

Globalization and Roman imperialism: Assessing the success of post-colonial Roman archaeology

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1. Introduction

My main aim is to argue that, instead of retreating into economic reductionism in our studies of the Roman empire, we should aim to address the genealogies of knowledge through which our ideas of Empire have been generated. In my paper, 'Empire' is used to refer to the current state of global culture (Hardt and Negri 2000) and 'empire' to the Roman territorial domination of the Mediterranean and northern Europe.

I wish to argue that we should join with scholars who undertake research in cultural and globalization studies in order to engage with the intellectual context of our interpretations of classical empires. We cannot put ourselves back in the minds of first-century Romans. Our works on the Roman empire form part of a series of attempts to explore and articulate a developing idea of Empire-rule, efforts that should aim to be cross-disciplinary and cross-temporal.

2. Genealogies of Empire

The main thread of my argument is that modernist thought in political spheres often continues to drive dichotomous interpretations of key concepts in the context of international relations. These binaries include barbarism: civility; core: periphery; assimilation: marginalization; modernization: resistance.

In this context, classical knowledge has been reinvented over the past 100 years to form a vital element of a developing discourse of modernity through which imperial relations in the modern world have been directed and transformed. To put this argument another way, classical Greece & Rome have been recruited as vital elements in a transformative cultural knowledge which has assisted in the creation of international geopolitics (Willis 2007).

Evidently, this territory has been explored in some detail through studies of the uses made of classical Greek & Roman models in Europe & the USA from the Renaissance to the 21st century. There is a healthy debate in 'post-colonial' classics today and also relevant work that is being undertaken in Roman archaeology.

But what is more relevant to me today is recent theoretical works in cultural studies which seeks to break down former binary categories by addressing the genealogy of our contemporary 'Empire'.

Hardt & Negri (2000) have explored the contemporary world to address how people can be marginalized into Empire while being assimilated and can resist while apparently becoming incorporated. Status and identity are malleable and hybrid and part of a highly transformative system of expanding Empire in which the vast majority co-operate while also being marginalized. It is argued that this is how our current global system expands and perpetuates itself. To illustrate this point, Hardt & Negri explore the writings of Virgil and Polybius, addressing the ancient genealogy of contemporary knowledge.

3. empire 2000 years ago

Emma Dench (2005) has suggested that studies of the classical past often explain historical phenomena in terms that satisfy modern tastes and interests—she refers to works on class, race, the military and technological ‘developments’, to which I would add imperialism and empire.

Much work over the past 20 years has focused on how we model current concerns into our accounts of the classical past. This is the nature of the critique of Romanization during the 1990s. Accounts of social change in the Roman empire took on a significance, in the world of the 19th and 20th centuries, in comprehension of the contemporary world and drew on current ideas to address the ancient materials studied by archaeologists and classicists. This is evidently at least in part a self-fulfilling prophesy.

Turning to Empire/empire, and, drawing upon Gopal Balakrishnan’s (2003) critical review of Hardt and Negri, I have argued in *Globalizing Roman Culture* (Hingley 2005) that some recent accounts of the Roman empire develop an empire-wide *gestalt* of flows and hierarchies—a less dichotomous and more intricate pattern of inequality (see Hingley 2009 for a development of this argument). I was thinking in making these comments, in particular, of the inspired works by Greg Woolf and other accounts that *Becoming Roman* (Woolf 1998) has inspired.

Ideas of Roman and native, elite and non-elite, incorporation and resistance, are seen to break down, to a degree at least, in a Roman empire that recreated itself through local engagement. People become incorporated into empire, in Gaul and elsewhere, according to their natural abilities and local resources, building on, and transforming, relations established with Rome at the time of their initial contacts, assimilation or conquest.

The Roman empire in many recent writings is recreated as a highly variable series of local groups, roughly held together by directional forces of integration that assimilated many into an atomized and multiform society that lasted for several centuries. An emphasis has developed on case studies that deal with diversity, complexity and plurality.

Accounts of the Roman empire, which have become influential since 1990, often appear to me to view cultural heterogeneity and indigenous agency as naturally empowering. These new accounts stress the active participation of provincial peoples in the creation of empire. In these terms, we might consider such writings effectively ‘post-colonial’, since change is driven by a wide range of disparate societies located across the Mediterranean and into northern Europe, not just by the landed elite of Rome itself.

These intellectual methods have been extremely useful in contradicting the surviving modernist emphasis in other works that address imperial imposition and Romanization—the idea that Rome created directional and predictable cultural change through acts of force and imposition.

4. Problems with the inheritance

Hardt and Negri appear to me, however, to argue that heterogeneity has come to serve (to an extent) as a binding force of imperial stability in our own world—a tool for the attempted creation of perpetual imperial order.

Now this is a highly contentious idea and a large number of scholars have attacked the argument. If hybrid identities in cultural studies have been built as a counter to the binary tendencies of modernity's conceptual arsenal, then eroding colonial certainties remains a crucial issue today.

Recent political history emphasizes the continued significance of the intellectual toolbox of colonialism—including concepts of barbarity, just wars, economic development as progress, etc. It is important that classical knowledge can still be used to counter these dangerous conceptions, rather than, as has sometimes been the case, to support them.

But, I want in particular to emphasize that we must also accept a need to apply a critical lens to our accounts of plurality and heterogeneity in the classical world. In these terms, 'post-colonial Roman archaeologies' cannot be exempt from the critical focus provided by colonial discourse theory (Hingley 2009).

How do the more hybrid identities evident in many recent accounts of the classical world—the developing works on diversity, complexity and plurality—relate to the politics of the present? It is easy to attack Mommsen and Haverfield, what about contemporary writings?

The point that I am making here should not be taken as a simple issue. I am not arguing that, through critique, we need to abandon accounts of diversity and plurality in the world of Rome or in today's Empire. Indeed, a critical re-assessment of the idea of multiform and transformational identities is *not* an argument for a return to the binary assumptions of modernist thought, including the ideas peddled through Romanization theory.

Rather it is a call for Roman scholars to situate their writings within the context of contemporary Empire. These are fields of study in which the complexity of identities are often addressed in political terms.

If we restrict our reading and researching to classical texts and material cultures we limit the scope and ambition of our studies. We need to read the works of those who seek to conceptualize contemporary Empire. This is partly in order to ensure that they are not misusing classical materials and partly because the classical origins of ideas of Empire makes these materials vital for our studies, so that we can situate our own materials and writings. Evidently, the materials that are derived from archaeological research—the pots, biological remains, glass vessels and traces of buildings and inscriptions—together with the ideas expressed in the writings of classical authors also form important elements in situating this developing knowledge of the genealogies of both empire and Empire.

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Richard Hingley (Richard.hingley@durham.ac.uk), May 2010