

Reconsidering the Roman conquest: new archaeological perspectives

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This issue of *JRA* includes a thematic section with 5 papers on new advances in the archaeology of the Roman conquest. They emanate from a session organised by the present authors at the Roman Archaeology Conference held in April 2018 at the University of Edinburgh. As editors of this section, we intend that the present article serves as a short introduction to the topic.

Limes archaeology versus the archaeology of conquest

The Roman empire, like most empires in the ancient world, was the product of aggressive military expansion. This process of expansion is documented in written sources¹ but the quantity and quality of those sources are highly variable and reflect a one-sided Roman perspective. Much research into Rome's military has focused on *limes* archaeology, which differs from the archaeology of the Roman conquest in terms of research questions, methodologies and theoretical perspectives. While the latter studies the material remains of offensive military campaigns that lasted just a few years, *limes* archaeology investigates the military infrastructure in the frontier provinces during the long period of the *pax Romana*. According to the dominant paradigm of *limes* archaeology, the Roman army normally acted as the defender of peace and civilian life in the provinces against external 'barbarian' enemies. By contrast, in the expansive wars of the Late Republic and Early Empire we see the Roman army in the rôle of brutal aggressor, associated with violence, mass enslavement and sometimes even genocide.²

Compared to the energy invested in *limes* archaeology, the empire's conquests, characterised by relatively short offensive campaigns against external enemies, have received little attention from archaeologists. Several factors play a rôle here. It is difficult to obtain a tangible grasp on the remains of mobile armies and battlefields. Marching camps used for only a few days leave few traces and scarce material finds. The same is true of the immense damage and demographic losses inflicted by armies that ravaged the countryside using scorched-earth strategies. Burning farmsteads, stealing cattle, destroying harvests, and enslaving, raping or killing people are all acts that leave little or no trace in the archaeological record. A further problem is the chronological resolution of the sparse material data, which hampers making connections to historically-documented military campaigns. It is no surprise that barely two decades ago scholars were still complaining that Caesar's actions in N Gaul and Augustus' Cantabrian Wars were almost completely untraceable in the archaeological record (see Roymans; Peralta *et al.*). Such considerations, however, should not lead us to conclude that conquests had limited societal impact because there

1 C. R. Whittaker, *Frontiers of the Roman empire: a social and economic study* (Baltimore, MD 1997); G. Moosbauer and R. Wiegels (edd.), *Fines imperii – imperium sine fine? Römische Okkupations- und Grenzpolitik im frühen Principat* (Rahden 2011).

2 Cf. N. Roymans and M. Fernández-Götz, "Caesar in Gaul: new perspectives on the archaeology of mass violence," in T. Brindle *et al.* (edd.), *TRAC 2014* (Oxford 2015) 70-80. From the perspective of ancient history, cf. N. Barrandon, *Les massacres de la République romaine* (Paris 2018).