ARRC – Acculturation, Romanisation, Roman Culture: Processes of Integration Across the Roman Empire

Edited by László Borhy, Kata Dévai, Linda Dobosi, and Csilla Sáró

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Edited by
László Borhy – Kata Dévai – Linda Dobosi – Csilla Sáró

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Romanisation

An evolving historical concept

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Abstract: This article examines Romanisation as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that characterised Roman imperial expansion, tracing its theoretical evolution from 19th-century perspectives to contemporary postcolonial interpretations. The contribution maps the historiographical debate from Theodor Mommsen's initially imperialistic conception to recent theories of cultural hybridisation, *métissage*, and creolisation, which recognise the active agency of local communities in processes of cultural transformation. Through regional analyses of western and Danubian provinces, the article demonstrates that Romanisation was not a monolithic process, but rather a multiplicity of localised adaptations that maintained systemic coherence derived from central political and military power. The study proposes an interpretative synthesis that reconciles Roman domination—characterised by ideological hegemony and urbanisation as the foundation of the imperial system—with recognition of reciprocity and local agency in acculturation phenomena. The research underscores how the strength of the Roman model lay precisely in its capacity to forge unity through diversity, transforming a multiplicity of peoples into a *communis patria* that valorised local particularisms within a shared imperial framework.

Keywords: Romanisation, *métissage*, hybridisation, creolisation, Balkan provinces

Introduction

This international congress has the merit of reviving a topic that was thoroughly studied between the 1990s and the early years of this century: studies on Romanisation. In the contributions of these proceedings, we understand through archaeology and material evidence the numerous facets of this complex process. This process is difficult to capture within a single definition. For this reason, I believe it is appropriate to provide a brief compendium of the origins of studies and the notion of Romanisation. I will attempt to explain the main theories that have dominated the study of Roman provinces for several years. The debate on Romanisation has passed through different interpretative phases. It has evolved from an initially imperialist vision to post-colonial and globalizing perspectives.[1] As Versluys emphasised, Romanisation revolves around understanding 'objects in movement.' This requires particular attention both to globalization theory and to material culture studies.[2]

The origins of the concept and the 19th-century context

From the end of the 19th century, the adoption of the Latin language, Roman citizenship, and the *toga* was described as the effect of a definitive process of 'Romanisation.' This process assumed

1 Gardner 2013, 1–25.

2 Versluys 2014, 1–20.

✉ Corresponding author

linguistic and material connotations. Theodor Mommsen demonstrated the potential offered by literary tradition, epigraphy, and numismatics. He created a new interpretative approach to history aimed at understanding the dynamics of Roman expansion.[3]

Mommsen is generally credited as the one who coined the term "Romanisation" in 1885. However, he never provided a precise definition of the concept.[4] Nevertheless, the German school developed a rich specialised terminology to describe these processes. The term *Romanisierung* became central in German-language studies. It was accompanied by complementary concepts such as *Latinisierung* (Latinisation) to specifically describe the adoption of the Latin language in the provinces. This terminological distinction reflected a more sophisticated understanding of the process. It recognised that the assumption of Roman culture *(Romanisierung)* and the adoption of Latin *(Latinisierung)* could proceed at different rates and with variable intensity in different regions of the Empire.[5] The German academic tradition also distinguished between different forms of cultural integration: *Akkulturation* (acculturation), *Assimilation* (assimilation), and *Integration* (integration). Each had specific nuances that we now recognise as fundamental for understanding the complexity of cultural transformation processes in the Roman provinces.[6]

Mommsen's vision was deeply influenced by the imperial context of his time. It considered Roman culture as superior to native cultures. As Freeman observed, Mommsen and his contemporaries operated in a context where European imperialism sought historical justifications for its own colonial expansion.[7] Although we cannot consider Mommsen as the exclusive father of Romanisation studies, we owe to the German scholar—and subsequently to authors like Pelham and Haverfield—the merit of having laid the foundations of modern studies on the provinces and Roman imperialism.[8] Francis Haverfield, Mommsen's student and often considered the "father of Romano-British studies," further developed the concept. He argued that Romanisation began mainly in post-conquest societies through the creation of veteran colonies that would have a romanising effect on native communities.[9]

Simone Weil's criticism and early contestations

On the immediate eve of World War II, the theme of Romanisation asserted itself with exceptional vigour. However, it came with polemical tones regarding the reasons for Rome's dominion compared to contemporary European regimes. The philosopher Simone Weil was the major architect of this critical tendency. She affirmed that "Rome was the first not only to threaten, but to annihilate the freedoms of the world." Weil painted a highly critical picture of the situation of provincials dominated by Rome. She based this on some literary sources such as the speech of the British chief Calcagus that Tacitus reports in the *Agricola*.[10]

In the famous speech, Calcagus denounces the Romans with the words: *"Auferre trucidare rapere falsis nominibus imperium, atque ubi solitudinem faciunt, pacem appellant"*—"To steal, massacre, rape with false names they call empire, and where they make a desert, they call it peace."[11] Commenting on Tacitus' text, Weil arrived at a provocative consideration: "Roads and bridges, and even

3 Mommsen 2010.
4 Hingley 2005, 15.
5 Pilhofer 2006.
6 Schörner 2005.
7 Freeman 1997, 27–50.
8 Pelham 1911; Haverfield 1905.
9 Haverfield 1905, 10–15.
10 Tac. *Agr.*, 21, 30–32.
11 Tac. *Agr.*, 30.5.

material well-being, assuming it existed during certain periods, are not civilisation. But if Germany, thanks to Hitler and his successors, had enslaved European nations and destroyed most of the treasures of the past"—as Rome would have done according to Weil—"history would certainly say that it civilised Europe." In fact, Weil did not take into consideration the process of uniformity of the Imperium Romanum. This was based on an unparalleled aggregating capacity that the imperialist powers of the 19th and 20th centuries totally lacked. Her criticism, although radical, anticipated many of the themes that would be developed by post-colonial criticism decades later.

The modern debate: post-colonial perspectives and new theories

In the last thirty years, studies on Romanisation have been enriched with contributions that characterise the long debate between admirers and detractors of the Roman imperial model. As Gardner observed, Roman archaeology has sought for over twenty years ways to go beyond the traditional concept of Romanisation. It has proposed a range of alternative approaches.[12] The paradigm shift in studies has led to the introduction of new theoretical models derived from contemporary social sciences. The concept of *métissage*, initially developed in French studies on colonialism, has been applied to the Roman world to describe processes of cultural mixing. These go beyond the simple imposition of Roman elements on local substrates. As Le Roux observes, *métissage* "helps to go beyond the linguistic sphere to which the word 'creolisation' belongs."[13]

The theory of cultural hybridisation has offered a further conceptual tool to understand how different cultures merge creating new syncretic forms. However, as Stockhammer emphasises, the term "hybrid" is necessarily rooted "in its even more problematic counterpart: purity."[14] If we accept the existence of something hybrid, we must accept the encounter between two pure entities. We thus incur the paradox of freeing ourselves from essentialist visions of Roman culture while simultaneously introducing essentialist models of native culture.

Webster has developed the concept of creolisation, defining it as "a process of resistant adaptations." This emphasises "the possibility that this cultural development from below could take place."[15] This approach recognises that local communities were not passive recipients of Roman culture. They were active actors in the process of cultural transformation.

However, these models present intrinsic limitations. As Jiménez notes, they refer to processes of linguistic (creole) and cultural (metisse, hybrid) mixing that originate from the encounter of entities that were unknown to each other until the 16th-century conditions of slavery, plantation, and colonisation. Neglecting this fact when dealing with Mediterranean and European contexts of Roman archaeology would create more problems than it solves.[16]

The active intellectual debate between the late 1940s and early 1970s, when the decolonisation process began in France and England, profoundly influenced the perception of Romanisation. Webster and Cooper were among the first to explicitly propose post-colonial perspectives in the study of Roman imperialism.[17] Meanwhile, Hingley noted how classical historians have articulated a "deeply imperial understanding of the relationship between colonisers and colonised" in their writings and archaeological research.[18]

12 Gardner 2013, 2.
13 Le Roux 2004, 287–311.
14 Stockhammer 2012, 43–58.
15 Webster 2001, 209–225.
16 Jiménez 2007, 21–36.
17 Webster – Cooper 1996.
18 Hingley 2008, 327.

Among the most influential critics we can include authors like Broughton and Pflaum.[19] They defined the process of Romanisation as a concept that should be removed from publications as a product of colonial ideology.

Van Dommelen[20] shared the same opinion. He proposed abandoning the notion of Romanisation "because of the intrinsic nuances of assimilation and the implicit colonialist perspective." As he emphasised in his influential article "Beyond domination and resistance," it is necessary to recognise local and colonial cultural identities.

The semantic problem and new theoretical perspectives

Cecconi, entering the detail of the exegesis of the term, argued how the word 'Romanisation' hides legitimate semantic perplexities. It elaborates on a concept equally difficult to define: that of 'Roman.' The terms 'Rome' or 'Roman'—as well as the notion of *Romanitas*—present themselves as problematic concepts.[21] They lack a circumscribed and comprehensible meaning. They cannot refer to a so-called 'pure' culture but to a reality that is already, in turn, the product of stratifications of previous acculturations.

Greg Woolf, in his influential study "Becoming Roman," demonstrated how the changes inflicted by the process of Romanisation affected different regions and communities differently. This makes a unified definition of the effects of Romanisation impossible.[22] His article "Beyond Romans and Natives" explores changes both in Gallic and Roman cultures. He notes that Roman culture was not uniform throughout the empire due to the effect of native cultures.[23]

Wallace-Hadrill[24] is clear in this sense when he states that "Being Roman" in the 1st century BC and in the 1st century AD can be considered the same only superficially. His analysis of Rome's "cultural revolution" demonstrates how Rome itself underwent profound transformations through contact with other cultures, particularly Greek culture.

Regional diversity: examples from Romanisation processes

The complexity and non-univocity of the Romanisation process clearly emerges when analysing specific examples from different provinces of the Empire. Each region presents distinctive characteristics that demonstrate how Romanisation was not a monolithic phenomenon. Instead, it adapted to pre-existing local conditions.

In Gallia Narbonensis, Romanisation followed a relatively peaceful path characterised by the collaboration of local elites. Epigraphic evidence shows a scarce presence of *peregrini* in the urban environment. This suggests rapid legal integration of native communities. The case of Divodurum (Metz, France) perfectly illustrates how creolisation was applied to urban development during the transition period between 100 BC and 200 AD.[25] Pre-existing Gallic structures gradually merged with Roman architectural models.

Britain presents a more complex picture, characterised by alternating phases of resistance and adaptation. As Millett demonstrated, the process was based on bidirectional interaction between

19 Broughton 1959; Pflaum 1961.

20 Van Dommelen 2001, 253–255; Van Dommelen 2014, 41–45.

21 Cecconi 2006, 81–94.

22 Woolf 1998.

23 Woolf 1997, 339–350.

24 Wallace-Hadrill 1998, 79–91; Wallace-Hadrill 2008.

25 Metz Excavations 2018.

Roman and local elites. The natives "had adopted Roman cultural values and ornaments" and "personal advancement was obtained through service in the Roman army or in civil life."[26] Sociolinguistic evidence along Hadrian's Wall shows a complex stratification of identities. Celtic, Roman, and Germanic elements coexisted in syncretic forms.[27]

Hispania presents perhaps the most varied picture of all. The Iberian Peninsula showed significant regional differences in the Romanisation process. While southern Baetica rapidly developed strongly Romanised urban centres like Corduba (Córdoba, Spain) and *Hispalis* (Seville, Spain), the northern regions maintained indigenous social structures longer.[28] Archaeological evidence from Emerita Augusta (Mérida, Spain) demonstrates how veteran colonisation created new urban landscapes. These overlapped, without necessarily cancelling, pre-Roman structures.[29]

Dacia represents an extreme case of "conscious Romanisation." It was the result of a domination policy aimed at building a new society by uprooting the old one and transplanting veterans and elites from other already Romanised territories. Epigraphic analysis reveals about 4,354 attested individuals from 2,645 inscriptions. There is a predominance of data from Dacia Superior explained by the presence of the two major urban centres of the province: Sarmizegetusa (Sarmizegetusa, Romania) and Apulum (Alba Iulia, Romania).[30]

Particularly significant is the data on *peregrini*: they constitute only 15% of the total names attested in Dacian epigraphy. This suggests either rapid legal integration or, more probably, massive demographic replacement. Unlike other provinces, Dacia shows a scarcity of native *peregrinus* names.[31] This indicates the intensity of Trajan's colonisation process.

In the eastern provinces, Romanisation had to confront pre-existing Hellenisation and millennial cultural traditions. In Cilicia (Turkey), epigraphic evidence shows a process of Romanisation very different from the western one. Syria maintained Greek as the language of culture and local administration. Latin remained limited mainly to military and governmental environments.

Egypt presents unique characteristics that distinguish it from all other provinces. Here, Romanisation did not follow typical models of urbanisation and municipalisation. Instead, it maintained the ancient administrative structure based on *nomes*. The Greek element continued to dominate culturally. Latin remained confined to governmental and military environments. Only with Caracalla's edict of 212 AD was there greater legal integration. However, traditional cultural structures remained largely intact.

Toward an interpretative synthesis: Romanisation 2.0 and the limits of globalisation

While the terms 'Rome' or 'Roman' are difficult to define, they still refer to a State and a unitary constitutional organisation. These were the creators of imperialism and economic and cultural relations with provincial realities. In this case, Romanisation must be understood as a conscious process of conquest supported by central power. This is especially true for territories along the *limes* where the central government created veteran colonies to "assist" the Romanisation process of local ethnic groups.

26 Millett 1990, 53.
27 Mullen 2019, 102–105.
28 Edmondson 1994, 13–30.
29 Caballos Rufino 2010.
30 Varga *et al.* 2018.
31 Németi 2019, 351–394.

As Pitts observed, there is a need to move toward a 'Romanisation 2.0' with high-definition narratives that can capture the complexity of the process.[32] Versluys proposed that Romanisation should be reconceptualised through the lens of globalisation theory and material culture studies. However, it is important to note that the concept of globalisation itself seemed to describe an unstoppable process of world integration in the 1990s. Today it is deeply contested.[33] Various scholars now speak of 'deglobalisation' or 'slowbalisation' to describe the slowing or reversal of global economic integration processes.[34]

We are therefore at an interpretative crossroads that requires a synthesis between these theories. If it is clear that in a first phase of conquest, Roman domination translated into the imposition of its own 'culture' within a system governed by central power, it was equally evident in a second phase of acculturation between the 'Roman' substrate and local ethnic groups. The role that 'Romanised' provincial elites had in adopting this culture—in a regulated process of bidirectional relations—was to maintain and consolidate their position in their communities of belonging. Sherwin-White suggested that the process of Romanisation was guided by the natives themselves. This vision, although criticised for the improbability that native groups would voluntarily abandon their culture, opens important questions about local agency.[35] This perspective on Romanisation defines Roman domination as an acculturating phenomenon. It distinguishes a first phase of conquest from the subsequent political-administrative reorganisation of conquered territories.

Reciprocity and domination: the complexity of the process

We must not stop at the mere notion without specifically defining the relationships between the Roman substrate and the realities involved. Although there is no doubt that one can easily find a position of military, political, and 'cultural' superiority of Rome over provincial realities, one cannot ignore the role they played in the process of integration and *métissage*.

The process of Romanisation must be seen not only as an external imposition but also as the choice of a resilient culture. This culture seeks a balance between its own traditions and the demands that the new situation proposes. Webster's concept of 'creolisation' offers an alternative model for understanding these processes of cultural hybridisation.

Analysing this process, it is necessary to consider a certain reciprocity in acculturation phenomena. Keep in mind that these—given Rome's supremacy—were not symmetrical. We can thus speak of a process of homologation and assimilation certainly characterised by forms of consensus. However, this never lost, especially in some provinces, its characteristic of being an instrument of domination.

Rome's hierarchical superiority and its acculturating impact is evidenced on multiple levels. This includes the ability to eliminate or reduce peripheral 'resistances' through force or forced displacement of entire populations. This characterised the conquest process of Noricum and Dacia. As Oltean demonstrated, the conquest of Dacia involved massive deportations and resettlements that radically transformed the social fabric of the region.[36]

Although Arendt[37] argued that Rome's objective was never to systematically eliminate previous social and institutional structures to rebuild a new society above them, we must nevertheless note,

32 Pitts 2021, 117–135.

33 Paul 2023, 3–8.

34 Abdal – Ferreira 2021, 202–230.

35 Sherwin-White 1973, 380–395.

36 Oltean 2007, 46–72.

37 Arendt 1958.

at least for the Danubian and Balkan provinces, a 'conscious Romanisation.' This was the result of a domination policy aimed at building a new society by uprooting the old one and transplanting veterans and elites from other already Romanised territories.

Van Oyen proposed to deconstruct and reassemble the Romanisation debate through the lens of post-colonial theory. She emphasised the importance of moving from global to local and vice versa.[38] Her analysis of *terra sigillata* demonstrates how apparently standardised objects could facilitate different types of local actions and practices.[39]

While it appears incontestable that the heterogeneity of the Roman Empire, derived from the historical, geographical, and cultural legacies of multiple 'citizenships,' was never overcome by systematic and organic Roman action, the birth of a Roman 'superstructure,' a universal ideology, and a sense of belonging are precisely due to these numerous provincial particularisms. These transformed different peoples and territories into a *communis Patria.* This process culminated with the *Constitutio Antoniniana* of 212 AD.[40] Through this, Emperor Caracalla granted citizenship to almost all inhabitants of the Roman Empire who did not already possess it. As Garnsey noted, this represented the culmination of a centuries-long process of citizenship expansion.

Two examples from the Balkan-Danubian world

The first example comes from Rome through Trajan's Column, erected in 113 AD to celebrate the conquest of Dacia. In scene 38, a battle is depicted essentially reduced to a duel between two warriors. The character on the right is easily identifiable as a Dacian by his *pileus* (conical cap) and tunic. His antagonist, however, does not seem to be Roman as one might expect. He is depicted with a thick beard, bare-chested, holding a scythe, with the typical iconography of a Germanic warrior (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Scene XXXVIII of Trajan's Column.

38 Van Oyen 2015, 205–226.

39 Van Oyen 2016.

40 Condurachi 1958, 441–454; Garnsey 2004, 133–155.

Extending the analysis to the entire scene, no legionnaire is recognizable in the melee. The Roman camp was probably composed of auxiliary cohorts *(auxilia)*, warriors from ethnic groups previously allied or subjugated to Rome, as in this case the Germans. Haynes demonstrated how the Roman army served as Britain's "first information revolution," transforming economic life through the introduction of new practices and technologies.[41] Auxiliary cohorts represented about half of the Roman army and played a crucial role in spreading Roman culture.[42]

The scene clearly defines the propaganda message: the clash between civilisation and barbarism, where legionnaires never fight directly. Instead, peoples who have adapted to the Roman model clash against those who do not want to submit–Romanised barbarians fighting against other barbarians. Rome does not fight, it builds: in Trajan's Column many scenes show Roman legionnaires, easily identifiable by their *lorica segmentata* armour, engaged in construction.

The Romans are identified as 'civilisers,' bearers of a model of *civilitas* that means the attitude to live within an urban space ordered by *mores et moenia* (customs and walls). This is in opposition to the nomadic and tribal life of the barbarians of the Dacian *Regnum*.[43]

A new model overlaps the old one when Ulpia Traiana Sarmizegetusa (founded in 106 AD) semantically merges with Sarmizegetusa Regia, the ancient Dacian capital. This facilitates the gradual integration of the Dacian people through administration and urbanisation.

The second example comes from Carnuntum (Petronell, Austria), a site that already in the Tiberian age (14–37 AD) was characterized by a *castrum* and subsequently by a civilian city. Carnuntum, located on the Danube in present-day Austria, became the capital of the province of Pannonia Superior under Trajan.[44] The city had its own military amphitheatre during the Flavian age (69–96 AD). From the Hadrianic age (117–138 AD) it was also equipped with a civilian one.[45]

Epigraphic documentation allows us to identify the benefactor: Gaius Domitius Smaragdus, a rich Syrian merchant who probably did not have a prestigious place in the military amphitheatre.[46] *Smaragdus* used the money at his disposal to build a civilian amphitheatre where he could secure a better seat (Fig. 2).

Euergetism, the practice of making public donations to obtain social prestige, was a fundamental mechanism through which local elites negotiated their status in Roman society.[47] By employing the same imperialistic model and the same strategy of social control to obtain prestige within a Romanised urban society from which he had been excluded, Smaragdus Romanises himself by opposing the Roman model. This example perfectly illustrates what Woolf calls "becoming Roman"—an active process of cultural transformation guided by local aspirations.

Conclusion: rethinking Romanisation in the 21st century

The process of Romanisation, especially in the Balkan and Danubian provinces, envisaged the creation of an urban being that made the city the foundation of the imperial system. The city was the economic, religious, and cultural centre of Roman citizens' activities. Urbanisation represented not only a physical change of the landscape but a fundamental transformation of social and cultural structures.[48]

41 Haynes 2002, 111–126.
42 Goldsworthy 1996, 30–32.
43 Coulston 2003, 389–424.
44 Gassner *et al.* 2011, 15–99.
45 Humer 2014.
46 CIL III, 11095.
47 Zuiderhoek 2009, 53–112.
48 Laurence *et al.* 2011.



Fig. 2. Inscription of Caius Domitius Smaragdus from Carnuntum (Civil Amphitheater).

Beyond direct domination exercised through political and economic power, the Roman state apparatus benefited from an ideological 'hegemony.' This was an adherence of spirits to a new conception of the world that consolidated and justified it. As Ando observed, Roman imperial ideology operated through multiple channels to create consensus.[49]

To make this 'ideology of consensus' perceptible, the Roman apparatus needed mass communication tools directed at elites and provincial populations. Public monuments, inscriptions, coins, and gladiatorial spectacles all served as vehicles for the diffusion of imperial ideology.[50]

In light of recent theoretical developments, it is clear that Romanisation must be understood as a multifaceted phenomenon. It assumes different forms depending on regional contexts, pre-existing conditions, and specific temporal dynamics. The models of *métissage*, hybridisation, and creolisation, despite their conceptual limits, have contributed to a more sophisticated understanding of cultural transformation processes. These go beyond the simple dichotomy of dominators/dominated.

The specialised terminology developed by the German school *(Romanisierung*, *Latinisierung*, *Akkulturation)* offers valuable analytical tools to distinguish between different levels and intensities of cultural transformation. Regional examples demonstrate that there was no uniform 'Romanisation.' Rather, there was a multiplicity of 'Romanisations' that adapted to local specificities while maintaining systemic coherence derived from central political and military power.

The debate on Romanisation continues to evolve. While some scholars propose completely abandoning the term, others like Woolf suggest that it might still have value if adequately reconceptualised.[51] What is clear is that our understanding of this complex process will continue to be enriched by new archaeological discoveries, new theoretical approaches, and new perspectives. These recognise the complexity and diversity of the Roman imperial experience.

The challenge for future studies will be to develop 'high-definition' narratives that can simultaneously capture local specificity and systemic coherence. We must recognise that the strength of the Roman model resided precisely in its ability to create unity through diversity. It transformed a

49 Ando 2000, 73–130.

50 Noreña 2011.

51 Woolf 2014, 45–50.

multiplicity of peoples and cultures into a *communis patria* that maintained and valued local particularisms within a shared imperial framework.

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