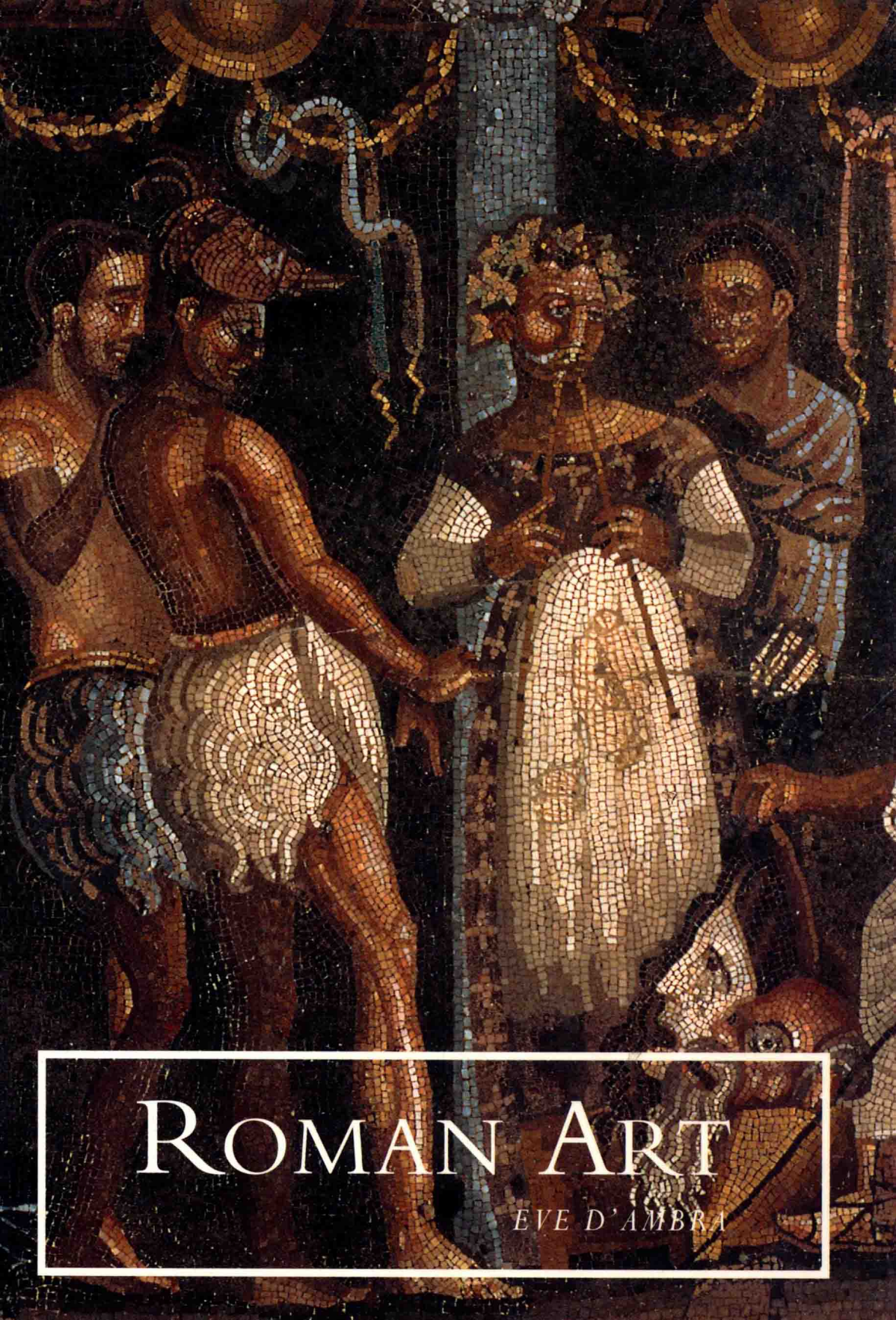

ROMAN ART

EVE D'AMBRA

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Frontispiece Portrait statue of a woman as Venus, page 108 (detail)

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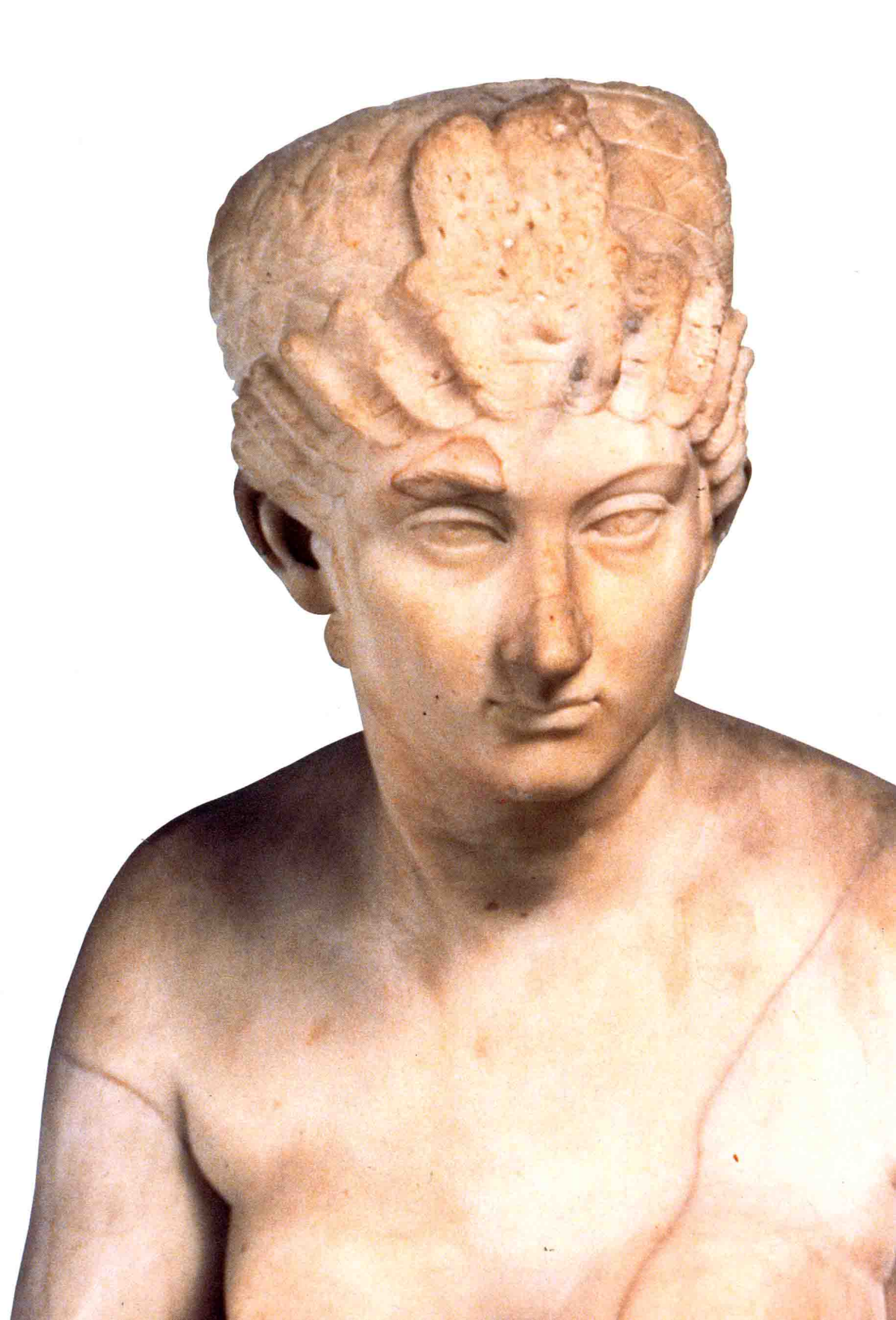

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Map of the Roman Empire in the second century AD.

Map of the Roman Empire in the late second century AD.

Empire and its Myths

1. Portrait of "Brutus," fourth–third century BC. Bronze, h. 27⅛" (69 cm). Capitoline Museums, Palazzo dei Conservatori, Rome.

The head, perhaps portraying the legendary founder of the Republic in 509 BC, who led a popular insurrection against the last Etruscan king of Rome, has been seen to express distinct predispositions to form and structure of the indigenous Italian peoples, particularly in the reductive geometry and the cubic form that give this work its authoritative presence.

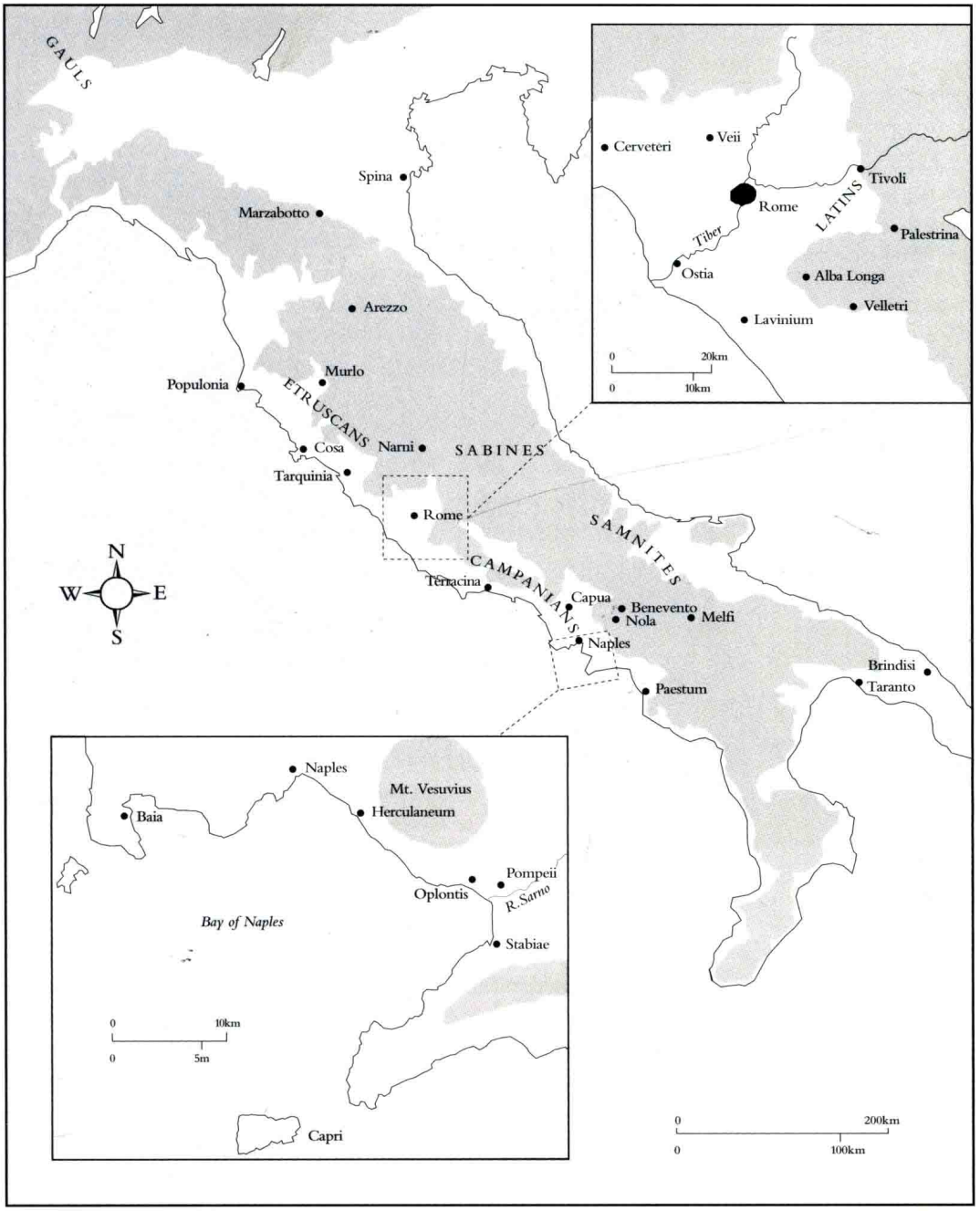
The study of Roman art has been complicated at the very start by the varied meanings of "Roman." It refers to place as the city that was the center of the imperial government and the hub of cultivated and sophisticated living – so much so that Rome came to be known simply as *urbs* ("the city" in Latin), the city among cities. Yet "Roman" may also indicate the vast expanse of territory: to the west it was bounded by the Iberian peninsula and the hinterlands of Scotland; to the east by the Tigris river (in the third century AD); to the north by the Danube; and to the south by the oases of the Sahara (see pages 6–7). And then it also refers to time as in the historical periods of the Republic and Empire (from the sixth century BC through the fourth century AD), marked by political systems that managed the transformation of Rome into the master of the civilized world through raw conquest and efficient administration. Although the extent of Romanization is disputed, the spread of Latin, the wearing of the ceremonial toga, and the construction of urban institutions such as amphitheaters and baths throughout Europe, sections of the Middle East, and north Africa show the effects of Roman cultural domination.

The adjective "Roman" seems to sit more comfortably with political geography and historical development than with easily classified and recognizable works of art. The Romans themselves were responsible for propagating the cliché of the business-minded bureaucrat or hardheaded military man dismissive of or confounded by the fine arts, which were denigrated as a pastime for idle and pampered foreigners. In the epic narrating the founding of Rome, the hero Aeneas is given a civic lesson by his dead father in the underworld: "Others will cast their breath-

ing figures more tenderly in bronze, and bring more lifelike portraits out of marble... Roman, remember by your strength to rule earth's peoples – for your arts are to be these: to pacify, to impose the rule of law, to spare the conquered, battle down the proud" (Virgil, *Aeneid*, 6.1145–47, 1151–54). As we shall see, the imperial mission of the Romans did not disqualify them from cultivating the arts or, at least, acquiring and collecting works of art. There were generals and politicians who understood the value of stately marble buildings and public portrait galleries for a young city, recently enriched by foreign conquests, striving to be the capital of the world. Its citizens saw how tombs conspicuously sited on the roads leading to the city or grand houses brought them prestige in the eyes of their peers.

The problem of characterizing Roman art arises from its relationship to its esteemed predecessor in the Hellenic world. According to the old theories, Greek art provided the model, Roman art followed suit. Traditionally, historians of Roman art have had to defend their field against charges of inferiority to and derivation from the achievements of the Greeks, particularly the idealized figure style of the fifth and fourth centuries BC that defines Classicism. Yet to do so ignores the innovations of Roman architecture, for one example, and also presumes that invention was valued for itself in traditional cultures that looked to the past before facing the future. Roman art was dependent on Greek precedents because it developed in the cultural climate of Hellenism in a Mediterranean landscape saturated with the products of Greek civilization. These came directly through the Greek colonies established in southern Italy and Sicily in the eighth and seventh centuries BC and from the war booty from the conquest of the Greek east in the third through first centuries BC, and indirectly through the Etruscans: their adaptation of Greek styles adorned their city-states in the central Italian peninsula and, ultimately, the city of Rome itself when it came under Etruscan rule in the sixth century BC (FIG. 2). In its beginnings, Roman art should not be seen either as a slavish imitation of Greek art or in rigid opposition to Classical styles of the fifth and fourth centuries BC but, rather, as an offshoot of Hellenism that developed an unusual and complicated relationship with the source of some of its styles and themes.

Yet there are works of art that give us a sense of Rome's awareness of its historic role from the beginning: a bronze sculpture from the early fifth century BC depicts a she-wolf that bristles with menace and pent-up energy; the animal is also represented suckling two little boys identified as the twins Romulus and Remus



2. Map of Italy in the third–second centuries BC, including earlier Etruscan cities and Greek colonies.