

Essay One

Looking for culture, identity and power

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Sometime during the second or early third century AD mosaic pavements were laid in a wealthy house in the north African town of Thysdrus, the modern El Djem in Tunisia (Blanchard-Lemée et al., 1996, pp.18–34). One was decorated with personifications of Africa and the Seasons, while another, in an adjacent room, depicted a series of figures who have been identified as representations of Rome and the provinces (Figure 1.1). Six hexagonal panels containing alternately female busts and full-standing figures surround a seventh which shows the seated figure of Rome, armed and holding the orb of the universe (Figure 1.2). The outer figures are identified by their attributes as personifications of various provinces: Africa (the left-hand bust) in an elephant head-dress (Figure 1.3), Egypt



Figure 1.1 Mosaic showing Rome and provinces from a house in El Djem, Tunisia. Museum of El Djem, Tunis. (Photo: Gilles Mermét)



Figure 1.2 Detail showing the central figure of Rome. Museum of El Djem, Tunis. (Photo: Gilles Mermet)



Figure 1.3 Detail showing Africa. Museum of El Djem, Tunis. (Photo: Gilles Mermet)

(the bust on the right) with hair in ‘dreadlocks’ and holding a rattle used in the worship of Isis, and Sicily (bottom standing figure), who is shown as a huntress and has triple ‘feet’ behind her head to denote the island’s triangular shape. The uppermost bust probably represents Asia since she has a turreted crown like those worn by personifications of cities in Asia Minor, but the others are less easily identified by surviving attributes (one holds an olive branch, and another a sacrificial jug and dish). Together these figures are linked in an arrangement which suggests the geographical extent of the Roman empire and its diversity united under the central control of Rome.

So here in this mosaic themes of culture, identity and power occur in various ways – in the personifications and their identifying attributes, in the arrangement of panels, and in the mosaic’s very setting in a provincial house. Here too are some of the issues that arise in interpreting the themes from the ancient evidence – the problem that some key knowledge is lost to us (for identifying the remaining ‘provinces’ from their attributes), and the fact that to an important extent viewers would bring their own cultural values to their reading of an image. In short, the mosaic provides a useful entry point for considering many of the issues involved in looking for culture, identity and power in the Roman world. These are concepts central to the understanding of any society, and are currently much debated by cultural historians, social scientists, and other academic analysts, producing a large body of literature. Writing about Roman experiences from such modern perspectives can be illuminating, but we need to be clear about what we are looking for, and looking at, in the ancient

material. After all, Roman society differed from present western society in some fundamental ways, and these differences are crucial to our understanding of Roman culture: for example, the institution of slavery (see Essay Five) affected all kinds of cultural practices, while the low level of literacy gave a special value to non-written forms of communication (see Essay Two).

By focusing this essay on the mosaic from El Djem and its images I will show what is at stake in looking for culture, identity and power in the Roman empire and introduce some of the central questions. At the end of the essay some of these issues will be considered from a more distanced viewpoint, particularly the question of Romanization (that is, the process whereby Roman culture spread to other areas) and the wider contexts of time and space.

Looking for culture

We must start by defining 'culture'. This is notoriously hard to do, and the term is used in many ways, often just to mean the arts or interests of 'high culture' (see Essay Four). But in this essay something much broader is intended, and 'culture as shared meanings' makes a simple and effective working definition (Hall, 1997). People who belong to a particular culture share a set of assumptions and experiences, and this sharing is expressed by following certain common practices or by employing accepted representations of mutual identity.

Immediately it is possible to relate this back to the mosaic. This expensive form of pavement, together with its chosen subject matter and iconography, is a way in which the householders expressed their membership of a particular culture (affluent and 'Roman', like the group described in the quotation that opens Essay Four). Even the arrangement of the panels, concentrically and within a containing frame, reiterates the idea of a shared cultural experience, which is reinforced by the way in which the figures of Egypt and Africa turn slightly towards each other. Similarly, the 'provinces' are all dressed in the same fashion, rather like heroic figures in classical Greek art. This too suggests their shared cultural experience, expressed in traditional Graeco-Roman terms. There is nothing distinctive in that, yet it is clear from the variation in their hairstyles, attributes and head-dresses that some measure of distinctiveness is also meant to be an important part of the experience. This is particularly true for the figure of Rome, whose centrality to the whole cultural relationship is expressed by her position in the design.

In fact, the image can be summed up in terms of two issues which are at the heart of any search for culture, identity and power in the Roman world. One is cultural diversity within the empire; the second is the

relationship of the central power (Rome) to societies on the periphery of the empire. Radiating out from these issues (somewhat like the configuration of the mosaic) is a series of further questions to do with identity, power and the practice of culture. These will be considered separately here to make their discussion clearer, although of course in historical reality they are closely interconnected: the social structures created in power relationships help to define cultural identity and determine how culture is expressed and practised. So, taking the mosaic as a starting point, let us look at some of the underlying questions.

Cultural diversity in the Roman empire

In the image of the mosaic the various 'provinces' appear to share a common culture (suggested by the overall setting, and by the dress they wear) but display some individual differences in their attributes. Visually, this produces a variety which is lively yet cohesive: all the differences are subsumed in the overall pattern and serve to enrich the group as a whole. But how far does this image represent the actual lived experience of cultural diversity in the Roman empire? Were different cultures treated as positively in reality as in the image, and how did they fit within the overall cultural framework of the empire? And what was the 'Roman' element in all this? Did the repeated representation of 'Africa' in the mosaics of this house mean that the owner felt particularly 'African', or perhaps 'Romano-African'?

These are complex questions, and in fact, as we shall see, Romans themselves may have been unable to answer them consistently. People experienced their identities in different ways, and what is more, many people can be described as 'Roman', from the inhabitants of Rome itself to Roman citizens who lived in far-flung provinces such as Syria or Britain. (This makes it hard to speak collectively of 'the Romans' as each time the particular group needs definition; but in this essay I use the term to refer to what in effect are the upper social strata of the city of Rome, and then from the first century AD onwards, of the empire.) In some parts of the Roman empire various cultures coexisted. This was true of the great cosmopolitan cities such as Rome (see Essay Three) and Alexandria, and especially in the east, where the legacy of Greek traditions inherited from the Hellenistic kingdoms which had succeeded Alexander overlay various local cultures (see Essay Eight). Jewish communities of the Diaspora, scattered as they were across the empire, experienced this pluralism in a different way, keeping their traditions within the wider Graeco-Roman cultural context (see Essay Eleven). In all these cases people would have demonstrated their cultural allegiances, consciously and unwittingly, by various means.

Representing shared values

So what are the means by which people demonstrate their membership of a particular culture, and how do they represent the values they share? Common language, religion, names, dress and diet are some of the media that spring to mind, but there are others which are fundamental and perhaps less obvious, such as ways of thinking about the world, and codes of morality and social behaviour: a key Roman social virtue, for instance, was *pietas* (a sense of dutiful obligation towards others), while ‘ancestral custom’ (*mos maiorum*) was much quoted in the early empire as a benchmark of social practice, harking back to a supposedly noble past.

Looking at the El Djem mosaic and its design, we can find some features that illustrate a range of these means. Firstly there is the role that the mosaic played in the overall design and decoration of the house. Floor mosaic was an expensive form of decoration and became something of a status symbol; and because it was used throughout most of the Roman world it was an effective way in which householders could associate themselves with others of similar tastes and standing across the empire (see Essay Four). The same could be said of the houses and their layout. They too were a way of articulating cultural values (indicating social status, for instance); we can look at them for influences of local traditions, as well as for design features that were more widely reproduced.

Secondly, there is the design of the mosaic itself: as noted in the opening description, its elements are carefully arranged in terms of a central feature and surrounding figures. With its alternation of full-length figures and busts this composition makes a pleasing impression, but its sum total is meant to be more than that: it aims to structure the relationship between the different features in such a way as to persuade the viewer of their conceptual relationship. This approach to design, as a means of giving order to experiences, could be described as ‘rhetorical’. Rhetoric played a central role in the Graeco-Roman world of the élite and educated in shaping thought and expression, and although it was linked with the practice of oratory (and was a central element in ancient historiography and biography) it was not confined to the verbal arts, as this example shows. It was more than a matter of elaborate or persuasive phraseology; rather it was a way of representing experiences and events within some kind of moral or social framework – in short, a way of expressing some of the ‘shared meanings’ that underpinned the culture from which it sprang.

Thirdly, there are the representations of Rome and the provinces. The fact that female figures have been used here to stand for geographical and cultural entities is significant in the context of our questions about how cultural values are expressed. Personification was one of several options available to anyone trying to depict these places in the visual arts

(or, indeed, in literature). Another solution would have been to represent the different places by landscapes, perhaps even rendered schematically in map-like compositions (as was commonly done in Roman depictions of Egypt and the Nile). But the choice of female figures is illuminating in what it reveals about the cultural background. Personifications of places or of social institutions, or even of particular vices and virtues, developed in the Hellenistic Greek world from the late fourth century BC, but they gained great popularity in Roman imperial art, where personifications of Rome, or Victory, or the Genius of the Roman People were frequently used. (Look at Figure 1.7, for example, the Gemma Augustea, which celebrates Augustus' rule by showing him with Rome and other figures, including the personifications of Earth and Ocean, which suggest the universality of his power.) These figures were almost always female, even when – as with the figure of Rome in the pavement – they were meant to signify 'male' qualities of military strength and prowess: in fact, the usual personification of *Virtus* (which literally means 'manliness', but translates more generally into 'courage' and 'conspicuous bravery') was a woman. Personifications of provinces were not uncommon in the context of imperial sculpture or coinage, where their obvious function was to reflect the nature of Roman rule; this meant that they were sometimes represented as captive subjects, but sometimes as apparently 'equal and free members of the Roman commonwealth' (Hannestad, 1986, p.197; cf. Smith, 1988).

What can be said of these figures, then, is that they show a particular mode of representing concepts that had a value commonly understood in the Graeco-Roman cultural tradition which became so much the culture of empire. This included a way of thinking about gender that allowed female figures to become effective symbols of certain 'male' qualities (like 'Rome' here) while at the same time suggesting a vulnerability (the provinces).

Finally, and remaining with these figures, we can look again at the use of dress to signify culture: like the various attributes (Egypt's Isis rattle, Rome's arms and armour, and so forth), the style of dress says something about the cultural associations to be made with these figures. In the El Djem mosaic it is rather a uniform garb, evocative perhaps of that worn by heroic characters in Graeco-Roman art, and so linking these figures to that status and cultural background. Headgear is used to the same effect: Rome's helmet shows her military power (Figure 1.2), Africa's cap is reminiscent of her wild beasts (Figure 1.3), the turreted crown evokes the strength of city states, and Sicily's symbol denotes the island's shape.

In fact, dress is an important way in which societies represent certain values: think of uniforms, badges, religious robes, academic hoods and gowns. Beyond its obvious basic protective function dress can carry

symbolic meanings, to do with status, ethnicity or morality, for instance. This was certainly part of the Roman experience, where different types of toga, for example, were worn according to social status. The equivalent Greek robe, the *pallium* (or *himation* in Greek), had some conflicting connotations in Roman society. As it was traditionally associated with Greek philosophers some intellectual Romans apparently chose to wear it, usually in private, but here it appears in a portrait statue of the philhellene emperor Hadrian from Cyrene (Figure 1.4). Yet generally it was considered unsuitable to be worn by Romans, especially in the context of public business, because it represented all the negative qualities of self-indulgence and degeneracy which Romans pinned on the Greeks.

This example of the *pallium* and the different values attached to it by Romans is a reminder that objects in themselves are not intrinsically meaningful in cultural terms. All depends on the meanings that people give to them, and these may vary from one context to another. Reverting again to the representation on the mosaic, we can imagine how the image of Rome's relationship to the provinces (and particularly to the 'home' province of Africa) could have been read in quite different ways by different viewers, especially, say, by visiting Roman officials and local Africans. In this case, however, we have no hard evidence to prove this variation, but one subject on which diverse reactions survive in the ancient sources is the amphitheatre games. These games included fights between gladiators, wild beast shows and the execution of prisoners and criminals, and involved a good deal of death and violence. In evaluating them we may have to make our own cultural leap to understand them in the context of ancient values and not of ours. Gladiatorial combat seems to have begun in Roman society as a display of aristocratic valour, but by the time of the empire had been developed by the state as a means of expressing imperial power. In this context it is not hard to understand the executions, the displays of



Figure 1.4 Statue of Hadrian from Cyrene, c. AD 122. The British Museum. (© British Museum)

animals from far-flung parts of the empire, and even the seating arrangements (which were allocated according to social status) as symbols of state control (Wiedemann, 1992). Amphitheatre shows were hugely popular across the empire, although in the Greek-speaking east they seem to have found a place within a rather different set of communal values, to do with the local city rather than the empire as a whole (Woolf, 1994). But there is also evidence (largely from the writings of an educated élite) that some people objected to them, particularly for their dehumanizing effect on spectators, and for what this said about contemporary society. So although it is easy to point to the amphitheatre as a distinctive expression of Roman culture, it is impossible to define its ancient meaning in a single way: it has a multiplicity of possible values.

Multiplicity of values is also important to bear in mind as we turn now to consider individuals and their cultural identity.

Cultural identity: relative or essential?

The possibility that individuals have more than one identity in cultural terms should not surprise us, as we operate on this assumption from day to day. If identity can be described as a way of placing people – individuals and communities – within a particular cultural context, then it can involve various different modes of definition such as gender, race, age, social status, job or religion. People belong to several such categories at once; so a woman may be simultaneously wife, mother, lawyer, British-born Afro-Caribbean, and ‘Thirtysomething’, and see herself as all, or some, or none of these at any given moment. Furthermore, it is not just a case of how people see themselves, but how they are seen by others, particularly when those relationships cross cultural boundaries, and the perceived, or their perceivers, are ‘insiders’ or ‘outsiders’ of a cultural group. Thus a person may claim one identity but have another one (or more) imposed by other people’s views. So in looking at cultural identity we meet with constantly changing or multiple definitions, and need to look carefully at the way they are expressed or signified. (Essay Five discusses examples of this from the Roman world.)

However, some fundamental aspects of identity, such as gender and ethnicity, have been seen as determined by various ‘essential’, non-negotiable factors (by biology, for instance), and not as relative to circumstances. This ‘essentialist’ or ‘primordial’ argument has often been used in discussions about the formation of identity, in present-day and historical societies, but it has now been largely superseded by the ‘relational’ view which, as Essay Six on gender shows, is clearly sustainable from the ancient evidence. In the Roman world, gender was

far from being regarded as a constant determined by the 'given' of biological sex, but was treated instead as a fluid category, set partly by social context; certain types of situation or behaviour constructed identities as male or female, but even these could be overridden in the presence of other social hierarchies.

As for ethnicity, the essentialist argument has been important in some discussions of modern nationalism as it sees particular races or nations as distinct and objective entities, identified by observable physical characteristics and common cultural features (such as language, customs and beliefs: Renfrew, 1996, p.130). This view was also important in the 'culture history' generated by archaeologists who linked a particular material culture with a particular people (such as 'the Celts' and 'Celtic culture'; cf. Renfrew, 1996). But here too recent views of ethnic identity prefer to see it as relative to a given situation, being often constructed by the group's own definition of its ethnicity in opposition to others. Even so, the essentialist line continues to shape certain approaches to archaeology, particularly those which may have some nationalistic sub-agenda (Graves-Brown et al., 1996); and, as we shall see, it is partly behind arguments in the modern 'Romanization' debate, which tend to imply that there was a single homogeneous and identifiable 'Roman culture'.

But 'essentialism' is not just a modern view. There are also some indications of it in the Roman world: for instance, where indigenous groups claimed a distinctiveness in terms of their past, usually as a survival strategy in the face of a majority culture. They did so by promoting the myths attached to the foundation of their cities, depicting local gods or heroes in public ritual and art, such as Androclus at Ephesus. The relief from the city of Cyrene (Figure 1.5) shows the local nymph of the same name being crowned by Libya.¹ Another way indigenous groups could claim distinctiveness was to make much of their own cultural heritage, as did intellectuals in Greece and Asia Minor during the second century AD. In the movement known as the 'Second Sophistic', these intellectuals drew on many facets of the Greek cultural past – literary themes and styles, and antiquarianism – as if to reaffirm the identity of Greek culture in the face of the Roman empire (Bowie, 1974; Swain, 1996).

Even the Romans (who saw themselves as instigators of the 'global' culture) used the past to set out their essential right to rule. Divine

1 According to one myth Cyrene slew a lion which was terrorizing the kingdom of Libya and was rewarded with part of the territory. The Greek inscription below the scene reads: 'Making this dedication in token of great hospitality, Karpos placed over the architrave Cyrene, mother of cities and lion-slayer, crowned by Libya herself, who has the glory of being a third continent.'

ancestry, for instance, could give an unassailably strong and exclusive identity, and in the *Aeneid* Virgil set out Rome's legendary descent from the Trojan heroes, interweaving Rome's past, present and future to create the idea of a given role and identity. Leading individuals did it too: witness Augustus, who could trace his family back to the goddess Venus (Zanker, 1988).

In cases like these individual people or communities promoted their identity as 'given' to suit their particular purposes and situation. But was it a view that was generally held? As Essay Eleven will show in greater detail, the case of the Diaspora Jews is particularly interesting in this respect. In defining itself this minority culture placed a high value on observant behaviour (rather than birth); as a result its identity was surprisingly open and tolerant of outside influences. As for the majority cultures of Greece and Rome, a recent discussion of Greek identity in the Roman world made a relevant contrast between the two peoples:

Romans did not conceive of their identity as underwritten by a unique language or a common descent in the same way that some others (including Greeks) did, and their traditions of origin stressed the progressive incorporation of outsiders. Roman identity was based to an unusual degree on membership of a political and religious community with common values and *mores* [that is, customs, morality and way of life]. Cultural change, especially acculturation, posed a special threat to a self-definition framed in those terms.

(Woolf, 1994, p.120)

This is an interesting point: it suggests that while Greeks may have had an essentialist approach to their cultural identity, Romans defined themselves in a way which was potentially more inclusive of outsiders. Yet because it depended on the continuation of certain social codes and institutions, this self-definition could be jeopardized by the same outsiders if they brought too much cultural change with them. In the context of the Roman empire, with its many peoples, this was a very real threat to the traditional sense of identity originally formulated in the small community of the early city of Rome. So the question must be, how did Romans keep their own sense of identity distinct and preserve the integrity of their traditions?

One answer is that they evolved boundaries of various kinds, which essentially served to exclude foreign influences from particular traditional areas of their society and culture. In the city of Rome, expulsion was one method of exclusion: Jews, Isis-worshippers, actors, astrologers and philosophers were all at some time told to leave town when their presence was interpreted as presenting a particular threat. Other strategies preserved Roman values alongside imported practices by acting out a division between the two. For instance, Dionysius of



Figure 1.5 Relief of Cyrene crowned by Libya, second century AD. The British Museum. (© British Museum)

Halicarnassus, writing at the end of the first century BC, observed that even in the celebration of foreign cults Romans still managed to preserve aspects of their own identity through practising their traditional

rituals and refraining from ‘foreign’ behaviour: in the worship of the Phrygian Great Mother goddess (*Magna Mater*) a Roman magistrate performed Roman sacrifices and games in her honour, but her priests were Phrygian and no native-born Roman was allowed to walk in the procession (*Roman Antiquities* 2.19). And looking out to the wider context of empire, perhaps it would not be too far-fetched to see in the design of the El Djem mosaic another version of this practice. The ‘foreignness’ of the individual provinces is kept separate and peripheral to Rome in the circle of self-contained panels; this not only allows Rome to exercise control from the centre, but keeps any threat of cultural contamination at bay.

Perceiving identity

More clearly perhaps the mosaic illustrates well the point I made earlier about cultural identity being as much to do with the perceptions of other people as with one’s own. It offers a Roman view of the provinces, as *included* in the culture of empire. Africa and Egypt (to take the most easily identified cases) are represented very much within the traditional Graeco-Roman artistic form of personifications, as women, with idealized features and wearing rather nondescript, classical dress; in this context their ‘ethnic’ features (Africa’s symbolic elephant-skin head-dress and Egypt’s dreadlocks and rattle) seem like a token concession to distinctiveness. They are being identified as exotic and distinctive entities, who have been brought ‘inside’ the orbit of Roman imperial culture and made to conform to a degree. This is particularly interesting to note in the case of Africa, since the other mosaic image of her found in the house emphasizes more ‘ethnic’ features by giving her corkscrew curls, large eyes, and darker skin (as described by Blanchard-Lemée et al., 1996, pp.19–22).

Other peoples were not so privileged, and elsewhere in Roman art and literature there are many examples where they are shown as ‘barbarian outsiders’. Yet here again this is a Roman view, and one that paradoxically needed an ‘uncivilized other’ as a foil for the qualities of civilization which Romans wanted to claim for themselves. Roman writers identified peoples such as the Britons and the Germans with all the hallmarks of barbarity – wild habitat (that is to say, not in ‘civilized’ towns), fierce looks enhanced with body-paint, unsocialized practices such as wife-sharing and human sacrifice – yet at the same time drew them into the Roman concept of empire with its ideas of a ‘civilizing’ mission, and used them sometimes as a mouthpiece for their own dissent (see Essay Ten).

In a similar way Romans looked at Greeks and their civilization with ambivalence, relative to their particular interests and experiences. On

one hand, they identified them with an ancient Greece, which was the source not only of high, classical culture (see Essay Four), but of civilization itself (Cicero, *Letter to his Brother Quintus* 1.1.27); yet on the other they berated Greek immigrants to Rome as full of vices (Pliny, *Natural History* 15.5) and a threat to traditional Roman virtues (Juvenal, *Satires* 3.62–118). In general Romans regarded Greek contemporaries as tending to bother only with their own concerns (Tacitus, *Annals* 2, 88, 4); and this seems to be borne out by the evidence. Greeks were often less than willing to identify with the culture of the Roman empire of which they were now part: some even went so far as to resist using official Latin terminology (Bowie, 1974, pp.200–01). Although some individual writers, such as Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Strabo, Plutarch and Appian, actively engaged with the existence of the Roman empire and could praise its virtues in relationship to Greek culture, few Greeks seem to have been interested in Latin literature, or Roman history, or even (until the mid second century) in holding high public office.

What these examples emphasize is how identities can be created and imposed according to different contexts; in other words they are relative to particular historical situations or viewpoints. Furthermore they are often expressed in terms of similarity and difference: Roman compared with barbarian or Greek, or, in the mosaic, one province compared with another. So much depends on the viewpoint, and here we have to remember just how much of the source material for our knowledge of the Roman empire offers the world-view of the élite Roman and Greek. There is little about how other peoples saw themselves, with the important exception of the Jews. This means that ‘belonging’ to particular cultural elements, or relative ‘similarity’ and ‘difference’, may be very much constructed in terms of the mainstream Graeco-Roman culture of the empire, according to a Roman imperial agenda. And inevitably the question of agenda does not stop there, as it also comes into interpretation of ancient events and images. It is a matter in which no one can really be objective and, indeed, as respectively reader and writer of this essay, you and I will bring our own identities to bear as we look for cultural identity in the ancient material.

Representing identity

Looking for identity as something shaped by context makes it important to consider the factors that affect its representation. Not only do we need to look for the kinds of signifiers that were discussed earlier (such as dress, names, food and beliefs) by which people are identified with one particular cultural group or another, but we also need to look at how these are used and why. For this reason representation and self-

representation are important sources for studying identity in the Roman world because they are to do with perceptions of self and others; they also show the values claimed by a particular cultural identity, and show how an identity is (sometimes literally) constructed from a selection of particular features.

Probably the most useful place to look to understand this clearly is at the image of an emperor such as Augustus. Here all kinds of identity needed to be conveyed, from a physically recognizable individual, to religious leader, invincible soldier and merciful conqueror. The motive for such representation was primarily political, and to this end a whole series of set scenes or poses were evolved in art to identify unmistakably the emperor's roles and the particular virtues that were attached to them (cf. Figure 1.7). Variations in their usual iconography can indicate a preference for one identity over another; thus Hadrian was shown in Greek (rather than Roman) dress in Greek-speaking Cyrene (Figure 1.4), while Trajan was depicted in Egyptian style, subduing enemies of Greece, at the Temple of Khnum at Latopolis on the Nile (Bowman, 1996, Figure 25).

As these last two cases show, similarity and difference remain important themes to look for in the representation of identity. In the context of the overall culture of the Roman empire they can suggest the degree to which difference was seen as a quality to be noted and respected. Earlier on I noted how attributes were used to differentiate the figures on the El Djem mosaic in a limited but significant way. Representations of soldiers provide some more examples: scenes on Trajan's column (erected AD 113) show Roman soldiers from different units in their own distinctive dress, as if to represent the wide ethnic range contained within the Roman army. These images depict people included in the Roman world-view; for representations of those excluded it is necessary only to look back at the representation of 'barbarians' in the literature quoted earlier, or at some Roman military tombstones which show the soldiers as distinctly Roman, whatever their own ethnic background, but the conquered barbarians as long-haired, wild and often naked, as if they had no hope of a place in the civilized Roman world.

As the different images of the emperor showed, it is quite possible to represent multiple identity, either through a series of images which express different facets of the same person (portraits of Augustus provide an excellent example: Zanker, 1988), or through a combination of attributes or allusions within a single image. Representations in visual art have, inevitably, to indicate identity at a single point in time, and often resort to showing a hierarchy of symbols which signify the various different identities experienced by the individual in the course of life; so different features are included in the iconography or through inscriptions to extend the scope of the central image. This happens on

many Egyptian mummy portraits of the Roman period, such as that of Artemidorus (Figure 4.2), where Greek, Roman and Egyptian elements are shown together but separated out as if to indicate the various cultural identities that had coexisted in his life.

In sum, looking for cultural identities in the Roman world almost inevitably opens up a world of relative definitions; when reading sources, written or material, it is important to notice details of representation and to understand the context. Ultimately, though, some things may elude us: does this portrait (Figure 1.6) show an individual (and if so who) or is it generic? Was it consciously shaping up a 'black' identity, and if so what might that imply? Is it a portrait of 'the other'? Or of someone perceived as belonging to a multi-ethnic empire?

Representations and power

When we look at the context of cultural representations and at their motives, power emerges as a key factor. It is present at almost every level. The El Djem mosaic shows this so vividly that it is worth looking at in detail. First of all the image depicts a power relationship between Rome and the provinces, articulating it by the radial design of the panels and in the iconography of the figures. Rome at the centre is the only figure who is armed, which illustrates her supreme military power. She carries an orb, the globe of the world, and her shield is decorated with the Medusa head, a motif with the power to ward off death and evil by its terrible gaze. But the power relationship is a two-way affair. Africa and Spain, in particular, had great economic power in respect of their exports of grain and oil to Rome (note the olive branch which the figure holds here) (see Essay Seven). The choice of this subject for the mosaic also expresses Rome's influence in the provinces, as experienced in the lives of rich householders like these: it shows the prestige attached to Graeco-Roman art and its images (to the extent that even the 'home' province of Africa is represented in these

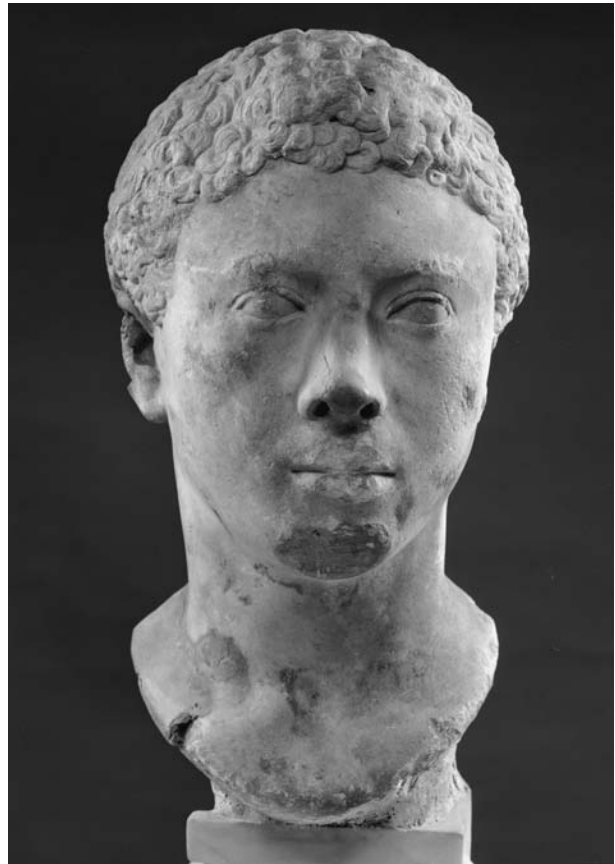


Figure 1.6 Portrait of a man of African origin, first century AD. Boston Museum of Fine Arts. (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, inv.no.88.643, Benjamin Pierce Cheney Fund)

terms), and suggests that the patron may have drawn on this as a way of identifying himself with imperial culture and its connotations of power, rather than with anything local. Producing the mosaic was an act of power, involving patron and craftsman. Even the position of the room within the house would have had implications in terms of social power. Decorated with this impressive scene of political power, this room was probably a reception room in the more public part of the house where the owner as *patronus* (head of household) met and dealt with visiting *clientes* (dependents or retainers). In fact the ‘social structure’ of a Roman house can be seen as a way in which power relationships were articulated in terms of different social functions (Thébert, 1987). (The distinctions that can be established for many elite Roman houses serve as a reminder that ‘public’ and ‘private’ often operated differently in Roman culture from how they work in the West today.) The house itself can be set in a wider context of power, that of the owner’s social status and influence (Essay Five) and of a flourishing economy in Rome and north Africa (Essay Seven). Finally, as an artefact that has survived for centuries, the mosaic is a reminder that it is usually material associated with the powerful that has lasted for our interpretation: the powerless in the ancient world are generally hard to trace in the surviving records.

This analysis of a single mosaic suggests that power is omnipresent as a factor in the creation of culture and identity, particularly where the context involves a set of social hierarchies or decisions to be made: who chose the mosaic, who saw it, and who paid for it all basically stem from power relationships. Looking at other sources would have added further examples: for instance, in the personal and domestic context, power relationships exist within the family structure, in the master–slave relationship, and even in the intimacy of sexual encounters where passivity and penetrability were regarded as defining gendered roles. The relationship of humans to the supernatural and elemental (such as the seasons and the weather) was experienced as an issue of power which required strategies for negotiation (see Essay Nine; and note too the sacrificing figure on the mosaic). And in interpreting the ancient past today, whether through written histories or museum displays, power is exercised in selecting and presenting the material. In short, power relationships condition the kind of culture that is created and the identities that people find for themselves within it.

But the specific historical context of the Roman empire adds another important collection of issues to do with power, particularly the power of the state and its institutions (such as the emperor, army and legislation). Not only does it mean that people get identified as ‘rulers’ or ‘ruled’, when they act in certain ways (seizing, imposing, resisting, losing or justifying power, for instance), but it throws into sharper focus the

relationship between ideology and power (usefully summarized by Millett et al., 1995, p.2).

As we have already seen in our analysis of how it treats issues of culture and identity, the El Djem mosaic is a highly ideological statement. The image of the empire it constructs has Rome at the centre of a relationship in which various important provinces offer goods and services (if that is the meaning of the sacrificing figure). All this is contained within a definite boundary. Is this perhaps the world united in peace and civilization that Romans had seen as a justifying vision for their earlier expansionism (cf. Virgil, *Aeneid* 6.851–3; Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 3.39)? Or does it perhaps celebrate the effects of peace won by war (see Essay Twelve), whereby provinces may flourish so long as Rome is at the centre? The fact that it was laid in a town house is perhaps also important when considering power structures in the Roman empire. Qualities symbolized by the city of Rome at the empire's centre (see Essay Three) were often replicated in towns and cities throughout the provinces, and in their civic institutions, formal culture and appearance, these communities articulated the central values of the empire and reinforced them in their locality: 'the city was both the major cultural construct and conveyancer of Roman imperialism abroad' (Whittaker, 1997, p.145; cf. Essay Eight). Certainly this can be seen elsewhere in Thysdrus (the Roman town at El Djem), which boasted an enormous amphitheatre like the Colosseum and many wealthy town houses with superb mosaics. Local élites could enjoy a 'Roman style' culture and so buy into the power and status it afforded them over the rest of the indigenous population. In fact, in the early days of the empire, this instinct for imitation, if not competition, was actively exploited by the Roman authorities as one of the ways in which they worked through local structures in a newly conquered territory, as Tacitus (*Agricola* 21) cynically observed in Britain. But by the second century AD, at the time this mosaic was laid, it was not so much a case of 'locals' imitating 'Romans' as élites across the empire sharing a similar culture (as argued in Essay Four).

A major problem with an artefact like the mosaic from El Djem, and the imagery it presents, is that it survives as evidence for one group in Roman society, while, as I said, the powerless within it are often voiceless in the ancient record. It would seem that this householder was happy to conform to the ideology of empire and accepted this rather 'public' subject matter in his private house, almost, it might seem, with pride. But conforming does not necessarily mean that there were no objections to the ideal, or no resistance; as Essay Ten will show, dissent from the empire could be couched in 'insider' terms. Perhaps it is possible to see the repetition of Africa in the two mosaics in the house as something more than local pride, especially since the other image puts her in the

centre of the design, and emphasizes more her ethnic features, but this can only remain a very tentative suggestion. The fact remains that there is little clear evidence for the reactions of other peoples in the Roman empire (apart from the Greeks and the Jews) to the cultural power of the empire; for the majority it represented something to be taken up, copied, and used for their own purposes of expression.

At this point in the essay I want to move away from the mosaic to take a wider view of two particular issues. One is the question of Romanization, which follows on from some of the matters of power which we have just been considering, and the other is the way time and space relate to some of these aspects of culture, identity and power.

Romanization

Earlier I offered a definition of 'Romanization' as the process whereby Roman culture spread to other areas. At that point only a simple explanation was needed, but its words were carefully chosen. For the fact is that 'Romanization' is quite a problematic term, and though invented to facilitate the interpretation of ancient material, it needs to be approached with caution; yet the dynamic of cultural change which it seeks to express is central to any discussion of culture, identity and power in the empire (cf. Woolf, 1998, pp.13–16).

The first difficulty is that scholars use the term in different ways. Some use it to describe more the processes by which local peoples assimilated Roman culture (cf. Hingley, 1997, p.84), while others reserve it more for the final outcome. It can be used to mean some two-way process: 'We must see Romanization as a process of dialectical change, rather than the influence of one "pure" culture upon others' (Millett, 1990, p.1). Or it can be seen more as a move in a single direction: 'Romanization is generally applied to all those processes whereby diverse indigenous peoples were either incorporated in or aligned themselves with the Roman Empire' (Barrett, 1997, p.51). Others ask how far 'romanization was deliberate and how much an accidental by-product of Roman conduct, resulting from actions like the imposition of a taxation system' (Millett et al., 1995, p.3). Some may concentrate on its economic facets, others on such aspects as literacy, ideology, or the spread of Graeco-Roman culture from the élites.

The second is a much more substantial problem. Implicit in the idea of Romanization (however it is used) is some notion that there was a homogeneous 'Roman' culture, and that this culture was both superior (in strength and quality) to the indigenous cultures it encountered, and has some unmistakable characteristics which can be found in the surviving evidence (see Freeman, 1993 and 1997). But this view of

Roman culture has become outmoded in many respects: there is now greater awareness of how diverse it was, and how different provinces responded to it in different ways and at different times. Questions are now being asked, for instance, about how far 'Romanization' was an underlying purpose of Roman expansion, what the signs of resistance to it were, what its negative effects were, and how much variation is to be found across the empire (is what happens in the north-western provinces, for instance, at all useful for understanding the very different situation in the Greek east?). (See, for example, Woolf, 1994, 1995, 1998; Webster and Cooper, 1996; Mattingly, 1997). Any answers to these questions have to acknowledge nuances and variations in cultural situations, and this is where close analysis of the evidence, written as well as material, becomes so important: observations at grass-roots level across the empire build up a wider picture and offer a productive way to proceed. But there is now a question mark hanging over the usefulness of the concept of Romanization, with its absolute tones, as a model for considering cultural change initiated by the Roman empire: can it provide a way of understanding the relationship between local provincial cultures and Rome?

At the heart of the concept of 'Romanization' is the question: was a Rome-centred culture imposed on provinces, or was it spread by locals, from below? Certainly a large amount of material survives across the empire which is to do with what might be termed 'official Roman culture' or 'imperial culture'; and it is not unreasonable to ask whether this could be seen as a 'homogeneous Roman culture' operating within a process of 'Romanization'. It involves the army, civil institutions (religious, legal and administrative) and their buildings and ceremonies, town planning and facilities such as baths and amphitheatres, as well as tokens of the imperial presence in the form of honorific statues, cult centres and coinage. It was underpinned by economic systems (see Essay Seven) and communication networks (see Essay Two).

Although 'Romanization' is itself a modern term, various ancient writers seem to describe a similar process (though usually for reasons of their own), with elements like these brought by Rome. Tacitus represents the introduction of such a lifestyle and its seductive 'improvements' as a deliberate aspect of Roman policy, at least in the case of newly conquered Britain (*Agricola* 21), while the sophist Aelius Aristides of Smyrna, writing later in the second century and from a very different part of the empire, eulogized the benefits and prosperity brought by Rome to reinvigorate the ancient cities of Asia Minor. But it would be wrong to see all these features as imposed by Roman authorities on the local communities. Many were created by local leaders themselves, albeit in the Roman vein: at Aphrodisias in Asia Minor, for instance, two local families were responsible for erecting an imperial

shrine, with its images of emperors alongside scenes of classical mythology (Smith, 1987), just as at Olympia Herodes Atticus built a large fountain, decorated with portraits of the imperial as well as his own family (Vermeule, 1977, p.84). (And the householder at El Djem used an 'official' Roman theme for his floor mosaic.) This pattern of imitation (*aemulatio*) is another factor in the complex processes of assimilation and acculturation, whereby local élites adopted for themselves some of the Roman practices, giving them further currency.

But despite the apparent similarity of much of what survives in the material record across the Roman world, behind it lies a diversity of actual cultural experience (as we have glimpsed). Some of this was inherent in the central 'Roman' culture itself: not only did it involve much that was and had been Greek, but it was regularly affected by the local cultures with which it was in contact across the empire (see Essay Four). It often reached more peripheral regions through intermediate provinces or via the army, thus passing through various cultural filters en route, and processes like this led to the development of 'hybrid' cultures. The same 'Roman' institutions might be invested with rather different cultural values in different places: for instance, in the Greek-speaking eastern part of the empire, the emperor cult was linked much more to a local civic context than to central Roman ideology (Price, 1984). Furthermore, some areas must have always remained multicultural in background despite being officially 'Roman'; these would include the great city of Rome itself, and military communities in forts such as those on Hadrian's Wall, where the 'Roman' soldiers in fact came from many lands.

It could be argued, then, that this 'centralized' imperial culture was more diverse than it might at first appear, and there are further arguments to be made as to how far it was actually imposed on the provinces (cf. Whittaker, 1997; Webster, 1997). A complicating factor is that it is so often difficult to establish the experiences of the local communities faced with this intervention: did they accept it, or resist, passively or actively? How can we tell? The sources usually show the Roman perspective (even when, like Tacitus, they purport to be addressing local reactions), and for some parts of the empire the evidence is sparser than others. This can be tantalizing for places such as Britain where the surviving evidence is primarily material, but for the eastern empire there is a good deal of evidence from literature (overt and otherwise) about Greek reactions to being in the Roman empire. For instance, it has been suggested that various religious cults based in the eastern Greek world were developed partly to counteract the propagation of the imperial cult across those areas (Elsner, 1997, p.189).

From both sides, then, the overall picture involved in 'Romanization' is complex. What is clear, though, is that a number of different processes

was involved, whereby Romans and locals adjusted in varying degrees to each other's cultures. Obviously there was some direct assimilation. But there are many signs that the cultural changes were not always just a one-way process, with locals taking on, for example, Roman cultural symbols. Romans too picked up on local characteristics, as is shown by their receptivity to local institutions (such as the dedications to local gods on Hadrian's Wall). Cultural contacts and exchanges of this kind must have served to build up the differentiated cultural patterns of the empire, producing a characteristic flexibility.

Time and space

This variability in the culture of the Roman empire makes it especially important to note the role of time and place in shaping change and diversity. So, to conclude, here are some brief comments and questions which they raise, as so far most of the themes and examples in this essay have been treated synchronically.

One of the major factors to note in relation to place is the cultural division between east and west of the empire. Not only did they use different languages (Greek in the east and Latin in the west), but they had different cultural histories, and were confronted by different experiences in their provinces. The north-west, for instance, contained territories which had had only limited experience of Graeco-Roman culture before their conquest, while the Greek east included many cities, ancient in their foundation, which flourished anew under the Roman empire. It is also important to remember so far as 'Romanization' is concerned that the cultural division was not just an issue for peripheral regions, but had affected Italy itself.

Then there is the relationship of the city of Rome to the rest of the empire: just as immigrants moved to it, attracted by its promise of wealth and power (Seneca, *Consolation of Helvia* 2.6), so others travelled out from it on various kinds of business. And when emperors themselves came from places other than Rome, how did that affect the capital and their home province? 'The city of Rome – capital and symbol' is the topic of Essay Three, which looks at realities and ideologies that underlay this critical relationship.

One of the key issues to consider regarding time is periodization, or how we divide past time into 'significant' periods, and what implications and consequences follow from this. A classic way of doing this for the empire has been in terms of the reigns of emperors, and is useful even now (see the list of key dates at the beginning of this volume). This approach was shaped very much by available ancient sources (Wells, 1992, p.31), but it also fitted in with a modern style of writing history

that privileged events in political or military history. Of course, it can be justified as a way of writing the political history of the Roman empire, since different emperors seemed to have had different interests in the empire at various times, as in its military defence, or in defining its limits; and sometimes these did affect cultural developments (witness Hadrian's philhellenism). Yet by and large these reigns are not really appropriate in looking for culture, identity and power as they are irrelevant to most of the source material. Perhaps a more effective way is to chart chronological developments as they occur in particular areas of the empire and then cross-relate them. For instance, one general picture that this might produce would suggest that two particular periods – in



Figure 1.7 The Gemma Augustea, cameo, first century AD. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

the late first century BC and the mid second century AD – saw a formative momentum in developing the culture of empire (Woolf, 1995; Whittaker, 1997, p.158).

These are some issues for real time and space; but the Roman empire also operated in their symbolic dimensions. The ambiguity of the great phrase ‘empire without end’ (*imperium sine fine*) promised to the Romans by Jupiter in the *Aeneid* blurs the end of time and space, and this reinforces the concept of universality which was so potent in Roman imperial imagery. It celebrated aims and achievement, and was repeated time and again in official and in private spheres. In the cameo shown in Figure 1.7, the emperor Augustus is depicted among the gods and cosmic personifications, presiding over a Roman triumph that was, it is implied, unending.

What the El Djem mosaic shows, however, is that as the real time of the Roman empire moved on, the image of Rome at the centre of the world might remain, but surrounded now by other parts of the empire with their own distinctive cultural identities, albeit contained in the context of imperial power (cf. Smith, 1987, especially pp.76–7). Culture, identity and power remain inextricably interconnected even though the way they are represented may shift over time. Tracing movements like these requires close attention to the ancient sources, and the essays that follow combine this with discussion of wider questions and contexts.

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