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# TRAC Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference

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THEORETICAL ROMAN  
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## INTRODUCTION

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*Pete Rush*

Most of the papers contained within this volume are derived from papers that were originally given at the second Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference (TRAC 92) held in the Department of Archaeology, University of Bradford on the 28th and 29th March 1992. In common with the first TRAC, held the year before at the University of Newcastle, no overall theme was imposed upon the conference with the aim of not limiting the topics discussed to any one narrow area. As a result the papers presented here cover a wide range of topics from questions of gender to finds research, from economics to burial practices, from urban geography to the interpretation of villa mosaics amongst others.

They are, however, linked by a central concern to challenge and re-examine the current traditional consensus that dominates Roman archaeology. In this they also raise new questions and new areas of investigation some of which, most notably gender issues, have been ignored for too long and, as in the proceedings of the first TRAC (Scott 1993), they open the possibility of the development of a reinvigorated, critically self-aware and theoretically informed Roman archaeology. Below, I examine briefly some of the major themes that were brought out in many of the papers at the conference.

Lindsay Allason-Jones and Carol van Driel-Murray's chapters both reveal the effect that unexamined assumptions about the relationship of artefacts and gender have had upon interpretation. They provide important examples of how assumptions have become embedded within Roman archaeology and have taken on the appearance of fact. Allason-Jones argues that the interpretation of certain classes of artefact as associated with particular genders is a projection into the past of contemporary views of such objects and suggests therefore that interpretations dependent on

such data may need to be treated with circumspection. Van Driel-Murray avoids this problem by utilising data, in this case the evidence of Roman shoes, where gender may be inferred through sexual dimorphism. Her paper also shows the value of ethnographic and ethnohistorical parallels in understanding features of Roman society, an approach which has been uncommon in Roman archaeology.

Eleanor Scott in her paper presents a more radical critique of the androcentrism present within the subject. She provides a number of examples where women have been either excluded, marginalised, or represented in a distorted fashion in the texts of Roman archaeology, and she demonstrates the need for the critical examination of the basis of discipline.

Similarly, the chapters concerned with various facets of urbanism by Simon Clarke and Simon Ellis show the use of theoretical perspectives that are innovative within Roman archaeology and which break with the traditional pre-occupation with the constructional histories of towns and cities. Clarke applies central place theory to the location of small towns in Roman Britain and shows how a sophisticated version of this can help in understanding the nature of urban settlement. Ellis examines the internal structure of Roman urban sites through theories based in modern town planning and shows how these can elucidate the social and power effects of urban architecture.

Although, many of the papers at the conference and those included here argue for the wider adoption of explicitly theoretical viewpoints in Roman archaeology, either through direct argument or, implicitly, through example, there was an awareness that theory on its own is not enough. Both Jeremy Evans and Michael Jones, amongst others, voice this concern here. Evans argues that methodological care in the collection of data forms a necessary foundation to any interpretation whilst Jones is concerned that over indulgence in theoretical introspection will cause communication problems between different areas of Roman archaeology.

Taken together these papers show the possibilities that a variety of different theoretical perspectives offer for expanding the horizons of Roman archaeology. Hopefully, the papers of this volume, which continue on from the first TRAC volume, will be a catalyst for change within the subject. In common with the first conference the aim has not been to set a new agenda or to develop a new school of theoretical archaeology but to show the dangers of complacently continuing within the traditional framework without examining the possibility of doing Roman archaeology in other ways and of addressing new questions and areas of research.

That the need is felt acutely by some within the discipline is probably to be seen in the continued interest in participating in, attending, and holding more Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conferences (in Glasgow 1993, in Durham 1994, and Reading 1995, with more promised).

*Reference*

Scott, Eleanor (ed.) 1993. *Theoretical Roman Archaeology: First Conference Proceedings*. Avebury: Aldershot.