



Culture, identity and power in the Roman empire

Introducing the Roman World

JANET HUSKINSON: “To Romans I set no boundary in space or time I have granted them dominion, and it has no end” In Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Rome’s destiny to rule the world was foretold by the great god Jupiter. And Rome’s Empire did indeed gain dominion over much of Europe, Asia Minor and North Africa. Though the empire did finally come to an end, the idea of Rome’s boundless power has proved inspirational to later emperors - Charlemagne and Napoleon - and to empires of yet more recent times.

Deeply entrenched in our image of the Roman Empire is the idea of imperial power and military might.

And in their day Romans themselves saw their Empire as a global force, with a mission. Rome saw her role in the world as joining together the scattered peoples and giving civilisation to mankind. Certainly the Empire came to include many different nations and diverse cultures within its vast expanse. Although by the early third century more people within the empire could claim Roman citizenship, many still saw themselves as belonging to other cultural backgrounds. So what impact did being part of the Empire actually have on them? What did it mean to be Roman? Through exploring a series of case studies, we can draw out some of the ways culture, identity and power interacted in the multicultural world of the Roman Empire.

At the centre - the emperor - exercising his powers in Rome and across the provinces. But what about the rest of Italy? How did the emergence of Rome’s empire affect the life-style of places on the Italian peninsula? What other cultural influences impacted on their “Roman” identity?

Further afield the Roman Empire encountered the long-established culture of Greece, whose architecture, art and literature had captivated Roman elites long before there was a Roman empire. So what happened in Greece and Asia Minor when they succumbed to Roman domination? How could the great traditions of Classical Greece be reconciled with the new demands of Roman rule? To what extent did Greek communities maintain their distinctive identities?

On the northern edge of empire was Britain. Before it was finally conquered by Claudius, the Romans saw Britain as barbaric, exotic even - a place to conquer and civilise. Roman Britain offers the chance to observe the dynamics of a frontier zone and the reactions of local communities to invasion, by a Roman army bringing with it its own questions of cultural identity. At the southern edge of the Empire - North Africa. Its geographical proximity to Italy and its wealth of natural resources made Roman North Africa a major economic power in its own right. Yet there were strong local traditions, rooted in Punic culture, that told of a long history of rivalry, and resistance to Rome’s might. Was it possible for these cultural and political differences to be worked out? How far could the peoples of North Africa come to identify with a Roman life-style? And in Judaea, Jewish religious traditions, Greek secular culture and Roman officialdom reveal just how culturally complicated the Roman Empire could be.

Across the Empire the same questions recur - what did it mean to its inhabitants to be Roman? What were their views of the Empire? Drawing on evidence from literature, from inscriptions; evidence from archaeological sites; from surviving buildings; from the visual arts and from objects like coins, we take the individual pieces of evidence, build them up into a wider picture and try to create an holistic view of Rome and its empire. But each generation

approaches the evidence from a different perspective. In “writing” history, our own identity and ideas from our own society are brought to bear. So issues of presentation and interpretation of the evidence are crucial to our investigation of culture, identity and power in the Roman Empire.