
by Tim Murphy

In 89 BC, Roman legionaries intervened in the Black Sea region to curb the ambitions of Mithridates VI of Pontos. By the time of the Arrian of Nikomedeia’s Periplus (AD 130), a stock-taking of Roman domination in the region at its greatest extent, Rome controlled two-thirds of the Black Sea shoreline. Roman control was enforced through a variety of mechanisms, from military annexation to alliances with native rulers. The new political and cultural situation involved the interplay of Roman, Hellenistic and local influences: although the Romans introduced a new material culture and transformed the civic landscape in provinces dominated by Greek culture, the populations of the East did not adopt Roman culture or identify themselves as Romans to the same degree as provincials in the Western part of the Empire.

This volume includes nine of the papers presented at the fifth international conference of the Centre for Black Sea Studies, which was held at Esbjerg in 2005 and which was dedicated to exploring the Roman impact in the region. In his Introduction, Tønnes Bekker-Nielsen traces the changes during the past century in the content and implications of the term “Romanisation” and observes that it remains a controversial and much debated concept. The term’s imperialist connotations were epitomized by Mikhail Rostovtzeff’s description of Romanisation as the “natural attraction to a higher form of life”. The classical theory of Romanisation was subjected to successive critiques during the twentieth century, for example by scholarship inspired by the breakup of the colonial empires after the Second World War and, later, by increased interest in the historical sociology of resistance and revolution. Today, the classical idea of Romanisation does not sit at all well with postmodern ideas of “identity choice” and “cultural bricolage”. It has become, Bekker-Nielsen says, “the R-word of ancient history, banned from polite academic conversation” (12).

While many different perspectives on Romanisation are included in the more conceptually-oriented contributions to this volume, the collection opens with two chapters that chart, in relatively objective terms, the extent of the “domination” referred to in the book’s sub-title. The first paper, by Jakob Munk Højte, traces the evolution of aspects of daily life in Pontos in the period following the final collapse of the Pontic forces and the flight of Mithridates VI in 66 BC. His survey of the somewhat limited archaeological evidence suggests that a host of important changes
occurred as a consequence of Roman influence, including, for example, the emergence of new settlement patterns; the introduction of local coinage; the introduction of eras related to a city’s incorporation by Rome; the more common use of Latin names; and new means of self-expression, both individually and for communities as a whole. The latter trend is primarily visible through the “epigraphic habit”, or the use of inscriptions in public and private contexts, which was “a fundamental feature of participation in the Graeco-Roman cultural sphere” (23).

Although essentially we possess only inscriptions written on stone, it appears that the custom of erecting inscribed monuments – particularly of a funerary nature – to commemorate oneself and one’s family began on the coast during the first century AD and then spread among the population of the hinterland. Højte remarks that it is difficult to say whether all these changes were perceived as “Romanisation” by the local population, “but they were certainly a product of the favourable conditions offered by the Pax Romana” (29).

Liviu Petculecu’s paper focuses on the the north-eastern part of Moesia Inferior. The Roman army first entered this area – which later became part of Scythia Minor and is now in Dobrudja – in 72-71 BC, during the war against Mithridates. Petculecu’s survey suggests that, with the exception of the Greek towns on the coast, which kept their traditions despite the strong influence of the Roman civilization, that part of the territory of Dobrudja that is now in southern Romania was thoroughly Romanised and Latinised during the second century AD. This was primarily as a result of the presence of a considerable number of troops that were required to guard the Danube and the attendant administrative and social infrastructure.

The next three papers focus on the Roman influence and Greek reactions in the double province of Bithynia-Pontus, the part of the Empire that features most prominently in this collection and which is located in what is now northern Turkey. The new political and administrative situation in the region was particularly complex for the local upper classes. For them, as Daniela Dueck observes, there was “a potential triple cultural identity: as people born in the region with a natural adherence to their geographical and physical origins; as intellectuals who had acquired a traditional Hellenistic education and lived in accordance with Hellenistic customs; and as inhabitants of the Roman Empire who in the course of time were often granted Roman citizenship” (43). To explore this potential multiplicity of identity, Dueck eschews the tradition of discussing the work of well-known authors whose fame rests largely on relatively well-preserved books and instead looks to the incomplete and epitomized work of Memnon of Herakleia, who lived probably sometime during the first century AD. We possess only an abridged version of Memnon’s History of Herakleia Pontike, and in the summary of his work by Photios, a ninth century patriarch of Constantinople whose Bibliotheca summarized the historiographical and theological works in his possession, we find several aspects that suggest the intentions or tendencies of the epitomizer rather than of the original author. Declaring an interest more in non-factual references and judgmental and personal allusions than in the truthfulness of details, Dueck insists that we can discover meaningful information in “fractured” works such as Memnon’s History.
Memnon had a biographical and moralistic approach to history but while his portrayal of the nature of the Romans generally depends on the individuals concerned, he reflected also the tendency to present “bad” Romans as exceptions to emphasize the rule, that is, the overall beneficiant effect of Roman imperialism. Memnon’s history charts three phases in the historical relations between Rome and Herakleia: official friendship; hostility deriving mainly from the fact that Herakleia was forced to join Mithridates in his war against Rome in 74 BC; and renewed friendship with Julius Caesar in 47 BC. Memnon assesses the Romans almost exclusively in relation to their involvement with Herakleia – the only internal Roman political development to which he refers is the conflict between Sulla and Marius for control of the Roman state during the first century BC – and Dueck argues that his history is “a story of focus, periphery and their interchangeable relationships” (58). While, for Memnon, Herakleia was the political and geographical focus and the rest of the world the periphery, from a Roman point of view Herakleia was marginal; yet Dueck concludes that in this work there is no significant conflict between patriotism and Roman loyalty and that, even with specific criticisms, “Greek and Roman identities could cohabit peacefully” (58).

Greek self-consciousness and scepticism towards Roman culture is often ascribed to intellectual resistance associated with the literary movement “the Second Sophistic”, a tradition from the first to the third century AD in which the authors’ linguistic style was inspired by that used by Greek Athenian writers, particularly in the fifth century BC. In a discussion of the diverse responses to Roman hegemony and the cultural influence of Rome among six members of the Greek intellectual elite, Jesper Majbom Madsen examines the level of resistance offered by this literary movement. He finds the views of the authors to be in fact very different and often related to their personal experiences. He examines three authors from Bithynia – Dion of Prusa, Arrian of Nikomedeia and Cassius Dion of Nikaia – and observes, for example, that the writings of Arrian express overall satisfaction with Roman hegemony, as would be expected from someone who was appointed governor of Cappadocia in the middle of the second century AD, while Dion of Prusa’s negative attitude to Rome developed after Domitian forced him into exile and changed his political status both in Rome and locally.

Madsen’s case study of how the local elite in Bithynia-Pontus responded to the coming of Rome indicates that its members, through careers in the Roman administration and the use of Roman names, were uniformly eager to present themselves as Roman and as members of the Roman community. Madsen concludes that the works of Dion of Prusa in particular do not represent the general attitude among members of the elite communities in the Greek cities in Bithynia-Pontus, but should be read in light of Dion’s view that Greeks were to accept Roman rule but not Roman culture, and therefore as a criticism of the increased Greek interest in Roman traditions and the widespread adoption of Roman identity.

Thomas Corsten’s short paper examines Roman influence on the role and status of
the indigenous Thracian population in Bithynia and concludes, on the basis of inscriptions of the Roman imperial period, that the formerly wealthy Bithynian landowning elite must have joined the middle- and lower-class Thraco-Bithynian population. As Bekker-Nielsen remarks in the Introduction, the notion of wholesale replacement of the old Thraco-Bithynian gentry by a new class of Roman entrepreneurial landowners can be related to the Rostovtzeff’s contested claim that Romanisation in the conquered western provinces was carried out by a class of *immigré* kulaks: “It addresses complex issues concerning the social structure and ethnic differentiation of provincial society, a subject that would merit a conference or a volume of its own.” (13)

Instead of viewing the Roman Black Sea from an indigenous perspective, the papers by Greg Woolf and Bekker-Nielsen try to view Bithynia-Pontus through the eyes of the Romans, particularly Pliny the Younger, who was appointed governor in 110 AD. Woolf disputes the conventional view that book ten of Pliny’s *Letters* is unlike books 1-9 in that it was never intended for publication. According to Woolf, the notion that book ten can be treated as essentially equivalent to an archive of the total correspondence between one governor and the emperor, Trajan, is not sustainable: Pliny’s decision to mention no problems that could not be resolved at once must have been deliberate; and it can be no accident that “Trajan and Pliny always emerge so well from the correspondence” (97). Book ten of the *Letters* is not a collection of confidential despatches from the Euxine front, argues Woolf, but is rather “an artfully constructed image of the good aristocrat in his province, and of the best of emperors in Rome” (103).

Woolf accepts, however, that the correspondence does offer glimpses of the ideology of Roman government and of the view of Pontos from Rome. We can detect an ideology of provincial rule as the application of general virtues, rather than the work of knowledgeable specialists; and Woolf notes also that Pliny’s province posed no imaginative challenge for him, it was rendered in any way that suited Pliny’s needs. This exhibits “an often remarked feature of Roman engagement with their empire, one that distinguishes Roman imperial culture from that of more modern empires”: the lack of “the appetite for the alien”, or the fascination and desire to engage with the exotic “that took sexual, gastronomic, aesthetic, poetic, architectural, scientific and even mystical forms” (105).

Bekker-Nielsen bases his study of local politics in an imperial context in part on a collection of municipal speeches by the local politician and orator who featured in Madsen’s account of the “Second Sophistic”, Dion of Prusa, and we also learn more of book ten of Pliny’s *Letters*. Bekker-Nielsen’s study explores municipal politics at the lower levels under four headings: the power of money; of minor officials; of Rome; and of rumour and innuendo; and he then presents two case studies, one from Ephesos in Asia and the other concerning one of Dion’s many conflicts with influential Bithynians. The conflict, originally involving payment for a building project that the city is effectively purchasing from Dion, escalates when Dion’s opponents argue that his placing of a portrait of the emperor near the burial places of
his wife and son is disrespectful and provides the foundation for a charge of *maiestas*. Bekker-Nielsen assesses the manner in which Pliny seeks advice from Trajan, who dismisses the *maiestas* charge as irrelevant but insists that Dion must open his account books for inspection. The power of Rome is filtered by the influence of rumour and innuendo and Bekker-Nielsen argues that, in the course of the dispute and its resolution, both Dion and Pliny exaggerated their personal familiarity with Trajan.

The papers by Anne Marie-Carsten and Jørgen Christian Meyer both conceptualise cultural interaction as a process between cultural traditions that are themselves developing and changing. Both authors deal with the cultural diversity and readiness of the dominant population to accept and even adopt the *mores* of their subjects when the situation called for it. Bekker-Nielsen remarks in the Introduction that modern populist-xenophobic politicians see cultural diversity as a threat to the stability of society, but Carsten’s paper, which does not deal specifically with Romanisation, challenges such myopic understandings. In a stimulating analysis of colonialism and the concept of culture, Carsten emphasises the central role of material culture in constructing human identity. She discusses how things are “signs that carry references, contexts, relations and origins” in the context of artefacts from the Persian empire following the conquest of Sardis in the 540s BC. Material evidence suggests that the transformation of the Lydian kingdom into a Persian satrapy was founded on a new hybrid culture headed by a transformed local elite. This explains to some extent the social resilience of Achaemenid structures of dominance and Carsten concludes that empire building is not only a question of power politics, dominance and submission, “but rather a case of creative negotiation as well as forceful and conscious use of cultural power. And that out of chaos, stress, and tension grow artistic quality and creativity” (130).

Meyer’s concluding essay emphasises that the Romans won the peace, *pax Romana*, as well as the wars, and that, although not adverse to brutal retaliatory measures, the Romans are noted most for their administrative capacity. In assessing the complex issue of identity and loyalty in the ancient world, Meyer considers “the group in the Roman Empire that definitely had no positive feelings about ‘what the Romans had done for them’, namely the Jews” (137). In the Jewish war of 66-73 AD, provoked by the Roman procurator’s unwise decision to charge the Temple in Jerusalem a tax, the Jews were able to call forth a massive horizontal mobilisation against a common enemy based on a high degree of impersonal cohesion, on one single, shared identity. Among non-Jewish populations, however, that is in societies with multi-identities and strong vertical or personal cohesion from micro to macro level, Romanisation followed a phased pattern in which the initial periods of conquest and consolidation were followed by phases of adaptation and full integration. Meyer suggests that the Romans had more to offer than the ability to maintain law and order: “What differentiated the Romans from most other empire builders was their willingness to share the fruits of the Empire with the subdued population, whether they were inhabitants of cities on the same cultural level as themselves or tribal populations with a less sophisticated way of life” (134).
One of the central dialectics at work in the period of history covered by this book is between the traditionalist and parochial on the one hand, and the dynamic and cosmopolitan on the other. The contributors offer diverse perspectives on “Romanisation” and the volume provides much insight into the nature of social and cultural change in the Black Sea region during its Roman period, and in particular into the interplay between local, Greek and Roman influences. It is regrettable that more of the conference papers were not included, and particularly that the collection does not include any paper devoted specifically to the reception of Roman law in the region. More maps, of both a literal and a figurative kind, could also have been provided. For example, Højte’s opening chapter provides sources for the long and very complex process of transforming the territory of the Pontic kingdom into the Roman provinces of Bithynia and Pontos, Galatia and Cappadocia, but an overview of this and parallel processes elsewhere would have provided valuable context for the collection. Although it cannot claim to be anything like a comprehensive account, this volume is nonetheless an essential contribution to contemporary understanding of the Roman influence in the Black Sea region.

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