The Dark Side of the Empire: Roman Expansionism between Object Agency and Predatory Regime

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Abstract: This paper offers a critique of some recent new materialist approaches and their application to Roman expansionism. According to certain authors, 'Romanisation' should be about "*understanding objects in motion*", a perspective that carries ethical implications. In contrast, we introduce the notion of a predatory political economy as an alternative for conceptualising Late Republican and Early Imperial Rome. Our approach aims to make visible the dark sides of Roman expansionism in order to produce a more balanced and inclusive account. Two archaeological cases studies –Roman conquest and rural communities– are presented to illustrate the potential of such a perspective.

1. New materialism: Towards a new understanding of the Roman world?

In a discussion article, published in *Archaeological Dialogues* in 2014, Versluys proposed a new understanding of the much-debated concept of 'Romanisation' as one of 'objects in motion'. Alongside a strong focus on 'globalisation', he urges Roman archaeologists to recognise the heuristic value of what he calls 'diasporas of material culture' (Versluys 2014:15) and to follow the 'object turn' or 'material-cultural turn' making: "*material culture, with its stylistic and material properties (and thus agency […]), central to our understanding of the Roman world*" (Versluys 2014:16). Although other aspects of his manifesto received profound discussion, his plea for object agency remained largely unchallenged.

However, besides the call in favour of 'globalisation' (Pitts and Versluys 2015), this is actually the most contentious aspect of Versluys' revision of 'Romanisation'. On the basis of the 'material turn', Versluys (2017:192) invites us "*to rewrite history as a particular relationship between objects and people with things as the agents provocateurs of (historical) change*". Our problem with this object agency approach is that it represents a soft-culturalist perspective which offers an unbalanced view of the working of imperialism, since it marginalises the hard power dimensions, the violence and the extreme social hierarchies. Despite some recent efforts to further promote it (Van Oyen 2017), the implications of adopting 'new materialism' in the study of Roman expansionism can best be gauged by

looking at other fields: disciplines such as art history, anthropology and visual culture studies have opened themselves to this particular strand of posthumanism over the last 20 years (Gamble et al. 2019; Green 2012).

It is not the purpose of this article to attempt any comprehensive overview of the diverse and sometimes partly intermingled approaches encompassed under the 'umbrella' term of posthumanism (Ferrando 2013). Within archaeology they include, but are not limited to, new materialisms, symmetrical approaches and the ontological turn (cf. Fernández-Götz et al. forthcoming). Some of the critiques offered by those trends have rightly spotted shortcomings of traditional approaches as well as opened interesting new avenues for reflection. Nevertheless, there are some issues with the way certain authors have applied the novel perspectives:

1) Firstly, the concept of 'flat ontologies', as postulated by many proponents of symmetrical archaeology (Witmore 2014) under the inspiration of Actor-Network Theory (Latour 2005), often fails to effectively identify inequality, power differences and cause-effect relationships (Hodder 2014; Preucel 2012). This can limit archaeology's capacity for social critique, a weakness that is particularly evident when trying to understand highly hierarchical state formations such as the Roman Empire.
2) Secondly, the emphasis of some posthumanist views –particularly those advocating Object Oriented Ontologies (OOO)– on 'things-in-themselves' (Olsen 2010), has been criticised for leading to a new form of object fetishism or 'antiquarianism' (Barrett 2016). From our perspective, archaeology's ultimate aim should not be the study of things, but of people through things.
3) Thirdly, the expansion of the concept of agency to objects without establishing a differentiation between human and non-human forms of agency. Following Robb (2015), we could consider that things have a type of agency in the sense that they act back on people, but this would be different from human agency. There should be no doubt that things 'shape the mind' (Malafouris 2013) and actively construct people's identities and 'being in the world', but this acknowledgement of their importance is not the same as granting objects that power without the human component (Ribeiro 2019; Van Dyke 2015). As an alternative, we could consider Stockhammer's (2019) concept of 'things effectancy': it acknowledges the effects that objects have on people (rightly recognised by Gosden 2005 in his study of Britain's incorporation into the

Roman Empire), but serves as a counter-notion to human agency and at the same time avoids the risk of anthropomorphising things.

2. Where are the ethics?

Our main concern with a lot of 'new materialist' approaches resides in the way they ascribe agency to objects, transforming them into historical players in their own right to the detriment of the study of human agency and social structure. In the context of Roman archaeology, the new materialist approach is exemplified, among others, by Woolf's quote: "*As we move beyond representation and instrumentality we take a great weight of responsibility off the shoulders of Roman actors. Humans are no longer the sole drivers of Roman success and Roman failure. […] Neither expansion nor collapse is to be explained primarily in terms of human values, ideologies, beliefs or motivations […] Taking things seriously allows us to put people in perspective*" (Woolf 2017:216).

This and other similar perspectives risk leaving aside the darkest aspects of social life in Rome and other imperial powers (e.g. enslavement, mass violence, sharp inequalities), thus putting the focus on what González-Ruibal (2019) has labeled as the 'soft politics' or 'political agnosticism' of many new materialist approaches (see also Gardner 2016). By shifting attention from people to objects, views based on 'the agency of Roman things' contribute to the production of a 'sanitised past' which has implications for the present (Rekret 2016). Blaming objects for the sins and bad intentions of the people who create and use them could easily serve as a witty thought-experiment about the daggers used in the assassination of Julius Caesar, but becomes a serious issue if we adopt the same 'things agency' perspective to the weapons used to kill millions of people during the Roman conquests. While some might argue that making these considerations about events that took place around 2,000 years ago constitutes a harmless intellectual exercise, the concerning implications of some new materialist approaches become evident if we apply the same logic to more recent events. Thus, the same perspective could come in handy in the defence of international stockbrokers who, it could be argued, in 2008 were simply overwhelmed by complex algorithms and not by the rapacious mindset of neoliberal capitalism; or, in its more extreme form, it could be used to take responsibility away from states and individuals in cases of modern wars and crimes against humanity, such as the Yugoslav Wars, Rwanda genocide or the Iraq invasion. Recognising the active role of material culture in social life should not lead us to underestimate human responsibility on the one hand, and suffering, on the other.

When analysing Roman expansionism, the above reflections are about much more than the material culture of a bygone empire: if we put the focus on 'things agency' instead of on human actions and social structures, we end up with an opaque narrative which emphasises the metahistorical qualities of objects over their value as historical sources. De-historicising means de-humanising, and more crucially it also means moving away from the possibility to develop empathy through our understanding of the past (Snyder 2017). Thus, Versluys' (2014:19) statement that "*Romanization is about understanding objects in motion*" and Van Oyen's (2017:287) proposal that "*the historical issue at the roots of the Romanization debate revolves around a particular patterning of material culture*" risk hiding or forgetting the human stories behind the process of Roman expansion, including the suffering caused by military actions. These approaches can lead to ignoring or at least understating that the conquest campaigns were, ultimately, aggressive acts that brought with them death and loss of liberty for millions of people. Illustrative is Appian's (*Celt.* 1.2) claim that Caesar killed one million Gauls and enslaved another million, out of a total population of four million. Although these figures might be exaggerated, even if we assume only half or a third the impact in terms of percentage of the total population is comparable to some of the cruellest episodes in human history, such as the two World Wars.

3. A predatory political economy

As a –partly complementary– alternative to previous models that aim to analyse Roman expansionism, in this paper we would like to introduce the concept of 'predatory regime' in order to define the political economy of Late Republican and Early Imperial Rome. Our use of the term is based on the application by González-Ruibal (2015:424) who, following Mbembe (2001), describes predatory regimes as being "*characterised by the militarization of power and trade, pillage as an economic strategy, the pursuit of private interest under public command and the conversion of brute violence into legitimate authority*". Especially in the last two centuries BC and the first century AD, Rome's foreign policy was largely driven by the personal interest of elite factions and individuals who used warfare and the extraction of external resources (both human –slaves– and non-human –e.g. minerals, grain, textiles) as a means to increase their wealth and prestige. The period of the Late Republic was marked by social and political violence, both internalised in the form of civil war and externalised by conquering new territories (Barrandon 2018; Lange and Vervaet 2019; Maschek 2018). Rather than a 'grand design' strategy by a state authority following an elaborate plan, we observe a process of exterior conquest that can often be described as the pillage of foreign

lands for personal gain. State gain, in this model, was in many instances just a secondary outcome of individual and familial agendas. Caesar's Gallic war provides a clear example, but there are also cases of longer military engagement and exploitation such as the Iberian Peninsula.

In fact, the characteristics of a predatory regime can be well observed in 2nd-1st century BC *Hispania*, where Roman actions encompassed the range of activities listed by González-Ruibal (2015:425): "*Predatory activities can be destructive (pillage, slave raids, total war) or productive (trade, mining, plantations). In the latter case, however, they always imply a systematic exploitation of resources beyond the threshold of social or natural sustainability*".

It should be noted, however, that the predatory model did not have the same intensity in all the territories occupied by Rome nor over the entire duration of the Roman state. The model of violent military conquest and large-scale plundering applies to some territories (e.g. large parts of Gaul, Iberia and Dacia), but not to others. Moreover, while neither 'Romans' nor 'natives' were homogeneous groups, applying binary terms like conqueror:conquered, Roman:native or domination:resistance can be useful for some instances of military conquest and for the decades afterwards, but it loses its sense in later times.

By conceptualising the expanding Roman state as a predatory system we aim to contribute to decolonising Roman studies in the sense of paying more attention to the 'dark sides' of imperialism. Thus, we argue that instead of moving the focus from humans to things we should pay more attention to the human component and put subaltern groups into the forefront. This means making visible those 'left behind' by the conquest process, as well as drawing attention to the mechanisms of imperial domination. Our theoretical perspective resonates with the work of Latin American scholars such as Mignolo (2011), who applies decolonial thought to highlight the dark sides of Modernity. Materiality plays a key role in predation, from military equipment and infrastructure to landscape transformation and the circulation of goods through raids or trade (González-Ruibal 2015). Changes in the material world enabled new ways of carrying out warfare and exploitation, but not in the sense of an extreme version of 'things agency' that takes agency and responsibility away from humans, but rather as part of a bidirectional process in which people create material culture and at the same time are constructed by it.

4. The dark side of the Empire: Two case studies

In what follows we would like to briefly present two examples of themes in which archaeology is providing new insights into the 'dark sides' of Roman state power.

a) Beyond limes archaeology: New perspectives on the Roman conquest

The archaeological research of the last few decades is revolutionising our knowledge of the Roman conquest of Western and Central Europe, with new investigations that are sometimes confirming information from written sources but others challenging official accounts or uncovering conflict scenes that were previously unknown (Fernández-Götz and Roymans 2018; Fitzpatrick and Haselgrove 2019). In addition to the ever-expanding corpus of data, there is also a qualitative difference in the way the Roman military is approached by a growing number of scholars. Traditional studies focused predominantly on so-called *limes* archaeology, i.e. Roman military infrastructure in the provinces during the post-conquest period. While this approach is still valuable (Breeze 2018), there is increasing interest in studying the moment of the Roman conquest itself, as well as its immediate aftermath. Within the dominant paradigm of *limes* archaeology, the Roman army is viewed as the defender of peace and civilian life in the provinces against external enemies. By contrast, our complementary approach analyses the role of the Roman military as aggressor during the expansion, including episodes of mass violence, enslavement and sometimes genocide (Roymans and Fernández-Götz 2019).

Archaeology can make a fundamental contribution by investigating the geographical dimension and the direct social impact of the conquests on the affected societies. The increasing use of techniques such as LIDAR, geophysics and systematic metal detector surveys is leading to the identification of numerous Roman marching camps, sieges of indigenous hillforts and battle scenes, while the detailed study of settlement patterns allows for assessing the demographic impact of the conquest in test regions.

Two of the scenarios where archaeological studies are more substantially changing previous narratives are northern Gaul (Roymans 2019) and northern Iberia (Camino et al. 2015; Peralta et al. 2019). Around two decades ago, Caesar's actions in the northern frontier (58-51 BC) and Augustus' Cantabrian Wars (29-19 BC) were almost untraceable in the archaeological record. This led many scholars –both archaeologists and ancient historians– to conclude that the conquest of those regions had limited societal impact, despite classical sources referring to the cruelty of the campaigns and the fierce resistance by native populations. This picture has now changed completely, with archaeology providing ample evidence for the massive scale of Rome's military engagement and the dramatic consequences for many local communities. To name just a few examples from northern Gaul, the fortification of Thuin has been identified as the *oppidum* of the Aduatuci conquered in 57 BC, an event after which the

entire population of over 50,000 individuals were sold as slaves. The site of Kessel/Lith has been reinterpreted as the scene of the Roman massacre of the Tencteri and Usipetes in 55 BC, an act classifiable as genocidal mass killing of, at least, tens of thousands of people, including women and children (Figure 1). On a larger geographical scale, the analysis of settlement evidence suggests a significant demographic decrease in the territory of the Eburones, which can be plausibly linked with the Caesarian campaigns (Roymans 2019). In northern Iberia, archaeological work has provided spectacular evidence for the Roman attack and destruction of indigenous hillforts such as La Loma and Monte Bernorio, identified over 60 Roman camps, and allowed to trace the routes followed by the legions in their advance into the Cantabrian Mountains (Camino et al. 2015; Peralta et al. 2019).

b) The archaeology of rural communities as part of a hierarchical imperial system

Until recently, rural archaeology in the northwestern provinces was dominated by the 'Romanisation' narrative with its focus on the period of the '*Pax Romana*' and themes like the emergence of villa landscapes and the development of markets. This narrative reflects an ideal of 'civilisation' in which the Roman army is portrayed in the role of the guardian of peace. However, the influence of postcolonialism and critical heritage is starting to create more space for alternative stories about dramatic rural transformations that underline the key role played by imperial agency and extreme social hierarchies. This is illustrated by three major transformations that had a deep impact on rural populations in *Germania inferior* (Roymans et al. forthcoming).

First, there is the phase of the extremely violent Caesarian conquest of the Lower Rhine, resulting in dramatic demographic losses for the indigenous population. Here, Caesar left behind landscapes of trauma and terror. As mentioned above, archaeology can study the impact of his campaigns through palaeo-demographic research and by identifying major conflict sites (Roymans 2019).

Second, there is the phase of fundamental reorganisation of the Lower Rhine in the post-conquest period, characterised by the large-scale immigration of 'Germanic' groups from the east bank of the Rhine. This process was largely initiated and managed by the imperial administration and resulted in the ethnogenesis of new tribal formations, often consisting of a mixture of immigrant groups and local remaining autochthonous populations (Roymans 2004). Archaeology has the potential to assess the historical model of migration and ethnogenesis through conventional material culture studies combined with isotopic analysis. Especially in the 1st century AD, rural populations in *Germania inferior* were intensively

exploited as a breeding ground for auxiliary soldiers. The constant drain of manpower for the Roman army had profound social effects and resulted in a rapid diffusion of elements of Roman military culture among rural communities. The impetus behind this process was the imperial policy to intensively exploit Lower Rhine groups as soldiers.

Finally, in the second half of the 3rd century AD we again observe a dramatic demographic decline among rural groups. The archaeological record indicates an almost complete depopulation of rural areas in the southern Netherlands and northern Belgium. The explanations for this collapse are still debated, but everything suggests that imperial agency played a significant role. In this context, we can refer to written sources about forced deportations of Lower Rhine groups to interior Gaul (Heeren 2015).

5. Conclusion

Modern scholars should be careful not to sanitise the past, particularly in those cases where ancient sources and archaeology provide ample evidence for the darkest side of imperialism (Figure 2). While processes of collaboration, integration and hybridisation undoubtedly existed, in order to produce a holistic history we cannot ignore the most aggressive side of Roman expansion. It is not our intention to disregard the concept of object-scapes in its entirety (some applications certainly contain valuable elements, e.g. Pitts 2019), but centring discussions on Roman expansionism around ‘objects in motion’ and ‘things agency’ risks missing or minimising crucial human aspects such as aggression, resistance and suffering. Imperial agency and asymmetrical power relations remain largely out of the picture within new materialist approaches, which are therefore unable to offer a balanced perspective on the functioning of empires –ancient and modern. In fact, these perspectives often resemble neoliberal narratives which portray an idealised view of modern-day globalisation focused on the movement and consumption of goods and ideas, leaving little or no mention of the more negative sides associated with the exploitation of people and resources.

All empires have ‘bright’ and ‘dark’ sides, which are fundamentally entwined. The bright aspects are often reflected in monumental public buildings, sumptuous residences of the upper classes and developed infrastructure. But the dark sides equally need to be taken into account. In the case of the Roman Empire, the dominant narratives have traditionally emphasised the bright aspects, from the spread of literacy to villa landscapes, public architecture, and high-quality tablewares. However, in order to develop a more inclusive and balanced account we also need to acknowledge the more brutal sides, from mass enslavement and destruction to huge wealth disparities. Our claim for a predatory model is therefore not

aimed at ‘demonising’ Roman expansionism, but providing a new framework that contributes to a better understanding and allows comparisons with similar cases of expanding imperial powers throughout history. If we want to reclaim the ‘people without history’ and give voice to the voiceless, their stories of suffering and oppression need to be made visible: the killed, the enslaved, the marginalised, the displaced, the oppressed. A holistic history should include winners and losers, and all those who cannot be easily assigned to one of these two poles, and who simply tried to adapt as best as they could to the changing world in which they lived.

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Figure Captions

Figure 1. Human remains from a battle-related find complex dredged from the River Meuse at Kessel-Lith (NL), probably related to Caesar's massacre of the Germanic Tencteri and Usipetes in 55 BC. After Roymans 2004; Photo M. Ydo.

Figure 2. The destruction of a Germanic village by Roman troops during the Marcomannic Wars (166-180). Scene from the Column of Marcus Aurelius at Rome. Image copyright: Alamy.