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Caesar's World Turned Inside Out? Roman Provincial Colonisation and the 'Settler Revolution' of the First Century BCE

Jitse Daniels

This essay was inspired mainly by Lorenzo Veracini's *The world turned inside out*, and an article written by Evan Jewell on colonisation and domestic displacement. Published in 2021, Veracini's study offers an explanation for the emergence of settler colonialism, focusing on metropolitan politics and, specifically, on policies of draining population surpluses. Similarly, Evan Jewell, while not writing within Settler Colonial Studies (SCS) discourse, seeks to explain Roman colonisation in a manner comparable to Veracini's analysis of modern settler colonialism. These works provide a productive foundation for reconsidering key aspects of Roman provincial colonisation, particularly its timing and purpose. The question which motivations lay behind sending out settlers looms large in the background, and it is here that SCS, in particular Veracini's recent work, may prove illuminating. One of the main issues that needs clarification is why there was an explosion of colonial foundations in the Roman provinces under Caesar and Augustus, while Rome had been very reluctant for most of its Republican history to found *coloniae* outside of Italy. Veracini's study can be a helpful starting point here. However, I will first zoom out somewhat to clarify how one could, I believe, apply colonial and settler colonial frameworks to the Roman context and how this may be helpful.

The Roman 'colonial situation' in the East until Caesar

Before addressing the motivations behind the surge in settler colonial foundations, it is important to first outline the context preceding Caesar's colonial program, with a focus on Roman expansion in the East. By the second half of the second century BCE, Greece (Achaea), Macedon, and Asia (western Turkey) had already been incorporated as Roman provinces. Interestingly, the Roman concept of a *provincia* is more akin to what is called an overseas colony in (early) modern contexts, whereas the Roman *colonia*, as I will explain below, signified something very similar to modern settler colonies, albeit small and clearly demarcated ones.

The distinction between a Roman *provincia* and *colonia* has parallels with the one made in SCS discourse between ('exploitative') colonialism and 'settler' colonialism: whereas colonialism aims at subjugating and exploiting the native population for their labour, settler colonists expel or exterminate

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the native population in order to exploit the land themselves (Veracini 2011; Osterhammel 2021). These distinctions have been nuanced and challenged in ongoing discussions in SCS discourse, though, as will be explained, between *provinciae* and *coloniae* the distinctions are arguably much clearer than those made in the debate on colonialism vs. settler colonialism.

Parallels between 'colonies' and 'colonisation' of different eras have been drawn before of course, and not seldom invoke scepticism or confusion. Moses Finley, an influential scholar of ancient history, once attempted to establish a consistent, more specific definition, or typology, of what a colony is (Finley 1976). For him, a colony was first and foremost focused on land and its exploitation, which in the case of a proper colony, by his account, is often done by settlers from the metropolis. As he himself states, British India among many others are ruled out by this definition as colonies, but Roman *coloniae* and the British colonies in America are included. What Finley defined, then, comes very close to what would later be typified as a settler colony, as opposed to colonialism as it developed in British India. Finley too, emphasises the distinction between a *colonia* and a *provincia*, but compares them to what Wales and Ireland were to England rather than what India was for Britain (Finley 1976, 187), which I think is a little off the mark. Finley presents the Roman provinces as thoroughly incorporated into a cohesive empire, but it should be stressed that this reflects the situation only in the later periods of the Roman empire. The provinces were clearly marked as different from the Roman heartland and were exploited mainly to the benefit of the imperial centre.

A Roman *provincia* was basically a region to which a general or governor was sent out and to which his authority was delimited, though, since the institution evolved mainly according to pragmatic and ad hoc needs of Roman policy, there were significant administrative differences between provinces (Alejandro Díaz Fernández 2021) - much like, say, different territories of the British Empire. These regions were put under the sovereignty of a Roman governor, and were in time also structurally exploited not only by means of tax levies – for which local power structures were used as well as Roman contractors – but also by extracting natural resources and setting up (unequal) trade relations. The colonial relation between Rome and her provinces also shows that there was a very clear and lasting conceptual distinction between the homeland, namely Rome and Italy, and all of Rome's provinces. Italy was not subjected to the same exploitative regimes and did not know structural taxation (Bleicken 1974).

In the provinces of Greece (*Achaea*), Macedon and Asia, there were many different groups of Romans already present before any *colonia* was founded. Of course, there were the governor and his staff, along with other officials, and often a garrison of Roman legions, especially in unruly or frontier provinces. Besides these enforcers of empire, there were groups of Romans that can be characterised as the exploiting agents of empire. These groups mainly consisted of the *negotiatores*, the Roman

businessmen and traders of all kinds, and the *publicani*, who were the private contractors that levied taxes in the provinces for the Roman state.

Interesting in this context are recent studies on the role of landownership among these entrepreneurs, which have shown that the possession of land by Roman traders in the Greek world was more prevalent and more important to their business than previously thought. This knowledge has quite some implications for our perception of the role of businessmen in Roman imperialism. These wealthy landowning Romans created large agricultural and industrial estates that aimed at producing high-end products for export, mainly to Italy, such as olive oil, textiles, cattle and marble (Eberle and Le Quéré 2017, 27, 41-42; Zoumbaki 2012, 82-85). This, as two scholars have recently pointed out, is a much more direct exploitation of empire that resembles the situation in early modern colonial empires such as those of Spain, Britain and Holland (Eberle and Le Quéré 2017, 52).

In the present context, the three most important similarities between *provinciae* and modern overseas colonies are the following:

1. Both *provinciae* and modern overseas colonies came to be governed by metropolitan agents overseeing an indigenous population
2. In both cases there was a clear and perpetuated conceptual and legal distinction between metropolis and colony/*provincia*
3. Both saw a class of private traders and contractors that were indispensable for the exploitation of the *provincia*/colony

On account of these similarities, the comparison between *provinciae* and modern overseas colonies is a useful one, as it clarifies what provinces were in relation to actual Roman *coloniae*. In a way, these *coloniae* were pockets of settler colonies inserted into this larger colonial structure, which was, in must be stressed, already firmly anchored.

Pre-colonial Roman foundations in the east

This brings me to another aspect of the pre-Caesarean situation in the Greek provinces which I want to address, namely the urban centres founded by Pompey that came to function as administrative centres for Roman governors. They are relevant here because they form an alternative to Roman colonisation in that they fulfil some of the same functions as urban centres that *coloniae* could fulfil. This is often neglected when historians discuss the role of Roman colonies in the eastern provinces.

When Pompey had subjugated Anatolia in the mid-1st century BCE, he moved about pacifying and reorganising the region, creating several new provinces (Eilers 2005, 90-91). Between 88 and 63 BCE, wars were fought against Mithridates, the king of Pontus (i.e. northern Anatolia), who had incited

rebellions throughout Rome's eastern provinces. This had greatly shaken Rome's hold on the region and had led to great massacres of the Romans living among the native population. Rome had cracked down hard on those who had joined Mithridates' side, and Romans supporting the imperial apparatus had flowed back in as soon as Rome regained control of Asia and many newly acquired territories (Santangelo 2007, 50-67, 107-134). Like in Asia, for convenient administration the provinces were divided up into administrative units which needed urban centres. Especially in Pontus, where no urban administrative centres had formed, Pompey found that such urban centres needed to be created (Sherwin-White 1984, 229-230). For this, he resorted to the Greek practice of synoecism, creating new civic units with an urban nucleus by moving and combining the surrounding population into that new unit (Jones 1987, 104-105). That Pompey opted for this Greek urban model is very understandable in this context: given the mainly Greek culture of the region it would have been much easier to anchor Greek-style urban centres which were more familiar to local elites – cooperation with the local elites while subjugating such a gigantic region was key (Sherwin-White 1984, 226-229; Gelzer 1949, 105-107).

The interesting point is that these cities functioned well as administrative centres and could be anchored easily in the Greek urban and political system. In this way, they are arguably much more desirable than *coloniae* for anchoring Roman rule without disrupting the social and political hierarchy as much. The fact that Pompey chose this path even in a time and place where military control seemed highly desirable, makes one doubt that Roman colonies were mainly means of military control or urbanisation during this period. In fact, Augustus too would not seldom opt for this type of city-founding. In Epirus and Egypt Augustus founded new Greek port cities, and in Anatolia, Augustus used the same process of synoecism to found the cities of Pessinus, Tavium and Ancyra (modern-day Ankara), in order to urbanise regions that knew no urban centres (Mitchell 1993, 80-81). Thus, this excursus shows that the Romans had other effective methods for urbanising and controlling regions that were less disruptive to elite exploitation structures than founding large settler colonies.

To summarise, there was already a significant Roman presence in the provinces, with businessmen, traders, and governors active in the region. Roman military leaders and imperial administrators had already experimented with methods for creating new urban centers without founding colonies. It was within this complex context that the *coloniae* of Caesar and Augustus were established—not on terra nullius or in hostile, barbarian lands, but in highly urbanised regions with established civic cultures, where Romans had already set up an imperial colonial structure. This leads to the question: what role did the *colonia* serve in Roman imperialism?

Roman coloniae: Modern research

Studies on Roman *coloniae* in the Greek east have traditionally focused on their foundation, their distribution, their military or economic role, and the provenance of the colonists (Vittinghoff 1952; Salmon 1969; Bowersock 1981). Historians have often explained colonies in military-strategic or sometimes in economic terms. Scholars have long known settling demographic surpluses to have been an important function of *coloniae*, but the implications of this should be pursued further. While there have recently been many studies on individual *coloniae* and their development over time, there is now more need for re-evaluation of the imperial political aspect of colonisation. There is no satisfactory explanation why so many *coloniae*, which were populated for a large part by the urban plebs of Rome, were founded in the provinces roughly at the same time.

It is here that a deeper focus on the sociopolitical motivations of Roman colonisation is necessary, for which SCS may prove very helpful. Veracini's *The world inside out* may be used to provide a useful framework from which to depart. In that work, Veracini addresses the question of how and why so many settlers got where they are today, leaving their metropoles behind and building communities elsewhere (Veracini 2021). He argues that settler colonialism, climaxing in a true settler revolution in the nineteenth century, constitutes a transnational political logic that, in order to prevent revolution, aims at voluntary displacement of impoverished population surpluses from the metropole. Such a political tradition seems clearly visible in the Roman context as well. And viewed within this context, we might identify something resembling a 'settler revolution' in the first century BCE under Caesar. Two important points follow from this comparison that can bring us closer to understanding the sudden colonisation of Rome's provinces in the first century BCE. Firstly, a political logic similar to that which Veracini has identified, i.e. stimulating 'colonial' migration in order to prevent revolution in the metropole, was present in Rome (as substantiated by Evan Jewell 2019). Secondly, something crucial had changed during Caesar's reign that explains this sudden Roman settler revolution, which moved Caesar to successfully plant settler colonies into Rome's provincial territories. The reason for this, I think, lies in internal Roman social and political processes, rather than in the provinces themselves. After all, we know that Caesar and Augustus stood at the beginning and the end of a fundamental regime change in the Roman empire. The foundation of Roman *coloniae* at this time in the east, I argue below, can be understood through their role in facilitating and stabilizing a regime change at the core of the empire.

Roman coloniae as a means of anchoring a regime change?

Recent studies on the previously mentioned Roman businessmen exploiting the provinces support the view that these *coloniae* were inserted into, and even disrupted an existing colonial structure. Particularly relevant is the observation that not only the indigenous population, but the Romans already living in Greece too, experienced disruption due to the influx of settlers. One study has shown that the Roman elite owned land in many parts of Greece, also where *coloniae* were founded, such as Butrint in Epirus. There is a case known concerning Titus Pomponius Atticus' estates near Butrint which were threatened to be incorporated in the Caesarean *colonia* that was planned there (Cic. *Att.* 16.16B.3-4). Atticus (a well-known and very wealthy member of the Roman elite) lobbied hard to save his estates, but due to the chaos after Caesar's assassination his efforts were in the end fruitless (Eberle, and Le Quéré 2017, 37; Deniaux 1987, 250-253). This is a clear example of how the wave of settler colonial foundations in the east could come into conflict with the Romans that were already running businesses in the provinces. The crucial point here is that *coloniae* could very well disrupt the provincial (that is, colonial?) system of exploitation that was already in place - they did not simply support or reinforce that system.

On the other hand, the foundation of Roman *coloniae* naturally entailed the creation of many more Italian landowners in Greece. The interesting difference between the two groups is that these colonists were far greater in number and were mainly simple, lower class Romans - not commercial big shots from the upper classes of Rome. In Italy the tensions between elite property and proletarian poverty had been a recurring issue, and now Caesar brought this class struggle to the provinces, in a way, by settling proletarians there in great numbers. Here, then, we observe something corresponding to a settler colonial logic as Veracini explained it, in that Caesar exported an internal class struggle. According to Veracini's logic, this exportation was to prevent a regime change, and, according to Evan Jewell, this colonisation programme was the result of an elite solidarity based on a fear of proletarian insurrection. However, there is a problem that complicates Jewell's argument.

Put briefly, elite solidarity in the late Republic is an illusion. In fact, the voices that had often propagated settler colonial policies in Rome did not belong to a monolithic elite, but rather belonged to a succession of dissident groups who can be described as populists, starting with the Gracchi (two politicians from the 2nd century BCE who turned against the Senatorial majority and who mainly pursued land distributions and colonisation). Caesar's colonial politics has often been described as being firmly grounded in the Gracchan tradition, aiming at the provision of land for the landless poor to settle (Brunt 1971, 256). There was therefore no elite consensus on how to 'drain the masses', i.e. on settler colonial policies, to prevent a revolution. Settler colonial policies were a deeply divisive issue and were mainly used by the Gracchan 'populists' to further their political agenda. Caesar, put simply, was the first one

who succeeded in pushing through such an agenda. Thus it rather seems that Caesar initiated a 'settler revolution' not to prevent a revolution at home, but to anchor his own.

The fact that a few decades earlier Sulla, an oligarch at the head of his own conservative, elitist faction, had exactly the opposite policies in mind for the Roman provinces, makes this point all the more interesting. Sulla conspicuously did not found any *coloniae* in the provinces, while as a dictator he was in the perfect position to do so. At the same time the data collected by recent studies shows that private Roman landownership in the provinces grew spectacularly after Sulla had subdued the eastern provinces that had rebelled against Rome (Eberle and Le Quéré 2017, 30-32). Sulla thus practically reserved the provinces for the elite to exploit.

In this context, could it be justified to see the Caesarean colonisation programme as a means of opening up the provinces to the proletariat while curbing the (economic) privileges and influence that the senatorial elite had enjoyed in the provinces? The internal Roman class struggle, which, simply put, boils down to a struggle over how the spoils of Empire were to be divided, is with the Caesarean colonisation programme settled more in favour of the lower classes. Of course, Caesar expected political endorsement in return, and could have relied on political support from his *coloniae*. It seems, then, that Caesar's settler colonies were meant to help control the provincial imperial structure on his behalf. This structure, after all, was set up by the system preceding Caesar's coup, and might have had different political and economic priorities. The colonies might in this way have supported Caesar's regime change. In any case, Caesar clearly deemed the foundation of dozens of colonies throughout the provinces a desirable way to bring change to the previous system - for change the colonies brought. That Caesar, a political dissident standing in the Gracchan tradition, now had absolute political control might then provide the best explanation for why it was at this time that Rome suddenly and vigorously planted dozens of settler colonies throughout its overseas empire. The question why this particular mode of domination was deemed most suitable by this 'Gracchan faction' and by Augustus is the larger issue needing explanation – one that most definitely needs more attention than is available in the span of this essay.

This brief study indicates that internal political and ideological principles had a strong influence on the timing and nature of the colonisation process of the first century BCE. Recent studies on Roman *coloniae* in the east do not often consider the influence of such political ideas on Roman colonisation. As I have tried to substantiate, the settler colonial logic identified by Veracini provides a good framework with which to rectify this, although I have also argued that the internal politics of Rome do not reflect a straightforward elite logic of displacing the proletariat; this issue was embedded in more complicated political and ideological struggles that, when researched more thoroughly, may explain

better why Rome knew such a sudden settler revolution under Caesar, when he decided to insert dozens of miniature settler colonies in the Roman empire overseas.

Reflecting on Settler Colonial Studies, and in particular on the internal dynamics of the metropole and its role in initiating settler colonialism, this essay suggests seeing the metropole as a multi-layered phenomenon. Of course, Settler Colonialism's strength as a concept lies in its capacity to examine overarching socioeconomic and -political structures, necessitating a high degree of abstraction. However, it might be fruitful to dissect the metropole to enable inquiring – within the Settler Colonial structure – how different parties or factions within the metropole competed with each other behind the scenes to push through their own desired mode of colonisation and domination. After all, recent research has identified numerous such different modes of colonialism (for an overview see Veracini 2023, 1-3). These inquiries can, in turn, illuminate how specific modes of domination benefited particular political, social, or economic classes and the mechanisms through which these benefits were realised.

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