Forging Romanitas: The Intersection of Urbanization and Identity in Mérida

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This paper aims to explore the role of urbanization in the formation of a shared Roman identity during the time of the Roman Empire. By examining the physical features of urban settlements and the economic opportunities that arose from them, it seeks to understand how these factors contributed to the development of a cohesive identity across the empire's vast and diverse territory. This paper will use examples from cities in the western regions of the empire, such as Pompeii and Mérida, to demonstrate how urbanization and the economic opportunities it brought forth helped create a sense of Romanness among diverse ethnic groups. It will also investigate the impact of building projects and intervention from wealthy elites in the fostering of a Roman identity through urbanization. This idea will then be tied into the role of Roman architecture and urban planning in the development of said identity, exemplified by the similarities and differences between settlements across the empire. At the same time, this paper will also consider the historical context in which these urban settlements emerged, examining how the broader geopolitical situation might have impacted urbanization. By analyzing the intersection between physical structures and economic opportunities brought about within Roman urban settlements, this paper hopes to shed light on the significance of urbanization as a driving force behind the formation of a shared Roman identity. This research will contribute to the broader understanding of cultural identity formation in ancient societies and the role of urbanization in shaping the collective consciousness of diverse populations.

Keywords: *urbanization, Roman Empire, Roman identity, infrastructure*

The Romans ruled over an extensive territory inhabited by diverse ethnic groups that were increasingly assimilated into Roman culture. The settlements they established played a significant role in this process, as the organization of communities and the social interactions within them were central to Roman society. Although there has been extensive discourse on Mérida (formerly the *colonia* of Augusta Emerita) as a Roman city, there is limited research on the city's cultural identities in English-speaking circles. Edmondson (33) delves into Roman identity in Mérida but does not make this the central focus of his work. Being that this is the best example in English that is available, it establishes the limitations in research in this area. To contribute to the research, I will investigate Mérida and examine the influence of urbanization on Roman identity in the city. Within Mérida, urbanization drove the formation of a Roman identity by forging economic opportunities and establishing a cultural identity with Roman and local Iberian influences. At the same time, different social strata within Mérida had their own understanding of what it meant to be Roman. I hope to contribute to the pre-existing body of research on Roman Mérida by using the city as a case study on the intersection between urbanization and Roman identity. I also hope to examine how social class can influence both factors, as one's identity can certainly be influenced by their status in society. By looking at all the city's components, one can achieve a greater understanding of the cultural identities present. This will not only allow others to achieve a greater understanding of the inhabitants of Roman Mérida, but it will also serve future discussions of Roman identity in general.

One cannot discuss urbanization without first considering the physical layout of a city. Although the focus of this manuscript lies in the Roman identity exhibited by Mérida, it is important to consider the physical structures present in the city and others like it. After all, discussions of identity that were impacted by urbanization cannot occur without discussing where this urbanization is taking place, and what it looks like. Urban settlements established by the Romans were often modeled after those in Italy. Although they were built in ways suitable to the local landscape, there was still an overarching sense of conformity to Roman ideals, especially within *coloniae* (Woolf 116). At the same time, it was this flexibility within local areas that allowed Roman architectural influences to take root in multiple parts of the empire. This provided the opportunity for many urban settlements to reflect these influences in the ways that worked best for them. Mérida is an excellent example. It had the main features expected of a Roman settlement, which included a public theater, two fora, and a temple. The fora are of note, as they constituted the core of the settlement. They served several purposes, facilitating several types of business and receiving embassies from elsewhere (Laurence et al. 52-53). In this case, the physical layout of either forum increased economic opportunity. The Roman forum was a hub for all types of businesses, whether legal or commercial. It was a place where merchants of all kinds could set up shop and attract customers. At the same time, the forum also served to connect with other parts of the Roman Empire, as it was one of many places where individuals could meet concerning official business. Thus, the layouts of settlements like Mérida made it easier for residents to participate in imperial affairs. This allowed individuals to have a more personal relationship with Rome, making it easier for them to share a sense of identity with other residents of the empire who lived in similar spaces.

Economic Opportunities and Urbanization in Mérida

In its early days, Mérida was of particular importance due to its position as the capital of Lusitania (Edmondson 33). The implications of this status are two-fold. Firstly, a provincial capital within the Roman Empire would have seen greater influence from Rome than other cities. This is only natural due to the inherent prestige that came with such a status. There would have been greater incentive to enforce Roman ideals in Mérida, making it better connected to other major Roman cities. As a *colonia* founded by Augustus, it was also held to remarkably high standards. Secondly, Mérida's urban center likely attracted more extensive economic opportunities compared to smaller urban settlements in the Roman Empire. If one were looking for areas in which to pursue business, they would be more likely to pick a large urban center like Mérida, rather than a smaller town within Hispania. Historically, Roman settlers seriously stimulated economic growth in the less populated regions of the Roman Empire, fostering urban developments and prosperity as seen in Hispania and Gaul. Although there were no coherent policies on economic expansion, the elites of the Roman Empire created the necessary conditions for the economy to flourish in Roman colonies (Garnsey and Saller 78). It is evident that economic growth, population increase, and urbanization all worked in tandem. The rising population was absorbed by territories in the western half of the Roman Empire that were less populated. The increased urban activity caused by these movements facilitated immigration and colonization efforts, which inevitably led to the rise of urban settlements (Garnsey and Saller 78). Thus, the economic growth associated with Roman *coloniae* would have incentivized people to migrate or facilitate business dealings in the surrounding region. In the case of Mérida, the city's two fora provided ample space for trade and commerce. This incentivized the formation of a Roman identity because it demonstrated to local inhabitants how conforming to Roman values had a positive correlation with economic success.

Mérida was an urban center that encouraged the establishment of a cohesive Roman identity in Mérida, despite local influences. This is supported by the fact that it was an Augustan *colonia* that doubled as the provincial capital of Lusitania. One can see the impact of local influences in Mérida through the very boundaries of the city. Edmondson (33) makes mention of how said boundaries were demarcated by local rivers. Although there were no advanced urbanization projects in Lusitania before the arrival of the Romans, the local landscape and its populace still held sway over the development of Lusitanian *coloniae*, like Mérida. Establishing a *colonia* with a bustling public life could facilitate economic prosperity in the early days of the Empire. Mérida was no different. Although one could say Mérida was molded by the region in which it was founded, it still served as the prime example of a Roman urban settlement to those in its vicinity. With its elevated status in the area, it most certainly served as an example of Roman ideals.

The Influence of Social Strata on Roman Identity

Sociocultural identity is complex and can be influenced by a number of factors. Within the Roman Empire, socioeconomic class played a significant role in how one was identified. Even though the Roman system allowed for and encouraged social mobility, it was designed to classify people into groups based on citizenship and monetary status. This is evidenced by the developments exhibited in many Roman urban

settlements. As residents contributed to the settlement through public service and economic favors, they could obtain greater privilege by becoming Roman citizens. Eventually, a social elite would coalesce within the settlement, resulting in a social hierarchy defined by financial status, which could theoretically improve based on one's merit, and citizenship (Laurence et al. 4). Thus, one would expect this to influence self-identification in all areas of the Roman world. As residents of a *colonia* that had a central administrative role in Hispania, the people of Mérida were influenced by social status in self-identification.

One can look toward funerary monuments, which could include tributes to deceased residents of Mérida or inscriptions from their epitaphs, as an example of the intersection between social status and identity. Funerary structures and burial spaces can give further insight into how certain individuals were viewed by the broader societies they lived in. These structures also provide valuable information on the lives of these individuals, including social status and achievements. Funerary monuments prove the existence of social stratification within Mérida during its time as a Roman settlement. This stratification most certainly impacted perceptions of identity within the settlement, demonstrating the intersection between urbanization, identity, and social status. In Mérida, there exists a monument dedicated to G. Marius Zosimus (Edmondson 424). Although Italian in origin, he was a distinguished soldier who carried out tasks for the governor of Lusitania. Upon his death in Mérida, his wife erected a structure in the shape of a ziggurat to commemorate his life. Although most soldiers were granted monuments typical of other deceased members within their communities, this is one example of a soldier who was commemorated distinctly . This was due to the prestigious nature of his service. Given that any such structure has yet to be found in the burial areas of the *colonia*, this certainly stood out to the residents of the settlement. Such a monument emphasized the greatness of Zosimus' achievements, for he was afforded a prominent and unique presence in the burial grounds of Mérida.

It is important to also consider how soldiers were granted special privileges after their service had concluded. Veterans were exempt from certain obligations, still being distinguished from ordinary citizens in post-military life. This, combined with the capital they were able to accumulate, put them in a favorable position to become local magistrates and priests (Laurence et al. 85). This not only reflects how service towards the Roman Empire was seen in a positive light, but it also portrays a split between those who were commended for their service and ordinary citizens. Although the military was not the only means of "giving back" to Rome, it was certainly an excellent avenue to do so for able-bodied men. Thus, Mérida's society, much like those of other Roman *coloniae*, was built in a way that incentivized upward social mobility and service to Rome. This same mentality is apparent in the funerary inscriptions of some veterans from Mérida, who were identified with their former legion even if they had not served in said legion for years prior to their death (Laurence et al. 84). A man rising through the ranks of the military, then returning as a veteran and becoming a local magistrate, would have been the prime example of a good citizen. This certainly fostered a common identity among the higher social strata of Mérida because they all shared the same sense of obligation to Rome and pride in their prior service.

The mention of one's legion after their death also makes clear that service was a core component of the identity of many residents of Mérida. For this to be mentioned on their epitaphs, which would serve as the

only remnants of their memory after the passing of all their loved ones, they must have perceived this as a significant aspect of their lives. Additionally, the burial spaces of Mérida would have been known to all its residents. Thus, the people of the city were likely quite familiar with the previously mentioned epitaphs, monuments, and funerary inscriptions. Although many identified as Roman, especially towards the later years of the Roman Empire, there was a notable difference between those merely born into the Roman world, and those who actively served it. They were afforded a different range of opportunities and had different obligations. This was strongly reflected in burial spaces, as an accomplished soldier who became a magistrate could afford a better monument than an ordinary merchant or artisan. Therefore, the monument of G. Marius Zosimus reflects how inhabitants of Mérida valued service to the greater Empire, distinguishing more accomplished individuals, even in death. Said values affected the urban landscape well, as seen with the prominent presence Zosimus was afforded in the burial grounds of the settlement.

There is an opportunity to compare this posthumous recognition of service with an epigraph found in Mérida during one of many excavation campaigns in the city. Hidalgo Martín and Sánchez Sánchez (267) made note of a particular Lucius Iulius Fortunatus who had a funerary altar dedicated to him by his wife, Claudia Julia. It was presumably created around the 1st or 2nd centuries C.E. Unlike the monument of Zosimus, his was more average in nature. The epigraph mentions his name, his piety, and his age at the time of his death. Since it appears that no mentions of military service or political offices held were made, it is likely that Lucius Iulius Fortunatus was an ordinary citizen. Thus, the fragments of his epigraph are a decent indicator of how a common man might have been immortalized in stone in a Roman settlement. His altar did not have any unique characteristics, and it was not unlike many others that could be found in Mérida. The juxtaposition of the ordinary man with a standard funerary altar and the accomplished veteran commemorated with a ziggurat-like structure would not have been ignored within Mérida. Even at a subconscious level, this demonstrated to the people of the settlement that not everyone in the town was the same. Even among Roman citizens, people differed in terms of social status or job occupation. Lucius Iulius Fortunatus and G. Marius Zosimus had names that were clearly of Greco-Roman origin, and yet their deaths were commemorated through vastly different means. The contrast of Fortunatus' ordinary altar and the more elaborate monument dedicated to Zosimus emphasizes the socioeconomic stratification that defined Mérida and other Roman *coloniae*. Fortunatus' altar embodied the ordinary citizens of Mérida, whereas Zosimus' monument reflected his service to the Roman Empire and emphasized the value of his contributions and status. The ways in which both individuals were commemorated exemplify how burial practices demonstrated social stratification within Mérida, which impacted the collective Roman identity of Mérida.

Commemorations within burial spaces are one of many ways the impact of urbanization on social identity can manifest. Given the period in which they died and the settlement in which they were buried, it is likely that Fortunatus and Zosimus both considered themselves to be "Roman". The epigraph of Fortunatus does not mention whether he served in the military or held office, simply that he was a pious man (Hidalgo Martín and Sánchez Sánchez 267). Thus, his sense of *Romanitas*, or "Romanness", likely derived from the community he had grown accustomed to and the people who were an essential part of his life. It is possible that Fortunatus was a soldier as well, but this would be pure speculation since this is not specified in his ep-

igraph. It is also possible that Fortunatus was a native of Mérida or came from a family that had been living there for multiple generations. In the same excavation that uncovered his epigraph, a funerary altar dedicated to a certain Mussia Proculina by her son Iulius Fortunatus was found (Hidalgo Martín and Sánchez Sánchez 267–68). There is not enough information available to prove whether this is the same Lucius Iulius Fortunatus mentioned previously, but still the possibility remains. If so, it would be a further indication of Fortunatus' connection to this settlement. One could compare this with Zosimus, whose wife felt his service as a soldier and as an orderly of the Roman governor of Lusitania was important enough to be mentioned on his monument (Edmondson 424). As a man of Italian origin who lived in a time in which the Roman state had already been well-established, he most likely considered himself to be "Roman". This identity was strengthened by his contributions to the Empire, serving in its military and working for a provincial governor in the capital of Lusitania.

Although both men were Romans who lived in the same city (Mérida), they likely conceptualized their own identities in different ways. While Fortunatus' sense of identity was derived from his community, and possibly family, Zosimus' sense of identity was molded by his service to the Empire. Social status is clearly at play too, given that Zosimus was of a higher social status, and was thus afforded a more distinct funerary monument. Both men considered themselves to be Romans for different reasons. Burial spaces are one of many examples of the intersection between physical spaces in Roman settlements and the sociocultural identity of the residents of these settlements. The examples of Fortunatus and Zosimus are a strong indicator that social class was an important factor in the formation of a Roman identity via urbanization, particularly within Mérida.

Conclusion

It has been well established that the physical structures in Roman urban settlements, and the economic opportunities associated with them, were a key part of Roman urbanization. In turn, this also implies they were the driving forces in the formation of a shared identity. As is apparent in the city of Mérida, social strata also played a fundamental role in how the residents of these settlements understood *Romanitas*. This is best seen through the burial spaces of Mérida, which make the social stratification of the city's residents apparent. Although it is important to remember that cultural identity is a complex concept that can be influenced by any number of factors, one cannot deny the role that urban settlements played in the formation of a cohesive identity within the Roman Empire. Furthermore, local influences and differences in socioeconomic status played a significant role in how Roman identity was conceived. This research allows for a greater understanding of how the inhabitants of Mérida perceived their own identities. It will serve as a catalyst for further discussions of identity in the cities of Roman Hispania. There is limited research focused on this part of the Roman world in discussions of sociocultural identity, as said discussions tend to have a greater focus on other regions of the Roman Empire (Lomas et al. 7-8). In essence, this research will allow for expanded discussions of how various factors, such as social class, economic status, and the physical structures of urban settlements, all influenced sociocultural identity in Roman Hispania.

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