A HETEROGENEOUS EMPIRE

R. LAURENCE, J. BERRY (edd.): *Cultural Identity in the Roman Empire*. Pp. xi + 205, maps, pls. London and New York: Routledge, 1998. Cased, £40. ISBN: 0-415-13594-X.

Sociologically informed approaches to Roman history and archaeology are increasingly common, and have encouraged scholars to see the Roman Empire as much a state of mind as a political and institutional framework. The Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conferences have played an important rôle in this trend, and this book draws papers from sessions on acculturation and cultural identity held in the 1995 meeting. Most of these studies are concerned with the impact the creation of the Roman Empire had on the culture and identity of its inhabitants. In the useful introduction, Laurence observes that they show cultural identity to be a complex and malleable construct in the Roman Empire. This undermines dualistic ideas of Romans vs. natives and resistance or cooperation, which were inherent in a nineteenth-century world view, and which have dominated studies of the Roman Empire until comparatively recently.

Identity and cultural change certainly deserve to occupy a central place in our understanding of the nature of the Roman Empire, and the appreciation of their importance has led both archaeologists and historians to focus on these issues. The papers in this collection range from traditional archaeological investigations like Isserlin's examination of the use of marble in the buildings of Roman Britain to Braund's illuminating study of the literary discourses concerning the entourage of Roman governors. No paper is entirely successful in bringing together archaeological and literary material; the closest to this, Van Dommelen's ambitious interpretation of field survey evidence from western Sardinia, ultimately forces the ambiguous evidence of pottery types into a largely literary framework of cooperation and resistance with the imperial powers of Rome and Carthage (pp. 25–48). This is disappointing, given the success of some exemplary recent studies, such as E. Dench, *From Barbarians to New Men* (Oxford, 1995), or G. D. Woolf, *Becoming Roman* (Cambridge, 1998), in interrogating the two types of material side by side. I also doubt the usefulness of 'cultural identity' as a guiding concept, as it suggests a straightforward and intimate connection between culture and identity. This is effectively problematized by Grahame, who explores the tremendous difficulty in separating out social, political, and ethnic influences on cultural features, although his analysis of debates on style offers no clear solution to these problems (pp. 156–78).

The diversity of evidence used, combined with the short length and geographical specificity of most papers (the focus is largely on the western Empire, and particularly on Roman Britain), makes for a heterogeneous collection. Despite the woolly, all-encompassing character of 'cultural identity', some themes do emerge which are illustrated by more than one paper. Unlike modern nationalist identities, the nature of 'Romanness' was elusive and continually evolving. Using Wallace-Hadrill's work on Pompeii, Grahame develops an interesting model of a continually adapting upper class always striving to stay one step ahead of its socially inferior emulators. Any attempt to measure the Romanization of the provinces against Italy must incorporate this idea of a shifting target (Grahame, p. 176), although this is not in itself a crucial objection to the existence of such change (A. Woolf, p. 111). Local identities emerge as similarly malleable (see Laurence on Patavium, pp. 104–5), demonstrating that identity was dynamic and fluid at every level in the imperial system. The Empire also

© Oxford University Press, 2001

https://doi.org/10.1093/cr/51.1.145 Published online by Cambridge University Press

offered far more opportunities for the conquered to join the ruling élite than most modern colonial regimes. Woolf's imaginative application to Roman Britain of a social model first developed for early medieval Ireland by Alf Smyth plausibly explains how some privileged groups would have been able to exploit these opportunities at the expense of those they dominated. This differential access to power must have affected Roman perceptions of indigenous groups and would have led to a different level of Romanization in the material record. The extent of such opportunities at the lower end of the social scale were more restricted. The 'negotiation' of identity was presumably irrelevant to most slaves, forcibly detached from their kin and home, and renamed by their master. However, Hope's study of monuments to gladiators in Nîmes shows that even marginal social figures might appropriate the rhetoric of more 'respectable' social groups (pp. 179–95).

There is no clear consensus among the authors as to why cultural change came about in provincial contexts. The adoption of Roman urbanistic ideals in Italian towns in the first centuries B.C. and A.D. was on the whole locally driven according to Lomas, and she suggests that this was the product of a more widely shared notion of *Romanitas* (pp. 64–78). In contrast, Grahame concludes that the development of Roman house forms within Pompeii was far more likely to be generated by social distinctions than any desire to be ethnically Roman (p. 175). Yet Woolf rejects the 'trite appeal to "élite emulation" ' (p. 120) for Romano-British society. These differences can partly be attributed to the varying cultural histories of the areas under consideration: local identities and traditions within Italy were probably both closer to Roman practices and more likely to be accorded prestige than their equivalents in the provinces. It is also apparent, however, that the effect of social structures on the cultural change undergone by conquered communities needs more investigation. This links closely with another important theme in many of these papers, the influence of pre-existing forms on senses of identity in the imperial period, whether tribal social structures (Woolf), neolithic monuments within the British landscape (Petts), or the historical traditions of Cyrene's Greek colonization and Libyan alliances (Marshall).

This book is full of stimulating observations on a wide range of topics but lacks the coherence needed to establish striking principles. It succeeds in proving that Roman culture was neither monolithic nor easily defined, and that the creation of cultural identities in the Empire was more complex than simple Roman–native dichotomies might suggest. Indeed the very diversity of papers helps show how the unprecedented scale of the Roman Empire offered a multiplicity of contexts in which individuals could variously define their identity. Such conclusions will surely be welcomed by most Romanists, although I suspect few will find them as 'provocative' and 'controversial' as the dust jacket claims. More detailed historiographical analysis of exactly which earlier views are being overturned would probably have sharpened the cutting edge of the arguments. Such shortcomings are perhaps inherent in collections of brief conference papers, but this is nevertheless a well produced and lively example of its genre.

University of Wales, Cardiff GUY BRADLEY

https://doi.org/10.1093/cr/51.1.145 Published online by Cambridge University Press