

BOOK REVIEW

Empire and Political Cultures in the Roman World. By EMMA DENCH. Cambridge, UK and New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pp. xvi + 207. Paperback, \$27.99. ISBN: 978-0-521-00901-0

In this short and stimulating book, Dench sets out to explain how the Roman Empire worked and was experienced between the era of mid-republican Rome and the period of the late empire. Part extended bibliographic essay, part *status quaestionis*, and part call to action, this book provides both those new to and well experienced with questions of empire plenty of fertile grounds for further investigation and should serve as the new starting point for future research.

Dench's points of departure are Haverfield's early 20th-century volumes on the Romanization of Britain, though the works of Ando and Wolff, among others, feature prominently. The first chapter, "Toward a Dialect of Empire," explores how the Romans moulded their empire and how local individuals and groups used Roman ideology to suit their own ends. The second, "Territory," focuses on the nature of the Roman frontiers and limits of Roman territory at the level of the empire and the city. The third chapter, "Wealth and Society," provides a concise overview of the Roman economy, though it also offers a penetrating discussion of the dynamic between local development and Roman influence through the lens of theatre seating.

"Force and Violence" is the title of the fourth chapter, which covers both civil unrest and the role of the Roman military in enforcing imperial ends. The fifth and final, "Time," explores the impact of Roman systems of timekeeping on local cultures, and it ranges between Julius Caesar's major refashioning of the Roman calendar and the use of the *feriale Duranum* in Dura Europos to the widespread adoption of consular dating. In the epilogue, Dench asks us to think of the Roman Empire not as a totalizing entity intent on its residents becoming Roman; rather, it is an "edgier and ... more precarious empire" that is "significantly more flexible, resilient, and dynamic" (159).

One hundred and fifty-nine pages do not leave a lot of room for a detailed exposition of such a big, complex topic like the workings of the Roman Empire. To

compensate, Dench alternates between the more general and the more specific. To give one example, in Chapter 2, she looks at some of the ways that Rome sought to control its vast territories throughout its long history. A few pages later, when she turns to the role of urbanization in fostering Romanity, she draws on the particular example of the colony of Cosa in southern Etruria to cast aside any suggestion that Rome had a policy on urbanization. At the same time, there is not a lot to find fault with in this book: it is well produced, nearly free of typos and factual errors and generally persuasive. For one thing, Dench does an admirable job of demonstrating the role of timekeeping in fostering Roman dominion and in illustrating the interplay between local and imperial interests and agency in the Roman Empire, in hindsight an obvious point that scholars of empire have not yet given as much consideration as they could have. To give another example, one of the hallmarks of studies of armies in late antiquity is a focus on the barbarization of Rome's military, though, as Dench herself notes, the Romans long struggled – at least as far back as Polybius – to find enough citizen recruits. The book is full of cutting and incisive discussions and remarks just like these, though it is also full of provocative statements, like Dench's reference to the "marked personalization of the role of commander-in-chief" in the age of Augustus (115-116).

On the other hand, there are occasional places that gave me pause – but they are few and minor. Still, I want to highlight two examples. First, given the enormity of the topic and the brevity of the book, it was a very pleasant surprise to find such a detailed and useful bibliography, replete with a short and stimulating bibliographic essay that offers some powerful insights of its own. One source that features regularly in the book as a whole is W. V. Harris' *War and Imperialism in Republican Rome*, which has had a significant impact on our understanding of Roman aggression in the creation of their empire. That said, while Dench notes the aggression of Rome's Hellenistic contemporaries (110), she leaves out Eckstein's *Mediterranean Anarchy, Interstate War, and the Rise of Rome*, arguably the strongest rejoinder in the past decade or two to the idea of Roman exceptionalism in the geopolitical realm, and the main proponent for the view that the Hellenistic kingdoms were just as aggressive as Rome. Second, when exploring the role of coinage in the spread of the iconography and might of Rome and when discussing A. Wallace-Hadrill's critique of Zanker's *Power of Images*, Dench draws attention to the user's role in attaching meaning, here prestige and winning quality, to a coin (35). I wonder, however, if most users of Roman coins would rather have been much more interested in whether they could use these coins to buy whatever it was they were looking to purchase rather than attaching any specific meaning to them.

And yet, as I said, points like these are small and should in no way take away from this substantial achievement. Dench has admirably described the dangers of Romanization, defensive imperialism and an overemphasis on “becoming Roman,” among other things, while calling for a much more wide-ranging approach to empire that emphasizes its role in the day-to-day at the local and institutional levels. This book should be standard reading for anyone interested in the nature of empire in the Roman world.

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