

Hellenism and Romanization* at Ancona: a case of 'invented tradition'

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Tradition is essential for the cultural identity of a community, both ancient and modern. Institutions, values and ethical norms are strongly supported and justified if they are thought to spring from ancient traditions. The need to reform the past and its interpretation arises frequently, especially in periods of transition, in order to present as descending from ancient traditions institutions and customs that are for the most part new. The historical past is continually revised to support different and changing needs — not very differently than the mythical past, with its many (and often contradictory) versions of the same myth. Many societies claim a fictitious continuity with a carefully selected and often invented past just in times of momentous change, as is well shown by E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger in their book on modern cases of 'invented tradition'.¹ Ancient societies had a strong need of tradition, which they usually fulfilled with myths; but the historical past (which, from the ancient point of view, was often not so easy to distinguish from myth²) was also used in a similar way.

This article treats a special case of this attitude to the past in a community of central Italy. It belongs to the context of the long and complex process of the making of Roman Italy. Ancona lies on the E coast, nearly 150 km south of the Po delta. Its harbour is the only good one in a long stretch of coastline, from the lagoons and canals of the Po delta to Brindisi more than 500 km to the south. For this reason it has been a crossroads for maritime routes across the Adriatic (fig. 1).

The first and only historical event earlier than the Late Republic recorded by the sources is the Syracusan colonisation between 388 and 383 B.C. Strabo³ wrote that the city was founded by colonists 'fleeing from the tyranny of Dionysius the Elder'. This passage, and one of Juvenal, where Ancona is referred to as a 'Doric city',⁴ have long been used by local authors and modern scholars to assert the Greekness of the city. However, the settlement is certainly much earlier than the Syracusan colony mentioned by Strabo. Remains of small scattered settlements, dated from the Middle Bronze Age to the early 5th c. B.C., and plots of graves of the 9th-7th c. B.C. have been found on the hills near the harbour (fig. 2). In the 6th and 5th c. B.C. the inhabited area seems to shrink, concentrating on Colle Guasco and Colle dei Cappuccini (traces of the ancient settlement are especially difficult to recognize because of mediaeval and modern buildings). The only known monuments earlier than the Roman Imperial period are the temple be-

* Both "Hellenism" and "Romanization" are heavily debated, even controversial, concepts. An extended discussion would be beyond the scope of this article, but it may just be worth saying that they are here used without any "colonial" or "theological" overtones (to mention a couple of buzzwords of the recent debate). The bibliography on Romanization is very familiar to the readers of *JRA*. On Hellenism, its construction and its diffusion, see, e.g., J. M. Hall, *Hellenicity: between ethnicity and culture* (Chicago, IL 2002); T. Harrison (ed.), *Greeks and Barbarians* (Edinburgh 2002); I. Malkin, *Ancient perceptions of Greek ethnicity* (Washington, D.C. 2001). It is only fair to acknowledge that a complex and critical approach to the issues of Hellenization and Romanization had been developed in Italian and French bibliography since the 1970s: see, e.g., C. Gailini, "Cosa intendere per ellenizzazione: problemi di metodo," *DialArch* 7 (1973) 175-91; M. Torelli, "Greci e indigeni in Magna Grecia: ideologia religiosa e rapporti di classe," *Studi Storici* 18 (1977) 45-62; M. Bénabou, *La résistance africaine à la romanisation* (Paris 1976).

1 E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger (edd.), *The invention of tradition* (Cambridge 1983).

2 On the problem of myth and history and their relation, see C. Ginzburg, "Mito," in S. Settis (ed.), *I Greci. I. Noi e i Greci* (Torino 1996) 197-237; *Mito e storia in Magna Grecia* (Atti XXXVI convegno 1996; Taranto 1997), especially the contributions by C. Grottanelli, "Appunti sul prodotto mito alla fine del Novecento," 11-24; C. Calame, "Mito, storia, ragione: l'utilizzo retorico del passato eroico nella Grecia classica," 25-56; id., *Myth and history in ancient Greece* (Cambridge 2003), with further literature.

3 Strab. 5.4.2.

4 Juv. 4.40.