Review article
Rome's zenith commemorated

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Following four centuries of Roman expansion, the Emperor Trajan led the Empire to its greatest extent by annexing Dacia (Transylvania), north-western Arabia and Sinai and, briefly, all of Armenia and Mesopotamia. He bolstered imperial administration, reformed provincial government, clarified certain principles of justice and encouraged a system of welfare, the *alimenta* (Bennett 2001). Last year, 2017, was the nineteen-hundredth anniversary of Trajan's death. The occasion was marked in various ways across Europe, and the opportunity to reflect on Trajan's legacy was particularly poignant in view of the continent's present troubles.

Nowhere could have commemorated the anniversary more aptly than Rome's Museo dei Fori Imperiali (Museum of the Imperial Fora), which occupies the building known as Trajan's Market. It overlooks most of the ancient fora including a view of Trajan's Column, where the great man was buried. The exhibition, 'Traiano: costruire l'Impero romano, creare l'Europa' ('Trajan: building the Roman Empire, creating Europe'), opened here at the end of November 2017 and is due to continue until 16 September 2018. It is an interesting experiment.

Any visitor to the museum must be struck that most of the small brick galleries and the high hall between them remain little changed since Trajan's time. What is now the back of the museum overlooks the very heart of ancient Rome: the foundations exposed in Trajan's Forum, the Capitoline Hill and the remains of Julius Caesar's temple to Venus Genetrix, with the bosky Palatine Hill to the left and the Vatican to the right. The sculptures and architectural fragments in the museum's permanent collection instil a compelling impression of both the Romans' sense for mass and the scale at which their imagination thrived. Builders they were indeed.

For the 'Traiano' exhibition, the hall floor is filled with six great curved casts of the scenes on Trajan's Column that illustrate the invasions of Dacia. They are borrowed from the Museo della Civiltà Romana (Museum of Roman Civilisation), which is closed at present. Fragmentary but massive marble sculptures of the Dacian vanquished exude presence. From the Museo della Civiltà Romana too are models of Trajan's bridges across the Danube and in Spain, his triumphal arches in Italy and Africa, his temple complex at Pergamon and the vast memorial to the First Dacian War at Adamklissi, accompanied by a large photograph of the reconstruction there. Also from the Museo della Civiltà Romana—and supplemented with noisy film footage from a historical drama—an intricate scale model of Trajan's second triumphal parade evokes another Roman method of expressing power. One surprise is the hollow bronze face and neck from the fortress at Xanten (Germany), tentatively interpreted as depicting Trajan (Figure 1).

Upstairs are fragmentary architectural ornaments from the Forum and stamped bricks from Trajan's Market. Emphasised among other busts and commemorative coins are specimens showing the emperor's wife and elder sister, who are credited here with encouraging him to cultivate both learning and the *alimenta*. Here too are sculptures and decorated wall plaster found at Trajan's villa at Arcinazzo in the early 2000s, and video footage of a house discovered more recently by the 'Roma Sotterranea' ('Underground Rome') project, also attributed to Trajan. Small pieces of military kit and an auxiliary soldier's diploma from Romania offer another way to assess Roman imperialism, but they are marginal to the art works that dominate 'Traiano'.

Despite the motto '*romanizzazione*' printed high on one of the hall's windows, the approach of the exhibition is distinctly 'metrocentric' (Doyle 1986: 22–25), with an emphasis on 'building Empire'. Other than a solitary text aptly placed beside the museum's interesting permanent display on amphorae and their distribution, the exhibition

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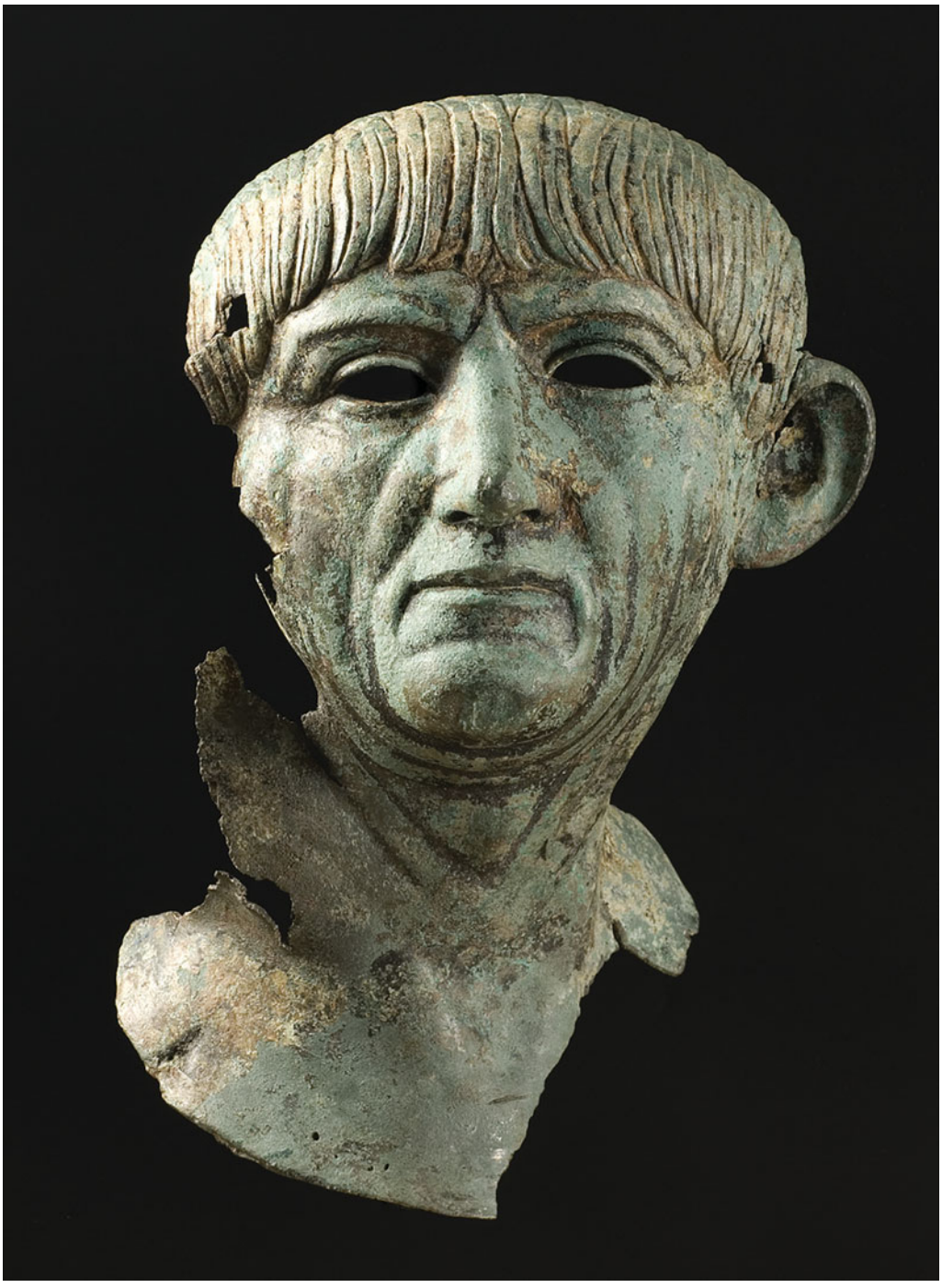

Figure 1. Bronze portrait from Xanten (424mm high; courtesy of the Museo dei Fori Imperiali).

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offers little about the other side of its subtitle, 'creating Europe'. Certainly, the archaeology of Dacia is notorious for apparently wholesale culture change following the Roman conquest. Yet there are hints that colonisation came not only from Italy—or perhaps not from there at all—but from the Middle Danube region too (Hanson & Haynes 2004; Vigliarolo *et al.* 2017: 39–44). So, could the National Museum of Romanian History not have lent 'Traiano' some of the subtle evidence for that source of change, such as funerary medallions (Hanson & Haynes 2004: 20–23, 160–62, 176), or did the exhibition's curators just not ask for it? Although the evidence for Romanisation in Spain looks more complicated than that from Transylvania, the catalogue's essay on Spain confines itself to bridges, aqueducts and the like (Curchin 1991; Vigliarolo *et al.* 2017: 45–49). This raises a question: can a museum in Rome adequately acknowledge the complexity of provincial Romanisation?

Temporary exhibitions enliven any museum, not least by offering fresh perspectives on permanent displays. For example, the exhibition's text on 'creating Europe' helps to draw attention to the museum's amphora collection. The 68 temporary additions for 'Traiano' are assembled from 16 Italian collections—including the museum's own—and 5 from other countries. The displays are spaced apart well enough for the limited flow of visitors, but they are not consistently well lit; and much of the printed text and labelling is difficult to read (mostly in English as well as Italian). Many of the exhibits are casts. Like the model of the emperor's triumph, films (notably of actors portraying Trajan) and lively digital reconstructions of buildings, scenery and soldiers provide background. Unsuccessful, however, is the model of the base of Trajan's Column looming over the front of the exhibition; it spoils the architectural effect of the hall. The big, stylish catalogue is systematic and accompanied by 58 notes and articles on both the archaeology and techniques of casting and digital presentation (Vigliarolo *et al.* 2017). Its contributions on building in Rome, including Trajan's Market itself, are particularly informative.

'Traiano' is unusual in that, apart from the main casts from Trajan's Column and the architectural models, it is distributed amongst the museum's permanent displays. In principle, such integration could be especially stimulating. Indeed, juxtaposition of the empress's message to the Epicureans in Athens with an epigraphic text on the *alimenta* works well; but, partly because the presentation of 'Traiano' is so akin to most of the other displays, it is difficult, in places, to follow the main argument for 'building the Empire'.

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