

The Archaeology of Late Hellenistic Rome, Italy, and the Wider Mediterranean: Value Systems, Social Hegemony, and Material Culture

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In the period from about 200 B.C. to the early Empire, all regions of the Mediterranean underwent a profound process of political, economic, and cultural transformation. Archaeological studies since the 1970s have coined two strongly interrelated concepts in order to describe these changes, namely the paradigms of Hellenisation and Romanisation¹. The diffusion of various forms and styles of material culture throughout the Mediterranean basin and centred on the Italian peninsula was understood as a linear process of acculturation, driven mainly by Rome and its senatorial elite. In this process, Romanisation describes the gradual assimilation of previously heterogeneous cultural areas and communities, such as the Samnites or the Etruscans, which reached its endpoint with the concept of *tota Italia* as promulgated under Augustus. In the view of many scholars the trajectory of Romanisation followed the political and cultural agenda of essentially hellenised Roman and Central Italic elites who already in the 2nd cent. B.C. had succumbed to the cultural superiority of the Greek East, as implied in the famous quote by Horace: *Graecia capta ferum / victorem cepit et artes / intulit agresti Latio*².

However, over the last two decades both paradigms have been thoroughly challenged by a variety of new approaches, drawing largely from postcolonial theory³. Since the late 1990s, a series of important studies on the interplay between material culture and identities in the Western provinces, not least in provincial settings such as imperial Gaul and Britain, led to a fundamental reassessment of the cultural and social processes commonly associated with Romanisation⁴. These research agendas were then

also explored in the context of Hellenistic and republican Italy and the Mediterranean more widely. Stressing the importance of multiple identities, local innovation, and resistance – all well-tested in anthropology, globalisation theory, and linguistics – the big narrative of acculturation was gradually deconstructed, introducing a much more dynamic but also heterogeneous image of the late Hellenistic Mediterranean⁵. In the foreground stood much-debated concepts such as creolisation, bricolage, or hybridisation, in which players from different cultures are actively negotiating and constructing their identities⁶.

A related approach has been proposed by Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, who conceptualises the cultural formation of late Hellenistic Rome and Italy as an example of bilingualism, stressing the importance of ‘deliberate code-switching’ for the transformation of value systems and material culture⁷. In his own words, ‘the cultures do not fuse [...], but enter into a vigorous and continuous process of dialogue with one another.’⁸ However, the socio-political framework for this kind of dialogue remains rather vague, causing a certain uneasiness with the undoubtedly attractive image of a multicultural society of code-switchers. As opposed to the older views of acculturation as an essentially linear process, driven by power relations that were dictated by the Roman elite, the idea of late Hellenistic multiculturalism and code-switching emphasises individual agency and complex, fuzzy trajectories in what could be termed a postmodernist understanding of cultural history.

It therefore seems that, with each subsequent academic generation working on the archaeology of late Hellenistic Rome, Italy, and the wider Mediterranean, the pendulum

1 E.g. Gallini 1973; Gros 1976; Zanker 1976; Gabba 1977; Zanker 1979; Smith 1981; Zanker 1983; Zanker 1987, 15–40; Torelli 1988; Hölscher 1990; Wallace-Hadrill 1990; Hölscher 1994; Sauron 1994; Smith 1994; Coarelli 1996; Wallace-Hadrill 1998; Torelli 1999. Important critiques of the concept of Hellenisation in Momigliano 1975; Veyne 1979; Flaig 1999. For in-depth accounts of relevant scholarship, with extensive references, see Aberson et al. 2016; Harari 2016; Maschek 2017.

2 Hor. Epist. 2, 1, 156–157.

3 E.g. Terrenato 1998a; Wallace-Hadrill 1998; Wallace-Hadrill 2000; Keay – Terrenato 2001; Bradley et al. 2007; Roth 2007; Wallace-Hadrill 2008; Prag – Quinn 2013; Stek 2013; Aberson et al. 2014; Stek 2014; Aberson et al. 2016; Demma 2016; Carlà-Uhink 2017; Roth 2018; Aberson et al. 2020; Belvedere – Bergemann 2021.

4 E.g. Roymans 1996; Mattingly 1997; Häussler 1998; Woolf 1998; Woolf 2001; Slofstra 2002; Woolf 2002; Woolf 2003–2004; Roymans 2004; Revell 2009; Mattingly 2011; Gardner 2013; Gardner 2015; Hingley 2015; Revell 2016.

5 E.g. Lomas 1993; Terrenato 1998a; Terrenato 1998b; Bradley 2000; Keay – Terrenato 2001; Bradley et al. 2007; Isayev 2007; Roth 2007; Stek 2009; Boissinot 2015; Terrenato 2019.

6 For various takes on the theoretical framework, see Woolf 1996; Häussler 1998; Terrenato 1998a; Woolf 1998; Webster 2001; Mattingly 2002; Woolf 2002; Woolf 2003–2004; Mattingly 2004; Hingley 2005; Revell 2009; Gardner 2013; Versluys 2014; Gardner 2015; Hingley 2015; Revell 2016; Häussler – Webster 2020.

7 Wallace-Hadrill 2008, 38–103. For the concept of code-switching and its possible applicability to material culture, see Mullen 2013b; Mullen 2013a; Revell 2013.

8 Wallace-Hadrill 2008, 23.

swings back and forth, without allowing for a stable middle ground. However, in our view such a middle ground is exactly what is needed, albeit not in the sense of an uneasy compromise or a simple blend of otherwise conflicting positions. Instead, we need new explanatory models and perspectives which acknowledge both sides of the coin: creativity and multicultural experimentation on the one hand, hegemony and uneven distribution of power on the other hand. Already Mikhail Bakhtin, one of the pioneers of the concept of hybridisation in literary studies, noticed the importance of this dichotomy. According to Bakhtin, ‘what we are calling a hybrid construction is an utterance that belongs, by its grammatical (syntactic) and compositional markers, to a single speaker, but that actually contains mixed within it two utterances, two speech manners, two styles, two “languages”, two semantic and axiological belief systems.’⁹

Consequently, Bakhtin distinguished between ‘unconscious’ hybridity and ‘intentional’ hybridity which both lead to the blending of linguistic or cultural traits. As a matter of fact, either form of hybridity will be reflected in the outcome, but the speaker or creator is in full control of neither. Instead, the two forms are bound up with social values, norms, and hierarchies which regulate the creative process to such a degree that a system of cultural patterns emerges. These patterns, across human history, are the subject of archaeological study¹⁰. The key challenge is to provide perspectives and models which duly acknowledge this structured nature of cultural production, whilst not overlooking the agency of individuals who engaged in acts of communication and exchange¹¹. This is particularly important, as, in the words of Andy Gardner, ‘holistic approaches to comparing a broad spectrum of different practices, and thus unpicking the interplay of different institutions, are still rare’ in Roman archaeology¹².

Thus, rather than focusing solely on the popular concept of (individual and group) identity, it seems promising to consider the material culture of late Hellenistic Italy and the Mediterranean basin as evidence for geographically and chronologically distinctive systems of shared values and practices¹³. Such value systems are established and

controlled through social institutions. As incisively highlighted by Wallace-Hadrill, they can manifest themselves in moral discourses or legislation, such as the series of Roman sumptuary laws against excessive consumption or architectural luxury¹⁴. As socially constructed systems, they are highly susceptible to shocks resulting from societal change. When assessing modes of consumption, artworks, or domestic and religious architecture from the late Hellenistic Mediterranean it is therefore crucial to pay close attention to the precise historical context. Who was in control of the value system at which time, and what were people’s motivations and challenges for actively shaping their existence? Are we merely dealing with unstoppable waves of fashion, in the sense of Bakhtin’s ‘unconscious’ hybridity, or can we at least tentatively identify some strategic aims behind specific cultural choices? Are certain patterns in the material record the result of collective consent, or coercion, or both?

In this context, it is useful to turn to Antonio Gramsci’s concept of social (or cultural) hegemony. In Gramsci’s definition, social hegemony is crucially underpinned by ‘the “spontaneous” consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is “historically” caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production.’¹⁵ Coercion by the state, again according to Gramsci, assures the discipline of those groups who object to this ‘spontaneous’ consent. In the case of late Hellenistic Rome and Italy, as indeed for most pre-industrial societies, the level of direct state control was in all likelihood much more limited. In the absence of a strong and omniscient late republican state, social institutions such as the *gens* or networks of acquaintances assumed a much greater importance, in particular as the patron-client system played a fundamental role for social cohesion¹⁶.

This also means that the cultural multivocality in late Hellenistic Rome and Italy, which over the last decades has been in the focus of archaeological studies, should probably be seen as the natural expression of a social sys-

9 Bakhtin 1981, 304-305.

10 Clarke 1978, 480-483.

11 Cf. Ando 2000, 21-23.

12 Gardner 2013, 10.

13 For different perspectives on the notion of identity in Graeco-Roman archaeology, see Pitts 2007; Hölscher 2008; Mattingly 2011; Roselaar 2012; Revell 2013; Revell 2016; Johnston 2017; Versluys 2017.

14 Wallace-Hadrill 2008, 329-255. Cf. Nichols 2010; Torelli – Marcattili 2010; Zanda 2011.

15 Hoare – Nowell-Smith 1971, 12; in the original: ‘del consenso “spontaneo” dato dalle grandi masse della popolazione all’indirizzo impresso alla vita sociale dal gruppo fondamentale dominante, consenso che nasce “storicamente” dal prestigio (e quindi dalla fiducia) derivante al gruppo dominante dalla sua posizione e dalla sua funzione nel mondo della produzione.’ (Gerratana 1975, 1519). Cf. Smith 2021, 223-225.

16 On the importance of clans in republican Italy, see Smith 2006; Terrenato 2019. The slogan of consensus became more virulent, albeit fiercely contested, in the context of the Civil Wars of the 1st cent. B.C. and in the first decades of the Principate: Torelli 1988; Ando 2000, 58-63; Mouritsen 2017, 67-99.

tem in which a considerable number of leading families played a more important role than the legalistic value-system of a centralised state administration. It thus seems fair to assume that Gramsci's concept of social hegemony, driven by elite groups but accepted by a substantial part of the population, is perfectly applicable to the case of Rome and Italy in the 2nd and 1st cent. B.C. That being said, it is important to bear in mind how Polybius, writing in the mid-2nd cent. B.C., described the limited power of the Roman senatorial elite: "The consul, when he leaves with his army invested with the powers I mentioned, appears indeed to have absolute authority in all matters necessary for carrying out his purpose; but in fact he requires the support of the people and the senate, and is not able to bring his operations to a conclusion without them."¹⁷

This is significant for the understanding of social hegemony in a late republican context: Roman commanders could not achieve much without their soldiers; commissioners of temples and public monuments could not see their works completed without their builders; magistrates were elected based on consensus, and social mobility was possible in a number of ways. As the members of Rome's senatorial elite relied on the *populus* in more than one sense, the exertion of social hegemony was far from straightforward or unidirectional. Moreover, it was the people of Rome and Italy themselves who moved and travelled the most in the Mediterranean, encountering new and different architectural, religious, and dietary customs, whilst equally spreading those of their own areas of origin and thus contributing to their blending, which played out differently in each regional setting. In this way, members of non-elite groups were important drivers of hybridisation and cultural mediation, for the most part without subscribing to the philhellenic culture of the elites, but following other interests through channels and ways that were essentially their own.

In terms of the archaeological record, this impacted a wide and diverse range of contexts: the circulation of consumer goods and the creation of artworks and buildings; the constitution of urban communities through architecture and spatial configuration; or the design, layout, and

usage of domestic, religious, and funerary spaces. Substantial numbers of non-elites were involved in such activities, which should also caution us against unduly privileging 'public' art or monuments in archaeological accounts of the late Hellenistic Mediterranean. A substantial number of recent studies has made it abundantly clear that social life and material culture in this period cannot be fully conceptualised by looking only at *one* side of traditional dichotomies, such as elites vs masses, or public vs private.

Against this conceptual backdrop, the contributions collated in the present volume shed new light on processes of cultural formation in the archaeology of late Hellenistic Rome, Italy, and the wider Mediterranean. By bringing together a range of pertinent evidence, the chapters assess the central role of the material world in the negotiation of different values and ideas. Based on specific case studies and themes, the authors explore new perspectives and key questions: To what extent did objects, buildings or texts carry and communicate values across time and space? How did they both reflect societal change and actively transform the social fabric? To what extent were political and cultural values embodied and communicated by objects, and to what extent did such objects themselves perpetuate and reinforce these ideas? How were different values transferred across the late Hellenistic Mediterranean, and what impact did Roman hegemony have on existing institutions and social systems? Did 'foreign' objects and habits imported into late Republican Rome and Italy transform the normative framework of Italic and Roman traditions and values? How were social and cultural systems reinforced or shattered through the acquisition and display of new prestige goods, languages, and styles?

By addressing these questions from multiple angles, the book seeks to provide a balanced and multi-faceted account of cultural construction and transformation in the late Hellenistic Mediterranean. Drawing from diverse fields of material evidence, such as art, architecture, inscriptions, and objects of consumption, the individual chapters contrast the positive qualities and effects of cultural exchange with disruptive factors such as violence, dominance, and subjugation.

17 Polyb. 6, 15, 1. Cf. Millar 1998; Wiseman 2017.