauls with a privileged place in the new order – whether through wealth, political favour or simply by virtue of their place in more complex societies than those of the late La Tène – had greater choice. Rome interdicted few cultural options, human sacrifice and inter-tribal warfare being the most important. But if their choice was wider it was now constrained by the cultural logic of the new empire, that new definition of civilization and the Good Life that had been formulated in the last years of the Republic. It was possible to choose unwisely (painted pedestal jars or monuments of raised earth) but the rewards for choosing well (a classical education, new styles of eating and cleanliness, the construction of Roman style buildings) were significant. Romans patronized the civilized and discriminated in favour of those Gauls whose reliability was evident from their adherence to Roman values (Woolf 1995). The new social distance from less privileged Gauls created by these choices was no different from that between Roman élites and their own subordinates, and was acceptable, since the position of the new aristocracies was now guaranteed from above rather than simply from below. Such calculations were broadly similar for élites throughout the empire.

Conclusions

What are the implications of these considerations for current views of Romanization?

First, there is the persistance of cultural diversity in the course of the extension of Roman power over Gaul. That diversity is not surprising in view of more recent colonial experiences. The creation of an empire always transforms the metropole as well as the periphery. But it is worth emphasizing since 'Romanization' is often presented in terms of homogenization and cultural convergence. Yet Roman power in fact created new kinds of difference, between social classes, between regions and between individuals. Second, Gauls were not 'assimilated' to a pre-existing social order, but participated in the creation of a new one. One of the main areas on which revisionists disagreed with their predecessors was over the question of whether Romans Romanized the provinces or whether locals Romanized themselves by willingly and prudently adopting the culture of their conquerors. The preceding discussion indicates that this dichotomy is particularly unhelpful, since the Roman culture of Gaul did not exist before Roman conquest either to be imposed or adopted.

Drawing these themes together, it becomes possible to suggest a rather more realistic view of the origins of Roman imperial society. Rather than the expansion of one national or ethnic culture at the expense of others, we are dealing with the emergence of a new, highly differentiated social formation incorporating a new cultural logic and a new configuration of power. This complex grew up from within, first, Roman and, then, Italian society, and expanded by drawing in more and more groups, individuals and resources. The process might be compared to the growth of an organism that metabolizes other matter and is itself transformed by what it feeds on. Eventually all participants acquired new places in the imperial system of differences because that system itself had been transformed.

Finally, this perspective makes it possible to make better use of that cultural myth which was so influential on early students of Romanization, that Rome civilized the west. Both the new rulers and their subjects came to regard themselves as in some sense descendants of a people – the Romans – who had conquered others and brought them to accept their ways. The literature and art of the period allows us to document in detail the means and stages by which that people – that imagined community – was given an origin, a history, a future and a moral and cultural definition. But we understand that identity better if we distance ourselves from it, and recognize it as the product of a particular historical moment and circumstance. It is then possible to see how it functioned not just as a means of explaining and legitimating Roman imperialism in the eyes of the Romans, but also and subsequently for the Gauls, as a consolation for conquest (Woolf 1996). If their ancestors had been defeated it was because they had been barbarians yet that had been the cost of their recruitment to the civilizing mission and was a guarantee of their future success within it. Understanding how that myth was formed and re-used should allow Romanists to escape from the shadow of both imperial and post-imperial understandings of Romanization, and to develop truly decolonized views of imperial Roman culture.

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