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Debate Article

Power, asymmetries and how to view the Roman world

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We thank Andrew Gardner, Alicia Jiménez, Lori Khatchadourian and Miguel John Versluys for their comments, and appreciate the opportunity to respond. We are pleased to see that all four commentators stress the importance of archaeological approaches that pay due attention to oppression and violence in the Roman world. We therefore believe that our core argument and its broader significance have been clearly recognised, as summarised in Gardner's (2020: 1640–1642) remark that "the complexity of the Roman world […] is indecipherable without connecting the violence with the grandeur, the frontiers with the capital(s), and the enslaved with the free". At the same time, the respondents also raise a number of important issues and sketch out potential alternative (or complementary) views.

The 'predatory regime'

Both Versluys and Gardner point out that the model of the 'predatory regime' is pertinent for the main phase of 'Roman expansion', that is, during the Late Republican and Early Imperial periods. Versluys (2020: 1646–1648), however, is misled in his claim that "this represents a much more limited subject and perspective—particularly as they retain the traditional Western European focus of post-colonial Romanisation studies, instead of examining the wider Empire". The applicability of the predatory regime model is not limited to the conditions of expansion and conquest. In fact, what is often innocently labelled as 'imperial administration'—particularly on the militarised peripheries of the Empire—would have been predicated upon the constant potential to exert violence, both externally and internally. As highlighted in Hopkins's (1980) fundamental study, the collection of tribute and the tax-exporting role of the provinces continued throughout the first and second centuries AD. Predation and exploitation at the provincial level could therefore be deeply engrained, even during supposedly more stable periods of imperial history (cf. Scheidel 2020). Moreover, to respond briefly to Versluys, what would an Empire-wide survey show us in the phase of conquest and expansion? If anything, more of the same, just underpinned by extensive literary evidence (e.g. Polybius, Diodorus, Livy, Appian, Cassius Dio) for relentless and often brutal Roman expansion in areas of North Africa (e.g. the destruction of Carthage), Greece (e.g. the Battle of Corinth and its aftermath), Dacia and the Near East (e.g. the Jewish-Roman wars). The scenes depicted on Roman imperial monuments, such as the Arch of Titus and Trajan's Column, graphically illustrate this violent reality.

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Versluys's (2020: 1646–1648) statement that "a long-term perspective may even show that it is thanks to war that we now live longer and more comfortable lives than ever before" might, perhaps, be true from a statistical point of view. Both lived experience and historical analysis, however, should be about much more than cold numbers. Violence, oppression and inequality cannot be justified or minimised by reference to a supposed long-term 'greater good'. As a case in point, the suffering and scars produced by the early modern transatlantic slave trade and European colonialism are still with us. Only by uncovering the 'darker sides' of modernity (Mignolo 1995, 2011) and the networks of asymmetrical power that enabled them can we move towards the construction of a better collective future.

Towards a more inclusive approach

Our focus on the study of Roman expansionism and conquest does not represent a simple shift of interpretative emphasis from 'good Romans' to 'bad Romans', as Versluys (2020) suggests. Roman expansionism was not necessarily more violent than other ancient state powers (Eckstein 2006), and pre-Roman Iron Age societies themselves were also far from peaceful (cf. Fernández-Götz & Arnold 2019; Redfern 2020). What we advocate is a more inclusive approach, in which the dimensions of 'hard power' are juxtaposed alongside the 'brighter' aspects of the Roman world. Particularly in the case of the Roman Empire, there has traditionally been excessive emphasis on the supposedly 'positive' outcomes of conquest through the resulting process of provincialisation. Our emphasis on the 'darker' sides of the Empire is therefore not an attempt to substitute one partial view for another, but rather a call for producing a more balanced and comprehensive understanding.

As Khatchadourian (2020: 1649–1652) rightly notes, "the failure to confront dispossession, subjection, inequality and the predations of Roman conquest" is certainly not a novel phenomenon. In our view, however, most 'new materialist' approaches have not (yet) sufficiently addressed the issue. Furthermore, we also have a more pragmatic reason for putting additional emphasis on the archaeology of conquest and its aftermath. Thanks to the enormous increase in the evidence base, the application of new methodologies and, especially, the improved chronological resolution of our dating of material remains, archaeologists are now able to approach the study of Roman military expansion afresh, and to reassess and complement text-based narratives.

While we are concerned that the exploitative and violent aspects of the Roman Empire are conspicuously marginalised in many 'new materialist' approaches, we also recognise that this does not necessarily need to be the case. As stated in the conclusion of our original article (Fernández-Götz *et al.* 2020), the predatory model is compatible with 'new materialist' perspectives, and we hope that this debate will encourage scholars from diverse theoretical standpoints to address the most uncomfortable aspects of both the distant and recent past. Grasping the richness and complexity of human experience requires varied theoretical approaches and viewpoints, and most contemporary archaeologists draw upon a variety of perspectives to achieve this.

Conclusion: asymmetries of power and the archaeologist's aim(s)

Ultimately, we return to the problem of power as a heuristic concept. Although Versluys (2020) confronts the very notion of power head-on, when it comes to understanding how

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the Roman Empire shaped the lives of its inhabitants, this position misses the point. Asymmetries of power, the exertion of physical violence and economic domination were of crucial importance for anyone living within the Empire's social, political and economic system throughout its existence. When it comes to assessing the role of objects and material culture, Jiménez's (2020: 1643–1645) insightful reflection allows for placing things, and other non-human entities, in context:

> *Objects did not move in a transnational free market, but rather in a new Roman order that privileged the movement of certain people, objects and ideas to specific places. Ignoring the power imbalance is not conducive to better insights to build artefact-driven historical narratives, and in some cases may even be misleading.*

This also touches upon the point, raised by Khatchadourian (2020), of diseases being essentially non-human historical agents with their own causality and historical trajectories. While this is undeniably true at the most basic level, archaeologists and historians are less interested in the history of bacteria and viruses such as *Yersinia pestis* or COVID-19 for their own sake, but because they affect human societies. In addition, the Johns Hopkins University map (https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html) clearly shows that the global spread of the virus is heavily conditioned by human-made connectivity. Political mismanagement and pre-existing social inequalities have further exacerbated the crisis in many states. Thus, humans are key when it comes to the assessment of causation, even in the case of a non-human 'historical agent'. There is an undeniable hierarchy of causality in history, which flat ontologies risk blurring.

In that sense, we wholeheartedly agree with Gardner's (2020: 1640–1642) affirmation that "the centrality of *human* agency to our accounts of the Roman (or indeed any) past, is critical for defending a relevant voice for archaeology". This goes to the core of how and why archaeology and archaeologists should study the past. While recognising that things and humans are entangled is certainly fine on the most general ontological level (Hodder 2018), it is critically important that we maintain a focus on people and on the dialectics of conflict and contradiction inherent to being (González-Ruibal 2019: 56–57; Van Dyke in press). As stated by Bauer (2018: 169), "it is humans who negotiate the meaningful contexts through which things and materials affect human affairs".

To conclude, we return to an example from the Roman world. Classical sources offer us glimpses of the significance of objects in socialisation processes, but they need to be understood within the context of societal asymmetries. As a child, the later emperor Septimius Severus played 'judge', complete with the traditional symbols of Roman power: the *fasces* and curule chair (*Historia Augusta Sev.* 1.1–5; Magie 1921). In doing so, he was clearly acting within a specific 'objectscape': the paraphernalia of authority had a powerful allure as bearers of significance. But, and this is the key point, the young Septimius Severus played judge due to his social background, and it was his familial network that enabled his ascent through the Roman imperial power structure. He was not doing it because a bundle of rods would have prompted him, by virtue of the power of its object agency, to become a magistrate and ultimately emperor of the Roman world.

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