

Romanization: The Process of Becoming Roman

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Collaboration or resistance?

How did the Romans maintain control of such a huge empire for so long? Partly, of course, it was a matter of using military power to threaten those who resisted. But partly, too, it was a matter of positive incentives to collaborate.

In their conquests, the Romans rarely faced united opposition. Usually they made alliances with native rulers who were willing either to fight alongside them or at least provide logistical support.

Once Roman military superiority was clear, other native rulers frequently gave up the unequal struggle and made terms. Die-hards who fought on to the bitter end were often a minority.

The difference between collaboration and resistance can be seen in comparing two cases: Pergamum in Western Turkey, which was bequeathed to the Romans by its last independent ruler in 133 BC; and Dacia, the ancient Romania, whose king resisted fiercely in three hard-fought wars between 85 and 106 AD.

The result was that whereas the long-established Hellenistic culture of Pergamum survived and flourished under the Romans, Dacia appears to have been laid waste, ethnically cleansed, and re-settled by foreign colonists.

Civilization or enslavement?

Another aspect of Roman policy was explained—rather cynically—by the historian Tacitus in a biography of his father-in-law, Gnaeus Julius Agricola, the governor of Britain from 78—84 AD:

‘He [Agricola] wanted to accustom them [the Britons] to peace and leisure by providing delightful distractions. He gave personal encouragement and assistance to the building of temples, piazzas and town-houses, he gave the sons of the aristocracy a liberal education, they became eager to speak Latin effectively and the toga was everywhere to be seen.

‘And so they were gradually led into the demoralizing vices of porticoes, baths and grand dinner parties. The naïve Britons described these things as ‘civilization’, when in fact they were simply part of their enslavement.’

Tacitus was a senator as well as an historian—one of the small class of super-rich politicians and administrators who effectively ran the Roman empire.

His testimony reveals that when native aristocrats adopted a Roman lifestyle and acquired a taste for Mediterranean luxury and refinement, the rulers of the empire were delighted.

Instead of jealously guarding their privileges, they were eager to share them. They understood that if the empire was to be stable and to endure, it required wide foundations.

Rome's rulers were happy to welcome native aristocrats as fellow citizens. This was possible because citizenship in the ancient world was not defined by nationality.

Anyone could, in theory, be granted citizenship of the city-state of Rome, even if they had never been there and had no intention of going.

Place of residence, language, religion, parentage—none of these was decisive. If you had standing in your own community and supported the new order, you were likely to attract attention as someone to be cultivated.

Becoming a citizen

For over a century, Palestine was ruled by Herod the Great and his successors. This dynasty of pro-Roman 'client-kings' were puppet rulers who referred all important decisions, especially regarding foreign policy, to Rome.

The Herodian kings were granted Roman citizenship in return for their loyalty. They in turn attempted to Romanize their territories by building classical-style temples, sponsoring new games festivals and decorating their palaces with frescoes and mosaics.

But it was not only kings who acquired Roman citizenship. The empire was controlled through a network of several thousand provincial towns. Each town dominated the countryside around it and functioned as a center of local government.

The country gentry were organized into a class of town councillors or 'decurions.' Most continued to draw most of their income from estates, but they took up urban residence, joined the political fray, contributed to the cost of public buildings, and became patrons of the arts.

St. Paul probably belonged to this group (he is described to us as a 'tent-maker,' but this may well mean a merchant who owned workshops, perhaps even a contractor supplying the army).

We know that he was born a Roman citizen. It was this that saved him from trial in a hostile local court, since Roman citizens were entitled to demand the emperor's justice—which is why, after his arrest in 58 AD, he was dispatched to Rome.

His case shows that in the early first century AD a well-to-do Jew from Tarsus in Southern Turkey could be a Roman.

Paul's case illustrates one of the advantages of Roman citizenship—legal protection. But there were many others. Roman society was meshed together by networks of patronage. Citizenship gave one access to the most important of these networks and the opportunities for economic, social and political advancement they offered.

Consequently, most men of rank within the empire were eager to become Roman citizens—and the Romanization we see represented by archaeological discoveries is evidence of both their striving and their success.

A 'multicultural' army

Sometimes, of course, it was outsiders who introduced the trappings of Roman life to the provinces. This was especially true in frontier areas occupied by the army.

In northern Britain, for example, there were few towns or villas. But there were many forts, especially along the line of Hadrian's Wall, and it is here that we see rich residences, luxury bathhouses, and communities of artisans and traders dealing in Romanized commodities for the military market.

Even here, though, because army recruitment was increasingly local, it was often a case of Britons becoming Romans.

Foreign soldiers settled down and had families with local women. Grown-up sons followed their fathers into the army. The local regiment became more 'British.' The new recruits became more 'Roman.'

We see evidence in the extraordinary diversity of cults represented by religious inscriptions on the frontier.

Alongside traditional Roman gods like Jupiter, Mars, and the Spirit of the Emperor, there are local Celtic gods like Belatucadrus, Cocidius, and Coventina, and foreign gods from other provinces like the Germanic Thincsus, the Egyptian Isis, and the Persian Mithras.

Beyond the frontier zone, on the other hand, in the heartlands of the empire where civilian politicians rather than army officers were in charge, native aristocrats had driven the Romanization process from the beginning.

Greeks and 'barbarians'

In the east, change was limited. Here, long before, urban civilization had taken root and for some centuries this had been of a distinctively Greek (or 'Hellenistic' character).

Though the Romans had once caricatured the Greeks as effete and decadent, this was changing by the late first century AD. The Romans increasingly admired and imitated Greek cultural achievement.

The change is symbolized in imperial portraits. Unlike their clean-shaven predecessors, second century emperors, starting with Hadrian (117—138 AD) sported the Greek-style beards of 'philosopher-kings.'

In fact, so far from the east being Romanized, it was more a case of the west being Hellenized. A uniform elite culture that was both Roman and Greek was thereby forged. This

became the developed language of rank, status and 'good taste' in the Roman empire's golden age.

In the western provinces, on the other hand, there was often a sharp contrast between traditional native culture and Roman innovations.

In Spain, France, Belgium and Britain, for example—all areas with a strongly Celtic culture—the archaeology of the Roman period looks very different from that of the preceding Iron Age:

Rectangular houses instead of round ones; towns with regular street-grids instead of hilltop enclosures curling round the contours; mosaics, frescoes and naturalistic sculptures instead of wooden idols, golden torcs and enamelled bronzework.

Limits of Romanization

We tend to take the material remains of the Roman past for granted—the towns, the monumental architecture, the villas, the luxury trades, the decorative and fine arts.

But in many parts of the empire, all this was very new, and the speed with which it was adopted is therefore a mark of the attraction to native elites of the new cultural package.

It was a fashion revolution at the top of society. Chariots, hillforts and bragging about the military exploits of one's blue-painted forebears were hopelessly passé. To keep up with one's peers, to elevate oneself above the lower orders, to get on under the new regime, one became Roman.

But there were limits to Romanization. Religious practice is a key measure. Roman gods are represented mainly at forts, towns and villas. Even at such high-status sites, however, there is evidence that many native gods were also worshipped.

While in the countryside, where the mass of common people lived and worked, we see strong survival of native cults. There is sometimes a Roman veneer—a stone temple, perhaps, or a dedicatory inscription—but the god worshipped as almost always a local one.

Roman archaeology is revealing ever more of the cultural diversity of the empire, and increasingly we sense that different ways of life, world-views and value systems could co-exist with the dominant, more uniform, Graeco-Roman culture of the elite.

Occasionally, indeed, one or another of these alternative cultures was forged into an ideology of resistance. There were winners and losers in the Roman Empire.

As well as the rich and their clients, as well as officials, soldiers, landowners and merchants, there were the exploited and oppressed, those who were taxed to make empire and civilization possible.

In three great revolts between 66 and 136 AD, for instance, the Jewish peasantry, inspired by radical interpretations of traditional Judaism, organized itself into a revolutionary force to challenge Roman power.

Each time they were defeated. But their efforts reveal to us the limits of Romanization. The culture of the conqueror often had little appeal to the oppressed.