

HEART OF DARKNESS? POST-COLONIAL THEORY AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE MEDITERRANEAN

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Orthodoxies – Old and New

The setting: a Liverpool lecture hall; the topic: the Roman empire's territorial organisation, its provinces and instruments of imperial rule; the audience: an average class of mostly state-educated undergraduates. The author of this paper points out to the students the empire's centre-periphery structure, using the British empire as an *explanans*. His hopes, the more recent example might ring a bell with some students, were met, but not in the predicted way: his mention of the British empire caused discomfort in the audience until finally one student declared: 'How can you possibly use the British empire as a model? We all know that it was evil.'

The episode is telling in more than one way: obviously, students find it difficult to distinguish between heuristic models and role models. By choosing the British empire as a heuristic model, no one has, of course, suggested that the European colonial empires of the 19th and 20th centuries should set an example for the world order of the 21st century. Nobody wants to justify mechanisms of expropriation and exploitation inherent in Europe's colonial empires – and indeed in more recent structures of dependency. But the student's remark also makes clear to what degree post-colonial theorising has become a common place in modern British society and education; to what extent it has been vulgarised; how profoundly normative categories have infiltrated the way we confront our past. History lessons at secondary school are soaked with anti-colonial reflex, not only in Britain, but all over the (Western) world.

Not surprisingly, the reaction to the intellectual Eurocentrism of past generations has left its mark on scholarship dealing with the more remote past of Europe's classical and pre-classical history too. The very idea of defining the Greek and Roman civilisations as 'classical' has become subject to criticism – and rightly so. No longer are Greek and Latin texts the measure of all things. Archaeology has given a voice to those who had been condemned to muteness, before systematic archaeological exploration began. And scholars have long since realised that the civilisations of ancient Greece and Rome can best be understood if we examine them from their fringes.¹

A fresh view from the fringes of the world of the Iron Age Mediterranean is now presented in Tamar Hodos's recent volume, which has the merit of having triggered the present discussion. In order to achieve its objective: to explore 'local responses' to 'colonisation' in this extremely dynamic period of Mediterranean history, the book comes up with an impressive array of archaeological material. Hodos's analytical approach is lucid, her methodology adequate to the subject. The three regional case-studies accounting for the

¹ The best example is still Millar 1966.

bulk of the volume (North Syria, Sicily and North Africa) provide rich evidence for the interaction between newcomers and local people. Each of the case-studies outlines, after a succinct introduction, what we know about populations (largely the historical facts plus some information on the local languages) and chronologies. The author then proceeds to settlements, 'burial customs', 'religious practices' and 'consumption patterns', before she takes into consideration 'artistic styles' and 'written voices' (inscriptions). All this is sound, pragmatic archaeological craftsmanship. It is also highly knowledgeable and very useful to any archaeologist or historian working in the field.

What is less convincing – and the concern of this paper – is the sweeping allegation of 'colonialism', 'philhellenism' or, in the case of the Phoenicians, 'monoculturalism' against the scholarship of previous generations in the field, namely T.J. Dunbabin and John Boardman, Hodos's predecessors as chroniclers of Transmediterranean expansion in the Iron Age, but also numerous others, all pioneers in the fields of Archaic Greek and/or Phoenician history and archaeology. Such reproach is in line with a general charge against 19th- and early 20th-century archaeological and historical scholarship: that it 'was geared to learn from history how colonial empires could be maintained and to celebrate contemporary colonialism'.² As any piece of scholarship, groundbreaking research included, the work in question is not immune to flaws and bias. As a matter of course, it reflects personal interests and the academic agenda of a particular *zeitgeist*. But does that disqualify these writings as guided by overt or disguised fantasies of the modern West's supremacy? Is Boardman's famous conclusion that 'in the west the Greeks had nothing to learn, much to teach' no more than an outbreak of 'colonialist and philhellenic ideologies'?³

Hardly. The language ('natives', 'mixed culture') may seem antiquated, the paradigms somewhat suspicious. Dunbabin's *Western Greeks* are explicitly, Boardman's *Greeks Overseas* implicitly, diffusionist; both consider 'Sikels', 'Iapygians', 'Phrygians' and of course Phoenicians and Greeks as given ethnic groups with definite collective identities (which they were not); both have a rather static concept of culture; and both endeavour to tell a master narrative, admittedly (and explicitly) from a Greek perspective, from the perspective of those who have produced the scarce written accounts we possess from the period.⁴

Ideal Types

The vanguard of archaeologists now wants to see such grand, text-based master narratives replaced by the many *pétits récits* which have come upon us from a variety of local contexts

² van Dommelen 1997, 307.

³ Hodos 2006, 11. Boardman's quote from Boardman 1999. Similarly Dunbabin 1948, 176: 'In material culture the Sikels had little to contribute to a Sicilian civilization.'

⁴ For a similar approach to the Phoenician expansion to the west: Aubet 1990; 2001; Niemeyer 1990a–b; 1995; 2002; Moscati 1992; Sommer 2005a, 113–44. The inclusion of scholarship on the Phoenician expansion in the criticism of 'colonialism' adds a peculiar flavour to the discussion. Until recently, emphasising the role of the Phoenicians in the development of the Iron Age Mediterranean was thought to be revisionist, as opposed to a then still prevailing Hellenocentric orthodoxy. Apparently, the Phoenicians' being 'colonisers' has now got the upper hand over their being 'non-Europeans'.

and settings; they want, as Hodos herself has pointed out in a recent paper, ‘give others (once labelled in modernist discourse as “the other”) a voice’.⁵ Fair enough. What betrays this shift of paradigms as the product of political rather than academic zeal is the fact that some of the main conclusions Hodos (pp. 200–204) draws from her – again: exquisitely presented – evidence are not at all so different from those of her predecessors: interaction results in ‘hybridity’⁶ and the ‘fusion of customs, practices beliefs and traditions’ respectively (Dunbabin: ‘mixed culture’⁷); Greek cultural influence was ‘more profound’⁸ than that of the Phoenicians, Phoenician expansion followed commercial patterns, Greek colonisation territorial imperatives (this is contested by Aubet, but appears to be *communis opinio* otherwise);⁹ Greek and Phoenician settlement in Sicily was not driven by aspirations for imperial rule, but brought about by ‘individuals and small communities from diverse city states for a variety of reasons’¹⁰ (Boardman: ‘no two “colonies” were founded for quite the same reasons’¹¹).

What is really novel about Hodos’s book is its comparative breadth, underpinned with a stupendous knowledge of the evidence, resulting in an instructive panorama of culture contact in the Iron Age Mediterranean.¹² Yet the results are obscured by the Procrustean bed of its postmodernist approach, obfuscated by the jargon it uses and the anti-Eurocentric reflex it evokes. The problem is not an archaeological one, it is heuristic: is it possible that the frontlines between ‘the colonisers’ and ‘the colonised’ are optical illusions inferred by the modern West’s own colonialist past?¹³ That distilling ‘discourses’ from styles of pottery and burial customs implies to overstretch the information value of material evidence of this kind? ‘The lines of further archaeological exploration are now clear’, wrote Moses Finley on ‘what is conventionally called Greek “colonization”’ some 40 years ago.

⁵ Hodos 2010, 9–10.

⁶ On hybridity and the complex theoretical implications, see van Dommelen 1997, 309–10; Bhabha 2006, 162–63.

⁷ Dunbabin 1948, 171–93, *passim*.

⁸ Hodos 2006, 201.

⁹ Niemeyer 1990a, 64: ‘Als Zentren einer auf Eroberung und Landnahme ausgerichteten Bewegung, wie sie für die griechische Kolonisation charakteristisch ist, waren die phönizischen Niederlassungen im Mittelmeerraum ... nicht ausgelegt.’ *Contra* Aubet 2001, 281: ‘... all through its history, the commercial policy of Tyre showed clear territorial and expansionist aspirations.’

¹⁰ Hodos 2006, 203.

¹¹ Boardman 1999, 268. Similarly already Fustel de Coulanges 1988, 289.

¹² As wrote Anthony Snodgrass in 2005: ‘... it would be nice if future books on Greek colonization found room for a treatment of such topics as the partly excavated layout of Phoenician Motya in Sicily, or of Carthage...’ (Snodgrass 2005, 57).

¹³ What Purcell (2005, 133) points out for the ‘colonialist’ master narrative holds true for its post-colonial counterpart as well: ‘there are two quite readily defined entities, colonizer and colonized; there is a phase of colonial onset, followed by the colonial period itself, during which complex social, cultural and political interactions occur; and these are seen through a phase of decolonization which rounds off the process. Whatever the merits of this narrative for understanding the last half-millennium, it is very hard to apply to the ancient world. All the elements are missing. Neither colonizer nor colonized had a group identity comparable to those of the last five hundred years....’

And he went on to remark that 'so are the difficulties and weaknesses in our methods of interpretation'.¹⁴

What we need in the first place is not so much the deconstruction of narratives, but terminological and hermeneutic accuracy. It is imperative that we determine to what extent our own anti-colonial reflex does and should shape the way we conceptualise cultural contact in antiquity. We cannot dismiss the master narratives as 'colonialist' and operate with the same categories ('colony', 'colonisers', 'colonised', 'colonialism'), simply replacing old generalisations with new ones. Finley himself has paved the way for a rationalisation of the debate: in his 'attempt at a typology' he broke down the monster word to more manageable ideal types.¹⁵ Finley has shown that 'colony' is a nebulous term standing for an immense variety of historical phenomena, with the method of subjugation and/or annexation, the number of settlers involved, the labour force employed and the degree to which settlers emerge as political actors as variables. Change one of the parameters and you will get an entirely different historical phenomenon.¹⁶

Largely based on Finley's considerations, the historian Jürgen Osterhammel has classified six ideal typical forms of expansion:¹⁷

1. *Totalmigration* ganzer Völker und Gesellschaften: complete migration of entire ethnic and social groups ('exodus': Great Trek of the Boers in the 1830s and 1840s).
2. *Massenhafte Individualmigration*: individual mass migration (voluntary and involuntary: transatlantic migration of Europeans in the 19th and 20th century, deportation of African slaves).
3. *Grenzkolonisation*: frontier colonisation (for instance in the North American 'west' or the Siberian 'east').
4. *Überseeische Siedlungskolonisation*: transoceanic settlement colonisation (with or without mass extinction/expulsion of local populations, with or without mass importation of slave labour force: English immigration to North America, European settlement colonies in Africa).
5. *Reichsbildende Eroberungskriege*: wars of imperial conquest (Spanish America, British India).
6. *Stützpunktvernetzung*: establishment of networks of (strategic and commercial) outposts (Portuguese and Dutch colonial empire, British 'port colonies').

The list shows that what we understand as Greek or Phoenician 'colonisation' is in fact merely one sub-type of a vast array of forms of colonial expansion (type 4, without mass extinction or expulsion and without an imported slave labour force, matches most closely). This makes it doubtful that invoking 'colonialism' provides us with the heuristic framework we need to get any closer to an understanding of the Iron Age Mediterranean and its dynamism. Osterhammel has defined colonialism as:

¹⁴ Finley 1975, 96 (originally 'Archaeology and history'. *Daedalus* 100 [1971], 168–86).

¹⁵ Finley 1976, 184–88.

¹⁶ Finley 1976.

¹⁷ Osterhammel 1997, 8–15.

eine Herrschaftsbeziehung zwischen Kollektiven, bei welcher die fundamentalen Entscheidungen über die Lebensführung der Kolonisierten durch eine kulturell andersartige und kaum anpassungswillige Minderheit von Kolonialherren unter vorrangiger Berücksichtigung externer Interessen getroffen und tatsächlich durchgesetzt werden. Damit verbinden sich in der Neuzeit in der Regel sendungsideologische Rechtfertigungsdoktrinen, die auf der Überzeugung der Kolonialherren von ihrer eigenen kulturellen Höherwertigkeit beruhen.¹⁸

Colonialism in this definition involves an entire society being deprived of its autonomous development, 'remote controlled' and reconfigured in accordance to the – economic – needs of the colonial rulers.¹⁹ Rudiments of such structures of dependency can possibly be traced in Classical Greece, in the Hellenistic territorial states and in the Roman world,²⁰ but for the Greeks and Phoenicians of the Iron Age reconfiguring entire foreign societies was not only beyond reach, it was beyond thought.

Reconstructing the Deconstructed

Given the elusiveness of 'colonial' phenomena at large, 'post-colonial' theory can hardly provide the heuristic framework needed for understanding the processes of Greek and Phoenician expansion in the Mediterranean and indeed any similar development in a pre-modern setting. That does not mean that postmodernist categories are altogether useless for guiding our investigation. On the contrary: the 'middle ground',²¹ *créolité*,²² connectivity²³ and the path-breaking perception that identities are social constructions²⁴ have all proved to be quite powerful figures of thought. Most notably, they have been invaluable for tearing down previous conventional wisdom: diffusionist conceptions of culture contact are now hopelessly out of fashion;²⁵ the association of archaeological 'cultures' with historical collective identities belongs, for most scholars at least, to the past.²⁶

However, all academic work consists in the reduction of complexity, and the historical disciplines are particularly prone to systematise what is notoriously unsystematic: human action and the environment that frames it. If we want to 'understand' it, we have to translate

¹⁸ Osterhammel 1997, 21.

¹⁹ Osterhammel 1997, 19: 'Erstens ist Kolonialismus nicht ein beliebiges Verhältnis von Herren und Knechten, sondern ein solches, bei dem eine gesamte Gesellschaft ihrer historischen Eigenentwicklung beraubt, *fremdgesteuert* und auf die – vornehmlich wirtschaftlichen – Bedürfnisse und Interessen der Kolonialherren hin umgepolt wird.'

²⁰ In the 4th century BC, Isocrates developed an agenda for the conquest and exploitation for a Greek-ruled Asia (*Panegyricus* 166) and Thrace (*Pax* 24). He proposed a full-fledged programme of colonisation in order to divert Greece's population surplus to conquered territories. Similarly, Xenophon (*Anabasis* 6. 4. 6) considered the foundation of new Greek cities in Asia, including the helotisation of the local population.

²¹ Malkin 1998, 15; 2004, 16–19.

²² Webster 2001. For details of the concept, see Enwezor 2002; Hall 2003.

²³ See now the contributions in Malkin *et al.* 2009.

²⁴ Seminal is the treatise of Berger and Luckmann 1966.

²⁵ See now, from the point of view of ancient history, the rather comprehensive reappraisal by Ulf 2009. On recent developments in acculturation studies, see Gotter 2000.

²⁶ Fundamental is of course Jones 1997.

actions into processes and their environments into structures. This being said, we now need, rather than the ‘deconstruction’ of old certainties, the ‘construction’ of new models, which are sufficiently flexible and pragmatic to use. We also require a reevaluation of the political settings in which culture contact takes place, inconvenient as this may be for scholars who study societies, from which no or little written evidence of a narrative kind has survived.

How this may work has, in recent years, been demonstrated by Roman archaeologists and historians studying the various peripheries of the Roman empire, in Britain, Gaul, Germany, Spain, North Africa, the Balkans, Asia Minor, Egypt and the Near East. In the case of Rome, nobody questions the asymmetries in the interaction between centre and periphery in the Roman world. And the notion that the empire penetrated its fringes not just politically, economically and socially, but also culturally, linguistically and religiously, is widely accepted. Consequently, ‘Romanisation’ has not been abolished altogether as a paradigm of acculturation; rather, the complexities and, sometimes, inconsistencies of processes of acculturation between centre and periphery have been exposed. To be sure, like the post-colonial reading of the Iron Age Mediterranean’s dynamics, such reinterpretations of ‘Romanisation’ have also been inspired by recent developments (namely globalisation), but the parameters appear to be more appropriate for comparison.²⁷

The Roman Near East as a Case-Study

The area which perhaps best exemplifies the transformation of the Roman periphery is the Roman Near East (the area of the 2nd-century provinces of Syria and Mesopotamia), where Roman expansion encountered local cultures that had been shaped (and continuously transformed), over millennia, by succeeding empires, of which Rome was merely the last. The ‘Romanisation’ of the Near East echoes the situation in the Iron Age Mediterranean only in part: in both cases contacts were asymmetric, but in the case of the Roman Near East they were conditioned by an empire and its hierarchic organisation. But two analytical categories can be applied, with some chances of success, to the complexities of culture contact in the Roman Near East, which may, *mutatis mutandis*, also help to understand similar processes elsewhere: frontier and tradition.²⁸

The one feature all processes of territorial – continental or maritime – expansion invariably share is their creating a shifting frontier of settlement, conquest and/or exploitation, which constitutes a contact zone in its own right, frequently in particular ecological settings (desert, steppe, prairie, forest, coast). The peculiarities of the frontier, the mentalities it generates and the impact it has on individuals have best been described, from the perspective of the creators of a frontier, by the American historian Frederick Jackson Turner.²⁹ The

²⁷ See, for instance, Millett 1990; Mattingly 1995; Woolf 1997; 1998; MacMullen 2000.

²⁸ For the application of frontier and tradition to the Roman Near East see in more detail Sommer 2003; 2004; 2005b; 2006a–b; 2009. On the area as the setting for extensive culture contact Millar 1993; 1998; Ball 2000; Kaizer 2002; Butcher 2003; Gnoli and Muccioli 2007; Edwell 2008.

²⁹ Turner 1986. The fact that Turner’s thesis forms part of a ‘colonialist’ discourse does not make obsolete its analytical value. See now Osterhammel 2009, 468–72. An operational definition can be found (Osterhammel 2009, 471): ‘Eine Frontier ist ein sich großräumig, also nicht bloß local begrenzt

frontier is a social space *sui generis*, persistent and yet transient in character, ambiguous and, asymmetries notwithstanding, with all actors being suspended in a precarious balance. Universalised, Turner's frontier is the archetypical periphery of pre-modern (and some modern) societies: empires (such as the Roman and the British) as well as clusters of city-states (such as ancient Greece or the Phoenician city-states) or emerging nation states (the United States).³⁰

In the Roman (or rather: Partho-Roman) Near East, the vast steppe between the Orontes and the Tigris bears all the characteristics of a frontier: over long periods, the political affiliation of a substantial proportion of the territory remains ambiguous, imperial power gradually fades towards the periphery, with local autonomy being a constant factor in the region's political setup and accounting for much of its social and cultural dynamism. For the modern student of the area, it is impossible to establish an exact border between 'Roman' and 'Parthian' spheres of influence: a classical gateway city like Palmyra was undeniably part of the Roman province of Syria and under the jurisdiction of its governor, but at the same time its citizens had privileged access to the trade routes running through the Parthian realm.³¹

Palmyra's and the other Near Eastern cities' political ambiguity was mirrored by the same level of cultural equivocalness. Here the second of the two analytical categories comes into play: tradition. The Partho-Roman Near East is the archetypical frontier zone where a variety of sets of customs, beliefs, forms of artistic and literary expression as well as legal systems, languages and social orders – imperial, regional and local – overlap and interact. For contemporaries, they all carried different significations and, in the first place, degrees of prestige. In most parts of Syria and much of Roman Mesopotamia, Greek was the language of choice when people epigraphically immortalised information; Roman law was employed, Roman officials invoked in lawsuits; the upper echelons of society dressed in Greek or Roman garment, went to theatres or bathhouses in the Roman style and had their houses and tombs decorated with Vitruvian architectonic features. They indulged in works of art which were, iconographically and iconologically, distinctly 'Western'. And they worshipped their gods in temples that shared many features with the sanctuaries of Italy and Rome. Does that mean that local traditions were eradicated as the Near East underwent a process of cultural 'amnesia'; that, as Fergus Millar wrote almost 20 years ago, 'Greek language, Greek social structures and Greek frameworks for the construction and worship of deities penetrated to the most remote of rural contexts'?³²

On the other hand, the temples and tombs which, at first glance, seem so 'classical' in appearance and construction technique, reveal, at a closer look, many features which would

manifestierender Typus einer prozesshaften Kontaktsituation, in der auf einem angebbaren Territorium (mindestens) zwei Kollektive unterschiedlicher ethnischer Herkunft und kultureller Orientierung meist unter Anwendung oder Androhung von Gewalt Austauschbeziehungen zueinander unterhalten, die nicht durch eine einheitliche und überwölbende Staats- und Rechtsordnung geregelt werden.'

³⁰ Geiss 1994.

³¹ For Palmyra's trade and political role, see Gawlikowski 1983; 1994; Will 1992, 260–66; Hartmann 2001, 45–64; Young 2001, 136–200; Yon 2002; Edwell 2008, 31–62; Sommer 2008.

³² Millar 1993, 391.

have puzzled any Greek or Roman visitor. The use of temple style buildings as tombs, 'Roman' as they may appear to the superficial observer, is indeed exclusive to Palmyra's oasis society. Colonnaded streets, which look 'classical', are restricted to the Near East and some parts of Asia Minor. The gods worshipped in the seemingly Vitruvian temples of Baalbek, Palmyra or Baitokaike bore Greek names, but their epithets and practices of their worship suggest that in essence, they were local, not Greek. This list could be extended ad infinitum – was the Graeco-Roman face of the Near East merely a veneer?³³

Both figures of thought – 'amnesia' and 'veneer' – are misleading. The imperial frontier did reconfigure those local cultures that got caught by it; but it did not make them all 'Roman'. When Rome conquered the Near East from 64 BC onwards, the 'great tradition' carried by the empire began to affect the many local 'little' traditions present in the area. It changed and overgrew, but did not completely replace them. And the 'locals' were anything but passive recipients of what the empire brought upon them. Rather they were creative explorers who adopted and appropriated for themselves whatever useful the warehouse of the 'great tradition' had to offer. In many cases, borrowings were deprived of their original meanings and contexts; frequently, misunderstanding paved the way for innovation.³⁴

The Iron Age Mediterranean, where the expansion of the Greek and Phoenician city-states took place, and the Partho-Roman Near East are, all differences notwithstanding, not that dissimilar: they both form peripheries (in one case of decentralised city-state systems, in the other of an empire), frontiers, 'middle grounds' as it were. Both are on the fringes of expanding pre-modern societies that lack both, the formidable potential and the ideological momentum of modern colonial empires, but which are well capable of penetrating their peripheries and imposing their set of customs, values, beliefs and forms of expression – their 'culture' – on the frontier as a 'grand tradition'.

The historical paradigm of the frontier and the anthropological categories of 'grand' vs 'little traditions' are, I think, preferable to the conceptual instruments employed by 'post-colonial' thinkers because they can be (and often have been) separated from a particular historical setting, because they can be applied universally and because they are – relatively – unprejudiced and less loaded with ideological significance. Let us give Max Weber, in a sense the *antiquissimus auctor* of all cultural studies, the final say:

Demgegenüber ist es aber eine *elementare Pflicht* der *wissenschaftlichen Selbstkontrolle* und das einzige Mittel zur Verhütung von Erschleichungen, die logisch *vergleichende* Beziehung der Wirklichkeit auf *Idealtypen* im logischen Sinne von der wertenden *Beurteilung* der Wirklichkeit aus *Idealen* heraus scharf zu scheiden. Ein 'Idealtypus' in unserem Sinne ist, wie noch einmal wiederholt sein mag, etwas gegenüber der *wertenden* Beurteilung völlig Indifferentes, er hat mit irgend einer anderen als einer rein *logischen* 'Vollkommenheit' nichts zu tun.³⁵

³³ As suggested by Ball 2000, 396.

³⁴ Sommer 2009, 245–46. The concept of 'great' vs 'little traditions' goes back to Marriott 1955; Redfield 1955a–b; and has later been adopted and refined by the late Shmuel N. Eisenstadt (Eisenstadt 1973; 1981; 1987).

³⁵ Weber 1956, 245.

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