

The Musée de la Romanité in Nîmes: The Roman Empire, Rhetorical Archaeological Museums, and UNESCO's World Heritage Program

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INTRODUCTION

When the Musée de la Romanité opened in June 2018, press coverage and official statements drew attention to the museum's support for a pending UNESCO bid: the city was then waiting to learn whether its exemplary and influential Roman buildings would be added to the ever-growing list of World Heritage properties (fig. 1).¹ The new museum offers a highly accessible location in the city center, just next to the Roman amphitheater, with a cutting-edge facility designed by international architect Elizabeth de Portzamparc, plus an updated display of the city's impressive archaeological holdings, now divided into Pre-Roman, Roman, and Medieval sections. In recent decades, this diverse collection has grown dramatically with spectacular finds from extensive salvage excavations. The prior repository, more neutrally named the Musée Archéologique de Nîmes, had occupied a slightly dilapidated and inadequate building a few blocks away. Its successor boldly conveys the city's investment in cultural heritage, while the addition of digitally interactive architectural models makes the new facility the principal site of interpretation for the structures that happen to be under consideration by UNESCO. The emphasis on Romanness now apparent in the institution's name and the organization of the collection should prompt archaeologists to reflect on the evolution of museums in the era of UNESCO's arbitration of global heritage. Scholars concerned with the presentation of empires, the history of museums, and the politics of cultural heritage will find much to study here.

The museum's reconception is particularly intriguing in light of current scholarship on Mediterranean contact zones and the Roman empire's provinces. Because France's southern coast was subject to Greek colonization (anchored by Marseille) and trade with Italy (especially Etruria) centuries before conquest by Rome in the 120s BCE, archaeologists have used it as a case

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¹ *Nîmes, Le Musée* 2018, 3; Sansom 2018. Additional figures can be found with this review on AJA Online (www.ajaonline.org). All photographs are the reviewer's.

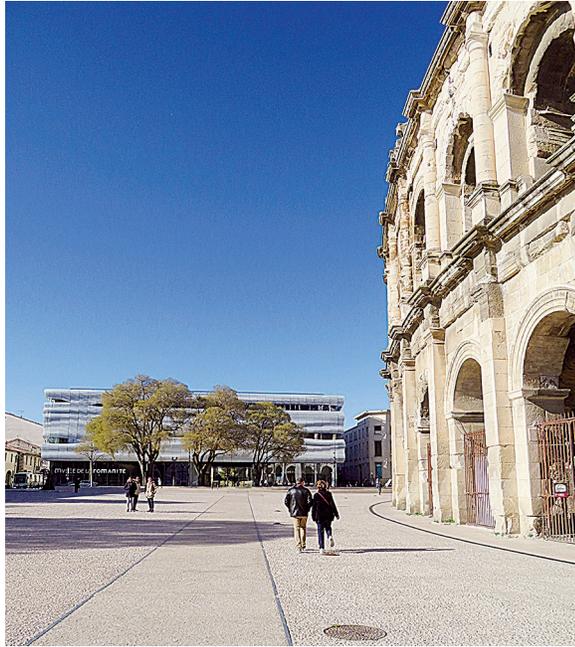


FIG. 1. View of the Musée de la Romanité and the Roman amphitheater (undergoing cleaning), Nîmes, with pavement toward the left indicating the location of the Roman city wall.

study for multilateral exchange during the Iron Age.² The process of conquest was anything but smooth and uniform. Resident tribes each determined their own political and cultural alliances (with Marseille, Rome, and each other) and often switched allegiance. The zone has therefore proved to be something of a Rorschach test for scholars of the Roman empire. Roman acculturation is often found in architecture, and Nîmes is especially rich in this regard, with a well-preserved amphitheater and city gate (the *Porta Augusta*), as well as the *Maison Carrée*, commonly cited as the best-preserved example of a Roman temple. Other bodies of evidence, however, have prompted alternative narratives of empire, whether related to the area's enduring multilingualism or to the persistent worship of local and regional gods.³ More broadly, scholars have argued that Gaul's residents adopted Rome's cultural forms not necessarily in order to become more Roman but to negotiate new hierarchies of status and vectors of identity.⁴ From this perspective, a shared history re-

sults, rather than one shaped solely by the conqueror.⁵ Some of these diverse historical trends are evident in Nîmes' official Roman name: *Colonia Augusta Nemausus*, the Augustan Colony Nemausus. The name's three components refer to privileged colonial status, the emperor Augustus, and the indigenous god Nemausus, whose worship here had drawn inhabitants to the site long before Roman walls arose. It matters a great deal, therefore, how the museum presents these complex developments and their interpretation to the general public. In prioritizing romanization, the museum communicates an admirably clear story to museumgoers, while sacrificing some (but not all) attention to the multivocal narratives now driving scholarship on the Gallic and Roman eras.

The museum's previous facility had certainly become inadequate to house material from one of the Roman empire's most splendid cities. In the late 19th century, Nîmes' artifacts were transferred from the *Maison Carrée* to a former Jesuit college. My own photographs taken there in 2007 show Latin inscriptions stacked from floor to ceiling in the arcades of an open cloister. Standing upright in a wooden scaffold was a mosaic featuring Bellerophon and Pegasus, discovered in 1950.⁶ Unknown to me at the time, another salvage excavation was uncovering even more magnificent finds. The most striking of these is a mosaic measuring 35 m² and depicting the demise of Pentheus at the center of an intricate composition.⁷ During the three months of conservation that followed this mosaic's removal from the ground, an estimated 75,000 people visited the Jesuit chapel to see it. This conservation-in-action is credited with inspiring a new future for Nîmes' cultural heritage.⁸ A proposal for a new Musée de la Romanité emerged as a campaign promise in the subsequent mayoral election of Jean-Paul Fournier.⁹

The site and the style chosen for the new building have provoked controversy, and legal challenges were filed to stop development.¹⁰ Yet, juxtaposing old and

⁵ Flamerie de Lachapelle et al. 2012.

⁶ *Nîmes, La ville* 2018, 39.

⁷ *Nîmes, Le Musée* 2018, 6–8.

⁸ *Nîmes, Le Musée* 2018, 10.

⁹ *Nîmes, Le Musée* 2018, 3; Souche 2018.

¹⁰ The new museum was initially planned to be in the vicinity of the Jesuit college, but historic buildings prevented construction there. An abandoned site near the amphitheater (the *Îlot Grill*), where a commercial redevelopment had stalled, was subsequently selected. An historic facade had to be preserved on

² Garcia 2004; Dietler 2010.

³ Deyts 1998; Mullen 2013.

⁴ Woolf 1998; Revell 2016.

new does have precedent here. The Maison Carrée itself received a dramatically streamlined neighbor in the 1990s, when Norman Foster unveiled a contemporary art center called the Carrée d'Art (online fig. 1).¹¹ Another precedent can be found at nearby Arles (Roman Arelate), Nîmes' rival for splendor in antiquity and for cultural prestige now. Arles has long had the advantage: in 1981, it was among the first sites awarded UNESCO World Heritage status; in 1995, it opened an archaeological museum with a sleek industrial design by Henri Ciriani. This Musée Départemental Arles Antique continues to be criticized locally for its inconvenient location outside the historic center (albeit near the partially preserved Roman circus) and on the opposite side of town from the public transit hub. In comparison, Nîmes now has an archaeological museum that is easily reached, just six blocks away from train and bus stations. It also has the more up-to-date facility, complete with the digital, dining, and shopping experiences expected by today's global museumgoers.

The Museum of Romanity (the institution's preferred name in English) cost 59.5 million euros, with the city contributing 35.4 million. The result is a building of 9,200 m², with 3,500 of those devoted to exhibition space. From a collection of 25,000 artifacts, 5,000 have been selected for permanent exhibition. Amenities include a panoramic roof terrace, an upscale restaurant, a casual café, a boutique with books and souvenirs, an auditorium for conferences, a space for special exhibitions, an historical garden, and a (planned) documentation center. The right facilities are now in place to support the conservation and study of Nîmes' archaeological heritage.

BUILDING THE MUSEUM

The Museum of Romanity provides an interesting comparison with the reimagined and relocated Acropolis Museum, which opened in Athens in 2009.¹² Both are what I call rhetorical archaeological museums: they present explicit arguments to an international audience about local esteem for cultural heritage and an attendant capacity to care for it. They advance their claims through strategic locations and sight lines; pro-

grammatic engagement with ancient architecture in their floor plans; globally contemporary designs; and materially minimalist interiors suffused with natural light. Whereas the Acropolis Museum aims to recover the prized Parthenon sculptures removed from Athens during a period of rivalry between the British and Ottoman empires, the museum at Nîmes aspires to increase global recognition of a community's Roman imperial past.

The Museum of Romanity embeds its artifacts in an experiential argument about the exemplary romanization that occurred in its cityscape. The museum and the amphitheater are not merely proximate; they occupy adjacent sides of the Place des Arènes (see fig. 1). From every floor of the amphitheater, visitors on tours or attending bullfights can now glimpse the glass and metal museum through the arena's ashlar archways. What will catch their attention is the sinuous screen of nearly 7,000 angled tiles (the semantics of which may elude them, however: publicity materials liken the tiles to mosaic tesserae and the screen's shape to a pleated toga). From inside the museum, openings in the screen reveal views of the amphitheater in front and the historical garden in back (online figs. 2, 3). The screen also parts for the restaurant on the roof terrace and is pulled back entirely from the ground floor and its café. Perhaps only the Acropolis Museum has more carefully orchestrated visual engagement with a superlative classical building.

The museum engages with the cityscape in three other ways. The building's ground floor is bisected by a public walkway, which leads to the garden (see online fig. 3). Here, plants common to the ancient Mediterranean are arranged in terraces representing the city's historical phases. Also visible are the remains of the Roman city wall. Its trajectory can be traced through indications in the pavement on the walkway beneath the museum and all the way across the plaza, where the wall runs startlingly close to the arena (see fig. 1). In this same walkway beneath the museum are stone columns and a pediment from the Roman Sanctuary of the Fountain, which originally stood to the north of town about a kilometer away. Although this staging risks causing confusion about the sanctuary's original location, it succeeds in complicating the boundary between the museum's interior and exterior, a key strategy of its architectural design.

Within the galleries, a winding path for visitors is shaped by casework and loosely arranged walls

the museum's long side, along the Rue de la République. For the history of this site with early photographs, see Souche 2018.

¹¹ See AJA Online for additional, online-only figures.

¹² Caskey 2011.

of varied height, as well as by ropes, signs, and alert guards. This organic arrangement allows movement to be directed through the installation's argument, while also leaving room for some degree of rearrangement: being able to accommodate future finds is one of the museum's goals. The neutral tones and textures of concrete and brushed metal keep attention focused on the collection, as do the streamlined structural elements required to stabilize the building and its heavy artifacts in a seismically active zone. The most noticeable architectural flourishes enhance the building's relationship to the amphitheater by echoing its curved shape. A double-helix staircase connects the two main floors and is anchored by a metallic ticket desk (the design of which recalls Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum at Bilbao). On the roof terrace, a circular viewing platform rises around a central garden and above the restaurant to offer yet more striking views.

INSTALLING THE COLLECTION

The decision to rename the museum has profound implications for the installation's argument. *Romanité* is a word not often used in French.¹³ It derives from the Latin *Romanitas* (often translated in English as Romaness). The Latin term seems to appear relatively late in the Imperial period, when the provincial Tertullian uses it to mock his fellow Carthaginians.¹⁴ This rare Latin word was previously revived by Benito Mussolini: *Romanità* was a major theme of his propaganda, as illustrated by the famous fascist exhibit of Roman archaeology, the "Mostra Augustea della Romanità" (Augustan Exhibit of Romaness, Rome, 1937). In French, *Romanité* highlights what a Provençal town values about its cultural heritage (the word also rhymes with *musée*). Nonetheless, given the Italian term's troubling history and the fact that the French term obscures the installation's full chronological sweep, the new name remains a curious choice.

The installation is divided into four parts. Artifacts from the Pre-Roman Period (seventh to first century BCE) and the Roman Period (first century BCE to third century CE) are presented on the second floor (i.e., the floor above the ground floor), with most mosaics and paintings on a light-protected mezzanine. The sections devoted to the Medieval Period (10th to 15th centuries) and the Legacy of Roman Antiquity

are on the ground floor, with the former on a second mezzanine. Visitors are invited to climb the helical staircase or take the elevator to begin the visit. They are greeted by a tall screen displaying images of water, the fountain sanctuary from which Nîmes arose, as well as evocations of the site's prehistory. In this entry area, an opportunity is missed to define what is meant by "Romanity" as an organizing principle.

The Pre-Roman Period

One consequence of naming the institution the Museum of Romanity is that a section labeled "Pre-Roman" comes to seem all the more like an opening act (fig. 2). Yet, these initial galleries are especially effective in illustrating the cross-cultural currents that shaped the region's Iron Age material culture. Combining artifacts from Nîmes and nearby sites in an achronological arrangement, this section includes stone sculptures of warriors; stone pillars once used to display such sculptures; stone lintels carved with representations of severed heads and with cavities to receive actual skulls; metal weapons and armor; Gallo-Greek inscriptions (i.e., the Gallic language recorded with the Greek alphabet); pottery assemblages (including imports); and a full-scale reconstruction of the Gallic Gailhan house with material culture in place.

The independent peoples of Gaul are not known for creating figural art or sculpting stone, but a number of sites in the south have yielded sculptures related to warriors and headhunting.¹⁵ This museum now joins the Musée Granet in Aix-en-Provence (with sculptures from Entremont) and the Musée de l'Histoire de Marseille (with sculptures from Roquepertuse) as a key center for their study. Given how few Gallic texts survive, the sculptures valuably illustrate the use of material culture now lost: the warriors, for example, are typically shown wearing torques in addition to their panoplies. Few actual torques survive in this region and frequent warfare likely explains why, given that the necklaces could be transmuted into currency during crises and that Rome's triumphing generals specifically sought them as booty, including during the conquest of southern Gaul in the 120s BCE.¹⁶ Archaeological evidence for headhunting does survive in this region, and the installation here makes special reference to a cache of heads excavated at Le Cailar in 2003. Alto-

¹³ Nîmes, *Le Musée* 2018, 10–12.

¹⁴ Tert., *De Pallio* 4.

¹⁵ Girard 2013.

¹⁶ Eutr. 4.22; Östenberg 2009, 108–11.



FIG. 2. View of the Pre-Roman galleries, with a lintel depicting severed heads (found in Nîmes' amphitheater, reused in a house there), a statue of a shield-bearing man (found near Nîmes' Tour Magne, a Gallic tower reused in the Roman city wall), a statue of a man wearing a cuirass and a torque (from the nearby Gallic oppidum of Marbacum), and an animal sculpture (Nîmes). Roman-era milestones, the double-helix staircase, and the ground-floor ticket desk are visible in the background.

gether, the Pre-Roman galleries make clear that the region's residents revered warriors, who sometimes severed and collected heads and who wielded the kind of first-rate weaponry on display. A false comparison emerges, however, when the looting and violence of Rome's invading army are not given equal attention in subsequent galleries. Such an omission absolves the conqueror of disruption and devastation, and it risks casting the conquered as savages in need of civilization.

The final gallery of the Pre-Roman section in fact presents a remarkably gentle story of empire: Rome's conquest of all of Gaul is recounted in an anodyne paragraph of wall text. Featured material includes a tomb assemblage illustrating the romanization of material culture (75–50 BCE), coins minted here after Nîmes was made a Roman colony (44–42 BCE), and a map of the Via Domitia (the main Roman road spanning the region), augmented with milestones from the reigns of Augustus (3 BCE) and Antoninus Pius (144–45 CE). Having the narrative of romanization

begin here anticipates the introduction of the Romans in the following section. Romanization is consequently presented as a *fait accompli*, rather than a bloody or even a negotiated part of imperialism.

The Roman Period

The prescribed path through the Roman section begins spectacularly with the story of urbanization and the monumental buildings so well preserved at Nîmes. Galleries with interactive architectural models and large-scale fragments from buildings (online fig. 4) wind around the museum's front, where views of the amphitheater are brought into play. The installation therefore leads with Nîmes' acknowledged strength—its well-preserved buildings—and makes the museum an essential site of interpretation for them. The next galleries display major finds from salvage excavations, including the Pentheus mosaic that sparked the entire enterprise, a statue fountain of Poseidon with traces of polychromy, and a striking Third Style wall painting in

red with a panel of a nude hero and a predella depicting dwarf-enacted myths.¹⁷ The circuit then takes the visitor up to the mezzanine, where other fine mosaics and frescoes are displayed, including a geometric floor from Brignan shown in a reconstructed bedroom.¹⁸ Back down from the mezzanine, the visitor can explore material culture large and small (fig. 3) toward the building's back, where there are views of the garden. This sweep of galleries illustrates the breadth and depth of the collections' inscriptions, recently conserved coins, and material culture (jewelry, glassware, pottery, writing equipment, and more). The final galleries are devoted to religious and funerary dedications, the latter including a remarkable set of mythological statues from a funerary garden at Beaucaire as well as stelae portraying Nîmes' leading citizens.¹⁹

Innovative technologies enliven the extensive display of coins and inscriptions. The coin section presents major series from the Hellenistic and Roman periods (i.e., not just those issued or used at Nîmes). One that was minted in the city, however, receives special attention. This bronze series featured Augustus and Agrippa on the obverse and a crocodile chained to a palm tree on the reverse, perhaps a reference to their defeat of Mark Antony and Cleopatra. The novel case displaying this series puts touch-screen technology directly on the vitrine and invites exploration of the shapes and iconography of the coins exhibited within (fig. 4). Here, the conceptual boundary between case and screen dissolves. In a neighboring gallery, projectors animate stone inscriptions with dramatic scenes of moving figures and flickering torches, which help convey the context of use (fig. 5). When the scenes fade, light traces the letters to make them more legible, then supplements them with a French translation. Other institutions have employed similar technologies to restore polychromy to major relief sculptures, from the Ara Pacis in Rome to the Temple of Dendur in the Metropolitan Museum in New York. The technology's experimental application to Latin inscriptions here has a sensationalizing aspect, but one that succeeds in helping visitors navigate a gallery full of stone carvings that few can read.

¹⁷ *Nîmes, Le Musée* 2018: 6–8 (mosaic); 44, 61 (Poseidon); 56–57 (painting).

¹⁸ *Nîmes, La ville* 2018, 37.

¹⁹ *Nîmes, Le Musée* 2018: 12 (stela of Licinia Flaminia); 50–51 (funerary statues).

More could be made of the mobility and the multivocal narratives attested in these and other dedications. One of the projection-enhanced inscriptions honors Jupiter Heliopolitanus along with Nemausus and was set up by a soldier from Beirut (see fig. 5).²⁰ In the nearby gallery with religious artifacts, many of the gods that are honored have indigenous origins. For instance, an altar dedicated by the freedman Titus Cassius Felicio to the Lares Augusti also names Minerva, Nemausus, Urnia, and Avicantus.²¹ The latter two deities are, like Nemausus, associated with local water sources. Indigenous gods with broader provincial popularity also appear, including a bronze figurine of Sucellus, who was worshiped throughout Gaul.²² These associations are duly noted in the labels and wall text, yet how they nuance notions of Romanity is never fully resolved within the installation's larger argument about Nîmes' successful romanization.

The Medieval Period, the Legacy of Roman Antiquity, and Special Exhibitions

To reach the Medieval Period galleries, a visitor takes the curved staircase down to the ground floor's mezzanine. On display here are belt buckles, a sarcophagus, and fragments of architectural relief sculptures, not all from Nîmes. Another set of stairs leads down to the ground floor's Legacy gallery, which highlights the humanists of Nîmes and displays their collections of Greek and Etruscan artifacts. Also on view are cork architectural models made by Nîmes native Auguste Pelet in the 19th century, as well as a selection of souvenirs related to the city. Of all the material in these two sections, it is the models (online fig. 5) around which visitors crowd. They replicate familiar Roman buildings near and far, from the Pantheon and Colosseum in Rome, to the theater at Orange, the Pont du Gard, and the amphitheater at Nîmes. These galleries allow the museum to display additional holdings while also pointing out that Nîmes has been a center for the study of the ancient Mediterranean for many centuries.

On the lower level is a space for special exhibitions, and these also seem destined to frame the museum as a key center for learning about the Roman empire. The first exhibition, "Gladiateurs, Héros du Colisée"

²⁰ *CIL* 12, 3072.

²¹ *CIL* 12, 3077.

²² *Nîmes, Le Musée* 2018, 49.



FIG. 3. View of the Roman Period section's material culture galleries below the mezzanine.



FIG. 4. Coin case with integrated touch-screen technology.

(Gladiators, Heroes of the Colosseum, 2 June 2018–24 September 2018), reinforced the links between the museum, the arena across the street, and the arena's connection to Rome. A second exhibit, "Pompeii, un Récit Oublié" (Pompeii, the Forgotten Story, 6 April 2019–6 October 2019), brings Nîmes into direct dia-

logue with what has become the empire's second most famous city.

THE INTERPRETIVE APPARATUS

The Museum of Romanity is saturated with screens and audio: there are 65 multimedia displays. Each



FIG. 5. Digital projections onto dedications for Jupiter Heliopolitanus and Nemausus (left, CIL 12, 3072) and Titus Caecilius Guttur (right, CIL 12, 3206), in the Roman Period section.

section of the installation opens with what the architect calls a “knowledge box” made of loosely arranged white walls that glow (one is visible in the background of fig. 2). Within, one wall displays a digitized, polychrome map of the Mediterranean, on which political boundaries and trade routes are marked and tracked over time. The accompanying text appears in four languages: French, English, Spanish, and Italian. These boxes are successful in marking moments of transition in the installation and in orienting visitors to each period’s political geography. The setup is slightly different for the Legacy section, which opens with one glowing wall (and no map) and concludes with a large screen on which a digital mosaic is projected to tell a story of Rome’s influence on Nîmes’ later architecture.

Screens with further content appear directly in the galleries. Short documentaries play continuously on screens small and large, with topics ranging from Gallic weaponry to recent excavations. Their French-only audio announces the documentaries’ presence from afar, and they are subtitled in French for the hearing-impaired. Touch-activated screens adjacent to models and cases invite viewers to learn more about the ancient city, particular buildings, and works of art, as well as fabrication processes (with content again in four languages). An interactive kiosk is located near the section devoted to inscriptions: visitors are invited to stand within to be scanned and then to observe images projected of themselves in Roman clothes. Most

intriguing are the pairs of stand-alone vertical screens positioned at both the front and the back of the second floor at openings in the tiled curtain. By pivoting the screens back and forth, visitors can see digital reconstructions of the area’s past appearance, as, for example, when the Roman wall was being constructed across what is now the Place des Arènes. Here, too, the cityscape is brought into the museum, and an interpretive apparatus is provided in four languages.

Given the multiplicity of screens, the galleries are not overwhelmed with static text. For the vision-impaired, many sections include stations where representative objects have been reproduced for handling, with explanations in braille. For the sighted, wall texts in French, Spanish, and English explain key themes for each major grouping of artifacts. Object labels, exclusively in French, are minimal and typically only include basic “tombstone” information (object name or description and date of manufacture). Findspot and year of discovery are indicated for many of the sculptures and architectural elements, but not for small finds. Nowhere are inventory numbers given.

Some interpretive materials are still being prepared. The audio guide was not yet ready when this reviewer visited (March 2019). A catalogue has not yet been published, so special issues of French cultural magazines serve to introduce the new museum, its permanent collection, and its relation to the Roman cityscape.²³ Although the collections database has not been made public, the museum’s French and English website has dynamic graphics and helpful overviews of the installation and building, as well as visitor information. Both the website’s page header and the museum’s larger signs are rendered in a customized font inspired by Latin inscriptions.

THE FUTURE OF CONQUEST: THE ROMAN EMPIRE IN THE MUSEUM

Claiming Romanity for a municipal collection risks giving the false impression that the story being told is *the* story of the Roman empire rather than *a* story. In this regard, the difference between a site museum and a national or regional one is especially telling. France’s Musée d’Archéologie Nationale (Saint-Germain-en-Laye), Spain’s Museo Arqueológico Nacional (Ma-

²³ *Nîmes, Le Musée* 2018; *Nîmes, La ville* 2018; see also Darde 2005; Teyssier 2018.

drid), and Germany's Rheinisches Landesmuseum (Trier) possess more abundant and diverse finds.²⁴ They allow for the development of more complex accounts of cultural production before, during, and after Roman conquest, with instances of persistence, transformation, and brilliance visible throughout. The installation at Nîmes instead presents a stark contrast between the "Pre-Roman" and "Roman" eras. The emphasis on romanization makes it hard to appreciate the extraordinary value of the Gallic material in the opening galleries and to track the multivocal narratives inherent in some of the later evidence. Romanity may have the benefit of creating a clear brand for global museumgoers, but it comes at a cost.

What should we make of the role of the World Heritage bid in all of this? It was a surely a disappointment for all involved that the application proved unsuccessful and the bid was passed over soon after the museum opened. UNESCO's advisory body for cultural monuments, the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), had previously determined that the application did not establish how Nîmes' Roman heritage and its legacy differed substantially from that of other sites already on the list (e.g., Arles).²⁵ ICOMOS also found fault with the urban excavations that had yielded such fantastic finds without preserving them in situ (e.g., the Pentheus mosaic). Most damning of all, concern was expressed that the new museum disrupted the integrity of the urban ensemble and represented excessive development within the historic zone. The World Heritage Committee, where selected representatives of member nations have final say on listed sites, accepted ICOMOS' recommendation to defer the application. Supporters plan to resubmit, perhaps with a narrower focus on the Maison Carrée.²⁶ The new museum should help, if ICOMOS' experts look beyond what they deemed a "provocative" architectural style to consider the quality of the interactive architectural models, the contextualizing installation of artifacts, and the high degree of public accessibility.

The coincidence of the museum's opening and the bid's rejection raises important questions about the

emergence of new archaeological facilities in the 21st century: de Portzamparc won Nîmes' international design competition in 2012, the same year that the city officially registered an intent to have its Roman buildings considered for World Heritage listing. The World Heritage selection process is certainly one determining factor in the rise of such museums. What began in the 1970s as an effort to identify sites deserving conservation has become something of a popularity contest, with member nations competing for what has been called a lucrative global brand.²⁷ With more than 1,000 sites listed so far, an escalation in amenities seems inevitable, as applicants strive to exceed the standards set by the upgraded facilities of listed properties (e.g., those at Arles). As the Acropolis Museum also shows, a new building by an internationally active architect is an excellent way to draw global attention to a community's point of view. Since opening, the Museum of Romanity has received a great deal of press coverage, with notices in English-language publications ranging from *Apollo* and the *Art Newspaper* to the *Guardian* and the *New York Times*.²⁸ That the museum appeared in a travel feature on Nîmes published in this last one highlights the potential economic benefits of investing prominently in cultural heritage, with or without UNESCO's seal of approval. In this context of global tourism and an expanding cultural heritage industry, the Roman empire has the appeal of instant name recognition. I wonder, though, how many opportunities are being missed to meet people where they are in their understanding of the past, and then to lead them somewhere new.

In the end, the quality of Nîmes' Roman architecture merits World Heritage designation, and the curators, conservators, and digital specialists working with the Museum of Romanity deserve credit for creating a dazzling and immersive experience of antiquity. In our present era defined by repatriation debates and museum tours countering the master narratives of modern empires, it is, however, striking that triumphant visions of Roman imperialism continue to enjoy celebration here and elsewhere. To the politicians, museum directors, and heritage officials who set global standards of cultural excellence, my plea is to let the Roman empire evolve. The multivocal narratives that abound in

²⁴ For the museum in Madrid, see most recently Shaya 2017, 2018.

²⁵ ICOMOS 2018.

²⁶ A website has been established to support the bid: www.jesoutiensnimes.fr/fr/.

²⁷ Meskell 2018.

²⁸ Bryant 2018; Sansom 2018; Barling 2019; Lobrano 2019.

scholarship and find the greatest traction in classrooms can appeal to worldwide audiences. Sanitizing and homogenizing the Roman empire will not ensure the future relevance of its archaeological heritage.

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