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# Fergus Millar: Rome, the Greek World, and the East. Volume 2. Government, Society and Culture in the Roman Empire (Book Review)

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Fergus Millar, *Rome, the Greek World, and the East. Volume 2. Government, Society and Culture in the Roman Empire*. Edited by Hannah M. Cotton and Guy M. Rogers. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004. Pp. vii + 470. Cloth (ISBN 0-8078-2852-1) \$65.00.

In Fergus Millar's discussion of his teacher, Ronald Syme, he states, "we can afford to take his stature as a historian as a presupposition and should not shirk the duty of asking what his work has been, what we have learnt from it" (p. 399). Likewise, now that Millar's papers have been intelligently collected into two volumes, the second of which roughly covers the first four centuries of our era, we attempt to ascertain the significance of one of the most influential ancient historians of the last forty years.

The editors, former students of Millar, have done the hard work of selecting twenty articles from his enormous production on the high Roman empire. In this selection they have followed the principle laid down in Cotton's lucid and compressed introduction to provide access to the broadest possible audience, a principle apparently close to Millar's heart. The pieces provide an excellent introduction to a wide variety of topics in economic, legal, political and social history, and they use a wide variety of sources epigraphical, juridical, and literary. Unlike many such volumes, this one will be useful for undergraduate imperial Roman history courses in which Millar's cautious approach to interpretation, copious use of evidence and clear prose should prove salubrious.

Millar rarely indulges in openly theoretical discussions, and his focus on exhausting all available evidence may give a faint hint of academic antiquarianism. But such an impression is misleading and should not prompt anyone to assume that Millar is methodologically naive. In these papers we see frequent and thoughtful attention to method. Millar's excruciating candidness regarding our paucity of evidence and his consistent respect for the existing sources combine with pithy statements of purpose to expose accurate, thoughtful and illuminating perspectives. For instance, in his critique of Luttwak's *Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire from the 1<sup>st</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> Century BC* (1976), he makes this characteristic statement (p. 164):

What follows is offered as no more than a few tentative steps towards analyzing the conditions under which the external policy of the Empire was formulated and put into effect . . . The discussion will be based on literary and documentary evidence, will have to be highly selective, and will do no justice to the complexities of particular campaigns or the archaeology of individual frontiers. But it may serve to raise some questions, and to emphasize the limits imposed on policy and its execution by Graeco-Roman culture, the structure of government, time, distance, and the conventions of diplomacy. No apology is made for the use of arguments from silence. We must *as a first step* listen to what our sources explicitly tell us and refrain from making assumptions as to what they do not tell us.

While conceding the importance and inherent interest of Luttwak's study, Millar in these few lines undermined the foundation of *Grand Strategy*, and hints at the anachronism of discussing Roman "foreign policy" and

“diplomacy.” In the pages that follow you will not find long discussions of grand themes or dense generalizations on the workings of history. But Millar’s wealth of evidence always supports clear objectives.

Rather than reading Roman history as a primer for running an empire, Millar shifted the focus to what it meant to live under Roman rule. From the American perspective an anachronistic discussion of the Roman “constitution” played a major role in conceiving and refining our own constitution, an achievement that might make us sympathetic towards using extrapolations of Roman juridical writings to discuss the operation of the Roman state. Such discussions do not reflect a defensible model of how the Roman state operated. Millar’s emphasis on the passivity of Roman imperial rule subtly undercuts the unconsidered imperialistic tendencies inherent in traditional studies, especially those produced in Britain, France and Germany.

The first section gathers eleven articles under the title “Imperial Government.” The first two are detailed analyses of imperial administration. The next three develop the topic into economics discussing the *fiscus*, *aerarium*, and imperial minting. Next are three pondering the emperor’s role as seen in the writings of Epictetus, Nero’s freedman; via the topic of public punishment; and through equestrian careers discussed in an insightful review of Phlaum’s work. The last three essays are grouped around the topic of “foreign relations.” All eleven articles persuasively demonstrate the improvised and passive nature of Roman imperial rule.

Since the editors chronologically arrange the essays in their section titled “Society and Culture,” we can see Millar’s interest in provincial life and its reflections on Roman rule develop in time. A somewhat schematic article, published in 1968, on Punic and Libyan identity deals mostly with linguistic evidence concerning the place of local languages in imperial North Africa. His more developed piece of 1969 delves into the life of the Athenian intellectual Dexippus. This essay suggests outlines of the complex process of cultural melding that eventually resulted in the robustly stable identity of the Byzantine citizen (*Romaioi*). Millar argues that the puzzling literary life of Greek speakers in the Roman empire marked a deep association with a classical past that would cement a lasting eastern Roman identity (p. 297):

None the less, we have to face the facts both that the Byzantine world survived against repeated attack in a way that the Latin world did not; and that a profound attachment to the classical Greek past remained fundamental to Byzantine culture.

This deep attachment to a literary past may well have enticed Millar into his subsequent research on Roman Jewish identity. Such an early anticipation of “Identity Studies” cannot fail to impress us.

In this section on imperial culture, an essay on Christian persecution (1973), one on the vivid political and cultural world of Apuleius’ *Golden Ass* (1981), and another on the place of provincial city dwellers (1983) all explore what life was like outside of the imperial center, though the focus remains on tentative suggestions regarding patterns of socio-political life. The last essay in the section brilliantly illuminates the conflict between the emperor’s need to confer on provincial leaders titles that relieved them from local

duties (liturgies), while he also needed strong provincial cities supported by such duties. The transition from honorifics such as *kratistos*, by which the provincial officials conferred exemption onto retired local dignitaries, to the abstract *kratisteia*, by which emperors first conferred exemption onto the same dignitaries, fascinated Millar. All the tensions of province versus empire were revealed in what appears to be a tidy philological point. Notice how he ends this essay (p. 371):

... the step from adjectives to nouns denoting statuses, as abstract qualities which might inhere in a person, arrived simultaneously with the conception that such a status might confer immunity from the obligations imposed by a man's native city. It is surely suggestive that our earliest expression of both of these conceptions is a document which records a petition to the emperors.

Such focus on provincial realities provides vivid insight into the chaos of imperial "policy," while the fascination with "abstract qualities that might inhere in a person" foreshadows Millar's interest in the development of collective, extra-Roman identities.

The view of Rome from the provinces and the development of group identities will be more apparent when the third volume of this series appears. In the last fifteen years Millar has become one of the most authoritative and provocative voices on the complex and dizzying developments of the Eastern Empire in late antiquity. His already remarkable expertise in Greek and Latin texts and inscriptions is supplemented by the Hebrew, Aramaic and Syriac sources, lending him an almost equally authentic voice in Near Eastern Studies. This collection powerfully demonstrates that we have learned, and will learn, a great deal from him.

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