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# The Role of the Digital in Roman Archaeology

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The editorial of the seventh volume of the *Theoretical Roman Archaeology Journal* explores the intertwining relationships between digital platforms and Roman archaeology. When faced with powerful digital tools, misinformation may be dangerously amplified. This editorial addresses the increasing influence of social media, particularly TikTok, in disseminating archaeological information to a wider public. It examines the role of misinformation, exemplified by the viral claim that 'Rome does not exist', and raises questions about how archaeologists can engage with such platforms to combat misunderstandings while promoting informed discussions of complex topics like identity and cultural diversity in the Roman world. As a case study, we use the 2023 Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference (TRAC) to reflect on the reception of digital tools for conference hosting post-pandemic. Held for the first time in a hybrid format at the University of Exeter, TRAC 2023 demonstrated the potential of digital tools, particularly Gather.town, to broaden participation and enhance accessibility for a global audience. In the end, we call for greater awareness and responsibility in the digital dissemination of archaeological knowledge, balancing the opportunities for broader engagement with the need for critical reflection.

### Roman Archaeology on TikTok

In the editorial for the seventh volume of the *Theoretical Roman Archaeology Journal*, we examine the evolving role of digital platforms within Roman archaeology, using the first digital Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference (TRAC) as a case study. Before analysing the beneficial functions of the digital at conferences as a catalyst for interpersonal engagement and diversity, we would first like to highlight how the rapid changing online environment is affecting the broader public and their understanding of the Roman past.

TikTok, a Chinese social media app which boomed during the pandemic (reaching 1 billion monthly active users in 2021)[1] due to its short video format, continued to gain popularity at a meteoric pace in the past year, with the last figures published in 2024 reaching nearly 1.7 billion (DataReportal 2024). Although still trailing Facebook (3 billion monthly users), as the most used social media platform, it ranks highest for growth and monthly downloads. There are significant differences both in demographic profiles, and preferred/specific use, with the figures self-reported and not including duplicate or fake accounts, or those under 18 years old (TikTok only). Moreover, as the same report suggests, TikTok is used for amusing or entertaining content, whilst Facebook is largely used to message friends and family.

This rapid rise facilitated the dissemination of information at a previously unseen rate, reaching wide audiences on varied topics from science to politics. Like most topics discussed on social media, Roman archaeology has not escaped controversy. While TikTok accounts engaging with Roman archaeology are too numerous to consider, here we focus on a single example which received some wide-spread attention. In 2021, a TikToker, @mommllinneal_ (original account deleted, currently posting from @mommllinneal_returns) became (in)famous online, both inside and on other platforms, by claiming 'Rome is not real' (amongst other strong statements).

To this day, this account has a playlist with 43 videos entitled 'Rome is a Lie'.[2] Academics, archaeologists and amateurs sought to debunk the claim, citing evidence and arguments for the existence of a distinct Roman culture, Empire and society;[3] others resorted to derogatory or inflammatory comments (which of course we do not condone). While it is difficult to gauge the motivation behind sharing such claims, they could reasonably be interpreted as a misguided attempt at decolonization, using reversed roles from centuries ago denying one's personhood, identity and ultimately, their existence.

One of this creator's most popular videos, which has collected 45,700 views to date, starts with the same clickbait claim that Rome does not exist,[4] before qualifying the

statement,[5] arguing that Rome, as one singular entity did not exist, and instead it was an amalgamation of several cultures and influences. Within the scholarly world, this is not an innovative observation but rather forms part of a long-standing debate pertaining to identity (see Roymans 2004 on contact with otherness and identity re-establishment; Hodos 2010 on the fluidity of an ethnic group; Gardner 2011 for plural and situational identities).

Overall, the sort of online content outlined above raises several issues: how can we, as archaeologists, constructively argue that a specific Roman identity existed? Are we equipped to discuss, convince and perhaps explore concerns of these individuals or should we abandon potentially toxic online debates to other social media users? In short, the challenge lies in how archaeologists can effectively address and engage with such claims, providing clarity on the complexities of Roman identity in an era of decolonization, and at what point we should intervene. This does not mean that the archaeologist should be concerned with every obscure idea present online but instead should recognise and challenge misinformation before millions start to believe it. As the infamous case of Andrew Wakefield showed (claiming vaccines cause autism), and more recently, the annulled presidential election in Romania due to illegal campaigning on TikTok,[6] misinformation can spread fast and have direct consequences on our lives.

## 'Roman' Identities

This section will discuss the concept of 'identities', exploring what Roman can mean depending on the viewer or receiver of the idea. In considering the roots of identity as a concept, it is important to understand its formation. Paradoxically, this idea is made of two opposing views: the *emic*, which refers to identity as a perception of self, and the *etic*, which ideally provides the outside perception on the same individual or group (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 4). The two sides have also been discussed under the idea of 'collective identity' which focuses on identity in terms of external and self-recognition (Jenkins 1994). While internally, individuals tend to differentiate themselves from others through criteria of community and a sense of shared belonging, externally, they still need to be recognised by outsiders (Jenkins 1994). Therefore, identity is a manifold concept which, depending on the perspective employed, may shed light on the similarities and differences between individuals, or unfurl varied perceptions of the same individual depending on who undertakes the analysis.

Considering the many facets of identity and its dependence on the 'viewer', the term 'Roman' may at times cause issues if used without further qualification. What actually

is Roman? For a long time 'Roman' was part of the dichotomous model of Roman vs. Native. Late twentieth-century studies provided decolonializing perspectives as an opposition against the earlier twentieth century Romanization, by recognising the agency of the local people in the way 'civilization' was received (see Millett 1990; Webster and Cooper 1996; Mattingly 1997). However, despite this revolutionary approach to interpretation and theory in Roman archaeology, these models nonetheless still based themselves on the old dichotomy of native and Roman, continuing to carry unconscious biases regarding these two terms.

In the light of these models, new, further qualifications have been given to the term 'Roman' as a movement forward from dichotomous models. Woolf (1998: 7) wrote that Roman designates a mosaic of different people, a melting pot that in no way was culturally uniform. Contextualizing this within the expansion of the Roman Empire, it is considered that over two million men had enrolled in the Roman *auxilia* between the reign of Augustus and the end of the Severan dynasty (Haynes 2013: 4). This high enrolment resulted in increased contact between different traditions across the Empire, due to the constant moving and detachment of troops from place to place and their experience with the encountered cultures. In other words, the high mobility of *auxilia* led to interactions between units and provincial communities, which facilitated the mutual exchange of traditions and practices, which in turn may have altered the identities of those involved in the process.

Simplistic categories of identity have therefore proven inadequate. The Romans could have been the Italians or similarly, they could have been the Batavians, originally from the modern Netherlands. The Roman armies that arrived in Britain in AD 43 were made of people born and brought up in a range of different provinces, not just Italy (Cool 2010: 28). The auxiliary soldiers may have thought of themselves as Roman, or not, but their tastes in food and drink may have been very different to those of a contemporaneous Italian (Cool 2006: 180). Therefore, being Roman often meant engaging with varied cultural backgrounds and, at times, blending cultures into a new concept.

## The Identity of the Batavians

The Batavians represent an ideal example of being 'Roman'. Their soldier communities have created a unique identity by blending all the dichotomous perspectives of home and abroad, indigenous and Roman, and what earlier Roman scholars would consider 'barbarian' and 'civilized' into a unique mix of varied elements. The Batavian identity was created in the battlefield between internal and external perceptions,

between self-image and image created by outsiders (Roymans 2004: 2). This led to the perception of Batavians as Romans, provincials or soldiers, depending on who undertook the analysis, that is, the Roman authorities, other populations, or the Batavians themselves.

The premise is that once part of the Roman Empire, the communities would become Roman in the eyes of those that are yet to be engulfed into the system, while staying as 'other' in the eyes of those that were already part of the Empire. So was the case of the Batavians, who would be stuck in between these two perspectives — the Roman authorities and legionaries with Roman citizenship, and the peoples that were yet to be part of this. The former, that is 'the Romans', generally classified the Batavians as Germans, meaning that despite their skills and special place in the eyes of the Roman authorities, they remained barbarians, culturally inferior and marginal in terms of civilization (Roymans 2004: 225). To list a few examples, Caesar (*Bellum Gallicum* VI.11–28) saw them as nomadic barbarians, Strabo (*Geographica* VII) followed Caesar's model emphasizing their nomadic existence, and Tacitus (*Germania* 6; 11; 15) highlighted a stereotypical barbarian behaviour, describing them as impulsive, undisciplined, unstable, warlike, less intelligent. This is, however, only one facet of their external perception.

Conversely, in new territories where the Roman armies would intervene, they would become the 'Romans' and instead, the new people would be the 'barbarians'. One such example may be displayed in one of the Vindolanda tablets, where presumably a soldier of Cohors IX Batavorum pejoratively called the Britons *Brittunculi*, due to their obviously different fighting skills (Tab. Vindol. 164; de la Bedoyere 2015: 74). In this situation, the roles reverse with the Batavians as the 'superior Roman', while the indigenous people, the Britons, become the barbarians who lack the 'proper' ways to fight according to the Roman military standard. Essentially, the *emic* is reshaped through the *etic*, where the internal perception becomes dependent on external factors and interactions. The Britons and the Batavians re-shape their identity in relation to each other, just as the Batavians and the incoming armies upon their conquering redefined their identities throughout their interactions.

This example shows that identities are not static, but flexible and ever-changing, spreading out from or coming into one culture, depending on the context. Gardner (2011: 12) has acknowledged the transition from the study of essentialist and monolithic identities to plural and situational ones. Likewise, Hill (2001: 14) argued that ethnicity and identity 'are situationally specific and actively created'. Such views have been essential for shifting away from the relics of the culture-history

approach of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century which saw material culture as a direct reflection of ethnicity, with strict boundaries between cultures evidenced through the spread of artefacts. These views turned identity into a static construct or led to dichotomous perspectives of Roman vs. native, barbaric vs. civilized. On the contrary, the multiple roles people and communities inhabit during their lifetime make them susceptible to change over time, affecting their identities. Consequently, it follows that identities are flexible constructs which do not pertain to a single cultural or ethnic group, but they can spread beyond physical or cultural boundaries, and they are susceptible to change even in the span of a lifetime.

Veering away from the material side, an additional element to the plurality of identities has been recognised as 'code-switching' (see Mullen 2013; Revell 2013; 2016 for specific discussions; see Mattingly 2024 for a general theoretical review and discussion). In a broader sense, code-switching is pluri-directional depending on group, age, gender or social status. In the public space, the well-known practice of *interpretatio Romana* or the merging of Roman and local gods (Rives 2015), resulted in some of the more extreme displays of code switching, in particular related to garments, attributes and postures (e.g. depictions of Hermanubis). With individuals, perhaps the best-known example is a second century AD letter of a young soldier. Writing as thousands other soldiers would have done before him, Apion is proud to inform his family of his new Latin name, Antonius Maximus (Breasted 1944: 708).

## The Digital Pivot: Progress or Precarity?

As the discussion of 'Roman identities' has highlighted above, this topic is complex and requires a clear understanding of the ancient and modern contexts, mixed with social and archaeological studies, to fully gauge these ancient interactions. The expansion of research dissemination on online platforms may represent both progress and precarity. Progress, because a rather specialized field gains accessibility to a wider audience, opening doors to topics such as identity and code switching. These discussions could also become anchored in current migration events. Precarity, because this may lead to the spread of misinformation through a small but active content creator community. The ease with which one can find articles and studies of dubious origin can only reinforce confirmation bias, drawing users and members of the public into a deeper and deeper rabbit hole, where they 'do their own research' (Levy 2022) and distrust everything and anyone else.

Additionally, platforms like TikTok encourage shocking statements, as is the case of 'Rome does not exist', through their relatively short video format. A dramatic opening statement to catch attention, that upon explanation turned out to be part of existing and on-going debates within the field of Roman archaeology. Despite a highly positive potential, unfortunately, the video led to misinformation among the general audience and in the light of this phenomenon, it remains to ask ourselves as archaeologists to what extent we should contribute to these discussions or avoid potentially polarized debates by stepping back. There are serious consequences for both, whether of online threats and violence directed at academics, or complete loss of control over 'alternative' interpretations.

## Digital TRAC

In addition to expanding horizons for public engagement, digital platforms are also facilitating new ways of communication within the discipline. TRAC 2023 was hosted at Exeter for the first time by a group of research PGRs in Archaeology, and Classics and Ancient History, taking place largely in a digital environment with keynote speakers invited to give their talks in a hybrid setting at the University of Exeter. TRAC 2023 was able to provide a sustainable and financially accessible conference experience for over 140 participants **(Figure 1a–d)**. Despite some digital setbacks, this edition continued to adhere to TRAC's long-standing commitment to foster theoretical discourse and accessibility. Its digital implementation — via platforms such as Gather.town and Zoom — has raised broader questions about the future of conferences and the impact of digital tools on encouraging diverse participation and the spread of information more widely to both a specialized and a general audience.

The online organization of TRAC 2023 was a residual effect of the COVID-19 pandemic, thus raising some particular challenges. Crucially, navigating the post-pandemic period of digital interactions, participation was not to be taken for granted given the supersaturation of online events and the craving for in-person academic gatherings. Despite this, TRAC 2023 saw over half of its participants contribute with 69 papers, eight posters, workshops and hybrid keynote speeches. This success also poses a looming question: how should Roman archaeology adapt to the post-pandemic realities of digital interaction, and what does this adaptation reveal about the discipline's broader challenges in navigating modern technological currents?

The digital element has been up for discussion ever since the pandemic limited in-person contact and 'forced' us to become more inventive regarding ways of
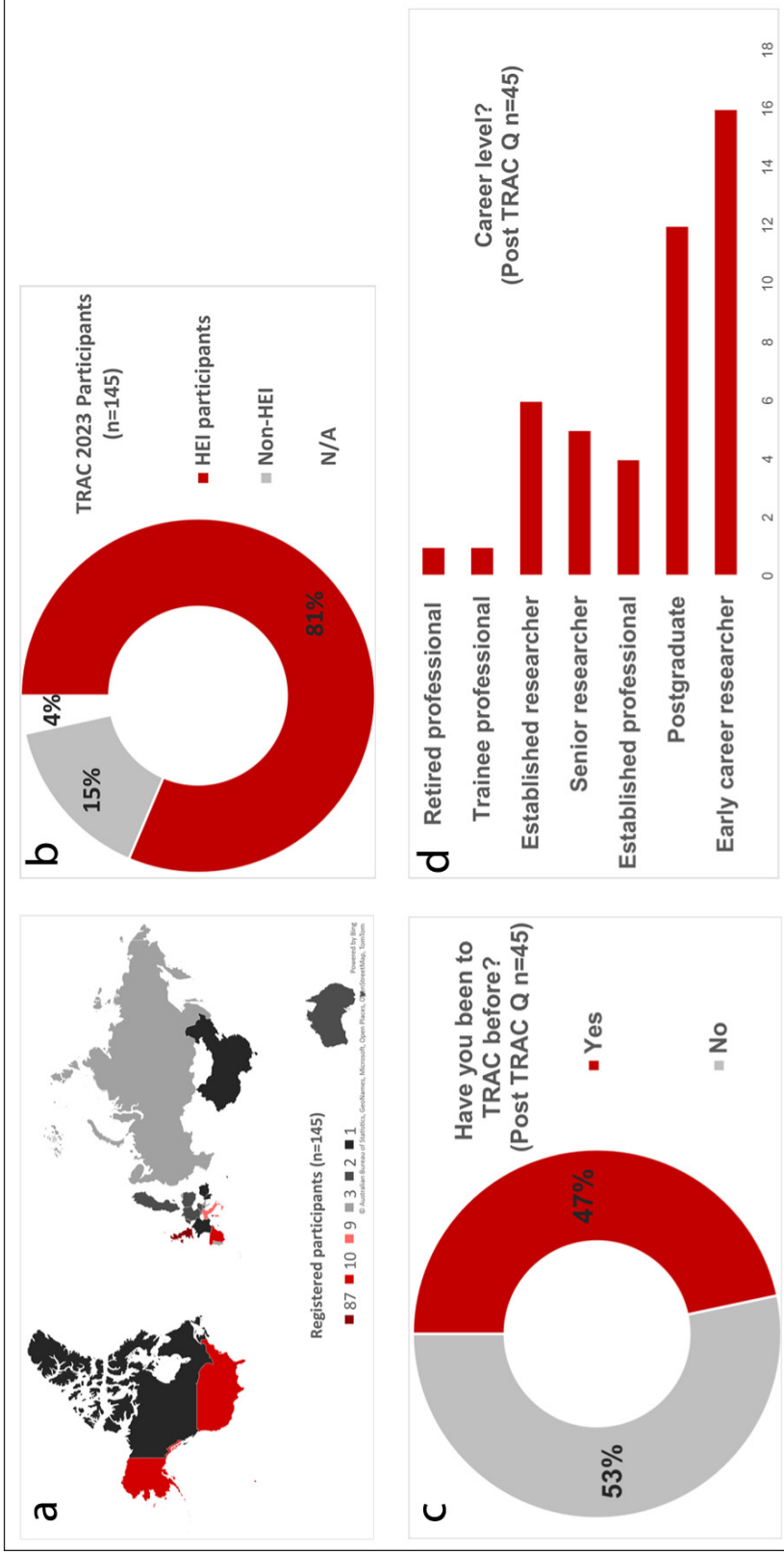
**Figures 1a–d:** The number and diversity of TRAC 2023 participants (Source: Authors).

expressing ideas. TRAC 2023 joined this creative current and, in the light of hosting an online conference, the platform of choice was Gather.town; a first for an archaeology conference in the UK. The app allowed users to create an avatar and interact with other nearby avatars, both in groups in the lounge area and in private spaces such as on a row of seats in individual rooms. This helped mitigate some of the shortcomings to alternative platforms, allowing users to interact with each other and with materials in an organic manner (digital posters, links to Royal Albert Memorial Museum objects), throughout the allocated digital space. Essentially, it provided a closer simulation of an in-person event experience.

Participant satisfaction was high, with over half of respondents giving maximum grades for TRAC 2023 and most expressing the likelihood of participating in future online conferences (**Figures 2** and **3**). This shows that in terms of post-pandemic online conferences, prospective participants appear less apprehensive than anecdotal evidence may suggest. However, we need to bear in mind the 'Yelp effect', that self-reporting tends to be bimodal, reflecting either particularly positive or negative experiences (Hu et al. 2006; Goes et al. 2014). The feedback was overwhelmingly positive, both in the post-conference questionnaire and in the emails received after, with participants ranking highly the social elements of Gather.town and specific papers/sessions.[7] However, it is obvious that there is clear room for improvement both in the use of Gather.town and in general conference management. The main issues relate to screensharing process, audio/video accessibility and connectivity and internet issues. Despite these, we encourage future hosts of TRAC, as well as researchers generally to be more daring to experiment with alternatives to established online platforms, and to explore their functionality and potential.
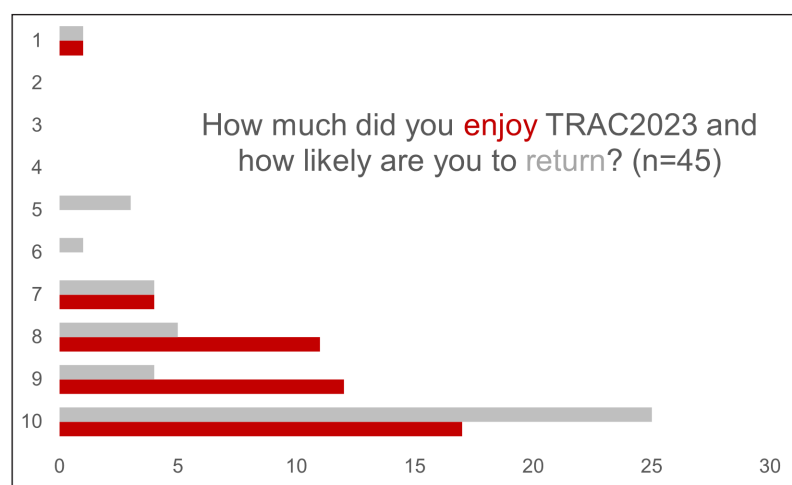


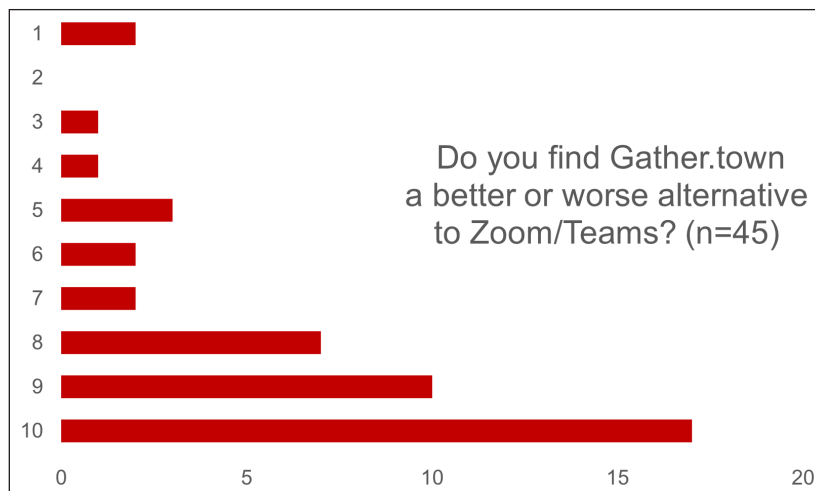**Figure 2:** Assessment of participants' overall satisfaction with TRAC 2023 (Source: Authors).

**Figure 3:** Assessment of participants' overall satisfaction with Gather.town (Source: Authors).

## In this Volume

The seventh volume of the *Theoretical Roman Archaeology Journal* contains three research articles and 22 book reviews. Its overall theme reflects the dynamic intersections between empirical data and theoretical frameworks, which represents one of the main hallmarks of contemporary Roman archaeology. This section explores the key themes in this volume, by examining the types of data employed and contextualizing these within existent broader theoretical debates. It also aims to build on the broader topic of 'data', whose importance has already been reviewed and explored in the *TRAJ* Volume 5 Editorial (Crawford and Mazzilli 2022). Following this 2022 volume, TRAC 2023 discussions shared similar intellectual currents which are essential to be acknowledged here.

A striking theme across this volume is the relation between material evidence and interpretive theory, which has always been at the core of the dialogues inspired by the TRAC movement over the past three decades. These dialogues engage with quantitative data in broader discussions that consider topics such as economic systems (trade) or varied ideologies (everyday practices and ritual practices) and the combination of local and global into the so-called glocalization. Such larger frameworks aim to understand and reconstruct the experiences of communities and the role of our 'data' into their everyday lives. To quote Roberts and Rainsford (this volume), in their example, animals become 'invested with meaning through everyday practices and associations', in a similar way that generally objects 'become invested with meaning through the social interactions in which they are caught up' (Gosden and Marshall 1999: 169), eventually circling back to the bigger idea of identities as flexible and ever-changing.

The articles in this volume use robust bodies of data, supporting and arguing their main theoretical points through combined types of evidence. In the case of Houston's article, the organization and infrastructure of exotic beasts in the Roman Empire is explored through historical records, epigraphic data, and even ethnographic analogies through the comparative analysis with other contemporaneous trade networks. Similarly, Roberts and Rainsford explore the role of animals in ritual activities in Roman Britain by employing a mix of zooarchaeological data, site reports and theoretical frameworks. Rademacher, meanwhile, focuses on coin hoards, using logistic regression to assess data quality and bias in the online database Coin Hoards of the Roman Empire (CHRE), furthering the theoretical understanding behind using numismatic data. In short, the articles from Volume 7 highlight the importance of employing diverse methodologies and interdisciplinary approaches in Roman archaeology. Brought together, historical, archaeological, and statistical data, can exemplify how robust datasets illuminate complex socio-economic and cultural practices, advancing both empirical knowledge and theoretical discourse in the field.

The book reviews of this volume are also aligned with the main discussion points above, regarding interdisciplinarity and holistic approached to understanding past communities. From the materiality of Roman religious practices to the intricate social dynamics of Roman towns, the books provide rich insights into the ways physical objects, spaces and environments shape and are shaped by the human experience in the contexts of religion, Roman towns and even architecture. These reviews, along with the articles of Volume 7 reflect a holistic approach, where data collection, methodological innovation, and theoretical engagement inform one another, ensuring a critical framework to enable better understanding of past communities.

## The Future of Theoretical Roman Archaeology

In the light of social media, misinformation and the wider reach of our work, it remains to reflect on the ways we can use innovative tools to promote a healthy understanding of archaeology. Moving forward, theoretical approaches promise to deepen our understanding of the past, while digital approaches open new horizons to disseminating information. However, it is important to receive all the information with an open mind, processing and filtering it. The digital era and its innovative platforms have opened an interaction between specialists and the general public that has not been witnessed before. While this has the advantage of making Roman archaeology more accessible, it also results in new challenges. In a digital world where misinformation can easily be spread, it becomes difficult to filter it, to identify half-truths and fabrications, and not let the sensational take over. Topics such as identity can gain more visibility and

become more relatable to contemporary communities, sparking debates on the link between past and present and shedding light on the facets of a society. The digital world is a powerful tool that can open new avenues if used appropriately, yet requires our consistent engagement and vigilance. It is our hope that theoretical Roman archaeology, within and beyond TRAJ and TRAC, continues to strive to reach wider audiences, becoming accessible to a more diverse group of people. Moreover, we believe there is scope for both TRAJ and TRAC to facilitate the combating of misinformation by anchoring such know-how into current scholarship, thereby adapting to modern digital consumption behaviours as well as the theoretical currents underpinning them.

## Notes

1  https://newsroom.tiktok.com/en-us/1-billion-people-on-tiktok [Last accessed: 3 February 2025].

2  'Rome is a Lie': https://www.tiktok.com/@momllennial_returns/playlist/Rome%20Is%20A%20Lie-726900395111329 2590?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc [Last accessed: 7 January 2025].

3  A reddit thread was started on the claim that 'Rome is a lie', 'A history TikToker claim that Ancient Rome didn't exist: r/confidentlyincorrect', https://www.businessinsider.com/history-anthropology-tiktoker-ancient-rome-not-real-backlash-viral-2021-12 [Last accessed 7 January 2025]; as well as several articles on Business insider, https://www.businessinsider.com/history-anthropology-tiktoker-ancient-rome-not-real-backlash-viral-2021-12 [Last accessed: 7 January 2025] and Daily Dot, https://www.dailydot.com/unclick/ancient-rome-isnt-real-tiktok-momllennial/ [Last accessed: 7 January 2025].

4  Video link: https://www.tiktok.com/@momllennial_returns/video/7143646131484904746 [Last accessed: 7 January 2025].

5  For a current definition see: https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/clickbait [Last accessed: 7 January 2025].

6  https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/dec/06/romanian-court-annuls-first-round-of-presidential-election [Last accessed: 3 February 2025].

7  https://www.trac.org.uk/previous-conferences/ [Last accessed: 3 February 2025].

## Acknowledgments

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