
TRAC Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference

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Paper Information:

Title: Introduction: TRAC (Theoretical Roman
Archaeology Conference) 1991

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Pages: 1–4

DOI: http://doi.org/10.16995/TRAC1991_1_4

Publication Date: 01 April 1993



Volume Information:

Scott, E. (ed.) 1993. *Theoretical Roman Archaeology: First Conference Proceedings*. Worldwide Archaeology Series, vol. 4. Aldershot: Avebury/Ashgate.

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INTRODUCTION: TRAC (THEORETICAL ROMAN ARCHAEOLOGY CONFERENCE) 1991

Eleanor Scott

The objectives and the content of the Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference 1991 are described, and dissatisfaction is expressed with the rhetoric and storyboard archaeology of Romanists as a means of explaining the past. Some editorial comments on the production of the volume are made.

This volume has its origins in the Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference (TRAC 91) held in the Department of Archaeology of the University of Newcastle upon Tyne during the weekend 23–24 March 1991.

The aim of this volume is to reproduce and expand upon the issues presented and discussed at the conference. TRAC was designed to be a structured but essentially egalitarian arena for discussion of the introduction and operation of theory in Roman archaeology. It would also be true to say that I organised TRAC because I wanted to attend it. The papers addressed a number of themes and demonstrated inextricable links between them all. The underlying concept of 'Romanisation' was ever-present, and with it was a clear understanding that this is more than just a useful term: it is a process which must be described and defined. There were also discussions of the Roman economy and technology and a heartening number of papers on the social and ideological configurations of space.

Theory and Roman archaeology are not concepts normally found linked together in people's minds, and their protagonists tend to sit in different camps, a situation applauded and promoted by many establishment Romanist figures. The reasons for and implications of this somewhat reactionary stance were explored in a series of research seminars at the Univer-

sity of Newcastle upon Tyne in the mid-1980s, and from early critique grew more developed attempts to incorporate theory into Roman archaeological research. But what is theory? All archaeological methods and perspectives involve theoretical concepts to some degree, but 'theoretical archaeology' seeks to be explicit about these concepts and to turn uncritical assumption into critical analysis.

As an undergraduate I was introduced to legionaries and natives, Caesar and Suetonius, Pompeii and Pliny – a plethora of names to invoke an age of lucubration, action and adventure. Roman archaeology is a prestigious scholarly world of excavations and texts, where pieces of evidence are skilfully manipulated and fitted together to give a full picture of events and even everyday life, which we can all understand. For a while I was hooked. But then, slowly, and I think directly as a result of attending the annual TAG (Theoretical Archaeology Group) conferences, I felt that there were cracks showing. The reasons for the attraction no longer seemed tenable, or even reasonable, and there were clearly dangers in succumbing to rhetoric and storyboard archaeology *as a means of understanding the past*. Traditionalist Roman archaeology is essentially an easy subject and can quickly become intellectually lazy and philosophically bankrupt. That there are a lot of facts to be learnt does not imbue the subject with a special epistemological magnificence.

The actual TRAC plot was hatched in East Jerusalem in the summer of 1990, where many evenings were whiled away with rumblings of discontent about the methodological and ethical iniquities of biblical and classical archaeology in the Near East; some western archaeologists seem to enjoy being an occupying power themselves. They dig in other peoples' countries to find a 'Roman past', but frequently offer little to those whose country it is. I have seen Arab artefacts dumped unrecorded by the skipful in the Middle East and Islamic buildings and cemeteries hacked out of the ground as if a nuisance. At a conceptual level, I am perturbed by Roman archaeology's uncritical fascination with hierarchies and its lack of interest in gender relations and the experience of women. In this latter regard, it is relevant to note that women are still marginalised within the profession of Roman archaeology – statistics show they do the archaeological housework while men have the cream of the university posts. It is still not unusual to attend conferences where every (invited) speaker is male, a situation almost unheard of in other professions, and there are documented cases where women who have spoken at conferences have been excluded from the published proceedings. The presentation of women in the past in many stan-

standard Roman archaeology textbooks is also disturbing when one considers that they are designed for mass consumption by students. Are these undergraduates being sold short? I suspect that Roman archaeology will soon begin to find that it cannot compete with the more methodologically rigorous and conceptually honest and exciting disciplines of prehistory and archaeological science. The better undergraduates have simply turned off from comments like 'A recent study of Roman women has compared their status to that of women in Victorian England . . . it was usually her own fault if a woman let herself be repressed' (Dudley 1970, reprinted 1987, 46) as they become more aware not only that this is poor scholarship, but also that this general tendency toward sexism and androcentrism goes unchecked. For those who have remained in Roman archaeology to try and change it, there has so far been little reward: they have received no patronage, but have been merely patronised. TRAC is an attempt to offer an alternative to this depressing orthodoxy and to create a visible network of ideas and new approaches.

Predictably, TRAC has had its detractors, that curious breed of non-attenders whose criticism of the event, apparently the result of an enviable meld of telepathy and staggering insight, reveal more about their concerns with the power politics of the archaeological establishment than with the open exploration of ideas. TRAC 91 was host to about 90 delegates from Britain, Germany, the Netherlands and the USA; the audience heard 18 papers. Many of the delegates attended out of curiosity and in order to keep abreast of potential new developments in Roman archaeology, and this was much to their credit, as they were not especially familiar with or keen on the idea of theory *per se*. Others were feeling a growing concern for the state of the discipline and were anxious to hear from graduate students, academics, field staff and museologists about their published and unpublished work. We all wanted to hear *ideas*; and as an informative gathering, TRAC succeeded. The conference ran again very successfully in March 1992 at the University of Bradford, organised by Pete Rush, where contributors offered a wider range of exciting papers on the themes of ideology, resistance and discourse. TRAC 93 will be held in Scotland, organised by Ross Samson.

This volume is intended to reflect the content of the conference in 1991 and to operate as a discussion document. The different authors involved come from a wide variety of archaeological backgrounds and have chosen to express themselves in quite different ways. This is in itself contextually interesting, and I haven't attempted to enforce a 'house style', as styles of

writing can influence expression and content. The volume also avoids taking a 'party line', not only because there isn't one, but also because I have never found a prepared consensus inspiring. Contrary to dark rumour, it is not my intention to force a structuralist 'agenda' on to Roman archaeology. The authors have made use of a wide variety of perspectives, as well as a wide variety of data. In addition, the volume has lost a few of the original papers but has picked up a couple along the way from contributors who were unable to attend the 1991 conference.

Regarding overall layout, the volume has three broad categories: the general papers; Roman Britain; and other provinces of the Empire. Roman Britain is probably over-represented, and I hope that this imbalance might be redressed at future TRACs. There are already plans to invite more contributions from Europe and the USA, as well as the Middle East. The general consensus seems to be that it would not be prudent to include TRAC in TAG, as this would mean TRAC becoming a 'parallel session', possibly competing against an important general theory session, and, more crucially, many delegates would no longer wish to attend. Yet TRAC is certainly a child of TAG, although we would be well advised to be wary of certain TAG 'agendas'; but of course Roman archaeology, coming relatively late to theory, has the precious gift of hindsight.

There is a fierce resistance to the introduction of theory into Roman archaeology. Perhaps Max Planck was right when he pondered that new ideas only become accepted when the old guard die. Yet the concept of a theoretical approach to history is not new and was propounded at length by R. G. Collingwood, the philosopher and Roman archaeologist. 'The gods have commanded us to philosophize' he wrote in 1932 in a letter to J. A. Smith, which forms part of the little used archive kept in Magdalen College, Oxford. Indeed it has been said that Collingwood is our best known 'neglected' British philosopher. His philosophical works have undergone something of a revival in popularity in recent years, but I suspect that some of his ideas of history remain unread by the very Roman archaeologists who claim his fieldwork legacy.

Bibliography

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