Castra et Coloniae:
The Role of the Roman Army in the Romanization and Urbanization of Spain

By Frank Miranda

All right, apart from the sanitation, the medicine, education,
wine, public order, irrigation, roads, the fresh water system,
and public health, what have the Romans ever done for us!?[1]

In a nutshell, Reg- the Jewish rebel leader played by John Cleese in the memorable 1979 comedy *The Life of Brian*- has rather simplistically described for us the benefits of urbanization brought to many societies around the Mediterranean by Rome's imperial expansion. At the same time, however, the sobering treatment given to that same growth by Tacitus gives us the notion that Roman progress was simply tyranny under another name-[2] at least in the eyes of those who saw little or none of its beneficial qualities. Regardless, it is to that urbanization of empire and its curious offshoot of Romanization- with all of its positive and negative connotations- that this paper will be addressed and, specifically, the role of the Roman army in its transmission.

Reg's complaint is actually less suited to his own environment in Judea, located in the more urbanized east, than in the relatively undeveloped Roman west of the 1st centuries BC and AD. While a highly urbanized civilization equal (and some argue superior) to that of Rome thrived for hundreds of years in the east prior to the Roman's arrival, the west remained largely rural with few large settlements not inspired or founded by the previous Phoenician and Greek colonizers.[3] The kind of cities of the Roman variety would have to wait for the soldiers and veterans of the legions and the *castra et coloniae*- the camps and colonies- that resulted from their arrival.

Spain was uniquely situated within the empire and its history of subjugation and urbanization. Concerning the 200 year-long process of conquest in the Iberian peninsula, Livy comments that "Spain, although it was the first mainland province to be entered by the Romans, was the last to be completely subdued, and held out till our own times." [4] However, the stubborn natives and harsh terrain were only part of the problem: the Roman senate lacked a uniform policy in dealing with newly conquered territory and the already gradual process of urbanization was further slowed. In Spain, at least, it was left largely to the initiative of the commanders to build an empire.

Roman troops first entered Spain in 218 BC to confront Hannibal and the Carthaginians following the sack of Saguntum.[5] Following Carthage's defeat in the Second Punic War, Rome found itself in possession of a small but significant stretch of the Iberian peninsula which it organized into two provinces in 197: *Hispania Ulterior* and *Hispania Citerior*: Further and Nearer Spain. The conquest of the rest of Spain, like many ancient campaigns, was brutal; in Spain's case, it was also protracted. The last armed resistance was as late as 19 BC and insurrection continued to simmer just below the surface into the early 1st century AD. Nevertheless, Rome eventually managed to pacify the peninsula utilizing a combination of effective military action, luck, and outright treachery.

Finally, the twin processes of urbanization and Romanization- which had already been developing gradually as Rome gained its new Spanish possessions piecemeal- could get into full swing. Yet while there is little argument as to what exactly urbanization was and what it entailed, the same can no longer be said of Romanization. Today scholars debate its exact details specifically what it entailed and what it accomplished.

---

[1] John Goldstone *Monty Python's Life of Brian* (Monty Python Pictures Ltd c1979).
[2] Tacitus *Agricola* 30 being the most famous: "they [the Romans] create a desert and call it peace."
[3] Leonard Curchin, *Roman Spain* (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, Inc., 1995), 103. The native Iberian settlements are more accurately categorized as *oppida* (fortified towns).
[4] Livy 28.12.
[5] See the appendix for modern Spanish place name equivalents.

When Velleius Paterculus recounts the Pannonian-Dalmatian revolt of AD 6-9, he describes it as absolute proof that Roman culture had been absorbed into local society at all levels.[6] Needless to say, as some scholars have observed, being a Tiberius partisan, Velleius was hardly an unbiased reporter.[7] Still, Velleius' comments have puzzled scholars and much research and debate has gone into determining the exact nature of Romanization in Pannonia as well as when and how it began.

Yet this curious statement by Velleius becomes more interesting given the situation that was occurring when he was present- a rebellion. That there was a revolt occurring should be considered into the equation of what Roman culture was and what it entailed. As Greg Woolf has noted in his work *Becoming Roman*, Roman culture in the provinces should not only be defined as a result of Romanization, but in resistance to it.[8] As in Pannonia, this syncretic approach to defining Romanization is made more plausible when considering the history of the Iberian conquest.

Of course, when attempting to define Romanization, the Roman's own view of *romanitas* must also be taken into consideration. So, for instance, according to one scholar:

> it was the responsibility of Rome to provide the atmosphere most conducive to the development of these qualities [*humanitas*], whether the men were Hellenic academicians or Iberian tribesmen.[9]

Never mind the actual means by which Rome would achieve such a result, barbaric as they often were- especially in the west and especially in Spain. Regardless, the process of urbanization occurred unhindered whether or not one agrees how much or what kind of Romanization transpired alongside. The initial means by which that urbanization was relayed to Spain was the army and the settlements that were created by its presence.

The army's presence as an urbanizing force made itself known in two obvious ways: camps or forts (*castra*) and veteran settlements (*coloniae*). I will first address the colonies as they are more numerous and survived longer into Roman Spain's development.

Colonies in Spain were initially established as military settlements. Beginning with Italica in 206 BC,[10] many Roman commanders in Spain settled veterans into colonies at the end of campaigns. This served multiple purposes- as a reward for services rendered, as a ready reserve of experienced manpower available for future campaigns or to put down local insurrections, and to influence the indigenous people with Roman customs (i.e., to Romanize them). A similar example at Camulodunum in Britain is recorded by Tacitus:

> In order to facilitate the displacement of troops westward to man [the nearby garrison], a strong settlement of ex-soldiers was established on conquered land...Its mission was to protect the country against revolt and familiarize the provincials with law-abiding government.[11]

Now, in Spain, the number of major towns with veteran coloniae is impressive: Norba, Tarraco, Caesar Augusta, Emeríta Augusta, Emporiae, Valentia, and Corduba- just to name a few.

---

[6] Velleius 2.110.5: "in omnibus autem Pannoniis non disciplinae tantummodo, sed linguae quoque notitia Romanae, plerisque etiam litterarum usus et familiaris animorum erat exercitatio…"

[7] András Móscy "The Civilized Pannonians of Velleius," *Rome and her Northern Frontiers* (Gloucester: Alan Sutton Publishing, 1983), 169-170.

[8] Greg Woolf, *Becoming Roman: The Origins of Provincial Civilization in Gaul* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 19. Curchin agrees, *Roman Spain* 55, 180. Also see Manuel C. Díaz y Díaz, "Penetración cultural latína en Hispania en los Siglos VI-VIII," *Assimilation et résistance á la culture gréco-romaine dans le monde ancien* (Paris: Société d'édition <<Les Belles Lettres>>, 1976).

[9] Richard W. Bane, "The Development of Roman Imperial Attitudes and the Iberian Wars," *Emeríta* (44, 1976), 418.

[10] Appian *Iberica* 38.

[11] Tacitus *Annals* 12.32.

Often, former soldiers- especially the higher paid and ranking centurions- became town patrons or local magistrates, as is the case with Caius Vettius. A centurion of the 30th Legion, Vettius became one of the first *duoviri*- one of the two local chief magistrates- of Urso.[12] Veterans in these positions would have had an enormous influence in town policies and cultural development. Similarly, Richard Alston's work reveals the continuous stream of veterans into the daily life of the colony at Karanis in Egypt.[13] Possessing full Roman citizenship, the ex-soldiers were at the top of the totem pole among the native inhabitants. This was especially important as the central feature of Romanization entailed the bringing together of the local elite with that of the Roman nobility into an empire-wide ruling class.[14]

Because of this trend, veterans, like those at Karanis and Urso, became attached early to the towns located within the provinces in which they served. Note the problem some settlements had in which this did not occur:

> Veteran soldiers were drafted into the settlements at Tarentum and Antium but did not relieve the under-population of these areas since many of them drifted away to the provinces where they had served...[15]

The reference to relieving under-population was yet another reason to use soldiers as colonists. Referring to Augustus' settlement policies, Hyginus Gromaticus notes "For some of these he founded new cities after enemy settlements had been wiped out..."[16]

This ubiquitous presence of citizens had a telling effect. Locals began to emulate their Roman neighbors. Regardless of the debate over how deeply Romanization penetrated the hinterlands of Spain, along the Mediterranean coast and in the south, where their presence was felt the longest, the population began looking and behaving more like the Romans. The southern province of Baetica was already heavily Romanized, and even in the interior Strabo notes that the people

> are already called "toga'd" (which is to say "peaceably inclined"), and have become transformed, clad in their togas, to their present gentleness of disposition and their Italian mode of life; these latter are the Celtiberians and the peoples that live near them...[17]

The indigenous people of the province were widely adopting Roman customs. It became so pervasive throughout the hinterlands of the empire- especially the use of Roman names- that the emperor Claudius felt it necessary to legislate against the practice.[18]

The widespread adoption of Roman names was also a common consequence of the ubiquitous military presence. Indigenous people who, for whatever reasons, found themselves in the Roman army took on the Roman *nomina*. Alston notes that several people in the register of Karanis with Roman names were not, in fact, citizens. One, an Egyptian by the name of Apion, wrote to inform his father that he had joined the fleet and adopted a Roman name.[19] There are similar examples in Spain, most prominent among these concerns the family of the Cornelii Balbi.

---

[12] *ILS* 2233 in Leonard Curchin, *The Local Magistrates of Roman Spain* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 166, inscription #291.
[13] Richard Alston, *Soldier and Society in Roman Egypt: A Social History* (London: Routledge, 1995) 39-41, 51, 60.
[14] For excellent studies on this, see P.A. Brunt, "Romanization of Local Ruling Classes in the Roman Empire," and José M. Blázquez, "Rechazo y asimilación de la cultura romana en Hispania (Siglos IV y V)," both in *Assimilation et résistance*.
[15] Tacitus *Annals* 14.27.
[16] Hyginus in Naphtali Lewis and Meyer Reinhold, *Roman Civilizaion, Vol II* (New York: Columbia Univ Press, 1966) 212.
[17] Strabo 3.4.20.
[18] Suetonius *Claudius* 25.
[19] *BGU* II 423 in Alston 64-65.

In the 1st century BC, the Balbi of Gades in Baetica were the epitome of the Romanized local elite. According to Cicero, Lucius Cornelius Balbus Maior had been granted citizenship by Pompey in 72 BC.[20] Yet for several generations the family preceding this event had already been using the *nomen gentilicum* of a prominent Roman military family long associated with Spain (that of the Cornelii Scipii). The subsequent rise of Lucius' nephew, Balbus Minor, through the *cursus honorum* (he became the first provincial to become a consul and celebrate a triumph) and Roman society in general is a testament to how Romanized the indigenous elite had become in which the military played a key role.

More practically, the influence of the army can be seen in the actual, physical foundation of many of these settlements. Caesar Augusta was laid out in a rectangular grid surrounded by a wall with four gates, one on each side directly opposite the other which, as Hyginus has observed, was the standard military pattern.[21] At Corduba and Tarraco, the Roman sectors are surrounded by a rampart and laid out in a military orthogonal pattern.

At Urso, Emporiae and possibly several other Baetican towns, we see a slightly different use of the veteran settlement: as a punishment colony. Land would be taken from towns that fought on the losing side and used to settle veterans not only as a reward to the soldiers but as a punishment to the residents. Presumably, the veterans could keep a much closer eye on these once enemy subjects. Examples of this type of military colonization can be observed elsewhere in the Empire, most notably in Italy where Sulla placed veteran colonies at towns that opposed him in 82 BC.[22]

In Spain, Urso had supported the Pompeians throughout the last civil wars of the Republic. The veteran colony placed there by Caesar was the result of their action. The original residents were responsible to the new Caesarian *duoviri* not only for the upkeep of the walls and other town maintenance but to serve as a reserve militia under loyalist officers.

However, establishing veteran settlements within the limits of an existing indigenous town was not the only way in which the Roman army "Romanized" or urbanized the hinterlands of Spain. There were fewer suitable towns moving progressively inland and northwards. Eventually, the Romans had to build settlements from scratch. Some of these, as we shall see, sprung up from or just outside legionary fortresses. Others, such as Emerita, were entirely new establishments.

After the Spanish campaigns of 26 and 25 BC, Augustus founded a new settlement for his soldiers, Emerita Augusta.[23] That these were some of his longest-serving veterans is indicated in the Latin root of the town name, *emeritus*. From the beginning, it is evident that Emerita was not like other veteran settlements or forts. Although it was located in a reasonably strategic area, it was not in a very defensible position when compared to older Spanish settlements such as Metellinum. Its purpose, rather, seems to have been more civil than military. According to John Richardson, "this was to be a high-grade Roman city," designed to overawe the locals with the Roman presence and symbolic of the goals of the Empire: "power, control and peace."[24]

The other means by which the army overawed the natives and urbanized the provinces was through the establishment of encampments and fortresses. After its pacification, Spain had only one legion assigned to it, in the formerly tempestuous north. Made peaceful by the late 1st century AD, it is sometimes wondered why even that legion remained for so long.[25] The writer Josephus succinctly concludes such a presence as the Roman "ornament of peacetime."[26]

However, during the conquest and pacification phase, several legions were assigned to the peninsula. While the various tribal wars in the north lasted, the need for a strong military presence was vitally important. To the south and on the east coast, a flourishing Roman community was growing. In the interior, the discovery of Spain's vast mineral resources was just beginning and their exploitation was soon to follow. With upwards of seven legions in Hispania Citerior at one point, adequate provisioning had to be

---

[20] Velleius 2.51. The Balbi were enfranchised by the *lex Gallia Cornelia* (Cicero *Pro Balbo*).
[21] Hyginus in Lewis and Reinhold 217.
[22] Appian 1.96.
[23] Cassius Dio 53.26.
[24] J.S. Richardson, *The Romans in Spain* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, Inc., 1998), 139, 141.
[25] For more details, see R. F. J. Jones, "The Roman Military Occupation of North-West Spain," *Journal of Roman Studies*, 66 (1976), 45-66 and Ronald Syme, "The Conquest of North-West Spain," *Legio VII Gemina*, Instituto Leonés de Estudios Romano-Visigóticos (Leon: Excma, Diputación Provincial. 1970).
[26] Josephus *The Jewish War* 3.5.

undertaken and appropriate accommodations made, making for a considerable logistical problem given the rustic conditions of the location: permanent camps and legionary fortresses were the solution.

The types of camps described in detail by Josephus and Vegetius refer mainly to the temporary campaign camps. However, even these were impressive, as Josephus notes in the 1st century AD:

> Thus an improvised city, as it were, springs up, with its market place, its artisan quarter, its judgment seats, where officers adjudicate any differences which may arise. The outer wall and all the installations within are completed more quickly than thought, so numerous and skilled are the workmen...[27]

Likewise, Vegetius refers to the marching camp, pitched everywhere the legion stopped in the field, as "an armed city."[28] If these temporary camps impressed them so, then the permanent camps and fortresses that followed must have been awe-inspiring.

The location of a fortress was selected primarily upon its strategic value- to guard a river crossing, on a hill to overlook a plain, etc. Such locations are also very conducive to a permanently established presence and thus, readily transformed later for civilian purposes. The area occupied by a standard legionary fortress was large- 50 to 60 acres on the average.[29] When the fort was built to station two or more legions, it would have covered an enormous area with massive buildings. The *praetorium*, the house of the legion's commander, was one of these.

The *praetorium* covered as large an area as the entire *principia*- the administration Headquarters of the legion. In addition to signifying a legate's status, this magnificent building could be used to overawe the indigenous population, especially their chieftains and envoys. It would be filled with all the trappings of Roman civilization- furnishings, statuary, treasures and mosaics. If the similar demonstrations that Julius Caesar prepared in his large marching tent were effective then the display afforded by a full sized *praetorium* would have been extraordinary.[30]

Additionally, the legionary fortress contained *fabricae* and other workshops, a hospital, stables and granaries. Tacitus tells us that the fortresses built by Agricola in Caledonia held a year's supply of grain and other provisions.[31] These indeed were the armed cities Vegetius was describing.

Of the main fortresses in Spain, Tarraco, Asturica Augusta, Lucus and Legio- famous as the home of *legio VI Victrix* and *legio VII Gemina*-[32] the last three were all in the north. This is unsurprising, for there the Romans mined the majority of Spain's vast haul of gold. As previously noted, the north was also the last area of Spain pacified and still retained some simmering tension into the 1st century AD. These forts and camps represented exactly the kind of military establishments that could effectively be transformed into civilian settlements- and they were. The three northern posts roughly conformed to the standard shape and size of army fortresses. At Asturica, the emperor Augustus is believed to have turned over the camp to the Astures tribe for their use as a capital, hence its eponym.[33] At Legio and Lucus, the *canabae*, the civilian settlements that grew outside the walls, eventually merged with the forts.

The *canabae* originated as the place where merchants who followed the legions set up their *tabernae*- shops and cottages Other camp followers, such as prostitutes and local women with whom the soldiers formed relationships, also occupied these settlements. Gradually, they became quite large as attested during the revolt of Civilis in AD 69. At Vetera, the civilian buildings had become so large that they got in the way and had to be destroyed for fear that opposing forces could use them: "A settlement just outside the camp had grown during the long peace to the size of a small town. This was now demolished to deny its use to the enemy."[34]

---

[27] Ibid.
[28] Vegetius *Military Science* 2.25.
[29] Graham Webster, *The Roman Imperial Army*, 3rd edition (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 184.
[30] Suetonius *Caesar* 46.
[31] Tacitus *Agricola* 22.
[32] Antonio Garcia y Bellido, "Nacimiento de la Legión VII Gemina" in *Legio VII Gemina* and Curchin, *Roman Spain*, 63, 70-75.
[33] Florus 2.30.60.
[34] Tacitus *Histories* 4.22. This is Birten, near Xanten in Germany, which was rebuilt and is still a village today.

The Roman army first became a colonizing force. As the *canabae* grew into a village, the impact of the army's presence was more deeply felt. Soldiers raised unofficial families and the product of these unions was significant. Livy reported that in 171 BC some 4000 offspring of soldiers and local women in Spain petitioned the senate for and were granted a colony.[35]

Upon discharge, most of these veterans remained in the small villages outside the forts with their families, which eventually became legally recognized. The legions recruited heavily among them, linking them to the army for generations to come. The veterans also attracted friends and relations to the villages, introducing new blood not only into the legions, but into the province as well. The army began to resemble a hereditary caste and the *canabae*-fort combination soon became,as Alston calls it, an "island of Roman power."[36]

The Roman army then became an urbanizing force. The highly specialized skills were put to use in the villages, towns and *canabae* outside the walls that lacked the infrastructure needed to support the forts. Many papyri discovered in Egypt and Dura-Europos attest to the continuous assignment of military duties that benefited the civilian settlements. In one scroll, soldiers were dredging harbors and manufacturing papyrus.[37] Others would be draining swamps and- as Reg complained- paving roads, building aqueducts and assembling bridges.

Eventually, the forts and villages merged- especially in the case where legions abandoned their bases. Normally, one might expect the *canabae* to suffer severe economic damage as a result of the army's departure, perhaps even disappear. However, the years of contact with the fort and its urbanizing influence often left behind an infrastructure capable of surviving on its own. Such indeed was the case at Pisoraca when the *legio IV Macedonica* departed for Mogontiacum (modern Mainz, Germany).[38]

In fact, there was to be such a close contact between legion and *canabae* in Spain that *legio VI Victrix* was heavily hispanized during its long stay and *legio VII Gemina* was raised almost entirely from within Spain. Some scholars have even gone so far as to speculate that some kind of proto-nationalism developed in Hispano-Romans serving aboard, pointing to a 1st century epitaph of a Roman soldier in Pannonia:

> Ti(berio) Cl(audio), Britti filio, Valerio, decurioni
> alae II Aravacorum domo Hispano, annonr(um) L,
> stipendiorum XXX, et Cl(audiae) Ianuariae, coniugi
> eius et Cl(audiae) Hispanillae filiae, vivis ex
> testamento. Flaccus dec(urio) frater et Hispanilla
> filia heredes faciumdum curaverunt.[39]

That the soldier identified himself as coming from "Spain" (*Hispano*) but not recognizing a specific province or city- as was the norm- or referring to Spain in the plural- as was proper- is intriguing enough, but he also named his daughter Hispanilla (Little Spain). However, only two similar epitaphs have been recovered to date, and neither of them is as detailed as the Pannonian example, so we may never know if these soldiers truly felt any kind of pride in being "Spanish."[40]

Nevertheless, the Roman army's presence inexorably brought Spain within the Empire's fold- militarily, politically and culturally. In time, Spain herself would be sending out colonies, such as the 3000 Romans who settle Palma and Pollentia on Mallorca in AD 123.[41]

Whether or not these were actual citizens or natives is irrelevant: they considered themselves so and were described as such by Strabo- one way or the other, they were Romanized and attest to the growing numbers of Romans on the peninsula, be they Hispano-Romans or Romano-Spaniards. Indeed, they serve as an excellent illustration of the words of the ultimate Roman oracle, Virgil:

---

[35] Livy 43.1.
[36] Alston 39-40.
[37] *Geneva Latin Papyrus* No. 1, Col. 3 in Lewis and Reinhold 510.
[38] Curchin *Roman Spain* 74.
[39] *CIL* III 3271 in M.P. Speidel (ed), *Roman Army Studies, Volume II*. Mavors Roman Army Researches, volume 8 (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1992), 329, entry #348.
[40] The other two inscriptions are *CIL* XVI 48 (a.103) and *AE* 1978, 342
[41] Strabo 3.5.

Your task, Roman, and do not forget it, will be to govern the peoples of the world in your empire. These will be your arts- and to impose a settled pattern upon peace, to pardon the defeated and war down the proud.[42]

Appendix: Spanish Place Names in the Text

Roman Spain	Modern Spain
Asturica Augusta	Astorga
Barcino	Barcelona
Caesar Augusta	Zaragoza
Corduba	Córdoba
Emerita Augusta	Mérida
Emporiae	Empúries
Italica	Santiponce
Legio	León
Lucus	Lugo
Mallorca	Majorca
Metellinum	Medellín
Norba	Cáceres
Palma	Palma de Majorca
Pisoraca	Herrera de Pisuerga
Pollentia	Alcudia
Saguntum	Sagunto
Tarraco	Tarragona
Urso	Osuna
Valentia	Valencia

[42] Virgil *Aeneid* 6.851-3.