

# Imperialism, Power, and Identity: Experiencing the Roman Empire

Tom Palaima appreciates a depiction of the nature of exploitation under Roman imperial rule

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## Imperialism, Power, and Identity: Experiencing the Roman Empire

By David J. Mattingly

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Of all the images of empire offered here, one persists in the memory and haunts the conscience. In a Sebastiao Salgado photograph of the modern Brazilian gold mine at Serra Pelada, countless human beings stretch in ant-like files up, down, around and across the vast sides of the huge pit opened by the collective unmechanised labour of their individual bodies.

What makes the image monstrous is Mattingly's use of it as a modern relic of the pre-industrial labour conditions that prevailed during the Roman Empire. In his chapter on metals and mines, he discusses how modern archaeological surveys and the scientific study of animal and plant remains and soil composition revise the picture that scholars had formed from historical sources of "the infamous center of Roman copper mining" at ancient Phaino in the southern Jordanian desert.

Mattingly argues that the imperial mines at Phaino and hundreds like them in Spain, Britain and elsewhere did use slave and forced labour - we have accounts of the savage persecution of Christians at Phaino in the early 4th century AD - but most could not have operated without what we call "free labour". A large part of the "ugliness of imperial exploitation of people", ancient and modern, is that it creates conditions that lure vast numbers of anonymous human beings to destroy themselves in pursuit of small improvements in their material wellbeing, all for the benefit of distant elites.

The Roman Empire, like modern ones, "was not a level playing field; some provincial elites were noticeably more advantaged than others in the competition for posts and stipends". In fierce infighting in the provinces, "for every winner...there were a hundred other people whose exploitation supported the social position of the elites".

The title of Mattingly's book is no false advertising. His treatment of what empire and imperialism are; how power permeated all relationships and transactions - personal, social, political, sexual and economic - throughout the Empire; in what ways the inexhaustible appetite for resources in Roman imperial times wasted human lives and did lasting damage to natural landscapes; and how individuals and groups conceived of their identities under Roman imperial rule, all make us experience what it was like to be part of its power system. He is right to stress that we cannot understand how and why the Empire encompassed as much of the world and its peoples as it did and lasted for so long unless we stay focused on the "power and inequality (that) lay at the heart of (its) discourse".

Mattingly also argues convincingly for several key points of interpretation. First, there was no one concept or form of imperialism at work within and during the Roman Empire. Second, the ideas advanced by elites near the centres of power about their "civilizing missions", their relative restraint (citing Cicero's *De Officiis*) in using the violence of power, or their benign desires to improve the human condition in the parts of the world they had acquired, directly or indirectly, by armed violence were really post facto rationalisations.

Yet these ideas had such hypnotic staying power that British classical historians could write in the 1920s that the Roman Empire "rose above the methods of brute force or mere well-devised bureaucracy", "made a genuine effort to unite liberty and Empire" and offered "a highly interesting analogy to similar modern experiments". Such interpretations of Roman history affected participants in the British imperial experiment. As Mattingly observes, six out of eight provincial governors in India in 1938 held Classics degrees from the [University of Oxford](#).

Third, Mattingly develops the insight of Ronald Syme that there was no such thing as Romanisation, because there was no such thing as "the execution of a deliberate policy" under the Roman regime. He aptly uses an observation of Michel Foucault to explain what it was really like to live anywhere at any time inside the limits of the Roman Empire: "It seems to me that power is always there, that one is never 'outside' it, that there are no 'margins' for those who break with the system to gambol in."

Scenes on Trajan's column representing the emperor's campaigns against the Dacians prove that there were no margins in the Roman Balkans. They proudly depict villages burned, livestock slaughtered, men executed, women seized and refugees herded away. Power was also used oppressively to extract resources and exact taxes. Cassius Dio, remarking on the Pannonian revolt against such oppression a century earlier, cites the Illyrian view that the

Romans "send as guardians of your flocks not dogs or shepherds but wolves". It took a while for the emperors and their armies to get the hang of rising above the methods of brute force.