Culture, identity and power in the Roman Empire

Roman Emperor and Empire 1

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The extent of the Roman Empire - its sheer scale and diversity made communications difficult It could take months to travel from place to place and letters or messages could equally take weeks to reach their destination. Cicero who corresponded from Rome with his son in Athens noted that letters took 3 to 7 weeks to arrive. How was this distance between Rome and the provinces bridged? Focusing on the symbolic rather than the physical aspects of communication, we're going to explore the role of the emperor as a unifying force.

Ancient Rome, like its modern successor, was cosmopolitan, the hub of the empire. Despite the difficulties of getting there, people from all over the known world travelled to the city and in return the city provided them with experiences drawn from all its empire.

For the inhabitants of Rome, the empire was a spectacle displayed to them by their emperor. And it was in the emperor's interests to remind the inhabitants of the glories of empire and present himself as world ruler. The empire was present in Rome through a variety of media - some subtle, some more blatant. In the arena were beasts and strange creatures transported to the city from around the empire, for display and slaughter; and also put to death were captives and prisoners of war.

Scenes like these, representing the latest conquests were also carved in stone and used to decorate the buildings and monuments of the city; providing a more lasting physical symbol of the glories of both emperor and empire. These grandiose imperial structures also drew upon architectural designs and building materials from across the empire.

Quarries like Chemtou, in Tunisia supplied Rome with the building materials that lined the walls and floors of these new buildings. In the Pantheon, the luxurious Numidian yellow marble was set in the floor. It was surrounded by a whitish marble with purple veins from Turkey, and encircled roundels of red porphyry from Egypt.

The massive grey granite columns supporting the porch of the Pantheon are also from Egypt, with capitals and bases made of white Greek marble. Egypt provides a graphic illustration of how a particular province impacted upon the physical appearance of Rome. During the early days of the empire the ancient culture had been a source of intrigue, so its defeat and annexation by Rome was a cause for celebration. A few private citizens of Rome adopted Egyptian designs. This funerary monument, in the shape of a pyramid, was constructed during the reign of Augustus to commemorate the public official Gaius Cestius Epulo. But original Egyptian artefacts were also imported to Rome and set up in prominent locations. This small obelisk now placed upon the back of an elephant carved by Bernini may have originally stood in the temple to the Egyptian goddess of Isis located in the Campus Martius. Also found in the Campus Martius was the obelisk used by Augustus as the pointer for his huge sundial. It was accompanied by an inscription, commemorating the defeat of Egypt, in the reign of Augustus. Since obelisks were already ancient monuments, hundreds of years old, their removal from Egypt and their incorporation into the cityscape of Rome physically symbolised the conquest of the province. The splendours of the ancient civilisation now belonged to the emperor and to Rome. The emperor who appropriated these treasures ruled the world and the extent of his empire was displayed on huge maps.

We know from literary sources that Augustus commissioned a plan of the world to be set before the eyes of the city. Although the original does not survive, these 20th century versions, set up by the Fascist regime, suggest how maps writ large could themselves be monuments, reminding all who saw them of the size and extent of their empire.

Ara Pacis The Augustan map may well have been the pictorial equivalent to the Res Gestae, the lengthy biographical epitaph of Augustus. This monumental inscription, also recreated by the Fascists, includes sequences describing Augustus' expansion of the empire.

But the emperor's role as a warrior and world conqueror was most powerfully expressed through trophy monuments. The emperor celebrated military victories by "triumphs" or parades that followed a set route through the streets of Rome. The triumphal arches or ceremonial gateways were set up along the triumphal route, recording the successful campaigns and promoting the image of the victorious emperor. Although only a few survive today, one famous example is the arch of Titus, actually constructed after the death and deification of the emperor in AD 81. On the underside of the arch his figure is carried heavenward by an eagle. The inscription records that the arch was set up by the Senate and people of Rome to divo Tito - the divine Titus, son of the divine Vespasian. Beneath the inscription a frieze depicts the triumphal procession which Titus had celebrated with his father the emperor Vespasian in AD 71 following the defeat of the Jews. The reliefs carved on the inner walls of the arch record the details of the triumph. On one side the plunder from the sacking of the Great Temple of Jerusalem is displayed - the silver trumpets and the seven branched candle-stick. The placards carried by the troops may have been painted with the names of the defeated cities and peoples. On the other side, in a chariot drawn by four horses, rides Titus and on his right, a winged Victory holds a wreath over his head. Crowning the archway are more winged Victories, this time with their feet resting on globes symbolising the degree of the Emperor's control over much of the known world.