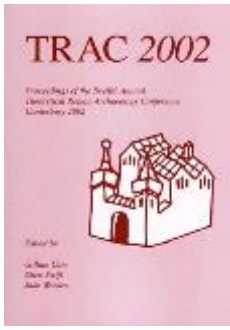

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Seeking a Material Turn: the artefactuality of the Roman empire

Andrew Gardner

Introduction: material culture and language

In this paper, my aim is to get closer to an understanding of the unique relationship between human beings and material culture. In so doing, I hope to offer a way of making the most of the major variations and changes in material culture that we see in the Roman world, and of directing our interpretations of these towards very broad problems. Recent debates on the theme of agency have served to bring the wider community of archaeologists closer to these kinds of problems, which have significant ethical and political implications in the contemporary world. One of the key themes in such debates has become the issue of whether one model of agency – such as that put forward by Anthony Giddens (1979, 1984) – is a universal schema appropriate for all people in all times and all places, or whether there are context-specific ways of defining persons and their powers. There is, as will be shown below, a good case for supporting the latter suggestion, and in what follows I wish to pursue the argument that different kinds of materiality are a significant factor in generating this variation. The Roman world is an excellent arena in which to explore this kind of problem, and indeed one which demands new ways of dealing with the many and varied kinds of social interaction taking place within it. The kind of approach discussed here does of course beg a question regarding the relative reality of different classifications of personhood. This I will put to one side at the outset with the assertion that all such categories are real insofar as they are socially consequential (cf. Jenkins 1996: 111), having real effects on the lives of human beings.

Before going in to a detailed consideration of the links between persons and materiality, it is worth summarising some of the major trends in the interpretation of material culture in the social sciences, particularly in relation to language. Within post-processual archaeology, material culture has rightly been treated as meaningfully-constituted (e.g. Hodder 1993: xvii). Understandably, in attempts to interpret this meaning-content, language has proved to be an important analogy, with structuralist, post-structuralist and hermeneutic approaches all based in ways of comprehending spoken or written language. Indeed, it can be argued that the relationship between material and linguistic meanings is more than merely analogical; that because thought is structured by language, so must any kind of meaning be likewise (Crossley 1996: 38–9). This is indeed true in many cases, but precisely because material culture often confounds our ability to describe it in language, it becomes necessary to consider ways in which it has significance in a non-linguistic sense (Hodder 1999: 74–7), and beyond this to suggest that these may in fact be extremely important – through processes of objectification, mediation or hybridisation – to the *intersubjective* constitution of human agency.

I will expand upon what I mean by intersubjectivity in the next section, but the general importance of non-linguistic or practical aspects of material culture meaning has indeed begun to come across in recent criticisms of the linguistic turn in archaeology. The idea of a linguistic turn – a move towards a dominant interest in the role of language in the creation of meaning – describes the impact of the theoretical trends referred to above on many disciplines, not least including history (Munslow 2000: 151–3). In archaeology, to grossly over-simplify, the early 1980s saw individuals like Ian Hodder and Christopher Tilley interested in structuralist

analyses of Neolithic pottery decoration in, respectively, the Netherlands (Hodder 1982) and Sweden (Tilley 1984). These studies attempted to elaborate the underlying symbolic grammar of the material concerned, and to explore its relationship to social and cognitive structures.

From the later 1980s, and into the 1990s, this trend bifurcated, with Tilley, among others, working through the impact of post-structuralism on the writing of archaeological texts (Tilley 1989, 1991a; cf. Bapty and Yates 1990), and Hodder turning to the more arcane art of textual interpretation embodied in the hermeneutic tradition (1991a, 1991b; cf. Johnsen and Olsen 1992). The former undermined the determinacy of meanings by exposing the arbitrariness of associations between words and things, while the latter sought more purchase on textual ambiguity by emphasising the contextual interconnections of specific readings. By the late 1990s, Tilley had moved back to considering much more generalised linguistic concepts like metaphor, but giving them particular material expressions (1999), while Hodder and a number of others, including Matthew Johnson and John Moreland, have argued for overlapping but distinctive realms of material and linguistic meaning (Hodder 1999: 73–9; Johnson 1999: 31–2; Moreland 2001; cf. Gardner 2001a). A growing body of work on the social choices involved in technological processes constitutes another, largely separate strand of recent archaeological and anthropological research on material culture [e.g. Lemonnier (ed.) 1993].

Meanwhile, and based more squarely in anthropology, a new field of 'material culture studies' has been carved out, with Danny Miller a leading figure in promoting the understanding of the distinctive role of material culture in social life, albeit largely within the context of modern consumer societies (e.g. 1998, although cf. 1994; see also Attfield 2000; Schiffer 1999). Recently, this kind of approach has been taken up and extended in a sociological setting in Tim Dant's book *Material Culture in the Social World* (1999), in an attempt to redress the marginal position of material culture within that discipline. Overall, we now have an emerging cross-disciplinary synthesis [exemplified also by Graves-Brown (ed.) 2000], which stresses the ways in which spoken, written and material forms of meaning-communication overlap – for instance in the importance of context-specific readings – and in which they differ – as in the greater temporal extension of writing versus speaking, or the more practical or biographically-evocative meanings of things. This is a promising situation, and one to which Roman archaeologists, with access to a broad range of material of both written and unwritten kinds, have a lot to contribute. In focusing on materiality, we can, however, go even further, and address questions not just of how different kinds of meaning are constructed by people, but at how people are themselves constructed by their meaningful relations with the material – as well as the social – world around them.

Materiality and intersubjectivity

Such questions have not been entirely ignored by archaeologists (e.g. Thomas 1989; Tilley 1991b), but it is only now, in the context of the inter-disciplinary developments described above, that substantive progress in developing them further is a real prospect (cf. Thomas 2000). In this section, I will make some general comments about the kinds of issues involved, before using a couple of specific objects to elaborate upon these in the context of the Roman empire. Here I want to argue that human agency is not an innate feature of an isolated subject, detached from an object world (cf. Gero 2000: 37–8; Elliott 2001: 41), but rather that it is constituted in intersubjective relationships between people, partly constructed and mediated by

things, such that both people and things can take on some of the properties of each other. This position extends, by virtue of its greater emphasis on objects as *material culture* (i.e. as culturally-laden artefacts), a long-established tradition of thought on human subjectivity, exemplified by the work of George Herbert Mead (1934; cf. McCarthy 1984), Alfred Schutz (1967), and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962 [2002]), and effectively summarised in Nick Crossley's recent book, *Intersubjectivity* (1996).

This tradition, which encompasses a range of diverse perspectives and within which a number of other thinkers could be included, shares a common rejection of subject–object dualism, and indeed overcoming this is the core issue at the heart of this paper. Just as the mind cannot be separated from the body in the manner that Descartes once desired, as both are combined in the perceiving, dwelling human subject (Crossley 1996: 25–9; Merleau-Ponty 1962 [2002]: 235–9), neither can such a subject be detached from the world of other subjects and objects within which it dwells, and with which it interacts in a range of different, and sometimes overlapping, ways. The importance of the relationships which a human subject sustains with the social and material elements of its world is such that its constitution as an agent (i.e. a knowledgeable actor) is dependent upon, and defined by, these relationships – by 'between-spaces' (Crossley 1996: 29). While 'intersubjectivity' describes this connectivity between people, the purpose of this paper is to show that things are a critical part of such networks, not least because "intersubjective relations are conducted in and by way of a physical environment" (Crossley 1996: 97).

Indeed, these kinds of 'between-ness' are also critical to broader aspects of human social life: "culture exists neither in our minds, nor does it exist independently in the world around us, but rather is an emergent property of the relationship between people and things" (Graves-Brown 2000: 4). From this point, it follows – importantly for archaeologists – that such a relational approach to breaking down the subject/object dichotomy allows us to accommodate cultural variation in the way that social selves are constructed. This kind of variation is well attested. Marcel Mauss, for instance, has charted the development of the concept of the unitary, free, individual persona through Roman and Christian Europe (1979: 78–94), and there are numerous anthropological studies highlighting differential constructions of the 'normal person', from the pueblos of south-western North America to China, with varying aspects of social connection (e.g. role, kinship) being emphasised over individuality (Carrithers et al. 1985; Hirst and Woolley 1982: 93–130; Mauss 1979: 59–77). The theme of the changing social definition of personhood, in a western context, also figures strongly in the work of Foucault on sexuality, discipline and other forms of social exclusion (e.g. 1967), Elias on the process of the 'civilization' of the western self (1939 [2000]), and Goffman, on social stigma (1963). In short, different cultures can have different ideas of what a normal person is – and indeed of what a person is – and I am arguing that these differences will necessarily involve relationships between people and things.

Igor Kopytoff has suggested as much in the sense that categories of things often relate to categories of people – that social and material typologies may be based on the same principles of hierarchy or identity (1986: 89–90; cf. Foucault 1970 [2002]; Miller 1994). On a more abstract level, however, we can argue that things play a fundamental role in structuring our intersubjective relations with either specific or generalised others (i.e. individuals or groups; Crossley 1996: 56, 97; Mead 1934: 154). There are a number of facets to this role, and I am going to focus on three: objectification, mediation, and hybridisation. Objectification itself can be thought of in a number of ways. In one sense, artefacts literally objectify social relations, evoking in a physical and often routinely-utilised form the identities and power relationships

which structure the human social world (Miller 1994: 402–8; Strum and Latour 1987). In doing so, they make such relationships more 'real'; it is for this reason that artefacts are so important in the construction of ideologies (see e.g. Leone 1984).

In another sense, though, things provide one model for the relationship between embodied consciousness and both itself and that which is other (McCarthy 1984: 107–10). Physical things help to draw the infant self 'out of itself', and are critical in the development of the capacity of human beings to regard both themselves and others objectively, from the 'outside' (Crossley 1996: 49–59). It is in these circumstances that a division between subject and object *is* (artificially) created, but importantly the object in this relationship can be another person treated as a thing. There are many examples of situations in the present day where particular ethnic, gender or class groups have been politically subordinated through such processes of objectification, and slavery is one which also applies in the Roman world. The general process of self-alienation, though, need not be negative and while it may, concomitant with variable material and social technologies of the self, develop culturally-specific trajectories, in its earliest phases it is likely to be a ubiquitous feature of human socialisation (Crossley 1996: 57–68; cf. Williams and Costall 2000).

The mediating role of material culture is easier to grasp, and more clearly subject to cultural variation. Objects mediate between people in a range of ways, and in so doing are, along with language, essential to the way that selves are constructed in relation to others – i.e. to intersubjectivity (Crossley 1996: 58–9; Dant 1999: 153–75; Latour 2000; Mead 1934: 124–5). It is in this sense that material cultures communicate, and variation between them can have profound implications. This is true in the context of face-to-face interactions, but more obviously so for the range and scale of interactions which different technologies permit with wider groups of contemporaries, predecessors and successors (Crossley 1996: 88–92). These are the three broad communities of 'others' which Alfred Schutz distinguishes (1967: 176–214), and they are particularly amenable to archaeological investigations which pay close attention to spatial and temporal patterns. Different kinds of material culture promote different kinds of concrete contact between people in different locations in space and time, an obvious example being writing (cf. Giddens 1984: 200–1). Furthermore, the physicality and relative longevity of material culture, compared to speech (Miller 1994: 409–15), plays an important and distinctive role in allowing the imaginative interaction between individuals and distant others within an individual lifetime, evoking memory and anticipation.

A third way in which materiality is fundamental to intersubjective relations, and therefore to human agency, is through hybridisation with a subject (Urry 2000: 77–9; cf. Dant 1999: 124–7). In a sense this is a synthesis of the previous two points, whereby the identity of a human subject in its intersubjective relations becomes partly defined by particular kinds of object. This again involves the blurring of the categories of subject and object, as each takes on attributes of the other. John Urry (2000: 78) encapsulates this idea well: "machines, objects and technologies are neither dominant of, nor subordinate to, human practice, but are jointly constituted with and alongside humans." Material practices are essential to the successful performance of particular identities, and objects and people thus become mutually associated in the construction of individuals and groups, and of their power to act in the world (Gardner 2002). Schutz also touches on this point by stressing the importance of typifications in intersubjective relations (1967: 181–201). Interactions are frequently based on the stereotyping of an 'other' according to assumptions about their identity (Jenkins 1996: 122–3). Very often, these will be based on material things forming a hybrid with the human, like the belt-soldier or the toga-citizen. This process thus combines elements of the objectifying (reifying) and

mediating (communicating) roles of material culture, in a way which is quite distinct from language.

The artefactuality of the Roman empire

There are a range of other general approaches to materiality that could be discussed, such as Heidegger's important work on building, and on the distinction between objects (equipment) being ready-to-hand (practically engaged with) or present-at-hand (discursively engaged with; 1962: 95–122; 1954 [1993]). However, I will focus on the ideas presented above, and illustrate these points with some examples of Roman material culture. In the presentation upon which this paper is based, I used actual artefacts to accompany this section, in an attempt to emphasise the physicality of things. In this printed version, the reader will have to make do with two-dimensional illustrations (Figs. 1 and 2), but perhaps the tangibility of this book can also convey some of the same general points about the complexity of our social relationships with material things, such as their mediating role, or their embeddedness in the biographies and identities of authors, publishers and readers (Dant 1999: 196–201; cf. Johnson 1999: 31–2). However, returning to material from the Roman period, the first artefact on which I would like to focus is a fragment of a mortarium (Figure 1). Pottery, certainly in the context of Britain during this period, presents quite a good example for exploring some of the more routinized aspects of human-material interaction.

It is certainly possible to envisage pottery as objectifying specific sets of social relations, as between producers, distributors and users, or between different kinds of users according to the identities – perhaps age, gender, status or locality – associated with cooking in a particular context, whether this be a farmstead kitchen or a military barrack room. Insofar as these relations will entail differences of power, this may be tangible in the materiality of the pot, yet embedded in routine and scarcely conscious practices. Thus the pot helps to reify – to make real – those specific relations of inequality for the people concerned. At the same time, and because it serves to draw the self into the between-space of the intersubjective world, the pot can mediate these relations in a more consciously-negotiated way, being discursively accorded specific cultural value by different individuals or groups. In certain contexts, for example, the pot may communicate the adoption of a new regime of dietary practices, valued as culturally exclusive by some and perhaps resisted by others (cf. Hawkes 2002).

This is something that is clearly likely to vary over the course of the Roman period in Britain, and change at different tempos in different areas, with phases of routinized use being interspersed with phases of discursively-contested fluctuation. Patterns of variability are certainly discernible in the archaeological data (Going 1992, Tyers 1996), and their contextual analysis in terms of practices like cooking and eating does, I would argue (Gardner 2002 cf. Hawkes 2001; Stallibrass 2000), permit us to consider periods of stasis and transformation in terms of these different kinds of meaningful relationship with material culture. In turn, these open up much more sophisticated interpretations of cultural change than simple paradigms like 'Romanisation', by allowing for greater variation in the cultural choices (passive or active, free or constrained) that people make in the ongoing process of bringing a particular social formation into being through material practices (cf. Barrett 2001: 152–7).

The multi-layered connection between materiality and temporality (in the form of continuity and change, or tradition and mobility – see below) becomes even more apparent by

thinking about the pot when it is *not* present. One of the main changes that archaeologists recognise as being a significant element in the 'end' of Roman Britain is the disappearance of pottery manufactured in the kind of fashion exemplified by the piece illustrated in Figure 1. In an important and interesting paper, Nick Cooper (1996) has suggested that this may have had relatively limited cultural impact, as pottery was primarily used with only convenience in mind. I would have to argue, though, based on the theoretical position developed above, that such a material transformation, though it may certainly be less sudden than it appears to us, is necessarily significant. Highly routinized material practices are more, not less likely to be an important element in the structuration of social relations in late Roman Britain. Disruptions to such practices will be correspondingly traumatic (cf. Giddens 1984: 64), at the very least entailing a drastic reduction in the spatial and temporal scale of those relations. This in turn has potentially serious implications for the connections between individual persons and different kinds of wider community.

Indeed, it is precisely because the Roman world encompasses such dramatic shifts and transformations of materiality that it is worth studying in pursuit of differential constitutions of agency, insofar as these will involve material culture in the ways described above. Many of these changes are generated by the dynamics of Roman imperialism, which seem to entail the adoption, emulation or denial of quite specific and overt 'technologies of the self' (Foucault 1988; this phrase conveniently encapsulates the combined material and social influences on the formation of selfhood). These include things like transformations in body appearance and comportment associated with bathing, grooming, or becoming a Roman soldier (e.g. DeLaine 1999: 12–14; James 1999: 16–21). They also include technologies like writing, and this brings me to my second artefact (Figure 2).

Inscriptions are an extremely important feature of Roman material culture. They materialise one of the key linguistic technologies of the self – the personal name – which in the Roman world was clearly a culturally-charged label which encapsulated an individual's relationship with his or her contemporary community, ancestors, and successors (Hope 2000: 131–2). In other situations, religious dedications to personifications of institutions, ideas, and most importantly places of all kinds (Huskinson 2000: 7–8) indicate the complex interplay between subject and object in Roman culture. This entails a different kind of hybridisation than that which might be envisaged for the pot, between buildings or other material symbols and an anthropomorphic deity. All of these different conceptual relationships, between human or divine subjects, are made more 'real' or 'objective' (outside the self) by being carved into a stone.

Again, though, we come back to the variation which the Roman world encompasses as a source of interpretative leverage on a series of fundamental problems to do with personhood and agency. It is well known, for instance, that the 'epigraphic habit' was quite uneven in social, geographical, and temporal distribution (MacMullen 1982). In Britain, for instance, inscriptions on stone are found relatively rarely outside of military contexts (Mann 1985). To interpret this in terms of a failure of Romanisation is to drastically underestimate the range of roles that inscriptions, both in material form and conceptual content, might have played through their making and reading (cf. Miles 2000).

Figure 1. Fragment of a mortarium. Photograph taken by Stuart Laidlaw; published with the kind permission of Institute of Archaeology Collections (UCL).

Figure 2. Fragment of an inscription. Photograph taken by Stuart Laidlaw; published with the kind permission of Institute of Archaeology Collections (UCL).

At the very least, this difference in distribution speaks to the relations between insiders and outsiders in particular contexts, with soldiers from other parts of the empire perhaps driven to reinforce their identities more materially in unfamiliar environments; in a similar fashion, 'Britons' are commonly referred to as such primarily in *non*-insular contexts in later antiquity (Snyder 1998: 70–2).

I would argue, though, that we should explore even further, and consider whether the interaction between different social groups in the Roman world might have been structured by different technologies of the self. In considering the balance of factors defining agency, we should not just ask whether Roman soldiers, local elites or peasant farmers had different capabilities to affect the world based on their resources, but also on the extent to which they actually saw their place in the world in different ways. In the interpretation of slavery, to take a more extreme example, we need to try to explore how people who were conceived of as things responded to this categorisation, and how this response fits in with our ideas of agency. The modern western concept of the self may have its origins in the Roman period, as Mauss has argued (1979: 78–86), but in such a formative period, with competing models offered by slaves and free, or pagan and Christian, let alone those to be found in other cultural traditions across the empire, we must surely be ambitious in attempting to explore the relationships between self, agency, and materiality.

Conclusion: theoretical and ethical agendas for the 21st century

Materiality is, however, but one element in the constitution of agency. In this paper, I have tried to develop a theory of materiality which lays emphasis on three kinds of role – mediation, objectification, and hybridisation – that material culture plays in the formation of intersubjective relations, and to draw attention to the ways in which this might allow for cultural differences in the formation of the self. In order to capture more fully the complexity and variability of the constitution of agency, across the Roman world and beyond, two other dimensions have to be considered, with which materiality is intimitely bound. These are temporality and sociality (Figure 3). Some reference has been made above to the first of these, and two key concepts which are of use in sensitising us to the social aspects of time are tradition (routine, reproduction, 'history') and mobility (movement, transformation; see Gardner 2001b).

These alternatives to the more abstract ideas of 'continuity' and 'change' reflect the importance of the temporal dimension in processes of structuration (Giddens 1984: 34–7), while emphasising the active ways in which humans engage with the ongoing flow of life as "repetition with variation" (Adam 1990: 53). Also considered in the foregoing paper have been some of the main aspects of social life ('sociality') which are central to the ongoing construction and reproduction of agency – not least the concept of intersubjectivity itself (cf. Barnes 2000: x). Beyond this, and as touched upon above, different social identities (negotiated in time through material practices) are a vital part of the relationship between agency and structure, allowing for the formation of collective agency ('community'; cf. Parker 2000: 106), and also for differentiation in power relations ('hierarchy'; see Gardner forthcoming). Taken together, these three concepts of materiality, temporality and sociality provide a powerful analytical framework for understanding the constitution of agency in different cultural contexts.

While this paper was originally presented as part of a session sub-titled 'theoretical agendas for the 21st century', the position developed here is not intended to be in any sense prescriptive. However, a couple of general points can be made which follow on from the discussion above that I would like to advocate more strongly. One of these is that Roman archaeologies, and specifically Roman archaeologies which are explicit about addressing theoretical concerns, need to be more adventurous.

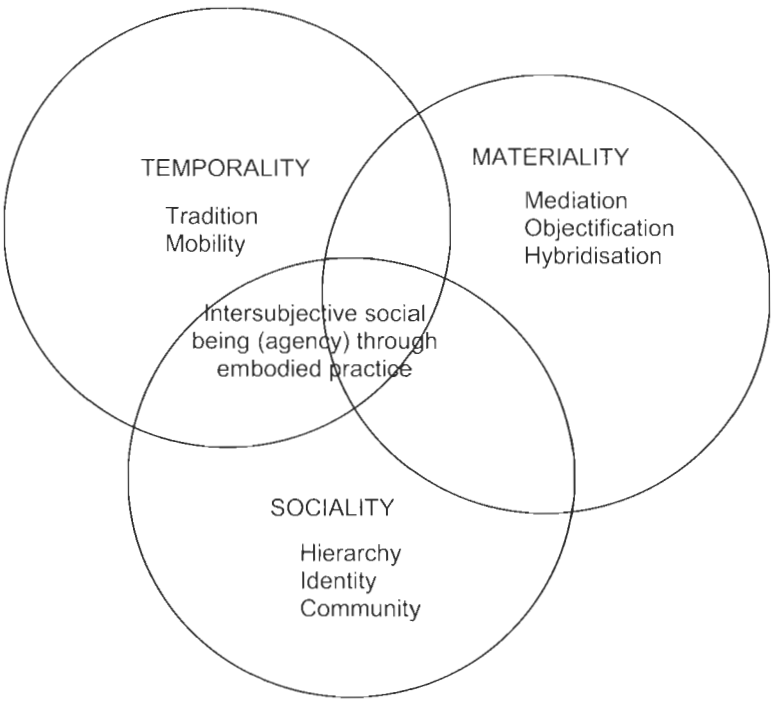

Figure 3. Multi-dimensional model of human agency, which allows for cultural variation in the construction of the constituent elements of materiality, temporality and sociality, through mechanisms like mediation, objectification and hybridisation.

To me, this means going beyond the 'add-social-theorist-and-stir' approach, which I have been as guilty of as anyone else in TRAC papers (e.g. Gardner 2001a). This is not to suggest that we stop reading outside the field – on the contrary, I believe in casting our nets as widely as possible to encourage the stimulation of new ideas. Rather, it is to advocate *writing* outside the field – considering to what debates the questions we ask are contributing. Understanding the Roman world is an important end, but it should not be an end in itself. As I hope to have demonstrated in this paper, there are a number of very fundamental debates in the human sciences to which archaeologies of this world can add a great deal.

This brings me to my second point. The potential of Roman studies lies not simply in what is perceived by Romanists and non-Romanists alike as a rich data-set, but also hinges upon more subtle relationships between past and present. In a range of scholarly and popular discourses about the Roman world, one frequently encounters the perception that the Romans were 'just like us' (e.g. Wilkinson 2000). This is often based on some of the more obvious technological elements of Roman life, like central heating, coined money, or the Latin alphabet. It is also possible, though, to discern formative stages in many of the social and philosophical ideas underpinning subsequent western culture within this period, particularly in the interaction between classical and Christian understandings of the world. As noted above, Mauss identifies this as precisely the context for the generation of the western 'self' (1979: 78–94), with Roman juridical practice bestowing rights and freedoms upon the individual, and Christian doctrine adding the rational moral conscience and the unitary soul. From these elements have been crafted the idea of a person as "a rational, indivisible, individual substance" (Mauss 1979: 86).

It is precisely these perceived and actual connections between Roman and later western culture that oblige us to look all the harder for the differences of the Roman world, for the alternative ways of thinking and ways of doing that speak to the complexity of the human condition, and which have since been subordinated to the dominant meta-narratives of the west. Such an agenda has significant ethical implications. Among the many contemporary debates surrounding issues of globalisation and multi-culturalism, one important question hangs over the validity of universalising models of humanity and agency, with their attendant universal morals, for dealing with the complex cultural encounters that are currently taking place. An understanding of human being which is believed to prevent discrimination can also flatten diversity. Such debates are complex, and ongoing (see e.g. Barnes 2000; Bauman 1993; Gero 2000). Archaeologists have much to contribute to them, and not only passively as the past is drawn upon by diverse identity groups with specific interests. In attempting to better understand the difference of the Roman past in terms of concepts like materiality and agency, we can adopt an actively critical – and therefore invigorating – stance on the present.

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