MATERIAL CULTURE IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE

TANNER (J.), GARDNER (A.) (edd.) *Materialising the Roman Empire*. Pp. xxviii + 324, colour figs, b/w & colour ills, b/w & colour maps. London: UCL Press, 2024. Paper, £35. ISBN: 978-1-80008-399-8. Open access.

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Many readers will be familiar with experiencing some divergence between academic conferences and the contents of subsequently emerging edited proceedings. *Materialising the Roman Empire* certainly falls into this category, with roughly half of the original list of speakers not delivering manuscripts as planned and presenting the editors with a dilemma: publish a collection with markedly different and less ambitious aims than the original conference or cancel the project in its entirety. The details of the situation are described with refreshing frankness in the volume's preface by Tanner, who provides an account of how a conference held in Beijing in April 2018 on 'Materialising Empire in Ancient Rome and Han Dynasty China' eventually turned into the present volume focused solely on the Roman empire. This story is worth reading for anyone interested in repeating the laudable aims of the project; that is, to bring together western and Chinese scholars to meaningfully pursue overdue archaeological comparisons between the Roman empire and Han China. Despite concerted efforts made by the organisers to pair contributors thematically and create pathways to bilingual publication, it seems the project was eventually scuppered by most papers on Han China not materialising. In the end, the editors decided there was enough value in forging ahead with the Roman chapters alone. But this does beg the question of whether one half of a project designed specifically for comparative analysis can offer sufficiently novel insights without the corresponding missing half.

Setting out the purpose of the reimagined volume, Gardner's introduction confidently states that the book 'defines an innovative research agenda for Roman archaeology, highlighting diverse ways in which the Empire was made materially tangible in the lives of its inhabitants' (p. 1). The premise that material culture was integral and active in the processes of Roman imperialism is surely one that is implicit in much research in recent decades, but rarely is it framed in such direct terms. For context, a great deal of recent archaeological research has focused on illuminating the material manifestation of facets of social and cultural identity within the Roman empire. However, the overwhelming tendency so far has been for material culture to be treated as a passive receptor or proxy for human activities and intentions. Giving material culture greater primacy, as implied by the title and introduction to this volume, ought to help make better sense of the distinct contribution of archaeology to the study of ancient worlds, rather than falling back on unbalanced older research agendas routinely deriving from readings of ancient written sources (cf. A. Van Oyen and M. Pitts [edd.], *Materialising Roman Histories* [2017]).

Gardner goes on to situate a range of approaches to materialising empire within a broader critical overview of developments in the field of theory in Roman archaeology. Much of this overview will be familiar to those who have followed Gardner's recent work, for example, in championing the 1990s TRAC movement (Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference, held largely in Britain) as one of the most thoroughly post-colonial fields of archaeology other than heritage studies, as well as his lukewarm appraisal of novel directions involving ideas of globalisation (A. Gardner, 'Thinking about Roman Imperialism: Postcolonialism, Globalisation and Beyond?', *Britannia* 44 [2013], 1–25) and, more recently, the so-called New Materialism (A. Gardner, 'Re-balancing the

Romans', *Antiquity* 94 [2020], 1640–2). Gardner's position has since shifted from advocating the study of institutions to drawing upon the interdisciplinary field of Border Studies, which he explores in greater detail in the penultimate chapter on frontiers. The general stance of Gardner's introduction is that Roman archaeology can only benefit from bringing together these various theoretical approaches in a complementary fashion, as opposed to pitting one against the other, since neglecting power dynamics, complex connectivity or close understanding of material culture can all be detrimental in various ways. Gardner suggests that, for Roman archaeology to remain relevant in the face of real-world crises, its practitioners ought to do more to bring the analysis of the materiality of (Roman) imperialism into dialogue with contemporary debates on subjects like decolonisation.

Unfortunately, the following chapters fail to live up to the forward-thinking rallying call of the volume's introduction. To be clear, this is not through the fault of the authors, who evidently prepared their contributions to explore archaeological comparisons between the Roman empire and Han China, and not a new research agenda for materialising the Roman empire. What follows are a series of handbook-style chapters that give up-to-date overviews of mostly well-worn topics, including Roman roads (R. Laurence), writing (J. Pearce), coinage (C. Howgego), trade (A. Wilson), urbanism (L. Revell), art (P. Stewart), religion (T. Derks) and frontiers (Gardner). Often the contributions foreground case studies that are likely already familiar to most undergraduate students studying classical subjects, for example the Via Appia, early imperial coin denominations, *terra sigillata* distributions, amphorae from the Monte Testaccio, the Prima Porta Augustus, the Pantheon and the Ara Pacis etc. Many of the contributions therefore read as thoughtful introductions, rather than advocating future directions or innovative lines of inquiry. The chapters by R. Redfern (on slavery) and A. Van Oyen (on craft production) arguably deviate the most in going beyond the handbook style of the other chapters. Redfern, invited to contribute after the original conference took place, comes closest to addressing the revised forward-thinking agenda outlined in Gardner's introduction. This chapter provides a valuable update on the necessity and centrality of Roman archaeologists properly getting to grips with the subject of slavery, in the context of wider calls to decolonise humanities disciplines. Addressing the modern political context, theoretical approaches and evidence from written sources to bioarchaeology (which the author is a specialist in), the chapter provides much food for thought. In a similar vein, Van Oyen's contribution presents a different approach by considering not simply how Roman craft production worked, but rather how craft production contributed to directly shaping the Roman empire, for example, by stimulating consumer lifestyles and identities that revolved around large diverse ensembles or suites of material culture. This is a rare overview chapter on Roman artefacts that does justice to the complexity of both economic forces as well as the socio-cultural contexts and precarity of artisans working in their wider networks.

The volume closes with an essay by D. Mattingly on Roman imperial power and the long-running Romanisation debate, picking up several of the theoretical perspectives from Gardner's introduction, with a greater focus on synthesising a practical approach involving aspects of post-colonialism, identity studies and globalisation ideas. The chapter is effectively a concise and much updated version of the author's 2004 agenda for the study of identities in the Roman empire (D. Mattingly, 'Being Roman: Expressing identity in a provincial setting', *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 17 [2004], 5–25), thereby serving as a useful introduction to these complex debates. The chapter, like the volume as a whole, alludes to a number of questions that are left unanswered. What does a truly decolonised Roman archaeology look like? Is it enough to redress the imbalanced accounts generated by past colonialist discourse in archaeology, especially those produced before the 1990s that present Roman imperialism in an uncomfortably positive light? (p. 289). Did cultural change work primarily in dialogue with the operation of imperial power (as Mattingly

argues), or did it pre-date or occur independently of conquest? (p. 291). By extension, questions concerning the causes of material change and innovation in object worlds are explored with much less frequency, despite the volume's tantalising title. There is little attention to the subjects of how Roman objects are labelled and studied by specialists working in field archaeology and museum contexts, or novel approaches to material culture itself, despite wide interest in Roman archaeology in both theoretical perspectives and the practicalities of working with Big Data.

On balance, the book justifies the editors' decision to publish, despite the very different aims of the volume to that of its preceding conference. However, rather than presenting an innovative research agenda for Roman archaeology as claimed in the introduction and publicity for the book, the collection is much better served as a pithy critical introduction to Roman archaeology for undergraduates – a market that lacks sophisticated overviews covering a not-too-overwhelming range of topics grounded in up-to-date and (often) politically relevant perspectives. While well-worn case studies feature prominently, there is much in the volume that contradicts preconceived notions of what Roman archaeology is about. For example, Stewart (p. 224) raises the important question of the extent to which visual culture produced within the Roman empire should be expected to map within or depend on the political limits of empire. This leads to a thought-provoking discussion of 'a globally circulating repertoire of Roman styles and imagery, which cannot be simply confined by calling it Roman imperial art' (p. 226), drawing on examples from Dura-Europos to Gandhara. Likewise, the inclusion of several other case studies scattered throughout the volume serves to broaden perceptions of what it means to materialise the Roman empire, from the connections detailed in the Muziris papyrus (Wilson), to evidence for male coming-of-age rituals amongst the Treveri (Derks). In sum, the editors have done a tremendous job to salvage a coherent and useful collection, but we can only imagine (for now) how the non-materialisation of the original line-up focused on comparing Rome and Han China could have expanded our archaeological world view of ancient empires.

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