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Celtic Romanization: Cultural Assimilation or Cultural Exchange?

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Celtic Romanization: Cultural Assimilation or Cultural Exchange?

Abstract: The rise of the Roman Empire created not only a military but also a cultural hegemony over colonized populations. While this interaction is often portrayed as a primarily unidirectional process of cultural assimilation, this may not be the case for Celtic peoples following their colonization in the mid first century BC. An examination of Roman perception of Celtic culture, perceived compatibility of Celtic culture, and mixed Romano-Celtic culture indicates that the cultural exchange between Romans and Celts was bi-directional.

In 60 BC, Sulla planted the first seeds of Roman imperialism through military dictatorship and conquests. While Sulla himself never spread Roman influence outside the Hellenistic world, he created a political precedent for military conquests. His successors – such as Julius Caesar – sought public and political appeal by conquering new territories, from Africa to Eastern Europe. As the scope of Roman military hegemony expanded, so did the Roman's cultural dominance (Kallet-Marx 292 - 304). During the mid first century BC, the Romans conquered the Celtic peoples living in Northern Europe. Although it's generally accepted that the Celtic people adopted aspects of Roman culture, there is no clear academic consensus on what factors affected this process of cultural mixing. Although Romanization has been traditionally viewed as a unidirectional process of cultural assimilation, expanding the analysis to include socioeconomic contexts indicates that Romanization was actually a cultural exchange. Not only did the Celts find it advantageous to selectively adopt aspects of Roman culture, but also certain

Roman populations met their unique socioeconomic needs by adopting Celtic identities (Riddle 71). Ultimately, the cultural exchange between the Celts and Romans was bi-directional, creating mixed Romano-Celtic identities to meet the class-based socioeconomic needs of both societies.

To simplify the socioeconomic groups involved, the Celtic people can be divided into two distinct social groups: the societal elites and the “common people.” The societal elites can be defined as the indigenous ruling class, including but not limited to religious, tribal, and military leaders as well as individuals that represented multiple cross-sections such as the Druids. The common people can be defined as any lower social class, ranging from family heads with little political capital outside the extended tribal family to slaves with little material possession. The Roman population also falls into two groups: the politically relevant and the politically irrelevant. The politically relevant can be described as land-owning citizens with the right to vote, and the politically irrelevant can be described as any Roman individuals who lacked the privilege of voting, including the slaves, the poor, and the semi-free workers. Although the metric is far from perfect and does not recognize the intricacies of class structures, these groups represent the distinct experiences of Romanization.

The Celtic elites and the common people experienced different processes of Romanization, but they both selectively adopted Roman culture for their advantage. After being conquered, many indigenous elites adopted Roman culture in an attempt to maintain their social status (Riddle 73). For the most part, ruling classes continued to exist after Roman colonization but only under the careful watch of a Roman governor, whose presence incentivized the adoption of at least certain aspects of Roman culture (Tacitus, Cornelius, Mattingly 62 – 69). Additionally, Roman provincial governments encouraged Celtic elites to adopt a Roman identity by forcing them to follow Roman laws and to interact with Roman citizens (Tacitus, Cornelius, Mattingly

21 – 67). It became advantageous for the elites to adopt Roman traditions and appearances in order to navigate these inherently Roman political and social dynamics.

In contrast, the Romanization of the common people was unaffected by Roman political objectives. It is a common myth that the Romans actively pushed their culture upon all members of conquered societies (Drinkwater 32 – 47); however, the provincial governments believed in “fostering of Roman cultural values among provincial elites” rather than in the entire population (Webster 210). Additionally, Celtic legal norms actually deterred the Romans from encouraging the Romanization of common people. In contrast to the local elites, the common people were held accountable according to traditional Celtic law rather than Roman law (Tacitus). This was significant because the Romans saw Celtic law as the epitome of savagery. Celtic justice demanded practices such as “payment in blood” as recompense for wrongdoing, which the Romans saw as barbaric. And by insisting that disputes be resolved not through the state or through sophisticated practices such as consideration of intent but between families through “the simple, ancient, and gruesome principle of an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth,” Celts practicing traditional law were perceived to be inherently incompatible with Roman culture (Riddle 71).

While the societal elites were given the social status to enjoy the entirety of Roman culture, the average Celtic person had no need to look, behave, and think entirely Roman because they lacked frequent and meaningful interaction with the Roman world. Instead, the common people integrated certain beneficial Roman traits into their pre-existing indigenous culture. The best example is the emergence of Romano-Celtic religion, which is particularly significant because many Celtic tribes lacked Hellenistic conceptions of intellectual capital. While the traditional Greco-Roman society expressed cultural experiences and lore through literature and

fine art, the Celts created new gods to express themselves, using their polytheistic religion as a medium for intellectual expression (Tacitus, Cornelius, Mattingly 14 – 32). So more than the adoption of Roman garb or mannerisms, the adoption of Roman gods epitomized the Celt's new mixed Romano-Celtic heritage and identity. The historical evidence for the Romanization among the Celtic common people has been strengthened by recent archeological discoveries of Roman-inspired religious artifacts in Celtic territory. Jane Webster explains the results of her newest archeological dig:

Three major groups of non-Classical deities occur:

1. Celtic deities paired or twinned with gods from the Graeco-Roman pantheon... explicitly linking a Graeco-Roman and an indigenous deity, or identifying one with the other. Another manifestation of deity pairing is the divine marriage of a Graeco-Roman male deity with a female Celtic partner. The best-known example of this pairing is the divine marriage of Mercury and Rosmerta.
2. A repertoire of clay statuettes, mass produced in the Allier region throughout the second century A.D. One of the most popular deities of this group was the pipe-clay "Venus," clearly based on the Venus Pudica iconographic type.... the Romanized appearance of Venus...
3. A series of deities, which although depicted anthropomorphically, are clearly neither Graeco-Roman gods nor based upon classical exemplars... and who were not actually incorporated into the Graeco-Roman pantheon. They represent an alternative creole pantheon in Roman Gaul... (Webster 220 – 223)

Although Webster's findings are only the results of a single archeological expedition and cannot represent the entirety of the Romano-Celtic intermixing, they indicate a wide diversity in the integration of Roman culture into Celtic identity. Some Celts created a permutation of Roman and Celtic culture, as indicated under Webster's example number one. The stylistic and symbolic combination of Roman and Celtic gods reveals a group of people who were well-served by their pre-existing culture but found varying personal benefits in also worshipping certain Roman gods, whether they needed a new explanation of a certain phenomena or simply wanted to honor the gods of their conquerors. Also, the mass-production of Venus statuettes listed in Webster's example number two indicates that other Celts found the Roman religion to be better than the indigenous Celtic gods or than the permutation of Celtic and Roman gods. However, these individuals probably found Celtic culture to be beneficial in other areas of life, as shown by the Celtic stylization of the Roman gods. Finally, the independent deities of sub-point three suggest that certain people actually created their own polytheistic religions with newly invented gods sharing the anthropomorphic features of Roman gods. This pantheon of gods, inspired by Celtic and Roman characteristics, represents a social group who perhaps fit best within a new cultural identity outside the parameters of the original Celtic or Roman traditions. Not only did the introduction of Roman character allow for a new Romano-Celtic culture, but it also served as an impetus for socially marginalized groups to create a new culture and identity to best fit their unique needs. And all of the statues are dated within approximately 150 years of each other, indicating that they all occurred independently rather than fitting a chronological progression (Webster 205 – 220).

These multiple manifestations of Romano-Celtic religion reveal that, despite appearing distinct, the Romanization of the local elites and of the common people was the product of using

cultural exchange to meet socioeconomic needs. The elites adopted Roman identities to advance their position in the eyes of Roman governors and politicians – a strategic maneuver actively encouraged by the Roman Empire through provincial government structures. Despite the lack of active incentivization by the Romans, the common peoples similarly negotiated and adapted Roman traditions to serve indigenous needs. And because the common people were divided into a variety of sub-groups, each with its own socioeconomic needs, there were multiple variants of Romano-Celtic culture produced by multiple sub-populations with different needs.

While, up to this point, this paper has presented Romanization of local elites and of the common people as two distinct processes, they both share a core principle. Across the entire socioeconomic hierarchy, the Celts adopted aspects of Roman culture to strategically advance their socioeconomic needs. The nature of Romanization in Celtic provinces also has a logical corollary: just as certain groups of Celts adopted certain aspects of Roman culture, certain groups of Romans adopted certain aspects of Celtic culture.

The politically relevant Romans adopted very little Celtic culture. As previously mentioned, the majority of Romans believed that Celtic traditions were barbaric and backwards. Additionally, as citizens of the western world's dominant hegemon, they had few political or social needs that could be better fulfilled by other civilizations or cultures. Although it could be argued that certain ideas of Celtic origin found place in Roman society, these incidents probably cannot be mistaken for the adoption of Celtic identity or culture (Riddle 72).

However, many politically irrelevant Romans actually adopted Celtic identity in search of social mobility and freedom. Unlike the land-owning citizens, who enjoyed immense protection under the state, less fortunate members of the Roman population such as the poor, enslaved, and semi-free laborers were ineligible to receive the freedoms associated with Roman citizenship,

instead wallowing in a rigid class structure and minimal political rights. Naturally, many of these politically irrelevant Romans were attracted to Celtic culture, which they perceived to be free of unnecessary societal restrictions. These same “barbarian customs” offered an opportunity for freedom, independence, and social mobility. As a result, many Romans adopted Celtic identities, spawning the proverb “The poor Roman tends to assimilate himself to the Germans and the wealthy German to assimilate himself to the Romans” (Riddle 71).

James Baldwin once said that “People are trapped in history, and history is trapped in them.” Similar processes are replicated throughout history, and it is crucial to understand history to understand future events. Analyzing the Romanization of the Celts reveals a bi-directional cultural exchange between the Romans and Celts, where Celts adopted Roman identities to meet their indigenous needs and where poor Romans adopted Celtic identities to achieve social mobility and freedom. Despite being the product of ancient military conquests, these mixed Romano-Celtic cultures are still relevant today. Academic studies of cultural mixing often focus on ideas of unidirectional assimilation; however, the most salient issues surrounding ethnic diversity, such as the effects of racial stereotyping on the evolution of African-American culture, instead require a perspective of cultural exchange (Callan 471 – 500). As societies across the world increase in their cultural diversity, a fundamental understanding of historical incidents of cultural exchange will be essential to understanding future socioeconomic dynamics.

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