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# TRAC Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference

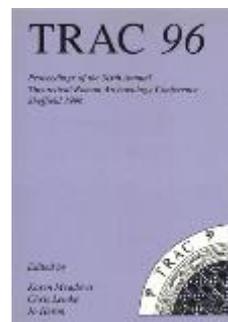
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Author: J. C. Barrett  
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# 1. Theorising Roman Archaeology

by J. C. Barrett

In concluding her study of Achaia, Susan Alcock writes of 'imaginary landscapes'. It was in the imagination of her conquerors that Greece "took whatever roles were assigned, assuming the shape and nature they desired". The Graeco-Roman elite could thus "disregard actual contemporary conditions ... as they walked in (or wrote of) a land of their own imagining" (Alcock 1993:227). The realities of life could, for some at least, be seen through a haze of tranquil unreality.

The idea of a dominant ideology is by now a familiar one in archaeology. An elite or conqueror whose power is manifest in the violence of physical control, ownership, administration, and taxation can talk of the world they dominate in terms of rustic charm and paternal obligation. This is the world of ancient lore, perhaps of childlike simplicity, for whom the conqueror carries a particular responsibility. It may also be a world in decline:

would that I had been able to provide this gift when Greece was flourishing, so that more people might have enjoyed my grace, for that I blame the passage of time for having reduced in advance the magnitude of my favour (*Inscriptiones Graecae* vii 2713 quoted in Alcock 1993:53).

Those to whom Nero's claimed generosity was directed were created as the 'silent other' in this passage. Their own imaginary landscapes are never made available, for only the conqueror and the elite have found a voice which remains within the texts and inscriptions. And perhaps many such lives, of no real consequence to those whose voices we do hear, were so reduced that all they faced was the physical reality of daily labour with little if any respite remaining for their own imaginations.

Apparently these 'people without history' have now found a champion. The tyranny of the written record, and with it the voice of the empowered, appears to be pulled away by an archaeology which digs beneath the idealised imagery to unearth the realities of the 'contemporary conditions'.

The questions I want to raise are simple. What secures our archaeological narratives of those silent lives from the charges which we now lay before earlier commentators? Why is an archaeology of 'post-colonial perspectives', or any other perspective for that matter, able to recover a reality which others either failed or refused to see? Why are we not also creating our own imaginary landscapes of liberal concern?

Archaeological theory often seems awash with jargon, polemic, and the hope born out of big promises. And while we have talked and published the world around us has changed. The theoretical programmes of the 1970s appear not only to have failed intellectually but also appear to be

inappropriate given contemporary experience. In particular, it seems a false hope that we might ever explain the past given current uncertainties over our contemporary and future world. Those touched by the 'post-modern condition', that 'incredulity toward metanarratives' (Lyotard 1984:xxiv), are no longer secure in the belief that grand, comprehensible forces shape our destiny, let alone that those forces may be understood and harnessed for our benefit. If the death of history has taken place it is not because liberal democracy and the free-market have achieved an unchallengeable hegemony and the world will never change; it is because history, as a narrative of logical connections and determinate forces, seems shot through by contingency and uncertainty.

None of this denies the material realities of the contemporary world – the huge inequalities of wealth, the fragile ecosystem, the acts of genocide – however horrific these are, they appear to demand a more local, diverse, piecemeal, even pragmatic confrontation. It is not that we are rendered politically impotent, but that conditions arise in such complex and disjointed forms that a general synthesis, or a theory of everything through which we might act as a vanguard for change, is now less believable than even ten years ago.

The post-modern condition touches everything, our understanding of ourselves with our moral and political responsibilities, our work as archaeologists and historians. It is not something which one can be for or against, because what is described is a shift in perspective. It is a shift to which many will certainly not subscribe, but it is one which has nonetheless taken place. However our various responses to this condition, the practices of post-modernism, are contentious and are in need of critical examination.

If the conditions which we confront, both in the contemporary world and as representing the past, cannot be securely tied into some grand narrative of underlying processes and structural determinacy, then their significance appears to be open and indeterminate. They seem to float free from any secure source or origin. With this comes the view that our interpretations of the past are no longer grounded upon any form of reality but may be endowed with any value which serves some current purpose of our own. In short, we appear to embrace the demise of truth. However, what is being called into question is only a kind of truth, one which depends upon establishing a correspondence between some observed phenomenon and the processes which are believed to have generated it. In other words, it is a kind of truth which is obsessively concerned with origins.

The idea that truth involves a correspondence between process and consequence, or cause and effect, is deeply ingrained in archaeology. After all, the evidence which archaeologists use is material residue whose significance appears to be fixed once we identify the historical processes which formed the record. It is as if the past had inscribed some truth concerning itself in the form of its archaeological record. The crude opposition against the tyranny of the text is that the historical text represents the voice of the elite, whereas the material residues recovered by archaeology speak of more democratic origins; the actions of a wider range of the population who have left their mark. The latter presumably represent the 'actual contemporary conditions' of which Alcock writes. There is however an immediate problem, and it is one which has long been recognised. No text, neither literary text nor material record, presents unambiguously the intentions of its author to the reader. The reader is always implicated in the meaning of the text because it is the reader who recognises and selects a meaning. If the voice of the other, the dispossessed and silent is now to be heard through the material record then it is we who will hear it and it is we who will give it life; it is through us that they will speak again. This seems to bequeath a considerable responsibility, akin to the obligations of a translator or representative and as fundamental as the responsibilities of the anthropologist.

Fortunately it is a responsibility which we may now find easier to bear, given the demise of our desire to explain the past and to establish securely, once and for all, the meaning of the evidence by reference to the past alone. It was, after all, a strange and increasingly unpalatable past which once lurked behind the evidence, made up of systems, organisations, forces, processes, all of which, in terms of their own essential logic, determined the direction of history. All these structural forces, however they have been expressed, were essentially abstractions, by which I mean their definition did not require them to be situated in time and space. They did not appear to be made in a real, occupied or lived history; indeed they could not, for that would have made them particular and contingent. On the contrary their claimed analytical strength was their applicability cross-culturally, this is where their essential characteristics were to be distilled and confirmed. The ability to reduce the enormous complexity of material and human realities to an understanding based upon a limited and abstract series of determinate forces has produced no great insights, and seems an increasingly barren exercise.

Two immediate and interrelated questions may now be posed. First, if we displace the structural and processualist 'explanations' behind the archaeological record are we then required to find something else with which to fill the void? Second, does a disenchantment with structural and processual archaeologies mean that we lose the ability to talk about social institutions and the long term trajectory of material and social conditions? These are the very things representative of regularised human behaviour which extends over long periods of time and over large regions of space, and it is such regularities which represent the traditional concern of the social sciences.

The answer to the first of these questions will allow us to deal with the second. We do not need to replace the structural and processual explanations of the archaeological record with a new explanation, this is because we can now demand a very different understanding of the material. We might certainly seek to understand the physical and mechanical processes which formed the material, but its historical and social significance must be found in quite a different context. To that end let us write not of the social processes by which the material world was made, but of the ways in which it was inhabited. This shifts our focus from the origins and creation of the material as a record, to an interpretation of the material as the inhabited context in which life was possible.

Inhabitation means to live and to move among the physical conditions of life – things, people, other life forms – to comprehend those conditions and the place of the self amongst them, and to act in some attempt to achieve certain desired ends (cf. Ingold 1993). Such actions demand both the knowledge of how to proceed and a control over available resources. The reality of the historical condition is not a question of how the world was created, but rather how different ways of living within it were possible, given the conditions of the time. Those different ways of living involved different levels of control over available resources and different forms of knowledge, and they worked upon and remade that world. That these lives were comprehensible, that each made some sense to the self who was able to recognise their own individuality (Cohen 1994), and also made sense to others with whom the self communicated, meant that certain commonly held assumptions about the order of the world were tested out and found to be effective in the routines of living. It is the extensive and long-term commitment to such assumptions, and their effective applicability to the conditions of the time, that gives social life its grand temporal and spatial scales of institutionalised form. The 'edges' of social institutions mark those places in time and space where those assumptions about the order of the world no longer held good, became ineffective, incomprehensible, unbelievable, or simply unliveable. It is at these edges, for example, where we find those excluded from a par-

ticular discourse, or the spaces inhabited by resistance, or the failure of a discourse to be maintained from one generation to the next.

We can now return to the distinction made by Alcock between the imaginary landscapes of Achaia and the reality. Obviously archaeologists are concerned to establish, as accurately as possible, the physical nature of their evidence. That evidence may take a number of forms. It may, for example, be the distribution of artefacts, buildings and environmental residues over a landscape of varying topography, soils, vegetation and drainage. This is certainly a reality of sorts, but until we begin to understand the historical significance of this reality it is not a terribly useful one (unless you happen to find distribution maps aesthetically pleasing). Historical realities, as I wish to define them here, were the realities of the human presence, and this was a presence which was sustained both physically and conceptually. These realities were never merely physical, they were realities which were known. It was from the position of knowledge that the world could be spoken about and acted upon. This is the reality of discourse. From this perspective it is difficult to maintain Alcock's distinction. There is nothing 'more real' than the ways people live. The way the world was inhabited had consequences which, although barely perceived at the time, will have affected the opportunities available to people for centuries afterwards. We certainly have the benefit of hindsight, enabling us to trace those consequences and the ways in which they were accommodated through time. This does not mean that our understanding of the world can stand as an explanation, supplanting the knowledge held by those whose lives actually had to come to terms with those changing conditions, thus endowing them with a particular historical reality.

Historical reality is not therefore something from which human consciousness can be expelled. If a particular discourse was able to see the world in a particular way we should investigate how that was possible, what sustained that particular reality, who subscribed to it and what its consequences were. Alcock characterises the paradox of Greece's cultural resilience and political domination as a theme central to the ancient sources but then asks if the image of Archaia in decline during the early imperial period was anything more than an elite discourse on that paradox. What more could it be? It must have made sense in terms of material conditions, a perception of the history of the new province, and an elite's perception of its own identity. It represents a discourse on the geography of the eastern Mediterranean where that geography touched upon not only material conditions but relationships of political control and cultural identity. It was also a kind of landscape which had a material form, but was also inhabited through knowledge and the ability to act. Such a landscape was of a different historical quality to those landscapes which Alcock uses in pursuit of her analysis. Alcock's four landscapes, rural, civic, provincial and sacred, are defined firstly in terms of the material form each takes and then in terms of the forces which created them (Alcock 1993). From such a perspective it is possible for Alcock to trace the history of each form of landscape through the early provincial period, identifying any possible changes which might mark the impact of Roman provincial control. It is clear from her own writing that each landscape encloses the others, that to inhabit one necessarily meant the inhabitation of the others. The question is therefore whether or not the analytical focus Alcock imposes (and analytical separation between each landscape which it demands) allows us to gain some understanding of the realities of that inhabitation.

Those realities are present in Alcock's text but because it is primarily the archaeology of materials with which she deals, rather than the archaeology of discourse, they are often seen as if reflected in a shattered glass and not with the clarity which might otherwise prove possible. Discourse situates its practitioners in time and space. It not only addresses the moment and place of its execution,

but through mnemonics, analogy, metaphor and direct reference it calls into play the past along with other places and experiences, and it can address a future as yet unknown. It interweaves between landscapes to give a presence and an authority to the practitioner. When effective it employs a strategy by which others are able to recognise the absent worlds to which reference is made, this in turn defines the extent to which a form of discourse appears relevant because it touches upon their own experiences and expectations concerning the order of the world. The power of any discourse is that practitioners submit to it and thus partly make their identities with reference to it.

Forms of historical discourse are certainly dealt with Alcock. In her treatment of the imperial cult, for example, she discusses the establishment of cult centres within the urban landscape, where the cult “offered a peaceful means of representing the sovereignty of Rome to the population at large”. She further suggests that the urban location of these activities “helped to express and foster ties between imperial and provincial governing elites”, where celebration “of this ‘universal’ cult allowed the formation of ties with elite families resident elsewhere in the province, and throughout the empire” (Alcock 1993:198–9). Much of this charts the consequences of establishing such cult centres, but the making of these conditions was itself the result of new forms of discourse, the agency for which addressed changing forms of human identity. Consider what was involved. A group of male citizens, through intermediaries, sought the permission, sometimes with the personal involvement of the emperor, of the Senate to establish a temple to the divinity of the emperor. It was a request in which “imperial encouragement, acceptance and ... refusal were all possible and legitimate strategies within the system of exchange” (Price 1984:69). It was an exchange between people who knew how to operate through the formula of correct presentation and utterance. As such, it operated through a highly restricted code, but it was worked strategically to create a community of identity “linking not only Greek to Greek but Greeks to Rome” (Price 1984:65). It could exclude those whose supplications were unsuccessful, and it was one of the forms of exchange which extended political patronage and obligation over the considerable distances which separated those who were involved. As such, it helped to create a new identity among the urban community, namely those who recognised their obligations to the divinity of the emperor in the building and maintenance of the temple and its rituals, and the burden of responsibilities which they carried for the *polis* as a whole through their establishment of such a cult centre. We may refer to these men as an elite, but if the term is used to describe some structural relationship, which defines the continuity of a locally dominant group over a number of centuries, then it fails to grasp the specific and shifting values by which that elite made itself anew. This group now spoke another language of authority and sought new rhetorical and material supports to sustain that authority. They spoke that language to different effect in whatever landscape they inhabited, be it rural, civic, provincial or sacred. Many of the points of reference for that authority were being changed, for whilst inherited wealth and status remained, new political identities were forged with reference to Rome. Perhaps it was in this context that many of the values of indigenous Greek political order were best secured by being marginalised and assigned to a glorious and cultured past.

The meaning of things depends upon the ways in which those things are incorporated in a particular discourse. The point is clearly made in J. Webster’s study of *interpretatio*. This is the case where an equation was established “between a non-Classical deity and one from the Classical pantheon” (Webster 1995:154). A number of commentators have taken such pairings as expressing an equivalence in the essential values represented by each deity. Thus, given our understanding of the Classical pantheon, it is assumed that not only was the value or function of the Classical deity mirrored

in its non-Classical counterpart, but that the same value or function represented by the non-Classical deity extended back into the pre-Roman Iron Age. Where a non-Classical deity is paired with more than one Classical representation, then this is regarded as expressing the functional 'polyvalency' of the non-Classical gods. Webster is, however, able to dispose of the claimed timeless functions assigned to the non-Classical deities by arguing that epigraphic *interpretatio* must be understood as a historically specific form of discourse. Under the conditions which she identifies, which in post-conquest Britain involved inscriptions initiated by non-indigenous military personnel or high-ranking officials, the *interpretatio* are best seen as translating an alien deity "by equating it with a Classical one", a process which "ultimately constitutes the superimposition of one belief system on another" (Webster 1995:157). The appropriation of non-Classical deities in this way rewrote the conquered world in the eyes of the conqueror. From a different perspective we can also envisage those whose contact with the Classical world required a translation in the opposite direction, to render that alien world comprehensible according to the logic of indigenous experience. Both forms of translation facilitated understanding by equating what may at first have been alien and unknown with values and functions which were known and secure. Both forms of translation did not, however, represent a discourse of equals.

To be empowered is to have the ability to act, it is the characteristic of agency. The scale of that action, its reach and control, depends upon the resources available to the agent and the knowledge of how those resources might be deployed. Certain dominant forms of discourse clearly emerged in the ancient world. The resources they deployed depended crucially upon human labour (slavery), but also included a dominant range of symbolism which could be read according to convention by those who were also educated and, if not literate, at least had access to literacy. Again we must emphasise that these conditions amount to more than the available material resources and must always include the knowledge required to inhabit and to deploy those resources effectively to achieve certain desired aims. Slaves were agents also, albeit limited and constrained in their access to the material and symbolic resources upon which they were able to draw. Thus whilst the mass produced and widely circulated products of the ancient world do appear, in their distribution and patterns of associations, to form a symbolic system (Woolf 1990), it would be wrong to assume that such a distribution represents the extent of a uniform cultural identity. It does not map the adoption of a single set of values which was either imported by or imposed upon a large region of humanity. The significance of that material depended upon the ways the system was inhabited. In other words, its meaning arose from the strategies of interpretation and use which people will have mounted from the position of, at times quite different, prior expectations and levels of authority.

To act effectively is therefore to act in a way which is comprehensible, it achieves some of the desired results including the understanding of others involved in that action. Such actions must therefore harmonise with a certain level of common assumptions held by the participants. At one extreme, violence requires no other authority, but the networks of discourse by which different forms of authority are maintained are always more complex. Comprehensible actions create a community who share certain prior-expectations about the nature of the world and find those expectations to be generally confirmed as an outcome of the discourse in which they engage. An elite, for example, was able to operate effectively through their control of resources and a widespread educated and shared understanding of the symbolic system which they inhabited. Thus was "proclaimed the existence of a common culture that was held to be the distinguishing mark of the diffused governing class of the empire, shared alike by the notables of each region and by the personnel of imperial

government" (Brown 1992:36). This was a 'common culture' that was always vulnerable. It was vulnerable in its mode of transmission across the vast distances of the empire, and it was vulnerable to the local demands and strategies which could, at times, disengage from the authority of the centre (cf. McMullen 1988). Nor could the dominant control of resources which maintained the symbolic system ensure that other apparently deviant readings of that system were not possible. Their effectiveness would have been more localised, as would those forms of discourse which either had little use for the extensively broadcast symbolism of the empire, or could not gain access to that symbolism in the first place.

An archaeology of the Roman Empire, as envisaged here, will treat that empire as a multitude of voices which were differentially empowered. Those voices found their effectiveness through their inhabitation of the material conditions which archaeology recovers. That material does not itself define the reality of the past. Nor does it stand as mute testimony to some general underlying forces which determined the lives of those ancient populations. Instead the historical reality of that material was that it could be inhabited effectively; it could be understood and, on the basis of that understanding, acted upon. There is no other reality lurking behind these lives. That these understandings were partial, prejudiced, capable of seeing the world from one perspective and not another, constrained by the demands of others, is undeniable. Such prejudices are also expressed in our own work and in the ways we inhabit our contemporary world, including its archaeology. All life is thus situated. It is for us to understand and to explore the prejudices which constitute our own humanity and which distinguishes us from others, rather than to duck the issue through some futile search for a reality beyond consciousness. It is not therefore the task of archaeology to explain the formation of the material record by reference to abstractions and to ideal types of social structure. Instead we might seek to understand the diversity of inhabitation of the ancient world and begin to grasp the range of life which was made possible in that context. This will recognise no absolute testimony for the truth of the past, although such absolutes are always the claim of political and economic authority. Instead those claims may be set beside other voices expressing other truths. Regionalised and less forcefully expressed as these voices may have been, they too had their history and it is for us to understand the places those histories inhabited. The archaeology of the Roman Empire has hardly begun.

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