

A God's Provincial Flair: An Analysis of New Ritual Development in Gaul

Prevailing models of cultural contact and change in the Roman provinces of Gaul use material culture as a lens through which to understand the different ways the conquered Gauls identified themselves and maneuvered these identities within the Roman provincial system. According to these models, these Gauls were not resisting Romanization or actively assimilating into Roman culture, but rather adopting these new Roman imports into their own cultural system. Yet such a conclusion does not take into account the active choices made by the Gauls in this process. In fact, the various Gaulish communities in the provinces created new traditions out of the intermingling of imperial and indigenous systems. Michael Dietler (2010) employed the term “entanglement” to explain the phenomenon of cultural shift based on contact as evidenced in the material culture of southern Gaul from the 7th to 2nd centuries BCE. This approach recognizes the nuanced nature of the changes and the active role the people made in choosing what objects and material to utilize. Dietler hesitated to apply this theory to the period of Roman conquest due to the more involved nature of Roman dominance, but the earlier work of Greg Woolf (2000) and Louise Revell (2009) shows that the Gauls of the three provinces were reacting to the influx of Roman ideas and material and choosing how to use it in a manner reflective of Dietler's hypothesis.

In this paper, I argue that there is a third piece of this puzzle: the active and dynamic ways in which the people of the provinces changed material as a result of contact, creating new traditions within the provinces. Ritual was no exception. The gods moved and changed to fit the needs of the population. Foreign gods, such as Mercury, entered the pantheon and paired with Gaulish gods, occasionally appearing very differently from the Mediterranean norms. I will focus on these ritual images and the interplay of choices and influences that spawned them. We know that this kind of imagery could shock a Roman observer from Lucan's reaction to the shrine of Ogmios/Hercules during his visit to Gaul (*Hercules*. 1-6). The imagery employed was divergent enough to be regarded as a separate understanding of the deity by Lucan, but could still be explained in Mediterranean terms by a local Gaul. I argue that this interplay of merged imagery and multiple divine narrative shows the unique position such an image had:

it no longer fit into a simple model of continuity or full incorporation. An examination of various depictions and groupings of Mercury in Gaul, reveals that he was at the center of a new ritual tradition in the Gaulish provinces, and one unique to that region. This was not a new deity; rather, it was a new set of images, understandings and associations that gave him a provincial flair. It was not a new ritual, but a new tradition within the ritual.

In this regional study, I focus on areas where Roman imperial presence was not as strong as in colonies and capitols, where there was more intense focus on creating a Roman area of prestige (see Revell, 2009; van Andringa 2002). As I suggest, more dynamic changes took place where contact was less enforced and natural entanglement could occur. With a better understanding of the nature of contact within the provinces we can better examine the development of the empire as a connected region of ideas and cultures.

Bibliography

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