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Debate Article

Re-balancing the Romans

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Manuel Fernández-Götz, Dominik Maschek and Nico Roymans (2020) offer a timely and compelling rejoinder to advocates of broadly 'post-humanist' approaches in Roman archaeology. I agree with much of what they argue. Their points are far removed from the traditional scepticism in Roman studies towards theory, which certainly used to be a widespread attitude (e.g. Frere 1988: 36), and instead they spring from a careful engagement with the implications of a diverse set of theoretical perspectives that have become widespread in archaeology over the last 20 years. As the authors acknowledge, many stimulating discussions have arisen from different strands of this theoretical debate, but significant problems have emerged in the capacity of 'new materialist' approaches to help us understand ancient societies, such as the Roman Empire, and, crucially, also to handle the resonances of the past in the political present. While there is considerable variation under the 'post-humanist' umbrella—and I am acutely aware that advocates of these approaches share many of the political concerns of Fernández-Götz *et al.* (2020) and indeed myself—I leave it to other commentators to address the characterisation of this theoretical alignment. Instead, here I focus on the specific questions raised about how we view the Roman Empire, and the significance of this vision in the early twenty-first century.

The authors make an important point that we require theoretical approaches that allow us to analyse the politics of empire in Rome, which was an undeniably violent, hierarchical and exploitative state. While this may seem obvious, it is fair to say that, for much of the twentieth century, European and North American scholarship on the Roman Empire was rooted in a strong identification with 'the Romans' as a benevolent, civilising imperial people (e.g. Hingley 2000). This did not mean that the violence of Roman imperialism was suppressed, as such, but rather, that it was cast in a glorifying light, or set against the supposed 'achievements' that Roman expansion brought to conquered territories—in a similar vein, and not uncoincidentally, to apologist accounts of the British Empire. When, in parts of the discipline, the theoretical currents finally began to shift during the 1980s and 1990s, the influence of post-colonial scholarship led to a rapid decentring of Rome. Simultaneously, however, aspects of the violence of the Roman world were avoided, either due to their role in past narratives, or because of a more widespread 'pacification of the past' that has also been documented in other subdisciplines, as characteristic of some broader theoretical approaches of that era (James 2007). The outcome has been a continued mismatch between scholarship on the Roman military and its activities, and that on other segments of Roman society or regions of the empire away from the frontiers. This must change (cf. Collins 2012: 1–5; Gardner 2017a). The complexity of the Roman world, and its transformation over time, is indecipherable without connecting the violence with the grandeur, the frontiers with the

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capital(s), and the enslaved with the free. I concur wholeheartedly with Fernández-Götz *et al.* (2020) that 'new materialist' perspectives—much like approaches associated with the understanding of modern globalisation—are ill-suited to progressing with this task.

This does not mean, though, that we should not think about the distinctive materiality of the Roman world, or the ways it ushered in new kinds of connectivity between geographically distant societies. There are certainly important insights to be gained from doing so. Such considerations, however, must always be linked to the role of power differentials in structuring Roman society, and, in this regard, insights from post-colonial theory remain useful. Furthermore, the emerging field of border studies offers potential as a corrective for some of the assumptions implicit in globalisation theory (cf. Gardner 2013, 2017a; Hingley 2018). The notion of Rome as a 'predatory regime' is also helpful in this way, although if we are to account for the long-term trajectory of Roman society, we must attend not only to the expansionist phase of conquest, but also to the social processes underway in the more superficially 'static' periods. Here, I would observe in relation to the authors' first case-study that scholars of Roman frontiers are now not simply addressing the details of infrastructure—which had been the traditional obsession—but also the social world of frontier communities, themselves microcosms of the entangling of violence, exploitation, opportunity and oppression that characterise the Roman world as a whole (e.g. James 1999; Gardner 2007; Collins 2012; Allison 2013; Haynes 2013). Such accounts connect the everyday experience of human actors with the structures that shape—and are shaped by—their actions over time, and show that while Roman soldiers were agents of violent expansion and control, they were not machines. They were colonial subjects themselves, incorporated into the imperial project, much the same as the soldiers of later empires (Haynes 2013; cf. Hechter 1975).

This type of nuance, and the centrality of *human* agency to our accounts of the Roman (or indeed any) past, is critical for defending a relevant voice for archaeology, as a humanist discipline in the present. At the time of writing, the demand for greater justice and racial equality in many societies is much in the news, encompassing debates about which individuals and causes are commemorated in public spaces. In the UK, reappraisal of how aspects of British imperial history are taught has also been part of this discussion, although this had already been increasing in intensity since the 2016 EU referendum, which revealed significant complexities in British identities originating in Britain's imperial past (Gardner 2017b; cf. Dorling & Tomlinson 2019).

Clearly, debating the relationships between people, objects and empires is a timely subject to which the issues raised by Fernández-Götz *et al.* (2020) are highly relevant. Just as the British Empire requires critical and balanced appraisal to remove some of the 'rose-tinted' lenses through which it has been viewed, so too does the Roman Empire. And while the objects erected to commemorate those who have benefitted from empire clearly have symbolic power, in both of these contexts, it is only human actors who have the power to dismantle them, and, while being inevitably shaped by the structures of history behind them, to work collectively for a fairer and more equal future. A generation ago, archaeologists worked hard to humanise the past; the lessons of that era should not be forgotten if we are to contribute actively to progressive change in the present.

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