Part II

Historical geographies of diversity
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On the face of it, it would be hard to find a more diverse political entity than the Roman Empire. The longest-lived empire that western Eurasia has ever seen, it lasted at pretty much full extent certainly for 400 years, and, in Britain aside (a minor appendage), for over half a millennium. It was also enormous. Running from Hadrian’s Wall to the river Euphrates, it encompassed a huge range of diverse geographical, economic, political and cultural contexts. Indeed, when it first came into existence, there were only a few actual Romans: a small privileged group in mainly central and southern Italy who enjoyed the legal and other privileges of citizenship. In the early imperial period, the widespread human diversity which the empire encompassed at its outset was not just recognised de facto, but often licensed de jure.

The early Empire

Like most pre-modern political structures, the Roman Empire could not be run as a centralised state in the proper sense of the word. In human terms, it was far larger even than it appears on the map. The real measure of distance is how long it takes human beings to cover it, and, in the Roman period, pretty much everything (except messages carried by changes of horse) moved at about forty kilometres a day. In the modern world, ten or twenty times that speed is entirely normal for people and goods, so that, in lived human experience, the Empire was actually between ten and twenty times larger than first appears.1 The problems of running it from a single governmental centre were thus colossal. Equally important, for much of its history the Empire possessed only limited bureaucratic capacity. As late as the mid-third century AD, when it had been in existence for over 300 years, there were only about 250 senior administrators for the entire Empire. With so little structure and so much original human variety, it is hardly surprising that diversity was a fundamental feature of the Roman imperial edifice.

On a political level, much of the Mediterranean region came pre-organised into a network of substantially autonomous local cities. Various types of organisation – leagues then monarchies – had provided a variety of political superstructure, but classical and Hellenistic Greek civilisation had put a huge cultural premium on the self-governing city (the polis) as a uniquely civilising form of human political institution. It had also proved a highly practical fit for Mediterranean littoral conditions in the first millennium BC. As a result, when the Roman Empire began to
absorb them in the last centuries before Christ, many Mediterranean communities came with long-established traditions of self-government, which Rome lacked the capacity or will to reorganise. Especially since its own traditions were highly influenced by the cultural hegemony of the Greek polis model, imperial administrators were generally happy to relicense existing local autonomy by authorising privileges of self-government in return for designated annual payments. The same was largely true in other parts of the Empire – such as northern Europe – where pre-Roman political structures took an entirely different form. Again, many existing elites and socio-political structures were often left in place with a Roman officer as political overseer.

On the legal front too, pre-existing structures and identities were often respected. Possessing formal citizenship of your home polis had for centuries been the key to a place among the elite of a Greek city: a privilege not available to the majority of inhabitants. Not only did the empire largely recognise these pre-existing citizenship patterns – i.e. existing patterns of social privilege – but also, when it started recognising particular individuals by grants of Roman citizenship, it often did so via new hybrids. These gave individuals the extra benefits of Roman citizenship only insofar as they did not impinge upon the existing rights of their home cities to call upon them for priesthoods, magistracies and other administrative positions (Sherwin-White 1973).

More generally, local legal structures were largely left in place as fully operative systems, particularly in the key area of civil law. In the ancient world, capital wealth really only came in one form: land. Most ancient civil law was therefore concerned with establishing watertight mechanisms for exploiting landed wealth (tenancies, mortgages, etc.) and for passing it on between the generations (marriage settlements, inheritance, etc.). For local elites, nothing was more important than secure possession of their landed wealth (citizenship itself usually required the possession of a minimum landed portfolio), and the Empire happily left pre-existing legal structures in place. Best known, thanks to papyri, is Egypt, where the local legal system remained substantially operative for over three centuries after it became a Roman province, but there is no reason to suppose it was in any way exceptional in the survival of existing legal structures.

The early Empire was also marked by wide-ranging cultural diversity, operating on various levels. Much was simply de facto. The new imperial state was just not interested in the cultural traditions of the mass of its subjects, particularly the land-working peasantry who probably made up between eighty-five and ninety per cent of its total population. So long as fiscal obligations were met, Roman administrators were content to allow life in the provinces to evolve along existing lines. Right into the late imperial period, therefore, peasants in different parts of the Empire continued to speak a vast array of languages, from Punic in North Africa to Celtic, Coptic, Illyrian and Armenian, amongst many others, across the rest of the Empire. Sometimes, continued diversity went far beyond cultural laissez faire. In its earliest centuries, Rome had come to the fore in central and southern Italy by aggressive self-assertion against the old Greek city states of southern Italy and Sicily. Not surprisingly, therefore, an important strand in early Roman cultural self-understanding defined itself vigorously against Greek cultural patterns: portraying Romans as self-disciplined and morally virtuous where Greeks were self-indulgent and corrupt. But Greek culture was much richer, and by the last decades of the first century BC, many Greek cultural ideals came to be internalised by the Roman imperial elite. Most fundamentally, Greek grammarians provided a set of tools which were applied to the Latin language to create the fixed ‘classical’ Latin, which was not merely a practical exercise in taxonomy but involved accepting the grammarians’ contention that possessing a language defined by clear grammatical rules was an indispensable first step for human beings who wished to develop their god-given potential for full rationality. Along with this came the absorption and mimicry of Greek philosophy, Greek science, Greek literary genres and most of the other fruits
of 1000 years of cultural development, so that a Greco-Roman hybrid quickly became the characteristic cultural discourse of the Roman imperial elite.\(^5\)

Beyond the educated elite, other cultural patterns – for instance in the realm of religion – show, again, a much greater diversity. There were some exceptions. Famously, Rome took it upon itself to suppress any religious cult – particularly that of the Druids – which practised human sacrifice. Roman officials had also periodically persecuted what they perceived as *superstition* (worshipping non-Roman gods and magical practices of unlicensed kinds), long before early Christians found themselves categorised under the same heading. In practice, however, the Empire nonetheless tolerated rich religious diversity. Famously, a whole series of equations were made with the established Roman pantheon to legitimise the gods of new provincial populations. Aquae Sulis Minerva worshipped at Bath is only one of multiple examples. And even where such equations were impossible, as with the Empire’s resolutely monotheistic Jewish populations, various types of modus vivendi were reached. Not only did the Jews function as a recognised population group within the Empire, but also, so long as various public rites were celebrated for the Capitoline Gods (Jupiter, Juno and Minerva), private cults could take many and varied forms, with new eastern cults, such as Mithraism, spreading widely through the army.\(^6\)

In its early phases, therefore, the Empire operated as a hegemonic, bureaucratically underdeveloped superstate over such vast distances that it had no choice but to tolerate huge local diversity de facto. Much more than that, however, it also licensed much of this diversity as a matter of deliberate policy. As the Empire continued to evolve, however, and as outside conditions changed, its original diversity came under significant pressure.

**Romanisation**

For all its licensed and de facto diversity, the Roman Empire was a conquest state. Some petty monarchs in Asia Minor ‘voluntarily’ ceded their territories to Roman control, but the vast majority of Rome’s territories were acquired by conquest. Not surprisingly, this hardwired a particular political dynamic into the Empire’s internal politics. Because it was a conquest state run by and for Romans, the most advantageous position to occupy within it in social terms was to be a Roman citizen; even if you were – economically – a relatively poor one. Best of all, of course, was to be a prominent and rich Roman citizen, since office-holding in the new imperial structure opened up colossal opportunities for enrichment, sometimes generating the kinds of legal case in which Cicero first rose to prominence.\(^7\) All of which posed a structural challenge to richer and more ambitious non-Romans within provincial society, who now found themselves second-class citizens within the new imperial world. How they responded to this challenge generated a significant decline in the Empire’s original diversity on a whole series of levels.

The earliest manifestations of response saw prominent provincials deliberately seeking out first Roman citizenship and then opportunities to work their way into prestigious Roman cultural structures, such as the imperial cult, which began to spread at an early date (see e.g. Fishwick 1987; Price 1984). This was followed by more substantial structural shifts: most notably the replacement of originally diverse patterns of local political organisation towards an Empire-wide norm. By the third century AD, the same municipal constitution had been adopted right across the Empire, redefining local government within the Empire as the responsibility of a series of city councils with responsibility for dependent rural territories. The model was ultimately based on the Greek polis, but reworked according to imperial priorities, and, not only did the new structure quickly spread across western and northern Europe, where there had never been any *poleis*, but also was increasingly adopted by old Greek cities of the Mediterranean littoral. Equally
important, the early third century saw Roman citizenship become universal for all the free inhabitants of the Empire through the *Constitutio Antoniniana* of AD 212 – and, as the third century progressed, Roman legal structures increasingly replaced older provincial traditions. Educationally, too, a much greater uniformity marked out the formation of the Empire’s landowning elites. From Hadrian’s Wall to the Euphrates, a standard, private education (in either Latin or Greek predominantly, depending on which part of the Empire you were born into) at the hands of grammarians and then rhetors became the hallmark of elite status, to such an extent that not to speak the kind of educated linguistic forms these men taught was immediately to mark yourself out as a parvenu. Extending Roman citizenship and Roman legal structures obviously had broader implications, but, above all, the first two centuries AD thus saw astonishing transformations in the lives of provincial landowning elites. It expressed itself even in the kinds of houses they built and the food they ate, adding up to a new elite uniformity right across the Empire.8

This certainly helped to eliminate the rebellions which were a regular feature of the early Empire, Boudicca being only one example of a recurring pattern. The weight of post-conquest imperial demands was heavily enough felt to prompt serious revolts in most (especially north European) territories. Occasionally, these were successful: Arminius’ rebellion led the Empire to cede land between the Rhine and the Elbe. The vast majority were unsuccessful, however, and, in general terms, such rebellions ceased by the end of the first century AD. Since this was also the moment when the lives of provincial elites were taking on a more markedly Roman character, then traditional scholarship often painted provincial elite Romanisation as a top-down process, designed to curb politically dangerous centrifugal forces.9

The main mechanism which expanded Roman citizenship to a wider cross-section of provincial elite society, however, was actually a specific feature of the standard municipal constitution which set up the new city councils. Under this constitution, of which a complete version was found in the 1980s inscribed on bronze tablets, one of the main perquisites of the positions was that the councils’ chief administrative officers received automatic grants of Roman citizenship. Looked at more closely, moreover, it has become clear that the spread of these constitutions was not a straightforward top-down process. Local communities first put up at their own expense some of the standard stock of public buildings – temples, theatres, etc. – which signalled that they were a culturally Roman community, and then lobbied their provincial governors to persuade the Emperor to grant them a constitution. Not only did this set in motion a process which progressively made them Roman citizens, but also it gave them defined means of raising revenues – through local taxes and tolls – from the countryside which now fell under their control (Gonzalez and Crawford 1986). What the period c.AD50–150 (when most of the constitutions were granted) broadly witnessed, therefore, was not top-down Romanisation, but a process of provincial self-Romanisation, part of the overall response to original advantages built into the imperial system for Roman citizens.

The spread of Roman law reflects similar processes. On one level, it was a direct effect of extending Roman citizenship, since Roman citizens (as in the case of St Paul) had the right to use Roman law. But there was always a potential gap between theory and practice, and it was not until the later second and third centuries AD that we have good evidence of Roman law, as a system, becoming the dominant legal discourse across wide stretches of the Empire. And here too, the inherent advantages of things Roman, in what was indisputably a Roman Empire, played a critical role. In a world where landed wealth was so crucial to elite status, it was not sensible to take any risks with the disposition of landed assets. Using Roman law, for a Roman citizen, had the huge advantage that the Empire’s premier legal system could ultimately be used to defend your assets and their distribution. In practice, therefore, provincial consumer demand spread the
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use of Roman legal structures, and this is firmly reflected in what became the main mechanism for updating Roman law itself in the later second and third centuries: the rescript system. This allowed citizens to write to the Emperor to clarify the law in difficult cases, and this was clearly done on a huge scale. By AD 200, the Emperor was dealing with several hundred of such petitions a year. And by the end of the third century, these clarifications had become such an important dimension of legal argument that structured collections of them had to be made for use in court (see Honoré 1994; Millar 1992).

But if self-Romanisation – an aggregate elite provincial response to the advantages of being Roman in a Roman Empire – both reduced elite diversity and brought rebellion to an end, it also generated new pressures within the imperial system. In the later Empire, these would combine with increasing pressures from the outside, and one internal cultural development of huge significance, to reduce further the Empire’s original diversity.

The later Empire

By c. AD 250, all the profits from local taxes and tolls had been confiscated by the central Roman state. The funds were still raised by the councils, but the money had to be handed over to the imperial centre, which was trying to fund a huge increase in its armed forces. In the east, Persia had reorganised itself into a rival superpower, while new confederations beyond the Rhine and the Danube also posed a greater threat. As a direct result of this loss of funds, winning power on local city councils became a much less attractive option for provincial elites, and long-established behavioural patterns – such as making generous gifts to home cities to win influence and power – quickly disappeared. Even these confiscations were not enough, however, to pay for an army that doubled in size between AD 220 and 320, and the decades either side of the year 300 saw new Empire-wide systems of general taxation reach down into local communities. Town councils had to do the hard work of tax collection, but measuring productivity and assessing tax liabilities, checking on the collection process and passing on the sums raised were all overseen by a central bureaucracy which mushroomed in size. The 150 years before AD 400 saw a twenty-fold increase in senior administrators and countless new intermediary functionaries besides.10

This process certainly expanded the power of the central imperial state, but not at the expense of so much local initiative and diversity as traditional accounts suggested. In the earlier twentieth century, it was supposed that higher taxation levels bankrupted provincial landowning elites, and, based on Soviet and Nazi analogies, that the new imperial bureaucracy became a repressive, centralising force within the Empire. It is now clear, however, that the process of bureaucratic expansion was not only or indeed mainly about increasing central control. Fourth-century legislation combined with multiple letter collections (most of which are dominated by letters of recommendation) show that the process of bureaucratic expansion was quickly taken over by former city councillors who were attracted to the new positions because of the privileges attached to them. By AD 400, length of service had been reduced to such an extent (often only ten years) and privileges increased, that a brief period in the bureaucracy had become a key means of local self-advancement, since ex-bureaucrats were now tasked with most of the interesting jobs in provincial society (e.g. allocating local tax bills – a position with colossal patronage powers – and sitting with the governor to judge legal cases). In the meantime, emperors had spent much of the fourth century trying and failing to prevent ex-councillors from moving into the bureaucracy, and even to limit its overall size. Looked at closely, the rise of the ostensibly more bureaucratic late Roman state resembles earlier patterns of self-Romanisation. Once the centre implanted certain incentives into the system, provincial elites hijacked them for their own
benefit, and, beyond the new tax regime, much of local society continued to govern itself as before, if under new rules and regulations (Heather 1994).

A much more substantial loss of diversity under the late Empire, in fact, was generated by the rise of Christianity. This process began with Constantine, who declared himself unambiguously Christian in the mid-320s and set in motion a process of Christianisation which was maintained by most of his successors (Julian, sole Emperor AD 361–3 being the brief exception). By AD 400, consequently, the Empire was dismantling pagan temples, and professing Christianity had become de rigueur for a career in the bureaucracy. This was not yet the end of the process. It would be another two centuries before Christian leaders came to definitive conclusions, for instance, as to how much of the old elite Greco-Roman culture was compatible with the new religion. Nonetheless, by AD 400 the Empire was irrevocably committed to a close and evolving partnership with the new imperial religion.

The resulting loss of cultural diversity is most obviously visible amongst the Empire’s highly literate elite. Over time, the wide range of acceptable religious cult still visible during the de facto tolerance of the Constantinian era gave way to a much narrower menu of licensed forms. Pockets of tolerated traditional elite paganism continued into the sixth century in the university schools of Athens and Alexandria in particular, but these became increasingly isolated as Christianity expanded its overall hold. That’s not to say that there was one monolithic model even of Christianity in the late imperial period. Gospel-inspired renunciation of the world co-existed sometimes uneasily alongside other traditions which continued to represent the Empire as a unique, divinely supported human society which devout Christians should serve without reservation. But non-Christian traditions suffered a slow but steady eclipse as the weight of imperial favour made it clear that Christianity was now a necessary pre-condition for success in the newly Christian Empire.

Some have seen in this process a qualitatively different level of political centralisation, Christianity presenting emperors with entirely new levers of power over their provincial elites. But, as the old process of self-Romanisation makes clear, the incentives for local elites to attach themselves to imperial structures in cultural terms had long had corrosive effects upon local diversity, and it is not clear that the rise of Christianity represented such a fundamental revolution in relationships.

In overall terms, the really negative impact of Christianity upon existing cultural diversity came in its entirely new imperative to interfere in the lives of non-elite inhabitants of the Empire. Before the fourth century, emperors hadn’t much cared what peasants did, so long as customary revenues flowed. One hundred years later, the old temples were being demolished, and 100 years after that bishops were co-opting Roman and post-Roman state structures to replace the peasantry’s traditional religious practices with Christian or at least Christianised counterparts, often with a significant element of constraint. There was still a long way to go to the thirteenth-century Inquisitions, but because Christianity prescribed that everyone possessed a soul which needed to be saved, it authorised an entirely new form of behaviour: using all the power of the state – positive and negative – to bring non-elite patterns into line with a licensed and monolithic cultural model. The kind of constraint the Empire had exercised over its provincial elites for centuries was now extended to the entirety of the imperial population, and this new imperative, as much as Roman law or Latin literature, represents a powerful imperial legacy to the Middle Ages. By entrenching Christianity within its own long-established top-down structures of cultural constraint, the Empire paved the way for the domination of the Christian religion across more or less the entirety of post-Roman Europe.
Notes


2 The classic treatment of relations between Rome and its Greek cities is Jones (1937); cf. Millar (1993). The deeper background can be explored through studies such as Murray and Price (1990) and Lagopoulos (2009).

3 The volumes of the Roman provinces series are an excellent place to start: Alföldy (1974); Frere (1991); Mocsy (1974); Wilkes (1969).

4 For an introduction to Greek legal structures, see Foxhall and Lewis (1996); for Egypt, see Bagnall (2006) and Bingen (2007).

5 On ideologies and practicalities of language see Kaster (1988). More generally, see e.g. Gruen (1992) on the Republican period and Bowersock (1969) for later developments (both have vast further bibliographies).


7 An excellent place to start is now Steel (2013).

8 On education, see Marrou (1981); also Kaster (1988). An excellent case study in the broader process is Woolf (1998).

9 For an introduction to Arminius, see Heather (2006: 46–58). On the revolts and the chronology of Romanisation, see e.g. the studies in the Roman provinces series: Alföldy (1974); Frere (1991); Mocsy (1974); Wilkes (1969).

10 The best overall analytical introduction remains Jones (1964: 15, 16, 19), although there are of course more recent studies of all of these phenomena.


12 For pagan survivals, see Watts (2006); different dimensions of the Christianisation of upper class life and values have been explored in the different works of Peter Brown: see in particular Brown (1988, 1992, 1997, 2012).

13 An introductory bibliography would be Fletcher (1999), Hillgarth (1986) and McKitterick (1977).

References


