Roman rule, present-day personality features and socioeconomic outcomes in German regions

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Extended Abstract

We investigate whether Roman presence in the southern part of Germany had long-run consequences on present-day personality profiles of citizens in these regions, with potentially important consequences for the future socio-economic trajectories of these regions. Did the Roman Limes Wall establish a cultural borderline that still divides today’s Germany in terms of local mentality and character?

To answer this question, we exploit regional-level data from a recent online survey on the Big Five personality traits in Germany. These data are combined with historical information on the location of the Roman border, Roman cities, and Roman roads.

Our regression analyses, comparing all German regions, indicate that there is a significantly positive “Roman effect” on the regional levels of extraversion and agreeableness, and a significantly negative effect on the regional level of neuroticism among today’s population in Germany. Furthermore, today’s German regions in the former Roman Empire seem to have a higher entrepreneurial spirit (entrepreneurial Big Five profile) than other German regions, offering a new interpretation of the already well-established finding that southern German regions that were under Roman rule are economically better developed today than non-Roman regions in Germany. In order to address questions of causality, we claim that, based on insights from previous research on the cultural and economic imprinting effect of Romans rule (Wahl 2017, Dalgaard et al. 2018), the Roman border was drawn in an unsystematic way, in order to secure the minimum area necessary to connect the two provincial capitals Augsburg and Mainz. That is also why parts of the Limes follow straight lines (i.e., ignoring of topographical conditions). The same also holds true for Roman roads, which usually did not follow the least-
cost path but rather were as straight as possible. The obvious reason is that these roads were primarily built for military purposes to be able to shift troops from one part of the Empire to another as fast as possible. To control for alternative sources of today’s regional personality differences, we include several historical and geographic controls, as well as federal state fixed effects in order to further mitigate the possibility of unobserved heterogeneity biasing the estimations.

In the further steps, we identify Roman cities and their trade activities, the higher urbanization of the Roman area as well as the Roman road network as potential channels through which Roman presence has influenced the personality traits of the regional population until today.

Furthermore, we show that the specific character of Southern Germans as formed by the legacies of the Roman Empire is significantly connected to regional levels of life satisfaction and other socio-economic outcomes, illustrating the “real world implications” of today’s regional personality profiles that may be traced back to Roman rule.

The study contributes to growing but still small literature on the long-term imprinting effects of the Roman Empire that continue to shape the socio-economic trajectories of today’s regions. It is the first study that investigates the imprinting effect of the Romans on today’s individual characteristics of the German population and on more broadly defined welfare measures such as life satisfaction. It is also the first study showing that aggregated characteristics of places like population density, accessibility, and trade activities can shape individual attitudes and preferences of profound economic importance over a very-long period of time.

**Literature**
