Cultural Imperialism in the Roman Empire: a Give and Take Relationship between Imperial Rome and Provincial/External Cultures

Hailey Smith
University of Mississippi

Follow this and additional works at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/umurjournal

Cultural Imperialism in the Roman Empire: a Give and Take Relationship between Imperial Rome and Provincial/External Cultures

Hailey Smith

ABSTRACT

The Roman Empire is often credited with being highly culturally influential both in its time and in later cultural contexts. However, the cultural aspects of art, politics, militarism, etc. for which the Roman Empire is known are the result of interactions between the imperial regime and external entities. The history of the Roman Empire is well documented, but few historians have analyzed the role of conquered cultures and foreign parties on the cultural evolution of Rome. To address these overlooked dynamics between existing cultural groups and their influences on each other, I explore the concepts of ethnicity and framework provided by Issawi (1989) for cultural imprinting in Imperial Rome. After examining scholarship surrounding specific aspects of culture (economics, religion, and politics), I argue that the culture of the Roman Empire was a culmination of Roman creation and influence from provincial and external cultures. These findings highlight the contribution to popular culture from cultural groups with less recognition and fame than their counterparts, and we must apply these findings to modern times in order to emphasize the fluctuating dynamics of domination and submission in the current geopolitical sphere.

Introduction

A question that recently circulated on social media and plagued many users was, "How often do you think about the Roman Empire?" The consequent resurgence in popularity of the Roman Empire among younger generations has inspired the following analysis of the cultural interactions between the imperial regime and the external entities that it conquered or interacted with. It is a common belief in the West that the Roman Empire set the precedent for successful political entities. However, whether or not society owes the state of politics, militarism, literature, art, economics, and theology solely to Roman Latin Culture must be analyzed. Using scholarship surrounding the Roman Empire to understand various cultural dynamics, I argue that the cultural characteristics of the infamous imperial regime, the legacy of which so many celebrate, are the result of dynamic cultural imperialism between the Roman Empire and external cultures, often depicted as less dominant.

Categorizing Ethnicity in the Roman Empire

To understand the role of the Roman Empire in global cultural imperialism, I analyze the cultural differences between the Roman world and their foreign counterparts. In "The Romans and Us: Strabo's 'Geography' and the Construction of Ethnicity," Edward Van der Vliet (2003) analyzes the first century BCE book *Geography* by Strabo that details the various geographical and political features of different locales within and surrounding the Roman Empire. Van der Vliet (2003) states that Strabo's worldview allows him to construct his categories of ethnicity (the social classification of people based on shared cultural traditions or landscapes) by using geography to order the identities of various political entities (258). These categorizations of ethnicity distinguish different ethnic groups based on various facets of culture, such as "language, dress, behaviour, and symbolic expressions" (Van der Vliet 2003, 258-259) as well as "tradition and political unity" (Van der Vliet 2003, 265). By analyzing Strabo's interpretation as an insider to Roman culture, we can identify aspects of culture that differ between the Roman ethnic faction and their counterparts as well as political conditions that shed light on the cultural imperialism in practice.

Van der Vliet (2003) exposes Strabo's binary worldview that aligns individuals between only two ethnic groups: the "civilized" and the "uncivilized." From Strabo's perspective, the qualification for "uncivilized" people, or barbarians, is participation in "a wretched existence and savagery," with a nature "characterized by a lack of capacity to civilise themselves, and a lack of self-control and moderation" (Van der Vliet 2003, 263). The description of this ethnic group is antonymous with the description of the wisdom and success of the Romans who demonstrated moderation and careful planning in the construction of their cities and the welfare of their citizens (Van der Vliet 2003, 268). Moreover, Strabo praised the Romans' abilities in military duty and administration (Van der Vliet 2003, 268) that directly contradicts the "lack of proper means of existence" evidenced by uncivilized people (Van der Vliet 2003, 265). These two comparisons demonstrate the binary characteristics of the civilized people and uncivilized people as they neatly fit into two distinct ethnic groups based on their dissimilar cultures and political organizations. Van der Vliet (2003) exposes the dichotomy presented in Strabo's Geography, between the Romans, who exemplify civilization and a proper way of living, and uncivilized people, who lack a good quality of life and do not have the means to improve it.

After neatly categorizing the two types of people into separate ethnic groups, we can analyze the interactions between the "civilized" and "uncivilized" to identify the nature of their cultural influence on each other. Strabo's *Geography* demonstrates a sense of Roman superiority through his high praises of Roman political wisdom and elite comparisons to other cities (Van der Vliet 2003, 268). These sentiments of Roman superiority directly translate into the relation-

ship between the civilized Roman Empire and the uncivilized entities that Rome conquered. Van der Vliet (2003) describes how the Romans "brought civilization" to their ethnic counterparts by establishing new lines of communication and building infrastructure, such as roads, to enable additional contact between peoples (268). Although the new forms of communication and interaction could have facilitated equal opportunities for each group to culturally influence the other, the Romans subjugated any threats to the empire presented by other political organizations (Van der Vliet 2003, 268). Therefore, the new lines of communication built under Roman control would only serve Roman interests. The political hegemony of the Roman Empire eliminated the likelihood that outside entities would overcome this power imbalance and dictate cultural interactions between the two parties. Thus, this political domination indicates that the power dynamic concerning their cultural influence on each other heavily favored Roman imperialism.

Understanding the Framework for Cultural Imperialism

Aside from the subjective and anecdotal account from Strabo, we can also understand the domination of Roman culture over its subjects using a more theoretical framework. According to a 1989 article by Charles Issawi, "Empire Builders, Culture Makers, and Culture Imprinters," there are three conditions that enable the successful and long-lasting cultural imprinting of one ethnic group onto another: 1) be the dominant culture of an empire with a societal framework that allows the diffusion of culture; 2) have a constant and large volume of culture-bearers migrating to provinces; and 3) identify with a religion that easily or actively admits converts (184). Satisfying these conditions enables one group to culturally imperialize the ethnic groups they conquer, and the Roman Empire met all three of these conditions. First, the Roman Empire conquered many lands and peoples, and the Latinized dominant culture spread due to the political hegemony of the imperial regime over the local provinces (Van der Vliet 2003, 268). Second, life in the Roman Empire provided various reasons for migration, such as pursuits of economic prosperity, military mobilization, or slavery, all of which facilitated the interaction between Romans and other ethnic groups under imperial rule (Price 2012, 5). In fact, Issawi (1989) goes as far as to suggest that the migration of "culture-bearers from the core to the outlying parts… was probably in the hundreds of thousands" in the Roman area (184). Third, the state imperial cult, as well as Christianity (after Emperor Constantine's 313 AD Edict of Milan), promoted the unification of several ethnic factions within the empire under religious pretenses that, consequently, helped promote Roman cultural imperialism (Price 2012, 6). Therefore, the Roman Empire was qualified to overlay the existing cultures belonging to the various ethnic groups that were conquered by the imperial regime.

Furthermore, Issawi (1989) states that the widespread practice of Christianity helped increase the chances of successful cultural imprinting for Romans in three additional ways. The first way Christianity helped promote the cultural imperialism of the Romans was by deifying the Latin language. Issawi (1989) argues that "…in addition to being the language of administration and culture, Latin became the language of religion and salvation" (185). This allowed Roman Culture to be more widely accepted, as adopting the language was a prerequisite for practicing Christianity. Additionally, Christianity facilitating the dissemination of Roman culture to the masses as religion was more accessible than the elitist aspects of Roman high culture, such as "law, literature, philosophy, the natural and human sciences, music, and the visual arts" (Issawi 1989, 180). Lastly, religion not only promoted cultural imperialism but it also increased the longevity of cultural imprinting by making society more resilient to cultural shocks, like those of the barbarian invasions in the Western Roman Empire (Issawi 1989, 184). The use of religion as a tool to disseminate the Latinized culture of imperial Rome helped facilitate cultural imperialization onto provincial subjects. The theoretical framework that determines the neces-

sary conditions for cultural imprinting, as explained by Issawi (1989), indicates that the Romans met all of the requirements to successfully imperialize the cultures of their subjects who originally belonged to separate ethnic groups.

Economic Influence on the Roman Empire

Alternatively, it cannot be said that the Roman Empire was never the *recipient* of cultural influence from other cultures or political entities. Trade in the eastern hemisphere influenced the cultural imprinting dynamic between the Roman Empire and successful, external trade networks. In Matthew Fitzpatrick's 2011 article, "Provincializing Rome: The Indian Ocean Trade Network and Roman Imperialism," he describes the interaction between Rome and various trading entities that all contributed to the global economy. Roman elites were often on the receiving end of goods that pertained to high culture, as Issawi (1989) calls it, for they imported many "ostentatious commodities" (Fitzpatrick 2011, 32). This constant and disproportional influx of foreign, luxury goods challenged the traditional culture of stoicism for the elite within the empire (Fitzpatrick 2011, 32). The popularization of luxurious eastern items symbolizes a shift in the cultural values of Roman citizens from practical to materialistic, which Pliny the Elder, author of *Natural History*, claimed was deleterious to Rome both morally and financially. Fitzpatrick (2011) explains that Pliny's high estimate of the trade deficit, 100 million sesterces per year, from the Roman economy to eastern trade holds some credibility, but the estimate accounted for such a small percentage of the total GDP of Rome, 10 billion sesterces, that it was sustainable and largely unworrying (31). Therefore, the impact of foreign trade on Roman culture was noticeable despite evidence that it had a negligible impact on the economy.

However, this lack of concern for the deficit did not translate to a lack of interest in eastern prospects. Fitzpatrick (2011) recounts various military campaigns in Asia, Arabia, and Africa where Rome attempted to conquer various prosperous trading kingdoms. Trajan, the Roman governor of Syria, led the successful campaign to take control of the Nabataean trade kingdom, which gave Rome reign over two cities that were necessary for an eventual campaign to control Parthia, Rome's "military and commercial rival" (Fitzpatrick 2011, 39). On the other hand, Rome, under the command of Aelius Gallus, failed to secure Arabia and, under the command of Cornelius Gallus, failed to conquer Adulis of the African Axumite trade network (Fitzpatrick 2011, 51-52). Perhaps shockingly, the incredibly wealthy India was never a target of Roman conquest despite previously successful leaders, like Trajan, being available for military action (Fitzpatrick 2011, 40). Leading to both successes and failures, the influence of economic prosperity from other groups guided the politics and, consequently, military action of the imperial regime that sought control over these prosperous entities.

While the empire could not dominate all external trade networks that piqued its interest, aristocratic individuals from Rome financially benefited from the allure of those prosperous regions, which created the opportunity for ethnic outsiders to culturally influence Romans. Fitzpatrick (2011) details the endeavors of money-lending imperial aristocrats who increased their wealth by collecting interest from Romans wishing to travel to various trading centers (40). The fact that funding expeditions to external locales was so profitable indicates that these voyages were widespread and potentially reached far and wide if they needed to source such large funds; so Roman citizens and subjects were most likely bearing witness to a variety of different cultures and interacting with diverse ethnic groups while on their journeys. Thus, the Romans imported many commodities from other locales that influenced the high culture of the elites and aristocrats; and the economic prospects of eastern networks, confirmed by Roman political and military interest, attracted Roman travelers, which led to additional interaction with foreign cultures. Thus, despite the propensity to imprint on different ethnic factions, the Romans were also the receivers of some aspects of cultural influence by others, such as the people in the

East participating in the Indian, African, and Arabian trade networks.

Religion Evidences Cultural Coexistence

Some facets of culture were extremely resilient to imperialization, and neither the Romans nor their cultural counterparts could influence the other. Religion presents one such example, and "Religious Mobility in the Roman Empire" by Simon Price (2012) explains the unique dynamic between religious cults and different crowds. After successful colonization, imperial expansion enabled a network of movement and migration for Roman citizens and subjects alike. Price (2012) states that the reasons for migration included commercial pursuits, military mobilization, and enslavement (5), and the resulting movement put various ethnic groups in closer proximity to each other, which increased the amount of cultural interaction between them. For example, Roman citizens who represented the Roman cults established "coloniae" in imperial provinces and maintained their traditional practices and rites after moving, to emphasize their Roman heritage and values of nationalism (Price 2012, 3-4). Similarly, Jewish communities founded in different regions of the Roman Empire due to economic pursuits or enslavement presented an "adherence to eastern origins" surrounding their religious practices, evidenced through "both language and iconography" (Price 2012, 4). The framework for mobility provided by the imperial networks increased the range of people and their native cultures throughout the empire.

The resulting migration of various types of culture-bearers facilitated the diffusion of culture into different regions of the empire and gave rise to the opportunity for cultural imprinting, but neither Roman nor outsider dominated in these cultural interactions. The Romans took this opportunity by imposing their Latinized religion onto the imperial subjects from different cultures. Price (2012) describes how Roman rule subjugated the pre-Roman cults by transforming the nomenclature of the local, ancestral cults to include the names of gods from the Roman pantheon (6). However, the practitioners of these ancestral or elective cults in turn used this reference to Roman tradition to legitimize their native cults. The Cult of Jupiter Dolichenus expanded upon the new nomenclature and became the Cult of "Jupiter Optimus Maximus Dolichenus" and "implicitly asserted the over-arching position of the deities of Doliche, perhaps in competition with the Roman state cult" (Price 2012, 16). Though this suggests that Roman subjects protected their ancestral religions from imperial suppression, some subjects had to adapt their practices to conform to Roman cultural standards. Elective cults were said to lack tradition and heritage and, therefore, virtue (Price 2012, 17), and Christianity was a victim of this Roman discrimination against elective cults. In response, some followers portrayed Christianity as an ethnic religion to gain social acceptance in their new environment while maintaining their personal religious values (Price 2012, 17). Although pressure from Roman culture influenced action from ethnic and elective cults, the followers maintained their autonomy and preserved their cultures against Roman imperialism. Alternatively, followers of the Roman state cult and other local cults displayed this same resilience when practitioners of different religions worked to diffuse their beliefs across the empire as well. Therefore, the Roman Empire did not culturally imprint upon their subjects in terms of religion. The Roman subjects did not fully adopt the religious culture of Rome nor did they abandon their ancestral or elective cults, and the local cults did not manage to extensively expand their influence to the Romans until the rise of Christianity much later in the chronology of the empire.

Roman Influence on Politics and Social Mobility

On the other hand, one aspect of culture that the Romans did completely dominate was politics. Alexander Skinner (2013) analyzes the opportunities for Roman citizens and subjects

to transcend the social hierarchy in his work, "Political Mobility in the Later Roman Empire." The first argument that Skinner (2013) makes is that the terminology for economic and career mobility needs to be qualified as political as opposed to social, for the mobility did not occur between social classes but inside them (19- 20). The patterns of this mobility thus indicate that there was not a workplace-facilitated interaction between members of each social class as peers in society, for one's career depended on their social identity. Thomas Erikson (2010) gives significance to this social dynamic in his book, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives*. To expand on the ethnic identity of the Romans as presented by Van der Vliet (2003), Erikson (2010) explains that among members of the same ethnic group, there are criteria that define further categorizations of ethnicity in horizontal and vertical dimensions. For the situation regarding Roman citizens and subjects, we need to examine the vertical scale of ethnicity as we are examining power relations in one society (Eriksen 2010, 58). Van der Vliet (2003) provides the framework used amongst the Romans to further distinguish the differences among members of the same ethnic classification. He states that the additional distinctions for identity are dependent on one's proximity to "the center of power," which is the emperor (Van der Vliet 2003, 271). This arrangement defines the division between Roman citizens and subjects alike based solely on their social class and labor contribution, which dictates proximity to the emperor. The new ethnic divisions theorized by Erikson (2010), and exemplified by Van der Vliet (2003), show that new groups are created under the same ethnic category based on economic and political positioning in society.

Thus, any cultural differences among the vertical scale of ethnicity understood in the Roman Empire indicate that there are new interacting factions that can be subjected to cultural imperialism by another. Based on the evidence from Van der Vliet (2003), we know that the new interacting groups were the different social classes, and we can determine cultural differences between them that would allow for cultural interaction. One example of cultural differences between the social classes is how the elites versus the commoners valued stoicism. As previously evidenced through Pliny's sentiments, members of the lower social strata disdainfully viewed the Roman elites' inflated consumption of luxurious Eastern commodities (Fitzpatrick 2011, 32). The indicated difference in consumption habits and accompanying sentiments illustrates a disconnect in cultural values between those belonging to the wealthy and to the lower classes. Additionally, the success of a Cult of Mithras, due to the collaboration and shared theology of Roman citizens identifying with the same social positioning, indicates that there were shared cultural values among the group. Price (2012) describes the successful recruitment for the Cult of Mithras in the city of Virunum based on the efforts and personal contacts of the followers, and he explains that the cult followers were all "modestly successful" as they collectively funded the renovation of their 'temple' as a group without the benefaction of any particular individuals (9-10). This example shows that different Roman citizens of the same social class exhibited similar cultural values, for they all subscribed to the Cult of Mithras and worked together to accomplish their collective goals of renovation and recruitment. These examples indicate that there were distinct aspects of culture differentiating the social classes in the Roman Empire, which allowed for the possibility of cultural imperialism among the various groups.

The opportunity for cultural imperialism among the different social classes was taken by the aristocratic imperial regime who determined the political culture for all in the empire. As previously stated, Skinner (2013) claims that the opportunity for political mobility was limited to the highest stratum of Roman society as this mobility was an "internal oligarchic phenomenon" (32). Skinner (2013) supports his argument by refuting the claims of other scholars who argue that social mobility can be witnessed in the Eastern Empire by discussing the examples of Quirinus, Pelagius, Domitius, and Eumolpius (45-47), all of whom depict mobility that was occurring within their original social class, the curial stratum. This sentiment regarding the internal phenomenon is further endorsed by the recruitment of provincial aristocrats and mem-

bers of curial families to fill in the political positions opened by outgoing imperial aristocrats. Skinner (2013) states, "…it was from the wealthy magnate families at the apex of provincial life that easter senators in general were recruited" (28), and he substantiates this claim with the historical evidence of "persistent regulation" of the "recruitment of persons from curial families into imperial service" presented by the Theodosian Code (38-42). The recruitment of provincial elites indicates that the political mobility of aristocratic subjects was more important to the imperial regime than the social mobility of Roman citizens from the lower classes.

The political hegemony of the highest social class had real political impacts, which translated into cultural imprinting as the ruling class determined their political stance based on their prospects for financial gain and maintaining their status. Fitzpatrick (2011) details how even the most austere politicians, like Cato the Elder (234-149 BCE), relied on the Roman trade and commerce policies for personal wealth and resisted political measures to reduce the greed of the senatorial class (35). Thus, the domination of politics by one social class dictated the course of Roman politics, an important facet of culture, which was enforced for Roman citizens and subjects of all social classes even if they did not share the same views. The analysis of political mobility by Skinner (2013) proves how the dominant Roman culture dictated by the elite was imprinted onto all of the imperial citizens and provincial subjects, displaying the clear cultural imperialization of the Roman Empire regarding politics.

Conclusion

Therefore, after examining the distinctions between ethnic groups and the framework for cultural imperialism, it is evident that the Roman Empire as we remember it today was the result of dynamic cultural influence from and onto external entities. This assessment of the cultural imprint both on and of the Roman Empire highlights the important but often neglected dynamic of influence on a dominant culture from a less dominant one. The theories of identity and ethnicity allowed us to understand how the conditions for cultural imprinting were fulfilled by the power dynamics between the different interacting factions, Romans and outsiders, to enable cultural imperialism. Moreover, the scholarship on trade, religious mobility, and political stratification informs our understanding of the results of cultural interaction between the Roman Empire and their provincial subjects as well as neighboring entities.

Recognizing this pattern can allow us to properly appreciate and remember the contributions to larger geopolitical interactions from societies without as much geographic or historical expansiveness as the Roman Empire. Further, I believe that this kind of research will be necessary to improve our understanding of contemporary geopolitics by emphasizing the contribution to the current state of popular culture from minority and otherwise oppressed cultural groups. Moreover, the analysis of culture based on fluctuating relationships of domination and submission will further our understanding of contemporary power dynamics between interacting entities, which will better equip us to promote equality and equity in modern times.

References

Eriksen, Thomas Hylland. 2010. *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives*. London: Pluto Press.

Fitzpatrick, Matthew P. 2011. "Provincializing Rome: The Indian Ocean Trade Network and Roman Imperialism." *Journal of World History 22*(1): 27–54. https://doi.org/10.1353/jwh.2011.0016.

Issawi, Charles. 1989. "Empire Builders, Culture Makers, and Culture Imprinters." *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History 20(*2):177–96. https://doi.org/10.2307/204831.

Price, Simon. 2012. "Religious Mobility in the Roman Empire." *The Journal of Roman Studies 102*: 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0075435812000056.

Skinner, Alexander. 2013 "Political Mobility in the Later Roman Empire." *Past & Present 218*: 17–53. https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gts044.

Van der Vliet, Edward Ch. L. 2003. "The Romans and Us: Strabo's Geography and the Construction of Ethnicity." *Mnemosyne 56(*3): 257–72. https://doi.org/10.1163/156852503768181031.