
TRAC Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference

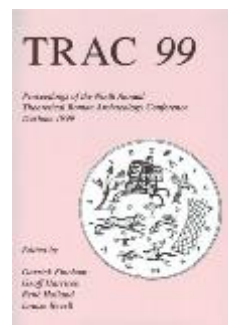
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Paper Information:

Title: Front Matter and Editors' Introduction
Author(s): Garrick Fincham, Geoff Harrison, Louise Revell, and Rene Rodgers Holland
Pages: i-x

DOI: http://doi.org/10.16995/TRAC1999_i_x

Publication Date: 06 April 2000



Volume Information:

Fincham, G., Harrison, G., Rodgers Holland, R., and Revell, L. (eds) 2000. *TRAC 99: Proceedings of the Ninth Annual Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference, Durham 1999*. Oxford: Oxbow Books.

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TRAC 99

Proceedings of the Ninth Annual

THEORETICAL ROMAN ARCHAEOLOGY CONFERENCE

which took place at
The University of Durham
April 1999

edited by

Garrick Fincham, Geoff Harrison, René Rodgers Holland
and Louise Revell

Oxbow Books 2000

Published by
Oxbow Books, Park End Place, Oxford OX1 1HN

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ISBN 1 84217 007 4

This book is available direct from
Oxbow Books, Park End Place, Oxford OX1 1HN
(*Phone: 01865-241249; Fax: 01865-794449*)

and

The David Brown Book Company
PO Box 511, Oakville, CT 06779
(*Phone 860-945-9329; Fax: 860-945-9468*)

or from the Oxbow Books website

www.oxbowbooks.com

Printed in Great Britain by
The Short Run Press, Exeter

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Acknowledgements

This volume presents 13 of the 25 papers presented at the ninth annual Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference, at the University of Durham in April 1999. We would like to thank all those who contributed papers and posters, as well as those who attended. Thanks go to the organisers and discussants for the sessions: Phil Freeman, Andrew Gardner, Sian Jones, Ray Laurence, Richard Reece, Julia Robinson and Jeremy Taylor. As ever, the smooth running was due to a large group of helpers, in particular Gesine Bruss, Florence Drew, Rebecca Gowland, Nic Holland, Ray Hunneyset, Ardle MacMahon, Melanie Nicholson, Christine Sheard, Kelly Spradley, Katherine Thomas, Shirley Waldock, Harvey Watt and Imogen Wellington. We would like to thank Simon James, Martin Millett, John Pearce and Jenny Price for their assistance and support throughout. Our thanks go also to the referees, to Sarah Poppy and Hugh Wilmott for help with the editing of the volume and to Yvonne Beadnell for the artwork on the front cover.

TRAC99 was generously sponsored by the Robert Kiln Charitable Trust, the Thriplow Charitable Trust and the Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies. We would also like to thank David Brown of Oxbow Books for his continued commitment to the publication of these proceedings.

Introduction

by The Editors

Like previous proceedings generated by TRAC the current volume contains an eclectic mix of papers that reflects the lively diversity of the conference itself. This poses a problem when attempting to introduce such a collection, in that there are few unifying themes or specific agendas around which to structure comment. This should not, however, be seen as a negative characteristic, rather a reflection of the different areas within which predominantly young scholars are operating with a theoretically informed approach. In an intellectual climate where we were moving away from the 'meta-narrative' of the Roman Empire as a homogenous hegemonic entity, we will surely also see a greater heterogeneity in ways of researching the past. The sheer variability of past-lived experience demands a greater flexibility in our approach as archaeologists, and diversity is to be welcomed. This being the case, the purpose of this introduction is consider what insight the papers that follow offer on the many areas of current and developing research. It is also our intention to reflect upon the role of the conference as we move towards the tenth annual meeting. This is timely in the light of both the intention to hold a debate on the current state of theory in Roman archaeology at TRAC 2000, and a recent review of four TRAC volumes, the Second Conference, TRAC 94, 96, and 97 (Laurence 1999).

The review by Laurence is a good starting point, not simply to address published views on TRAC, but because it crystallises one strand of opinion about the conference. Some constructive criticisms are offered, principally the fact that a number of past papers have lacked significant theoretical content and that many authors have failed to address theoretical developments in other areas of archaeology (Laurence 1999: 387). He points to the lack (in the four volumes that he reviewed) of attention paid to material culture, and offers Barrett (1997) as 'the nearest Roman archaeology has to a theoratised agenda'. These criticisms lead him, through specific comments on individual papers rather than a deconstruction of the conference as a whole, to conclude that 'we might question why theoretical Roman archaeology should have its own conference when archaeology as a discipline meets annually to discuss theory at TAG' (Laurence 1999: 390). However, this ignores the impact which TRAC has had on reshaping the agendas and discourse of Romanization and Roman imperialism; an impact highlighted during the Romano-British Research Agendas session at the Roman Archaeology Conference 1999. In this field, TRAC has had a profound influence on the study of Roman archaeology as a whole.

A second important point made by Laurence (*ibid*: 388-389) is the failure of TRAC to become seriously engaged with gender issues. In her introduction to the first TRAC volume, Eleanor Scott stated that one of her aims was to integrate other issues, particularly the study of women and gender (Scott 1993). These topics have remained largely ignored by the majority of TRAC delegates as they have by Roman archaeologists as a whole; instead they are left to the ancient historians and classicists. The challenge for TRAC lies in questioning our assumptions and increasing the theoretical scope of the discipline as a whole.

However, Laurence admits that some papers (more than he has space to mention) do make effective use of theory, and do engage with theory from other areas of archaeology (Laurence 1999: 389). Not all papers are 'successful' by Laurence's criteria. Yet over four volumes with a total of sixty-two papers, predominantly by post-graduates or the younger members of the profession, it would be unrealistic to expect all papers to be of equal calibre. This very fact exposes the fundamental nature of TRAC, and the reason why we should have no doubts about

the future value of the conference. TRAC was set up as, and has remained, an egalitarian forum for the discussion of theoretical issues, and as such it provides an invaluable opportunity for all those within the discipline to discuss new ideas within a friendly, but respected arena. The mix of post-graduate students and established academics can provide an exciting and stimulating 'workshop' atmosphere, both in the conference hall and the coffee bar. The nature of theoretical debate is one of dialogue: new ideas and approaches need to be tested within such an atmosphere. Both the professional standing of some of the speakers and the consistently high attendance at the conference indicate how valuable such a forum is generally felt to be. Furthermore, the rapid publication of the proceedings allows debates to continue and ideas to be disseminated whilst they are still fresh.

TRAC's value as a first step into full academic life is also not to be underrated, giving the first time conference speaker the chance to voice thoughts in a friendly environment, and, in many cases, to publish a first paper. For those who take their involvement a step further, the experience of organising the conference or a session and editing the TRAC volume is invaluable training, and one of the principal motivations for establishing the conference in the first place. This is not to consign TRAC to the status of a 'post-graduate' conference, it is clearly more than that. It is accessible (something of value in itself) and offers a freedom that more a formalised forum would not.

Laurence also comments upon the lack of detail and depth in many of the papers, and the lack of thematic structure in TRAC proceedings, offering Laurence and Berry (1998, which was based upon *selected* TRAC papers) as an exception to this trend. The eclectic nature of TRAC has already been considered above, but it is worth noting that Laurence and Berry (1998) also suffered from the lack of a unifying thread, even though the papers it included were grouped around a central theme (see Fincham forthcoming). This is perhaps inevitable when dealing with conference contributions – and TRAC in particular. The strength of TRAC is its open nature, and enforced agendas and strict themes can only restrict debate in the long run.

The lack of detail in some contributions is unavoidable given the restricted format of the conference paper, and the small amount of time given to each speaker. This generates a necessarily abbreviated digest of an individual's research, and this also influences the final written form. But given the nature of the speakers, many of whom are engaged in doctoral research, it is surely obvious that these papers are not intended to be the finished product, but are interim reports of on-going work. If a skim through TRAC papers leaves the reader feeling that many are less substantial than might otherwise have been hoped, then it should be remembered that the ideas presented are still being formulated whilst also being advanced for discussion and criticism. They will not reach full fruition, nor have their full impact, until the projects of which they are part are complete. We should value a forum in which discussion and criticism can take place, and not suggest that it be wound up because some of the work on show does not reach the standard of those who are more advanced in their academic careers.

The inherent value of an event like TRAC aside, many of the papers in this current volume provide an important insight into the impact of developing issues within the study of the Roman Empire. Mattingly, in his introduction to *Dialogues in Roman Imperialism*, outlines a number of themes for future research directions in Roman archaeology (1997: 9 - 10). The exploration of identity and its articulation at different levels of society has evolved from the concept of discrepant perspective (Said 1993), and is particularly important. The poly-vocal nature the Roman Empire, and the different identities contained within it constitutes an immense variety, which is addressed at differing scales by several of the papers included here. Comparison between Revell's analysis of the creation of regional elite identity in Spain, Eckhart's regional lighting styles, and Fincham's diverse traditions of status display in the Fens illustrates the value of considering a multi-layered approach to levels of interaction within ancient society.

What is interesting is that in different ways each of these papers applies theory to the data, carrying the debate beyond the theoretical ghetto to a real application.

The consideration of regional Spanish elites and their methods of signifying Roman identity is an example of the construction of highly complex, multi-faceted identities, which were fluid and in continual negotiation, mediated through architectural forms. Ekhart's paper illustrates the use of 'Roman' material culture in a 'native' social context. It appears that objects were deployed according to local social conditions, to indicate degrees of status. Fincham addresses the difficulties of theorising survey data, but reaches a conclusion compatible with more detailed approaches, that there was significant cultural variability even at a comparatively local level in the Roman Empire. The application of theory in this way is an important indicator that theoretically informed approaches have the potential to influence differing aspects of archaeology.

Although it is an important thread running through many of the contributions in this volume, the issue of identity is not the only topic addressed here. Walsh's reassessment of the quality of evidence for on the maritime activity around Britain during the Roman period, and Mac Mahon's on the application of economic theory to Romano-British architecture illustrate the wide-ranging nature of TRAC. Another important traditional area of study is, of course, the Roman Army, and it is not neglected in this collection. Clarke explores the symbolic and ritual implications behind the deposition of artefacts and faunal remains at the Newstead military complex. He advocates the integration of these concepts with more traditional areas of exploration – for instance, the economic and technological – within our interpretation of society in the Roman period. This paper is complimented by that from Pegler, which builds upon previous studies emphasizing the practical and functional nature of cults and *collegia* within the Roman army. Pegler illustrates the advantages of exploring the social dimension of these institutions.

The chronological scope of the papers offered at TRAC underlines the theme of 'eclecticism' with several contributions focussing on late antiquity. Janes examines dramatic change in the built environment in northwest Europe at this time. Public, religious, and private buildings were lavishly constructed by church, state and landed elite in the fourth century AD, but by the seventh century such projects were largely restricted to the church. Ideas of cultural expectation, and the shifting techniques deployed in the negotiation of status, linked also to changing economic circumstance are used to help explain this phenomenon. Rushworth, looking at late North Africa, considers the collapse of Roman authority and how this led to the creation of successor states in the fifth and sixth centuries AD. These ideas are compared to the historically recorded, post-imperial collapse of the Chinese-Inner Asia frontier, and illustrate how the old Roman frontier zone became central to the new regional polities.

The two papers on faunal remains reflect the on-going development of critical approaches in material culture studies. Stallibrass, echoing the issues raised by papers on multi-layered identity, considers the animal bone from several Roman military sites in northern England. She concludes that people in such areas should be expected to have diverse origins, religious affiliations and ethnic identities. Complexity in the faunal evidence is thus the result of a wide variety of crosscutting and inter-related cultural and economic factors. Ciaraldi and Richardson focus on Pompeii, and examine the way in which the city exploited natural resources, and how the nature of 'rubbish' changed depending upon location within the urban centre. This allows consideration of how such resource exploitation was linked to the ritual lives of the inhabitants.

The final pair of papers presented here make use of Geographical Information Systems. GIS is a powerful tool, allowing the rapid processing of large amounts of spatial information (e.g. the location of sites), which may, at the same time, be linked to a relational database listing the attributes of those different locations. This makes the comparison of many different

combinations of data possible, and pushes spatial analysis further than could be comfortably achieved using manual techniques. The role of such processing will almost certainly become more pronounced in archaeology in the future. It's utility and broad based applicability is illustrated both by Strutt in his analysis of the relationship between Portuguese Castro sites and Roman period settlement and by Tully's analysis of the settlement in the hinterland of Silchester. There are, however, concerns over GIS. It has been said that the very power of the tool can lead to a seductive reliance upon the framework that it enforces, and can encourage a structuralist, empirical, and environmentally determinist approach (Gillings 1998: 119-121). These difficulties do not render the tool useless, but do require that we actively consider the theoretical context within which this technique is deployed. It also reflects the growing debate over the connection (or lack of one) between archaeological theory and method. Given that the practice of archaeology is being questioned, it is important that this is done from the excavation itself to the publication of the final report.

This introduction ends as it began, with recognition that the variability of papers presented here renders it impossible to create a unified thematic framework for the volume. Such a structure would be artificial, given the different approaches and research interests of the contributors, and constraining, given that eclecticism is one of TRAC's chief strengths. Ultimately these papers should be read as what they are – a thought provoking snapshot of current research and an indication of how wider debates are impacting upon aspects of Roman archaeology.

Garrick Fincham
 Geoff Harrison
 Louise Revell
 Rene Rodgers Holland

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