Being Roman:
expressing identity in a provincial setting

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This article explores aspects of identity in Roman Britain and the extent to which these can be studied within prevailing academic approaches and traditions. The first section will involve a critique of current approaches to identity and related problems (including difficulties with the Romanization paradigm). In the second part, developing some ideas about 'discrepant experience' of empire, I try to delineate a few alternative identities within the province of Britain, focussing on issues such as religion, the epigraphic habit, and the identification of distinct communities. I hope to demonstrate the validity of a new approach to culture change in the Roman empire that is focused on the issue of identity, rather than on conventional notions of Romanization.

Current approaches to identity in the Roman empire

Comparative studies of imperial systems (and of their negotiated impacts on subject peoples) enrich our understanding of specific case-studies.[1] Here I wish to explore what it took and what it meant to 'be Roman' in Britain and other provinces.[2] At one level the question is a facile one, but it goes to the heart of current debates about the relative degrees of uniformity and diversity present in Roman society. It is self-evident that the highest degree of social conformity occurred at the upper levels of society, especially amongst those involved in the governance of empire. The Roman senate and equestrian orders eventually consisted of individuals from most regions of the empire and these people shared in a metropolitan Roman culture. Yet they were always a small élite. What of the rest of society? On the one hand, there is broad acknowledgement that a Romano-Briton would have perceived considerable differences between himself or herself and, e.g., Romano-Africans or Syro-Romans. The cultural mix in individual provinces differed markedly from place to place. Yet the dominant paradigm in Roman provincial studies is Romanization, a concept that emphasizes conformity, that presents cultural change as a unilateral and hierarchical process, involving the passing down of Roman culture and ideas about identity to grateful provincials.[3] The difficulties associated with the continued application of this paradigm are widely recognized, leading advocates to invoke watered-down concepts such as 'vulgar Romanization' or 'weak Romanization'.[4]

Romanization: unity and conformity

Romanization was not an ancient Roman concept, but it has a long pedigree in Roman studies, being traceable back to a tradition of study developed by Mommsen and Haverfield in the late 19th and early 20th c.[5] The initial enthusiasm for the approach was in part at least conditioned by the involvement of European scholars in their own world of colonization and empire.[6] In the circumstances, objectivity was always going to be difficult to maintain, and a close association between the scholarly viewpoint and that of the imperial power under study was the predictable result. Some talked of a Romanization policy on the part of Rome (somewhat akin to the equally specious insistence on the civilizing mission of white settlers in

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1   Alcock et al. 2001; Ferguson and Whitehead 1992; Miller et al. 1989; Said 1992.
2   Berry and Laurence 1998 and Woolf 1995 look mainly at identity at the upper end of society and in the core provinces. I am interested here in the 'barbarous' regions, for which cf. Burnham 1995; James 2001a; Wells 1999 and 2001.
3   For a range of publications mainly presenting the conventional understanding of Romanization, see Blagg and King 1984; Blagg and Millett 1990; MacMullen 1984; Wood and Queiroga 1992.
4   Keay and Terrenato 2001, ix and 228-30; but see Mattingly 2002.
5   Freeman 1997; Haverfield 1906; Hingley 1996 and 2000.
6   Hingley 2001.