CHAPTER 12

The ‘Opportunistic Exploitation’ of Melos: a Case Study of Economic Integration and Cultural Change in the Roman Cyclades

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Introduction

Over the centuries, the term ‘Roman Empire’ has been a part of the common vocabulary among the historians of Antiquity. However, the exact meaning of this expression remains ambiguous, due to the complexity of the very notion of empire. Therefore, in the present study, it is vital that the term ‘Roman Empire’ is clearly defined. Ancient Rome is often admired for having created, run, managed, and coordinated a vast and long-lasting empire, incorporating a large number of populations, and characterized by an extraordinary capacity of integration. During the largest part of the twentieth century, the main approach to the Roman Empire consisted of studying it in terms of hegemonic domination as well as the product of an intentional imperialism. Scholars attempted to underline the universalistic claims of the Empire, its desire to unify subject populations and territories, as well as its political and military supremacy. This vision thrived partly due to the temptation of establishing some correlation with modern imperial experiences.

Based on these assumptions, the question arose: how did the imperial authority of Rome manage its vast territory, and what was the nature of administration of the Empire? For nearly half a century, this issue has been the subject of numerous works that have brought forth different perspectives. It has been stressed that the Roman administration could govern the Empire only

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1 See the reflections of Hurlet (2011, 110–20) and Dalla Rosa (2012, 101–14).
2 See for example the works of Millar, Eck, and Haensch.
because it had different centres of authority in its territories, some of them several thousand kilometres away from Rome. The basic unit of this administration was the *provincia*, which, in an abstract sense, referred to the tasks carried out by a Roman (pro)magistrate and, in a territorial sense, was defined as an administrative district of the Empire.3

Unfortunately, in the study of Roman Cyclades, current knowledge on these administrative units is not very helpful, as these islands never actually formed a distinct *provincia*. They did not even belong to the same province; they were at all times divided between the provinces of Achaia and Asia.4 From a geographical point of view, the Cyclades were on the fringe of the Empire, far from the centres of political power—Athens, Ephesus, and Rome (fig. 12.1). They consisted of small islands, small towns, and small villages. Furthermore, they were not at the frontiers of the Empire, so that the imperial army could not play any part in their cultural integration into the Empire.

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3 For the meanings of the word *provincia*, see Bertrand (1989, 191–215).
4 On this point, see Le Quéré (2015).