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Necessary comparisons: a post-colonial approach to religious syncretism in the Roman provinces

Jane Webster

Abstract

Questioning existing paradigms regarding religious syncretism in the western provinces of the Roman Empire, this paper addresses the difficulty of reconciling comparative study with historical contingency. It is argued that discourse analysis, as developed in post-colonial discourse theory, both facilitates comparative study of material culture in colonial contexts, and enables radical new readings of Romano-Celtic syncretism. It is further suggested that the discursive relationship between Roman imperialism and Western European imperialism – the cycle of interaction between ancient and modern colonialisms – has influenced the study of Romano–Celtic religion in such a way that we not only *can* compare colonialisms, but *must* compare them if we wish both to articulate the nature of religious syncretism in the Roman provinces, and to achieve a reflexive understanding of our own discipline.

Keywords

Syncretism; comparison; colonialism; post-colonialism; discourse; Romano-Celtic.

Introduction

This paper addresses a long-debated paradox concerning the difficulty of reconciling comparative study with historical contingency. By using comparative tools in our attempts to understand past societies, do we in fact deny the historical uniqueness of the peoples we are attempting to study? This paradox remains at the core of comparative historical archaeology, which simultaneously must take account of the global and the local (Hall 1992), and I would be foolish to attempt to resolve it. Rather, my aim here is to address the value of a comparative approach in an *ancient* historical setting: the Roman provinces.

It is undeniable that comparison between colonial contexts risks the reduction of 'colonialism' to a cross-cultural monolith (see e.g. Thomas 1994: Webster 1996: 6–9). Attempts to define essential, systemic characteristics as a basis for drawing cross-cultural comparisons between empires have been both synchronistic and deterministic (for an

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exercise of this type, see Bartel's (1985) application of pattern analysis in his attempted development of a probabilistic model of imperialism as social domination). In this context, an important critique of reductionist histories of the Roman Empire is to be found in Barrett's recent writing on Romanization and Roman imperialism (1988, 1989, forthcoming; Barrett and Foster 1993). Barrett has criticized both the reduction of 'the Roman Empire' to a single coherent entity (Barrett 1989, forthcoming; Barrett and Foster 1993), and the role of cross-cultural analogy in historical enquiry generally (Barrett 1988). The latter is valueless, Barrett argues, because there can be no satisfactory cross-cultural discovery of what constitutes 'imperialism'. Rather, it is necessary to understand the specific historic conditions under which imperialisms were brought into being. Comparison, on this reading, is a denial of the very historical conditions we are attempting to elucidate.

Leaving to one side the issue of whether it is actually possible to avoid analogical reasoning in contemporary representation of the subject positions of the long dead, Barrett is of course right to stress the inadequacies of the polarized opposition between 'Roman' and 'native' which at present informs the majority of work on Romanization. My argument below will be that if we are to provide this much-needed discursive *re*-presentation of the subject positions of the Roman era, comparative analysis is not simply unavoidable: it is a methodological necessity.

The first half of this paper will comprise a case study examining current approaches to religious syncretism in the western provinces. I will draw on post-colonial discourse theory to argue that discourse analysis both facilitates comparative study of material culture in colonial contexts, and enables radical new readings on Romano-Celtic religion. Discourse draws upon and reproduces particular structures of knowledge, and in so doing, it reproduces relations of dominance within society (Barrett 1988). It is this aspect of discourse theory – the relationship between knowledge and power – which is of particular interest to post-colonial theorists, and to Romanists working from a post-colonial perspective (Webster 1996: 8; papers in Webster and Cooper (eds) 1996), and on which I shall focus here.

In the second half of this paper, I will move beyond the Romano-Celtic context itself to explore the ways in which the discursive relationship between Roman imperialism and Western European imperialism has influenced the study of religion in the Roman provinces. It is this relationship – the cycle of interaction between ancient and modern colonialisms, and above all between the discourses by which those colonialisms were maintained – which has prevented a nuanced analysis of syncretism in the Roman west. The paper will conclude with a second illustrative case study, on the clay statuettes of central Gaul.

The aim of this paper, then, is to suggest that the nature of the discursive relationship between ancient and modern colonialisms has been such that we not only *can* compare colonialisms, but *must* compare them if we wish both to understand the nature of religious syncretism in the Roman provinces, and to achieve a reflexive understanding of our own discipline.

Romano-Celtic religious syncretism I: Mercury and Rosmerta

Figure 1 shows a Romano-Celtic religious image from Gloucester, England (*CSIR* Vol. 1, Fascicule 7: 78). It depicts the Roman god Mercury and a Celtic goddess who is not named

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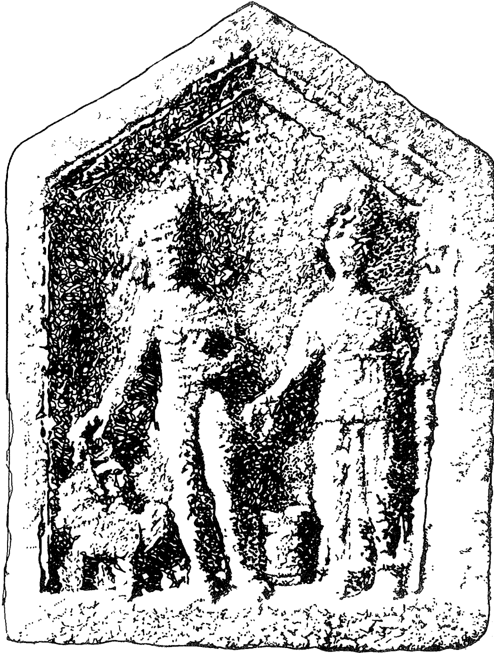

Figure 1 Relief of Mercury and Rosmerta from Shakespeare's Inn, Gloucester (after *CSIR* Vol. 1, Fasc. 7: 78).

but who, from her attributes, is probably the deity named elsewhere as Rosmerta ('the great provider'). This image was found outside the North Gate of the Roman town, and is one of three similar images within this vicinity, suggesting that a shrine to one or both of these deities was situated in this area. Mercury and Rosmerta are one of the most common of the well-known divine 'marriages' between Roman male and Celtic female partners (Green 1989: 54–61), occurring widely in central and eastern Gaul and in Germany, and also, as here, in Britain. I have chosen this image because these pairings are regarded as the ultimate expression of Romano-Celtic syncretism. This is a syncretism envisaged as a partnership between Roman and Celtic religion (Green 1989: 73): a two-way *interpretatio* in which Roman and native deities are entwined in what Webster has called a double indemnity (1986: 57). This image is certainly a statement in the religious discourse of colonial Roman Britain, but if we want to read it, and comprehend the discourse of which it is part, we need a different set of conceptual tools than those currently on offer in Roman studies.

Almost all iconography in the western provinces was produced by indigenous sculptors, for indigenous patrons, and this fact appears to negate the possibility that the imagery could reflect indigenous ambiguity towards religious syncretism. But when I turn to other colonial contexts (for example Hall's (1992) study of eighteenth-century settlements in South Africa and Virginia) the danger of assuming that the adoption of a dominant material culture implies acceptance of an alien world view becomes clear. The eighteenth-century slaves studied by Hall had no choice but to utilize European manufactures. But their embracing of these new forms was not 'acculturation', it was a transformation of the conditions, and the world view, imposed upon them by slave owners. Hall (1992: 373) calls

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this response to Western material culture 'conflictual fusion'. What appears to be acculturation can, then, be a complex mix of fear and desire, resistance and adaptation.

A number of recent studies of contact situations in post-Columban Latin America have highlighted similar complex ambivalences, this time with specific reference to religious 'acculturation'. Of particular interest here are studies of the processes of *mestizaje* (mixing) between Spanish popular Catholicism and indigenous beliefs in Latin America, which offer some important illustrations of ways in which resistance and conformity can occur simultaneously in pre-capitalist colonial situations (see e.g. Salomon 1987; Stern 1982; Kellogg 1992; Rowe and Schelling 1991: 68–74, 122ff.). These studies show that processes of *mestizaje* actively facilitated the preservation of native structures of belief. Colonial Mexico provides a striking example of the ways in which Christian iconography could be used within native structures of belief. This is the cult and iconography of the Virgin of Guadalupe (or the Indian Virgin: Rowe and Schelling 1991: 19–24; Kellogg 1992). It would be easy to assume that this indigenous cult, centred on the greatest Christian icon, represents successful colonial penetration. Yet the first vision of the Virgin occurred at Tepeyac, site of an Indian shrine to the major Aztec deity Tonantzin ('our mother'), which subsequently became the centre of the new cult. Despite its Christian terms of reference, the worship of the Virgin of Guadalupe combined the cult of an Aztec deity with the Catholic Marian cult, and it did so in a way which facilitated the continuation of native religion inside a supposedly dominant Catholic iconography (Rowe and Schelling 1991: 69).

The insights I have drawn from this body of work have caused me to look again at Romano-Celtic images like that of the 'marriage' of Mercury and Rosmerta in Figure 1. Armed with these insights, the image appears considerably more ambivalent than conventional wisdom on the processes informing the development of Romano-Celtic religion would allow. Elsewhere I have suggested some alternative readings of the image presented in Figure 1 (Webster forthcoming). Here, I need simply mention that there is some evidence to suggest that Rosmerta was a powerful indigenous goddess, particularly among the Aedui of Burgundy in Gaul, and that she does appear on some occasions without Mercury, pointing to an independent, non-syncretistic, identity. In the light of the comparative analyses I have undertaken, it becomes possible to read Figure 1 not as a neutral indigenous adoption of a Classical god, but in terms of Hall's 'conflictual fusion' (1992) or in terms of what Stern (1982: 11), in a Latin American context, has called 'resistant adaptation'. Perhaps this Romano-Celtic image may be seen both as actively facilitating the continuation of indigenous belief, and as employing a non-indigenous medium (iconography in stone) subversively, submitting a Roman deity to the power of an important local goddess.

Discourse and comparative colonialism

By centring my advocacy of comparative colonialism around the notion of discourse, I am of course raising the paradox with which I began. Discourses are *situated* communications: the meaning of a discourse is grounded in the context of usage (Barrett 1988). Given this groundedness, how can it be possible to compare artefact-centred discourses from various colonial contexts?

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As I have outlined above, the dominant paradigm in the archaeological interpretation of Romano-Celtic religion is that of a happy partnership between the Roman and Celtic gods: a politically neutral, *laissez-faire* syncretism which was not imposed upon the provinces from outside, but reflected the spontaneous desire of polytheistic peoples to accommodate each other's gods (Green 1986, 1989, 1995; Webster 1986). In my own recent work on the growth and development of Romano-Celtic religion, I have been questioning this neutrality, arguing that although syncretism was enthusiastically embraced by military and indigenous elites in the Western provinces (Webster 1995), it was also an arena of complex negotiation, particularly among indigenous non-elites (Webster forthcoming). It could also be contested (Webster 1995). This approach to Romano-Celtic religion has been shaped by my reading on aspects of religious syncretism in current colonial discourse analysis, in historical anthropology, and also in historical archaeology (in the American usage of the term, for the study of countries colonized by Europeans after AD 1400).

Three things have drawn me to this work: its interest in documenting the textually undocumented (the non-elites of Europe's colonies), its approach to material culture as multifaceted colonial discourse, and the fact that it focuses on moments of culture contact between two potentially *opposing* habitus (a focus I find missing from Barrett's perception of the Roman Empire as localized social practice, outlined earlier in this paper). In his study of Captain Cook's voyages to Hawaii, Sahlins (1985) provides a powerful analysis of culture contact in terms of conflicting habitus. For Sahlins, the encounter between Europe and Hawaii was a meeting and conflict between two cultural logics. As the two interfaced, in what Hodder (1991: 89) calls 'the playing out of practical scenes from different viewpoints', radical changes ensued. The long-term result of Hawaiian contact with the British (beyond Cook's death) was transformation of the *tabu* system, but this gradual tranformation – which did not occur without resistance – comprised a pragmatic indigenous redefinition of pre-contact cultural categories (Sahlins 1985: esp. 142–3).

Sahlins' argument is thus for a dialectical relationship between externally generated events and localized actions. Whilst it may be objected that Sahlins' cognitive approach to material culture (Yentsch and Beaudry 1992: 17) is necessarily a-historical, this is not the case with the work of Martin Hall (1992), who has highlighted the need to explore the specific dialectics which informed the relational meaning of material culture in colonial contexts. For Hall, as for Sahlins, it is possible to mediate between posited transhistorical 'structures' (or cultural logics) and the changes (conflicts) which colonial contact created. The means by which to achieve this, Hall argues, is discourse analysis. Significantly, he also suggests that discourse analysis facilitates *comparative* study of material culture in colonial contexts.

Hall (1992) has specifically addressed the notion of comparative colonial discourse in his study of the material culture of two eighteenth-century slave-owning societies widely separated in space: tidewater Virginia and the South African Cape. Drawing on Foucault's approach to discourse, Hall locates artefacts within discursive 'statements': 'A statement is a relation with a domain of objects, whether those objects be spoken words, written texts, or material artefacts. Discourse is formed from a sequence of such statements, and in turn gives regularities to statements' (1992: 377). Hall presents a study of two parts of the world which at the time of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment developed markedly different intellectual and aesthetic traditions. But by regarding his seemingly disparate study areas

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as the sites of discourses, Hall argues that significant insights may be gained from the comparative method:

> *Remembering Foucault's insistence that the regularities of statements are to be attributed to the form of the discourse*, 18th century Virginia and the Cape can be interrogated purposefully. *And now the salient observation must be the fact of slavery*, rather than a general law of the mind. Although Virginia lacked the urban slavery of Cape Town, the political economy of the countryside was structurally similar in both areas. As with Virginia, the Cape had a small group of large-scale slave owners, whose daily contact with the slaves was mediated by overseers . . . and a substantial group of smaller, yeoman farmers. The details of economy were different: the principal crops of Cape estates were grapes and wheat, in contrast to tobacco, and later, the more diversified agricultural economy in Virginia. Still, the relationship between slaves, overseers and owners had much in common . . . What we see emerging here is part of an archaeology of slavery . . . The statements emerging from these widely separated places are similar not because of a law of the mind but because the discourses of which the statements form a part are similar. In turn, the discourses are similar because they are both part of the wider discourse of the expansion of European merchant capital.
>
> (1992: 379, emphasis mine)

The focus on Foucault in the opening sentence of this passage is particularly important, in that it recalls his insistence (e.g. Foucault 1972) on the inextricability of the power/knowledge relation. Hall's point here is that colonialisms embodying certain similar institutions, practices, and inequalities inevitably exhibit similar regimes of truth and knowledge (that is, similar forms of discourse). Where the forms of discourse are similar, the statements of which they are composed (whether these are written or artefactual, as in the case of iconography) may thus be compared. To effect such comparisons is not to posit a monolithic colonialism; on the contrary, it may shed light on an enormous variety of colonial experiences.

This discursive similarity extends through time as well as through space. Hall has of course focused his enquiry on societies separated in space, rather than in space and time, but I take this to be a reflection of his own interests, rather than an implication that cross-temporal comparisons (between, for example, the discourses of slave-owning communities in eighteenth-century South Africa, and Roman Britain) are not equally possible. Indeed, it is precisely the recognition that discursive statements or strategies can be deeply embedded in space-time which has inspired the field of colonial discourse analysis (meaning here the analysis of Western writing on colonized Others). Whilst emphasising that there is no monolithic colonialism, and no monolithic 'colonial discourse' (Thomas 1994; Mills 1991: 51–3) one of the departure points of the project has been the recognition that similar strategies for the construction of the Other have been employed over time in disparate historical circumstances. These circumstances are united, to use Hall's terminology (1992: 379), by the *fact of* colonialism.

In drawing together the arguments I have offered above, I can do no better than to quote from Comaroff and Comaroff's (1992) exploration of the relationship between ethnography, colonialism, and history:

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> The image of colonialism as a coherent, monolithic process seems, at last, to be wearing thin. That is why we are concerned here with the tensions of empire, not merely its triumphs: with the contradictions of colonialism, not just its crushing progress. This is not . . . to deconstruct colonialism as a global movement. It is instead, to broaden our analytical compass . . . to treat as problematic the *making* of both colonizers and colonized in order to understand better the forces that, over time, have drawn them into an extraordinarily intricate web of relations.
>
> (1992: 183)

Comaroff and Comaroff may not have had in mind as distant a colonialism as that of Rome's western provinces when they made this comment, but that is not the point. What I have tried to argue here is that, however temporally disparate, there is a point beyond which the 'fact of' colonialism cannot be deconstructed (cf. Eagleton 1993: esp. 124), but within which the *discourses* of colonialism may be subject to comparative analysis. It is from that base line that the new comparative colonialism in Roman studies proceeds.

The politics of syncretism: modern colonial discourse and religion in the Roman provinces

There is, however, an additional reason why discourse analysis must be an essential feature of Roman colonial studies. The point here is that Western archaeologists cannot explore colonialism in the past without attending to our *own* place in history; to our own complicity in the continuance of colonial discourses. And in order to develop a reflexive understanding of these issues, we *must* compare colonialisms.

Among Giddens's many sets of concepts about time is one which he refers to as 'episodic characterisation' (1984: 374). An episode is a sequence of change, 'having a specifiable opening, trends of events and outcomes which can be compared in some degree in abstraction from definable contexts' (Giddens ibid.). As Craib (1992) has pointed out, this concept of time appears to represent a compromise between two extremes: on the one hand, the abandonment of an overarching, evolutionary view of history, and on the other the idea that historical change is entirely contingent (Craib 1992: 63). It is a similar need to negotiate between two temporal extremes which concerns me here, with reference to our understanding of discourse. Discourses are situated, but, at the same time, they leave echoes in later temporalities. Thus, discourse *about* distant temporalities – particularly where some identification is drawn between the present and the past – can radically reshape the past in its contemporary telling. These discursive echoes resonate in our own cycle of encounter with, and response to, the past. This is nowhere more true than for the relationship between modern European colonial experiences and the development of Roman archaeology in the 'high imperial' period of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Hingley 1996; Mattingly 1996; Webster 1996: 4–5). In this context, archaeological interpretations of syncretism within the Roman Empire have been strongly influenced by one of the long-lived 'Othering' strategies by which the West has categorized its colonial Others – the opposition Christian : pagan. In terms of the argument above, these oppositions (which also include barbarian : civilized (Webster 1996a) and

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centre : periphery) should be interpreted as the contingent products of specific, but also interrelated, dialectics. Thus, nineteenth-century discourse on 'the heathen' differed in many ways from Roman discourse on non-Classical panthea; but the latter has left its mark on the former, and the former has in turn helped contemporary Roman studies in the West to situate Roman-Celtic syncretism in a setting which says at least as much about ourselves as it does about the Roman world.

It is very clear today that much indigenous adoption of Christianity within the European colonies took highly syncretistic forms. However, one of the main justifications put forward for modern European imperialism in the latter half of the nineteenth and the early twentieth century (as Roman archaeology developed as a discipline) was of course the *conversion* of the 'heathen' to Christianity. Thus although, as discussed above, the study of religion in colonial contexts increasingly demonstrates that Christianization in the European empires involved negotiation with and contestation of Christianity (Shaw and Stewart's (1994) 'anti-syncretism'), imperialist discourse about religion in the European empires could not easily accommodate either syncretism, or a *politics* of religious synthesis.

Syncretism was, however, well documented for a number of historically distant polytheistic Others, including Rome (Shaw and Stewart 1994: 4-5), and for a variety of reasons, the non-politicization of syncretism which imbued contemporary colonial discourse about religious synthesis was also extended to the Roman Empire. The *interpretatio Romana*, which Tacitus had defined as the Roman interpretation of alien deities (*Germania* 46) (with no mention, incidentally, of an accompanying *interpretatio Celtica*), was on the whole conceptualized as a benign accommodation of foreign deities into an ever expanding Roman pantheon. Several factors contributed to this reading. First, Western ethnocentric concepts of the 'pragmatic' nature of faith among polytheistic peoples whose religions were not 'of the book' deproblematized the interface between 'heathen' religions. Second, Christianity had since the Renaissance absorbed influences from many Classical philosophers, and Classical polytheism was regarded by many scholars as an intermediary rung on the ladder to the monotheistic Christian ideal (Shaw and Stewart 1994: 4–5). Third, religious syncretism within the Roman provinces was (and still is) largely considered as a feature of 'Romanization'. Its positioning under this umbrella was critical, because discourse on Romanization – itself shaped by a strong identification between the 'civilizing' mission of the modern European and Roman Empires (Hingley 1993, 1995, 1996) – cast 'Romanization' as progress. Seen from this perspective, it was inevitable that indigenous cults would have tended towards syncretism with the Classical ideal. Through this mixture of ethnocentric Othering and positive imperialism, the indigenous adoption of Classical deities within the polytheistic Graeco-Roman melting pot came to be regarded as an inevitable progression, and the Roman attitude to indigenous deities one of *laissez-faire* accommodation. Syncretism, in other words, was cast as a *neutral* process.

This reading continues to permeate interpretations of Romano-Celtic syncretism. It is very noticeable, for example, in attempts to accommodate the Imperial cult within existing paradigms of neutral syncretism. The Imperial cult – the cult of the deified Emperor – was the one religious institution imposed upon the Western provinces by Rome, and indigenous resistance to its introduction is well documented (in Tacitus' words, the temple to the deified Claudius at Camulodunum in England was a focus for hatred of Rome, being

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perceived as *arx aeternae dominationis* (a stronghold of eternal tyranny) (Annals 14, 31)). Yet although it is accepted that the cult indicates the manipulation of ritual and belief by the Roman state, expressly in order to foster provincial loyalty (Fishwick 1987: 199; Price 1984: 171), the implications of this religious interventionism have not been fully worked through for other areas of Romano-Celtic syncretism, where the paradigm of *laissez-faire* Roman neutrality remains dominant (Webster 1995).

In a new study of imperialism and culture, Whittacker (forthcoming) emphasizes that the massive exposure of provincials to imperial culture – including the Graeco-Roman pantheon – was not simply the product of internal demand; it was the product of imperial intentionality. For the reasons I have set out above, the implications of this point have not until now been fully acknowledged in studies of Romano-Celtic religion. What I have tried to suggest here is that Western European readings of religious discourse in the Roman provinces have been so entwined with more recent colonial discourses that what we think we know about the neutrality of syncretism in the Roman world – the place in the past in which we situate our contemporary readings of Romano-Celtic iconography – is open to revision. A comparative approach to the discourses of religion in colonial contexts, and a reflexive awareness of the way in which our own place in history works upon our past, can contribute positively to such a revision.

Romano-Celtic religious syncretism II: the pipe-clay pantheon

Throughout the second century AD, a group of *officina* centred on the Allier region produced a well-known repertoire of clay deity statuettes. These mass-produced figurines were widely traded in the Western provinces, and occur in domestic, healing-spring shrine, and funerary contexts throughout Gaul, the Rhineland, and Britain. The pipe-clay repertoire includes figures which, since the nineteenth century, and following common practice, have been categorized in terms of Classical figures which they most appear to resemble. Thus, the two most common categories of figurine (naked standing females (Fig. 2), and clothed seated females nursing two infants) are known as clay-pipe 'Venuses' (or 'pseudo-Venuses') and *Deae Nutrices* respectively. There is little doubt that the artisans who modelled these figures derived inspiration from Classical exemplars (Vertet 1984: 102 ff.). As Green notes (1989: 38), the majority of the 'Venus' statuettes are clearly modelled on the Classical Venus Pudica iconographic type, and Henig (1984: 200) points to the similarity between certain of the *Deae Nutrices* and Juno Lucina, a fertility goddess analogous to Venus. At the same time, however, it is generally argued that these images are not simply local representations of Classical deities. In the case of the 'Venus' figures, this argument is advanced on two grounds. First, other than the pipe-clay figurines themselves, evidence for worship of the Classical Venus in the western provinces, and particularly in Gaul, is largely absent. There are far more clay figurines than there are monumental sculptures of Venus, and epigraphic evidence for the goddess is also very sparse. Second, a small number of the figurines are decorated with non-Classical symbols, such as solar symbols (Figure 2 is an image of this type, from the Toulon area).

The pipe-clay 'Venuses' are therefore generally said to represent an indigenous fertility divinity or divinities (see e.g. Green 1995: 86). But in terms of our existing paradigms,

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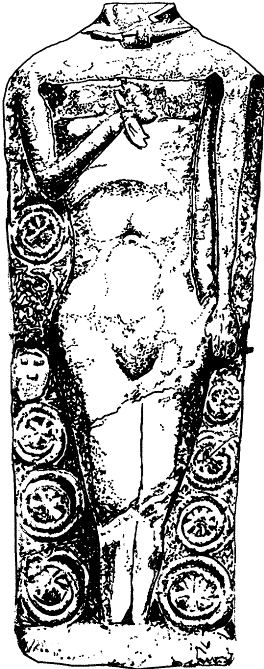

Figure 2 Pipe-clay 'Venus' with solar symbols, from the Toulon area (Allier) (after Green 1984: 38, Fig. 15).

these deities *must* gravitiate towards the Classical ideal. Thus, syncretism with the Roman pantheon is argued to have taken place at the level of the image exemplar, with the Venus form being chosen by the indigenous population to represent a Celtic personification of fertility. In this vein, Green (1989: 39) suggests that 'translation of the iconographical type of the Classical Venus to that of the domestic Celtic protectress is logical in that the Classical Venus was not simply a goddess of love but had very real links with fertility'. Like many other commentators, Green takes this argument a step further by suggesting that the Classical Venus 'may well have been the *conceptual* as well as the physical inspiration for this Celtic cult' (1995: 115 emphasis mine). This contention is entirely speculative, but it allows the pipe-clay 'Venus' to become a true hybrid, an indigenous deity cast in Classical form, whose very nature is Classically inspired. What is lost in this assumption of a spontaneous, indigenously inspired syncretism is the fact that the pipe-clay 'Venus' is *not* Venus – she in fact operates beyond the orbit of the Classical pantheon. This, from a post-colonial perspective, is her salient characteristic.

A single, sustained critique of the syncretistic reading of the pipe-clay Venus may be found in the recent literature. Vertet (1984: 88–97) has argued that, despite their Classical form, the pipe-clay figurines of Central Gaul represent not an indigenous reading of Classical deities, but an *alternative*, indigenous pantheon – different to that of the Classical gods; different to that of the Eastern gods who arrived in the wake of the Classical deities; different even to the pantheon of 'Celtic' deities which are known to us through their occurrence in monumental and epigraphic forms (Vertet 1984: 85–8). Rather, this fourth category was a pantheon of the poor, obeying a logic entirely its own.

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The independence of this group, Vertet argues, is demonstrated first by the fact that, despite the obvious debt to Classical form described above, the deities of the clay pantheon display few Classical tendencies. (In this context, the solar motifs and other non-Classical traits associated with some of the Venus figurines (see Fig. 2) are refreshingly interpreted by Vertet not as syncretistic 'Celticizations' of the Classical Venus, but simply as an indication that the deity is *not* Venus; 1984: 92). Second, Vertet demonstrates that in contrast to the other panthea he envisages, the pipe-clay pantheon is strongly dominated by female deities. His analysis of the clay statuettes in six museum collections (1984: 89–90) indicates that female figures outnumber males by a ratio of 16:1. Vertet's argument is that the 842 female figures he has documented (556 of which are 'Venuses' and 205 *Deae Nutrices*) cannot be dismissed as a degradation of Roman forms and concepts (1984: 117). Rather, these figures represent the living pantheon of the section of the population of central Gaul which had least to gain from Romanization, and which was ultimately a victim, rather than a beneficiary, of second-century AD economic expansion (see also Drinkwater and Vertet 1992). The increasing emphasis on female deities, he suggests, was a response to a growing sense of economic inferiority, worked through in terms of the logic of indigenous fertility beliefs (1984: 115); a pantheon, in other words, of discrepant colonial experience, and with some degree of spiritual resistance to Classical religious schema.

Whilst it is unneccesary to accept all of Vertet's conclusions (particularly his psychoanalytical reading of the 'regressive' feminization of the clay pantheon; 1984: 115–19), the strength of his argument lies in his willingness to accept that syncretism, which may simultaneously incorporate acceptance and rejection of an alien material culture, need not imply the adoption of an alien belief system. Above all, he has tried to identify discrepant colonial experiences in Romano-Celtic Gaul, and to articulate the experiences of the lowest levels of Roman colonial society. It is precisely this twin focus on the non-homogeneity of religious experience and on contestation within popular religion which is lacking in the great majority of studies of Rome's western provinces. This is so despite the fact that there is a large body of literature on the relationship between popular religion and the preservation of native structures of belief in other colonial contexts (for a summary on Latin America, see Rowe and Schelling 1991). I have argued above that such perspectives are rare in Roman studies because we continue to work within paradigms which have dominated the study of Romano-Celtic religion since the nineteenth century, and which make it almost impossible to recognize discrepant or contested experiences in the Roman west. For the variety of reasons discussed above, Western European scholars cannot break free of these paradigms by a simple act of will, but need to develop a comparative approach to Roman colonialism, rooted in the reflexive strategies developed by post-colonial discourse analysis.

Conclusion

I have based my approach to Romano-Celtic religious imagery on the work of Hall (1992), and others, on polysemic colonial material culture, and on studies of religious interaction in post-Columban Latin America. What is crucial here is that my insights did not come from within the Romano-Celtic 'record' itself, because they could not. The very ways in which we have collected and presented this material, taking it out of its archaeological

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context and into the pages of *CSIR* and *RIB* (Collingwood and Wright 1965), preclude a nuanced analysis of the type I have been seeking. The reason for this is not simply that Romano-Celtic imagery tends to be collected and analysed in a vacuum, and from the subjective basis of what constitutes good or bad provincial art. It is because it is collected from within paradigms which assume its neutrality: it is an art without politics: an art beyond contestation. In my own work, in order even to see the possibilities for new readings, I have had to turn to other colonial contexts, and in particular to post-colonial analyses of the artefact-centred discourses of other colonial contexts. Those analyses tell colonial histories which many Romanists would neither recognize or accept, but that does not mean they are not relevant to Roman colonialism.

In their work on religious syncretism in Latin America, Rowe and Schelling have emphasized (1991: 18) that any study of *mestizaje* (mixing) must involve the concept of power, because 'without an analysis of power structures, *mestizaje* becomes an ideology of racial harmony which obscures the actual holding of power by a particular group'. I have argued that the neutral conception of syncretism which continues to dominate Romano-Celtic studies reflects an ideology of exactly this type. It is one which has developed as a result of a complex interaction between ancient and modern colonial experiences. Its existence is problematic less because of the benign image of 'Roman' provincial polytheism that has resulted, but more because it has obscured the active *indigenous* role in the development of a Romano-Celtic religious synthesis; the localized negotiations, adaptations, and resistances through which 'Romano-Celtic' religion was formed. It is these active histories which a comparative, post-colonial perspective may help us to recognize.

I began with a paradox, which I repeat here. I know that there are dangers in comparative study, particularly those dangers of collapsing a wide variety of colonial experiences into synchrony. But I know too that not to compare also denies history. It seems to me that the history of the indigenous peoples of the Roman provinces is not being written within existing paradigms, and that attention to other colonial encounters may help us, at the very least, to formulate a new set of questions, which demonstrate a reflexive awareness of Western European archaeology's own place in the shifting constancies of the history of colonialism.

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