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Comment on “Contingent Persistence: Continuity, Change, and Identity in the Romanization Debate” by Lara Ghisleni

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I feel that this paper makes an important contribution to this topic that extends well beyond the study of the Roman world.

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Ghisleni adds an additional voice to the growing chorus of archaeologists dissatisfied with conventional approaches to understanding the material evidence for intercultural entanglements. Particularly troublesome in this regard is the stubborn idea that continuity and change are two mutually exclusive trajectories initiated at the moment of contact. Such formulations lead to a priori assumptions about material culture that limit the ability of archaeologists to trace the complex relationships resulting from such encounters. In seeking to break down the dichotomous thinking that has pervaded the archaeological study of the Roman Empire and its local instantiations, Ghisleni offers an alternative that treats continuity not as the simple replication of earlier practices but as both contingent and emergent. In other words, continuity is structured by the past, but the path taken ultimately reflects only one of many possible ways forward. Seeing continuity and change as mutually constitutive directs archaeologists away from teleological narratives and toward a more temporally sensitive method for understanding the complexities of identity and practice.

As an archaeologist studying how indigenous people negotiated Euro-American colonialism in North America, I found this article particularly thought provoking. The historical and archaeological applications of the Romanization concept have clear parallels in the archaeological study of more recent European and American colonialism, as do the subsequent critiques. In both cases, early approaches relied on essentialist views of identity that reified the distinction between the colonizer and the colonized. More recent postcolonial critiques have been widely, although perhaps unevenly, acknowledged in both areas. Whether one studies the Roman Empire or the Spanish Empire, few would deny the limitations posed by dichotomous categories for the interpretation of material culture and past social identities. Regarding these points, this article identifies a broad common ground that supports increasingly frequent conversations across temporal and topical boundaries.

With that in mind, it is worth pointing out the geographical breadth of the literature cited, including many scholars studying more recent colonial contexts, such as those in North America and Australia. In thinking about how the past structures emergent possibilities in the present, it is worth examining the genealogy of the concepts under consideration. From a North American perspective, the focus on change and continuity is both deeply rooted and explicitly political. For instance, the impetus for early anthropologists to study American Indian groups was often to document supposedly pristine na-

tive societies before they were forever altered by externally imposed change. But sustained interactions with Euro-Americans led many observers instead to detail the transformations that rippled across various realms of indigenous life. The concept of acculturation, which Ghisleni argues against in this article, originated in this distinctly American milieu (Cusick 1998).

Decades later, the fundamental tenets of such models have proven difficult to uproot. Although most archaeologists today would disavow strict acculturation frameworks, the notion that tradition and transformation are somehow separate processes continues to suffuse many scholarly and popular understandings of the legacies of colonialism. Indeed, the political realities for indigenous groups in settler societies are still tightly bound to questions of continuity and change. In the United States, for example, American Indian groups seeking official recognition as sovereign nations must demonstrate unbroken political and social cohesion from the point of contact forward (e.g., Lightfoot et al. 2013). In this way, indigenous groups are often caught in a double bind in which even strategies to ensure community survival are seen by outsiders as evidence for an irreparable break with an essentialized identity tied directly to the precontact past.

This intellectual and political context is an inescapable backdrop to the archaeological approaches developed from the study of relatively recent colonial encounters. This is not to suggest that the question of Romanization raised by this article does not intersect contemporary political concerns; it is well established, for instance, that historical accounts of the Roman Empire were mobilized to support the ideology of the British Empire. However, an important difference between present-day settler nations and Roman Britain is that, although such history continues to resonate, there are no extant communities that can claim direct lineal descent from either Iron Age Britons or the Romans who sought to conquer them (Hingley 2015). And here is perhaps an important strength of the argument presented in this article: Ghisleni acknowledges the teleological baggage that is common to studies of colonialism worldwide, be it of the Roman, Spanish, or British variety, while operating outside of the immediate political dimension present in much of the literature from North America and other settler nations.

From this vantage point, Ghisleni makes the case that “continuity can be otherwise from the past,” a statement that succinctly attacks the fundamental issue with conventional expectations regarding the outcomes of colonial encounters, be they ancient or recent. The article’s brief case study illustrates this point through an exploration of the Late Iron Age and Early Roman period in southwest England. The material patterns, including spatial configurations and burial practices, are decidedly “multidimensional and nonlinear.” Such a finding mirrors similarly complex spatial and temporal patterns noted by archaeologists examining colonial encounters in other areas of the world, and the final interpretations are admittedly open ended. But that is by design. The goal of the article is to encourage archaeologists to consider how our reluctance to aban-

don the continuity/change dichotomy blinds us to more nuanced insights about past intercultural entanglements.

I cannot comment directly on the impact that this intervention will have on the Romanization debate, but I believe it will add a fresh perspective for those of us conducting research on other colonial contexts. Over the past two decades, archaeologists studying European and American colonialism have worked to balance the insights of postcolonial understandings of identity with the blatantly essentialist frameworks in which many contemporary indigenous communities must operate. Given the cross-fertilization captured here, it is interesting to see how Ghisleni has taken these ideas and applied them to a conceptually similar but historically and politically distinct case study. I will look forward to seeing how the suggestions developed in this article cycle back.

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The idea that continuity is a historical product was firmly put on the intellectual agenda by Marshall Sahlins in *Islands of History* (1985). Lara Ghisleni's article reminds us of the important insight that continuity and change are dialectical, that continuity is therefore always emergent, and that we should study (social) change in terms of what she calls "ongoing, long-term processes of rearticulation." The application of this research agenda to questions of Romanization is useful, not only because it gets this debate going again in a fruitful manner (Van Dommelen 2014; Versluys 2014a, 2014b; Woolf 2014), but also because Roman history and archaeology should interact more with anthropology on this particular aspect; it is very welcome to see Romanization being discussed in these pages. Following Greg Woolf's landmark *Becoming Roman* (1998), research has focused more on deconstructing the "Roman" from his title than on achieving a better understanding of "becoming." Therefore, much remains to be done—but a lot has been done already as well. "As so often in Mediterranean history, the problem is not in finding continuities, but in assessing which ones are significant—and why," Horden and Purcell conclude in their long-term (ecological) history of the Mediterranean (Horden and Purcell 2000:411). This is very much about putting "ongoing, long-term processes of rearticulation" at the center of understanding continuities and change, as has been the case in recent discussions about processes of inventing and neglecting traditions in the Roman world as a form of becoming Roman (Busch, Busch, and Versluys 2015).

I quote from *The Corrupting Sea* (Horden and Purcell 2000) on purpose to draw in that book's long-term perspective, because it enables us to see an important point that Ghisleni, I think, underplays: the period in Eurasian history that we call Roman is, in many aspects, all about transformation. One

could argue that, in fact, every historical period is—but in terms of heightened cultural interconnectedness and all kinds of radical social, religious, and cultural changes, the Roman period certainly involves transformation to a maximum pre-modern extent (Witcher 2017). Therefore, focusing on change in the context of Empire is a useful point of departure for understanding Romanization, simply because we do recognize an immense amount of dramatic transformation—and because Rome is only partly responsible for all the emergent possibilities and their (unintended) consequences, I think that understanding these as taking place within the single cultural container of a global world effectively moves us beyond the essentializing categories of Roman and native (Versluys 2014a, 2014b). But the remaining challenge, as Ghisleni rightly underlines, is then still to understand "how continuities and changes are constituted in contingent contexts of possibilities." The central characteristic of these contexts of possibilities, as the Dorset case study also shows, is a broadening of range, a widening of repertoire. The constitution of both persistence and change takes many different forms, but both take place in a globalizing context in which more options become available and repositioning is unavoidable (Pitts and Versluys 2015). As always, "glocalization" is one of the outcomes of this expanded geography, and this is also the case in the Roman era. I was therefore surprised to not see the concept of globalization, now widely used within anthropology and archaeology for interpreting continuity, change, and identity (Hodos et al. 2017), used or discussed by Ghisleni.

The new might present itself as the shock of the new and, as such, put dialectics of change and continuity at work, but, as Ghisleni rightly warns us, this is not necessarily so. I found her conclusion on the mortaria illuminating in this respect. Being new is only one of many more affordances of a mortarium—and the one scholars tend to focus on in their search for continuity or change. However, changes in food preparation implied by these new vessels apparently did not take place, as residue analysis documented dietary continuity—as such, the mortaria constitute continuity and change simultaneously. Ghisleni does not discuss the important question of whether the new style or design of the mortaria and the changes they brought to the "visual ecology" (Wells 2012) of Britain in the Roman period play any role. This is unfortunate, as Chris Gosden has convincingly argued for the importance of such affordances of objects and even groups of objects—what he calls the inter-artefactual domain—for understanding continuity, change, and identity in Roman Britain (Gosden 2006), and John Robb has now even presented aesthetic style as a (middle range) theory of material culture in general terms (Robb 2015).

Apart from the mortaria, roundhouses constitute another telling example of the importance of the approach advocated by Ghisleni, because roundhouses do not always turn out to be "round" houses. Again, scholars have focused on this particular characteristic and subsequently understood it as change, while it might well concern continuity in terms of identity and practice. In other parts of Roman archaeology, scholars have long been aware of these shifting meanings of similar forms and have