

**Acculturation in the Ancient Near East:
Romanization or Hellenization?**

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Abstract

It is a commonplace in western scholarly literature to reserve the theory of Romanization to talk about the social and cultural changes in the West after Roman annexation. *Per contra*, in the East, they advocate that of Hellenization to account for such a change.¹ However, when looking at the reasons behind such an academic view, we will find them include: the belief that Romanization was limited, to the people of the West since those people were the only race who is 'capable of civilization', and that the coming of the Romans into the East did accelerate the processes of Hellenization, not that of Romanization. In this paper, we will examine such an approach critically to see that the Romans tried to Romanize the ancient Near East either by imposing their institutions, or by encouraging Greek institutions cautiously. The conclusion, then, will be drawn where it will be shown that we should use the theory of Hellenization when talking about the cultural contact between the Greeks and the peoples of the east where as using that of Romanization when treating the cultural contact between the Romans and the eastern clutters.

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¹ For more information about the influence of Greek culture upon the Romans, see, *inter alia*, Peremans, 1961 .

The Ancient Near East between the Greeks and the Romans

For many scholars, when the Romans came to the East, they did not interfere with the ongoing Hellenization of the area, and instead on imposing their institutions, they encouraged the Greek ones. The adoption of such view may be sit down to some reasons. First, is the believe that when the Romans came into direct contact with the East in the middle of the 1st century B.C.E, there was ongoing acculturation between the Greeks and the eastern peoples. Though this is may be correct — indeed western scholars exaggerate the affect of Hellenic culture to the extent that they portray the East as *fully Hellenized* — until the arrival of the Romans, it is not justifiable that the concept Hellenization is employed to account for the cultural contact between the Romans and the peoples of the East. Closely related to such an view is the opinion that noble Romans associated themselves with Greek culture which led them to come to the East to liberate Greece (see Freeman, 1997: 29). Besides forming a basis to defensive imperialism, such attitude meant that the Romans encouraged the Hellenization of the East instead of trying to Romanise it.

Definitely, the Romans encouraged some elements of Greek culture in the ancient Near East, not least among the pre-existing Hellenic and Hellenized groups. But this conscious encouragement in itself should be seen as Romanization. This is because the term Hellenization gives the impression that the Romans did not try to impose their culture and institutions upon

the peoples of the East (cultural imperialism),² or say encouraged their spread, which, in fact, was not the case. '[...] Rome deliberately and directly promoted Romanization' writes Hanson (1997: 76). Why? Because 'it was in the Roman interest to attempt to control the hearts and minds of the indigenous population —or at least of the élite, for 'civilized' (in other words Romanized) people were easier to control than 'barbarians'' (Hanson, *ibid*). Similarly, Grahame (1997: 1) points out that Romanization ought to be seen as a conscious Roman policy rather than the now-not-valid *laissez faire* approach which regards subjugated peoples the responsible factor on the adoption of Roman culture.

It is known that in the East, Roman imperial officialdoms and Roman soldiers did not speak any language but Latin (Levine, 1998: 73). 'So sensible were the Romans of the influence of language over national manners', writes Gibbon (1979: 17), 'that it was their most serious care to extend, with the progress of their arms, the use of the Latin tongue.' This may explain the penetration of some technical terms from the latter into Greek. The Roman generals and leaders in the East encouraged the coming of the translators and interpreters of the Roman law to the area. In addition, they tried to raise the awareness of natives of the Roman law. This can be seen in the fact that they took care to preserve the sources of this law not only by writing them in imperishable materials, but more importantly by making copies of these sources and demanding their distribution and

² See Said, 1994.

exhibition. Moreover, it was Latin which was used on Roman coins, one of the main instruments of Roman imperial propaganda (MacMullen, 2000: 12-13). Augustus commemorated the annexation of Egypt by striking a coin in both gold and silver with the phrase: *Aegypto capta*. Trajan's coins which commemorated the annexation of Nabataea were written in Latin: *Arabia adquisita*, for example. As far as inscriptions are concerned, some Latin inscriptions were left in different parts of the East.³ A clear example which illustrates the Romans' attempts to spread their language is the case of the Greek judge who was sacked on account of his ignorance of Latin — the event which took place a generation after Augustus (MacMullen, *ibid.*). Therefore, it is not as some scholars argue that the Romans only encouraged Greek in the East where as Latin was encouraged in the West. Such an argument is taken by some European scholars to account for the shallowness, if any, of Roman cultural influence in the East as compared with the West. As Gibbon points out, the reason for the failure of Latin to spread in the East was due to the fact that 'the East was less docile than the West to the voice of its victories preceptors' (Gibbon, 1979: 17).⁴

³ For these inscriptions which are found in Jordan, see Sartre, 1993 .

⁴ It should be note that Gibbon saw the East as only had one language: Greek.

The fact that the spread of Roman culture was not *laissez faire* but imposed on the occupants of the empire⁵ is supported by the writing of ancient writers, especially the classical ones who hold the Roman responsible for the introduction of their culture in many areas of the world (Miles, 2000: 21). The Roman historian Tacitus, for example, says:

The following winter was spent on schemes of the most salutary kind. To induce a people, hitherto scattered, uncivilised and therefore prone to fight, to grow pleurably inured to peace and ease, Agricola gave private encouragement and official assistance to the building of temples, public squares and private mansions. He praised the keen and scolded the slack, and competition to gain honour from him was as effective as compulsion. Furthermore, he trained the sons of the chiefs in the liberal arts and expressed a preference for British national ability over the trained skill of the Gauls. The result was that in place of distaste for the Latin language came a passion to command it. In the same way, our national dress came into favour and the toga was everywhere to be seen. And so the Britons were gradually led on to the amenities that make vice agreeable – arcades, baths and sumptuous banquets. *They spoke of such novelties as 'civilization', when really they were only a feature of enslavement* [italics mine] (Tacitus Agricola 21).

⁵ The same argument holds true for the Greek culture as well. The Greeks, according to Josephus (Antiquity 1. 121), imposed names on their subjects as well as form of governments.

Finally, contra the popular opinion that the coming of the Romans into the East did accelerate the processes of Hellenization, it is known the processes of Hellenization were affected negatively by the arrival of the Romans in some areas in the East. In Egypt, for example, the immigration of the Greeks into Egypt came into an end as a result of the coming of the Romans (Peremans, 1961: 138).

Haverfield and the Cultural Identity of the East

Some reasons may account for the avoidance of some western scholars to talk about the Romanization in the East is that for some, Romanization was limited, and should be confined, to the people of the West since those people were the only race who is 'capable of civilization'. For example, Haverfield (1923: 12) related the limited effect of Romanization in the East, *inter alia*, to the fact that the inhabitants of that part of the earth were not Europeans, as he writes:

This Romanization was real. But it was, necessarily, not altogether uniform and monotonous throughout all the wide Roman lands. Its method of development and its fruits varied with local conditions, with racial and geographical differences. It had its limits and its characteristics. First, in respect of place. Not only in the further east, where (as in Egypt) mankind was non-European, but even in the nearer

east, where an ancient Greek civilization reigned, the effect of Romanization was inevitably small.

He goes on to say that 'the west offers a different spectacle. Here Rome found races that were not yet civilized, *yet were racially capable of accepting her culture*' [italics mine](Haverfield, 1923: 13). Hence, for Haverfield, the fiasco of Roman culture to prevail in the East was due to two factors. First, is that the people of the East were not racially capable of accepting such high standard culture. Second, is that they had already acculturated by the Greeks. However, a strong case can be put forward against this thesis. First, the people of the East produced and created many civilizations long before the arrival of the Romans — some go back to the 3rd millennium B.C.E. However, what Haverfield did here is that he operated, unsurprisingly taking into account his time, within the wider meaning of Orientalism highlighted by Said (1978: 2). In this meaning, Orientalism is a style of thought in which the West (the Occident) is contradicted with the East (the Orient) in order to assert and understand the former's identity. A clear sequel of this is that many European writers including historians, poets, imperial administrators, economist, political theorist, and archaeologists accepted and adopted the distinction between East and West as a springboard for their treating of the East. Hence, when Haverfield was discussing the acculturation between the Romans and the people of Britain, he resorted to the contrast with the situation in the East.

Second, is that not all the peoples of the East were affected by Greek culture as Haverfield seemed to take for granted. The strong influence of the 19th century writers such as Haverfield upon the studies of the ancient Near East can be seen in the following quotation from a celebrated scholar in the field. '[...] Every aspect of [Near Eastern] society and culture was influenced both by Greek civilization and by the progressive extension of Roman rule', writes Millar (1993: 235). However, such gross exaggeration should come as no surprise since Millar is not sure if the ancient Near East should be seen as 'part of the "Orient"' or as part of the wider Graeco-Roman world' (*ibid.*). If we look at ancient writers, we find no ancient author talks about, to use Shipley's phrase, 'the Orient "going Greek"' (2000: 1).

As far as the Greek cultural impact upon the easterners is concerned, a distinction ought to be maintained between those who came under a direct control of the Greeks and those who did not. A clear example of the former was Egypt.⁶ Was Egypt completely Hellenized? Some may think so, but the reality was different (Fontaine, 1991). In his informative article *Ygyptiens et Ytrangers dans L'Ygypte Ptolémaïque*, Peremans (1961) shows that the Hellenic influence was limited owing perhaps to, among other things, the Egyptian national movements⁷ and the exclusiveness nature of Ptolemic administration. It is known that with the arrival of the Greeks a new ruling class was created

⁶ For the limits of Hellenic influence Syria, see Herbert, 1993.

⁷ For the conflict between the native Egyptians and Ptolemy IV, see Polybus (v. 107. 1-3).

which was completely made up of the Greeks (Fontaine, 1991: 104). The native Egyptians were kept out of the administration of their country, a country which 'fut administré d'après des conceptions grecques et qui se servait de la langue grecque' (Peremans, 1975: 393; see Shipley, 2000: 233-234). This led them, the Egyptian, to start their military struggle which started, according to Peremans (1975: 402), in the year 205/204 B.C.E. What is interesting here in the case of the Greeks in Egypt is that they were influenced by the older Egyptian civilization which led some scholars to talk about the 'dishellenisation of the Greeks in Egypt' (Fontaine, 1991: 106; Jouguet, 1926: 397-398). This was clear enough in Alexandria which is supposed to be a Hellenic center to the extent that when Polybius visited the city in the 2nd century B.C.E., he found the Greek community of the city had lost its Greekness, or as he put it, 'no longer πολιτικόν' (Milnc, 1928: 229).⁸

Now if this was the case with those who were ruled directly by the Greeks, such influence *a priori* was less among those who kept their political independence. With this in mind, we can move now to another example, namely the Nabataeans. The Nabataeans, never subjugated to direct foreign rule before 106 C.E., were exposed to the Hellenic influence of the Macedonians, the Ptolmies, and the Seleucids for more than three centuries. This notwithstanding, they preserved their Arabic identity whether in their ethos, mores, traditional laws, or the use of

⁸ This does not, of course, alter the fact that there was Hellenic influence in Egypt.

Arabic language (Shahîd, 1984: 9-10). They also, as we have seen, adhered to their Semitic religion and their Arabic personal names. Even their cities kept the typical eastern organization. As far as their names are concerned, we know that even their élite after the annexation kept their native names; they usually did not try to Hellenise their names (c.f. Sartre, 1993: 10). This can be seen even in Bostra, which was the capital of *Provincia Arabia*. At the latter, the majority of the civilians had Semitic names (Isaac, 1992: 351). However, looking to Gerasa which was geographically close to Bostra, we find the magistrates were Roman citizens and personal names of the population were Hellenised (Sartre, 2000: 652-653). As for the organization of Nabataean cities, the latter preserved their Semitic outline. Petra, for example, does not seem to have gymnasium or agora which doubtlessly were two of the main indicators of Hellenization.

Now, if the East, as we have seen, was far from fully Hellenised, at least in the case of some civilizations such as that of the Nabataeans, why Haverfield as well as many other scholars think the other way round, one may ask? There are, one may say, two sources for such a mistake. First, acculturation is seen as one-way process starting from the Greeks. This assumption has been proven to be wrong, to say the least. Not within our aim to trace the eastern influence upon the Greeks, though, it is a consensus that the latter absorbed many eastern cultural elements. To give an example, in Egypt, the Greeks were influenced by the Egyptian cult. As early as the 3rd century B.C.E, there was a decline in Greek interest in their gods along

the Nile valley. This synchronised with an increase on worshipping Egyptian gods and a decrease on the number of dedications to Greek deities. Therefore, we find Isis became popular among the Greeks. This led to the wide distribution of her cult to include the eastern Mediterranean, Greece, and Italy (Eddy, 1961: 277).

The second cause, also related to the mechanism of acculturation, is the commonly held assumption that the consumerism and manners of the élite are always imitated by the lower strata of society. Hence, should some elements of acculturation (Hellenization) found among those people, it is taken as an indication of a far-reaching acceptance of Hellenization. So sweeping a generalization has been challenged recently. 'Yet', writes Mattingly, 'the detailed study of the use of material culture in various provinces, and by different ranks in society, suggests to me that there were many divergent approaches and value-systems at work, rather than a simple pattern of emulation behaviour' (1997: 17).

Returning to the reason behind the distinction between Hellenisation and Romanisation, we can say the third one is that Haverfield and many other scholars ignore the active role of native peoples: to choose, accept, or refuse. They judge the civilities of indigenous peoples, especially those of the ancient Near East, according to their influence by Greco-Roman culture. Had the effect of the latter strong, the native peoples were civilized. Otherwise, they were savage who 'were not capable of

accepting such high civilization.’ Indeed, this was part of the cultural main stream at the time of Haverfield. At that time, people were drawing parallels between the British empire and the Roman Empire with the aim of understanding how better to assimilate natives judging the latter according to their stand from British culture (see Hingley, 2000: 48-49).

Conclusion

Hence, in the light of what have been said, the idea that the acculturation which took place in the ancient East during the Roman period was Hellenization whereas which happened in the West at the same time was Romanization should be neglected. Because what the Romans did in the East was Romanization whether through the conscious encouragement of Greek culture or *via* imposing some elements of their own culture. Thus, the limited impact of Roman culture in the East should not only be attributed to the influence of Hellenic culture in the area. That is to say, the refusal of some native eastern peoples to accept such influence ought not to be dismissed. Various reasons may be responsible for the lack of attractiveness of Roman culture for some eastern peoples, or say the failure of Roman culture in the East. First, one may say, is the dissimilar perception between the peoples of East and those of the West as far as Roman culture is concerned. If the success of Roman culture in the West is sometimes put down to the fact that some western peoples regarded themselves Romans (Branigan, 1991: 103), the case in the East was different. The eastern peoples, one may say, *never* thought of themselves as Romans or Greeks. 'The Romans', writes Ball (2000: 449), 'if not actually regarded with hostility, were regarded as transitory outsiders by the far older and stronger civilisations of the east.' Hence, for natives of the East, the Greco-Roman culture was alien one which never had a deep root among them. Therefore, whereas we find traces of Greek

and Latin in the Romance languages today,⁹ in the East, both Greek and Latin disappeared quickly with the Islamic conquest where yet a new native language was to spread in the area. Today, there is neither Greek nor Latin influence on modern Middle Eastern languages. This fact has led Ball to conclude that, 'The Greek linguistic presence to *which many historians give so much weight from the narrow evidence of the inscriptions, therefore, was always superficial*' [my emphasis] (2000: 447). The reason for that, one may say, is the difference in the spirits of the civilisations of the Greeks and of the Near East. As Arnold Toynbee says, there was a conflict between the Greeks and the ancient Near East just as the one which is now between the modern West and the modern East. This was due to, Toynbee goes on, to the parallel between the Greek civilization and the modern European civilization in one hand, and the difference between these civilization and that of the East whether ancient or modern (1928: 292). Finally, another possible reason behind the lack of Roman cultural influence in the East, as Woolf (2004: 237) puts it, is that 'no one had ever really wished, in their heart of hearts, to become Roman as an end in itself.'

⁹ As late as the 19th century, Edinburgh University medical dissertations were written in Latin. The French historian Jules Michelet in order to get his medical degree in Paris, was required to submit two thesis, one on French and the other in Latin. For more information about the importance on Latin in the modern western civilisation, see Vance, 1997: 6-8.

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