
TRAC Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference

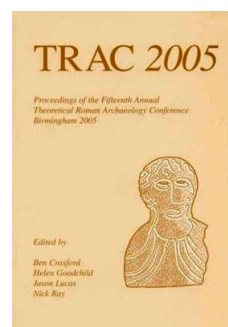
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Paper Information:

Title: The Future of TRAC
Author: Andrew Gardner
Pages: 128–137

DOI: http://doi.org/10.16995/TRAC2005_128_137

Publication Date: 24 March 2006



Volume Information:

Croxford, B., Goodchild, H., Lucas, J., and Ray, N. (eds.) (2006) *TRAC 2005: Proceedings of the Fifteenth Annual Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference, Birmingham 2005*. Oxford: Oxbow Books

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The Future of TRAC

Andrew Gardner

Introduction: does TRAC have a future?

After 15 years, the Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference has become something of a venerable institution in Roman archaeology in Britain. A regular publication series, a consistent audience, and a Standing Committee to provide organisational continuity all indicate that the conference is still healthy too. However, with seemingly ever-increasing demands on the time of everyone involved, rising costs of hosting conferences, and a variety of other events on the calendar, no conference can take its existence for granted. This is even more true for TRAC, a gathering which was founded with a specific agenda, and which has always had something of a mission beyond self-perpetuation. The problem we need to address at the outset, then, is whether TRAC has a future at all. There have been arguments in the recent past that the conferences, or at least the publications coming from it, have not been theoretical enough. In a review of a selection of four volumes of proceedings, Ray Laurence suggested that TRAC was failing in its mission to deliver well-argued theoretical papers in the majority of cases, partly because of a self-imposed insulation from theoretical discourse in other sub-disciplines (Laurence 1999; cf. Fincham *et al.* 2000: vii–viii; Woolf 2004: 420). Further consideration will be given to the latter issue below, but Laurence’s comments certainly raise questions about the future of the conference in its present form, which has nonetheless remained largely unchanged since they were published.

Other questions come from almost the opposite direction. The suggestion that TRAC has succeeded in its mission to reshape Roman archaeology into a more open, multi-vocal and theoretically-aware discipline has been voiced by some (Gardner 2003: 434; Hill 2001: 12; cf. Scott 1993), and again this might incline one to think that it no longer serves a purpose. This development is mainly detectible from the kinds of sessions that now regularly feature at the Roman Archaeology Conference, the larger, biennial event first held in 1995 which was, at least originally, seen as a more ‘mainstream’ gathering than the ‘way-out’, radical TRAC (Davies *et al.* 2001: v). Recent RACs have included sessions on themes like the life course and the parallels between Roman imperialism and globalisation. Some of these have been organised by people who have been active within the TRAC community, while others perhaps testify to the wider influence of TRAC in broadening the terms of debate within the field (Forcey *et al.* 1998; Gardner 2004: 6–7). It would be presumptuous to suggest that the increasing diversity and dynamism of Roman archaeology can be solely attributed to the existence of TRAC, particularly as some of the key publications which helped to open up discussion of themes such as Romanisation (including Millett 1990 and Reece 1988) predated its establishment, while the first RACs certainly had theoretically-innovative sessions (see e.g. Mattingly 1997). Nonetheless, it is certainly becoming difficult to distinguish TRAC and RAC sessions when the two conferences are held in tandem, and the audience also appears to be increasingly willing to attend strong TRAC sessions without discrimination, in contrast to earlier years when these seemed somewhat neglected. If more and more people are aware that

Roman archaeology (like all archaeology) is inherently theoretical, and participate in the development of ideas in conjunction with data, then surely the battle has been won?

Well, yes and no. In this paper I will argue that TRAC still serves several important functions, though there are also changes which could be made in the future to adapt to the shifting context in which the conference exists, and particularly to break down some new boundaries which have been inadvertently set up over the past 15 years. In my view, TRAC has certainly had a beneficial effect upon Roman archaeology as a whole during this period, and it will continue to do so, providing that it remains concerned both to foster initiative in looking at the Roman past from new angles, and to encourage participation from all-comers. There are certainly many areas of Roman studies where fuller dialogue and attention to matters of theory are still needed, and TRAC should be at the forefront of pursuing these. Even so, one other point is important to note at this stage. While those involved in TRAC should always be aware of the shifting agendas that the conference may serve, there is no need to be too self-critical. There are limits to what a collective institution such as TRAC can achieve, and in many ways one of its most vital roles is to offer a meeting-point for individuals who will also pursue their ideas in other contexts and with other collaborators. As an annual conference, TRAC has had a major impact on Roman archaeology, but I sense that its lasting benefit now and in the future will be its encouragement of a tolerant and open-minded attitude in the people who participate, which will have consequences far beyond the study of the Roman empire.

Arguments for continuity

An open forum

Among the strengths of the conference which can be emphasised as a foundation for the future, TRAC's role as an open forum should therefore take centre-stage. There is no doubt that this 'open-ness' can be increased, and more on this will be said below, but here I want to stress the positive side of the current situation. While the balance of speakers from different backgrounds changes from year to year, TRAC provides a rather unusual environment where students, lecturers, field-workers, finds specialists and museum archaeologists can give papers without any serious obstacles and without any intimidating status-divisions. The main beneficiaries of this have been post-graduate students, who have dominated the roster of speakers for some time, but the value of such an introduction to academic discourse and, for many, publication should not to be underestimated (Davies *et al.* 2001: v; Fincham *et al.* 2000: viii). Nor should the balance of different groups represented among speakers and delegates, biased towards academics as it may be, come in for too much criticism. Some conferences which fulfil similar roles to TRAC in other sub-disciplines, such as the Iron Age Research Student Seminars and Current Research in Egyptology, have either been restricted to student speakers or prioritised them much more explicitly (Humphrey 2003: xi; Piquette and Love 2005: viii; cf. Chadwick 2003; Hingley 2004). While set up to counter the same restrictive mainstream orthodoxy as TRAC, these conferences do not seem to share quite the same open-ness as the latter, which has challenged that orthodoxy not just by a different set of ideas or speakers, but by a different attitude. There are still lessons to be learned from these gatherings, and they have begun to accept contributions from other professionals, but TRAC can certainly take some pride in the fact that its principle of open-access has been maintained from the beginning (Scott 1993: 3), and this should be strengthened in the future.

A critical conscience for Roman archaeology

Another valuable role that TRAC has performed has been the development of critiques against established paradigms within the wider field of Roman studies. The most obvious of these has been Romanisation, which is in some ways the defining motif of the first decade of TRAC's existence (Hill 2001: 12; Laurence 1999: 388). From many theoretical angles, and using many data-sets of historical and archaeological material, simplistic models of Roman-native interaction in the Roman world have been undermined in numerous contributions. While this may have been too repetitive a feature of TRAC papers for some, the forceful arguments which have built up over the years against Romanisation as an all-encompassing paradigm still need to be heard in some quarters (cf. Mattingly 2002). Equally, it is important to note that this particular 'meta-narrative' has not been replaced by a single new one; rather, the multiplicity of experiences of the Roman world have been done better service by a diversity of interpretations of the interactions between different groups in different regions (cf. Barrett 1997: 7). This open-ness to alternative narratives echoes that of the conference itself, and constitutes both a substantive contribution to Roman archaeology and an important development of disciplinary maturity. While meta-narratives always need to be questioned on a sound basis of inter-woven theoretical and empirical argument (cf. Laurence 1999: 389), the continued scrutiny of dominant ideas at TRAC will be another key plank of its future success.

A breeding-ground for new ideas

More positively, TRAC has provided an opportunity for specific theoretical developments to be aired, debated and evaluated. While many of these ideas have endured a time-lag from their introduction in other sub-disciplines, particularly prehistoric archaeology, as the receptiveness to new approaches among Romanists has increased, so has this time-lag diminished. At the more explicitly theoretical end of the spectrum of TRAC papers, practice, structuration, phenomenology, Marxism and post-colonialism have all had their day in various guises. More specific themes that have received extensive treatment include landscape, identity, memory, time, urbanism, and religion, as well as methodological issues relating to material culture analysis and GIS. Many of these concepts and issues, which would not be out of place at a meeting of the Theoretical Archaeology Group, have been discussed in focussed sessions. This format has worked well as a way of facilitating links between individual papers, while providing a greater range of topics for the audience than a single-themed conference would (Fincham *et al.* 2000: viii). There is certainly quite a variable degree of reference to particular bodies of theory in the papers presented at TRAC (Laurence 1999: 387), as might be expected, but this rather begs the question of what 'theoretical Roman archaeology' should look like; this will be discussed further below. The point here is that a healthy diversity of approaches to the Roman past has been a characteristic of TRAC. Its influence can be detected not just in the proceedings of the conferences themselves, but in all of the other volumes and journal articles where the impetus and opportunity provided by TRAC to individual scholars' work is manifest. This, again, is a powerful reason for continuity in the way TRAC works in the future, but one that can be enhanced by considering an even wider range of alternatives, as we will see in the next section.

Possibilities for change

Access

Although I have stressed diversity as a strength of TRAC on a number of levels, a major issue that organisers of the conference will need to confront in the near future is maximising the breadth of access to it. There are several areas where attention is needed. The first has to do with the dominance of the event by academic archaeologists, primarily postgraduate students but also staff at various levels. As already noted, the value of TRAC as a postgrad-friendly event should never be sacrificed, but at the same time the open-ness to other professionals which has always existed in principle needs to be better fulfilled in practice. This problem has been aired before (e.g. Davies *et al.* 2001: v), and some steps have been taken to try to address it, including the provision of a designated space on the TRAC Standing Committee for a member from the museums, finds, or excavation communities, and a commitment in the Committee's mission statement to encourage access from the whole archaeological community. Some of the causes of the problem are also very difficult to overcome. These include the fact that availability of time and facilities has tended to favour a university as the conference venue, thus putting the event at the mercy of university timetables – so generally limited access on weekends – and, increasingly, conference and accommodation fee structures controlled by central administration. These factors mitigate against people working in different environments where time and money to attend conferences are not so readily obtained.

Of course, Roman archaeology is not alone in facing these issues, as the division between academic and professional communities in the wider discipline has often been manifest in the different constituencies of TAG and the IFA conferences (e.g. Cobb 2005: 14). To help break these kinds of barriers down, more collaborative efforts need to be pursued within TRAC, making sure that sessions organised by particular professional bodies are prioritised, perhaps, or showcasing the work of local archaeological units at each conference. If TRAC can involve more partnerships between academics and members of other professional communities, as well as advertising as fully as possible within relevant publications and organisations, a genuine contribution could be made to the solution of broader disciplinary problems. Beyond these boundaries, there are others that need to be challenged. One strength of conferences like CRE, mentioned above, is the participation amongst the audience of representatives from public societies focused on ancient Egypt (Piquette and Love 2005: vii; cf. Claxton 2003). While Roman archaeology in Britain seems to lack the exotic appeal of Egypt, which strengthens the latter's popular profile on television and fosters the growth of dedicated societies, widening public access to TRAC would be a beneficial step. This might be done through archaeology societies local to the conference venue, or through advertising specific sessions or lectures as 'public lectures'. Differences in audience knowledge and interest need to be borne in mind, and TRAC should not compromise its professional status or its academic integrity, but alternative formats for some sessions (see below) might also allow for genuinely wider participation in debates concerning the presentation of our ideas about the Roman past in more diverse ways.

One other issue of access is important. Some recent commentators on TRAC's published proceedings have remarked that female speakers are under-represented in these, and (although these points should not necessarily be connected) that gender has figured less prominently in TRAC sessions than it might (Hingley 2004; Laurence 1999). The former problem relates both to wider imbalances in Roman studies and, indeed, academia as a whole, but does seem to be

changing for the better if more recent sets of proceedings are considered. One hopes that TRAC's contribution to making the Roman period more interesting to everyone will facilitate further progress in the gender balance among contributors, although formidable professional barriers to equality remain which must be tackled by all archaeologists (cf. Scott 1998). The second issue is perhaps more serious as far as the future of TRAC specifically is concerned, as it does not seem to be changing: a recent session on Roman women at TRAC 2002 attracted limited support, even though it deliberately aimed to tap into areas of the wider field of Roman studies where, at least in some cases, archaeologists are behind classicists (Baker 2003). This must be a priority area for future TRACs to address, with the obvious but important proviso that gender is not just about the study of women by women, but of all gendered relationships in which people participate – whether or not these can be neatly categorised – by both male and female scholars.

Internationalism

Another major area for potential change, and one which overlaps somewhat with the preceding section, is the make-up of the conference according to nationality. TRAC is dominated by British scholars, and to a lesser extent by Romano-British archaeology (Davies *et al.* 2001: v; James 2003: 181; Laurence 1999: 387; Woolf 2004: 420). As with some of the other limitations to open-access discussed above, the fault here does not necessarily lie with the individuals who have participated in TRAC over the years, but with broader structural features, though this is not to say that future generations cannot strive to challenge the latter. So long as the conference is held in British universities, it is not surprising that the majority of speakers will be people who work in British organisations, even though there is certainly some degree of diversity in the provinces which are represented in this research. The only other significant national contingent that is regularly represented comes from the Netherlands. The lack of other overseas participation is of course partly a geographical issue, with travel costs a genuine obstacle, and also a linguistic one. More seriously, though, it relates to fractures within Roman archaeology as a field, with different agendas dominating different national traditions, and particularly with 'theory' meaning different things in different countries (Woolf 2004; cf. Scarre and Stoddart 1999; Ucko 1995). The development of a special interest in 'theoretical archaeology', Roman or otherwise, is a distinctly Anglophone phenomenon at the moment, and it remains an open question whether such an interest is leading the way or disappearing into its own ghetto.

This is obviously not a problem that TRAC can hope to solve on its own, but it can certainly contribute to raising awareness of the issues. Holding a conference in an overseas venue, such as in the Netherlands, has been mooted as one way of tackling this, and this would certainly be a major step in the right direction. However, I feel that the way needs to be prepared somewhat to make sure that a truly international audience can be secured for such an event, as it may be problematic for TRAC's core British audience to make the journey for some of the same financial reasons as currently restrict traffic the other way. Sessions which directly tackle the difference between Anglophone and other archaeologies of the Roman empire might help to achieve this. Rather than inviting overseas speakers to present the latest discoveries from a particular region, as currently happens at RAC, these might involve dialogues between speakers of different nationalities over the problems considered important in varying traditions. While it may not be possible to reach agreement over what the 'big picture' of Roman archaeology ought to look like, or even if there should be one (and on this I am

sceptical; cf. Woolf 2004: 422–3), some attempt to exploit the great geographical extent of the empire, which goes beyond simply looking at Roman life in different provinces, is certainly desirable. This is also important with respect to the widening of public access to Roman archaeology, touched upon above. The Roman empire is an excellent context to look at the interaction between different ethnic and status groups in a somewhat ‘globalised’ system, which is very relevant to the contemporary world (James 2003), and which might be useful in engaging an interest in archaeology among people who are not white and middle-class (Benjamin 2004). Discussion on how to take this forward, with involvement from archaeologists and other interested parties working with different local communities, would be welcome. Overall, examination of how national and ethnic identities structure the study of the Roman past, and conversely of how the study of the Roman past can challenge contemporary cultural stereotypes, would be a significant step forward that TRAC could take, widening the range of its participants in the process.

Radicalism

As well as pursuing a project of breaking down disciplinary and social boundaries more aggressively than more orthodox events, TRAC needs to advance radical agendas and formats to keep up its momentum as a distinctively dynamic and stimulating gathering. The nature of theoretical discussion in Roman archaeology will always be somewhat different to the debates which generated all of the classic works of archaeological theory, primarily because there is no need to rehash these given the time-lag that has delayed their introduction to our field, but also because Romanists, by inclination, seem always to want to stick quite closely to empirical studies (Scott 1993: 4; Woolf 2004: 420). This does not mean, though, that some more explicit discussion of the work of particular theorists or bodies of thought – as Laurence has suggested (1999: 390) – would not be useful and even enjoyable. Roman archaeology is definitely an increasingly dynamic and interesting field to work in (James 2003), but it would be easy to over-estimate how much change there has been. The continued existence of TRAC as a separate conference is, in some ways, part of the problem here, as it allows some sectors of the discipline to continue to believe that theory is something which is a distinct specialism rather than something which underpins all archaeological work (Woolf 2004: 420). Nonetheless, the fact that TRAC has played a big part in the changes that have occurred, as noted in the Introduction, suggests to me that the benefits of what TRAC does outweigh the disadvantages. In much the same way, teaching theory as a separate subject in university archaeology programmes is not as ideal as theory being an explicit part of all courses, but is realistically the only option until this happens. Even then, some ideas and approaches need to be dealt with in more abstract terms, and more of this could happen at TRAC – both to continue the project of helping to transform Roman archaeology by ‘pushing the envelope’ of discourse, and also to help us talk to other archaeologists.

Such dialogue is necessary to address the image problem that Roman studies still seems to have, in spite of recent developments, and therefore to secure the future of the discipline as a viable university subject or an attractive specialism (Gardner 2003; James 2003). It is also necessary because it is a good thing. We are well aware of the material and textual riches that Roman archaeology can exploit, but unless these are made to speak to general problems of archaeology as a social science – using the necessary language of a social science – then they will continue to be regarded as the preserve of an insular community. Bridges between the study of parts of the Roman world and parts of other worlds can be built with ideas such as

agency, power, ideology, materiality, personhood, practice, dwelling and many others. We should not be afraid of talking about them amongst ourselves as ideas, which may need thinking through in themselves, and of arguing about how they relate to Roman culture. This is preferable to simply taking them from the shelf and sprinkling them over our Roman case-studies like so much exotic flavouring. There are of course other venues to do this than TRAC – TAG being the major one in Britain (see below) – but there is no harm in discussing theoretical problems with reference to Roman archaeology in multiple forums, as it can only sharpen their relevance in both spheres. Furthermore, all of the different kinds of themes which might be discussed at future TRACs would benefit from some experimentation with formats. The 20-minute paper, c.6-paper session arrangement is widely used and serves quite adequately for snap-shots of research in progress to be presented, grouped around a particular theme. However, discussion tends to be curtailed within such a format, partly because of time-constraints and partly because the format encourages specific questions, rather than collective work on a general problem. There is no doubt that such a format has a place, but such conventional sessions could be accompanied by more discussion-oriented sessions, with shorter and more opinionated presentations, or with a greater degree of audience participation in evaluating alternative positions on a certain issue (as was successfully attempted at TAG 2004). Alternative ways of organising sessions might be particularly useful in facilitating wider participation, and might also make greater use of web-based technologies to communicate with colleagues in other institutions. In all of these kinds of ways, TRAC can strive to remain at the cutting edge of Roman archaeology.

Conclusion: whither (theoretical) Roman archaeology?

All of my comments in this contribution come, of course, from a personal perspective, and the suggestions I have made are nothing more than that. TRAC has always been a forum for the exchange of opinions, and as long as that continues there will be good ideas on how it should proceed from all kinds of directions. That it should continue, though, is my firm belief. Part of my personal perspective in writing this piece is the benefit that I have gained from participating in TRAC in different ways over the last few years, and my feeling is that the same kind of positive effect has been experienced by many others. TRAC is always enjoyable. Any negative effects of self-segregation seem to me to be outweighed by this constructive impact on individuals, as well as by the influence that themes and questions first aired in TRAC sessions have had on the wider discipline. There is absolutely no reason why these kinds of opportunity should be denied to future generations of Roman archaeologists. At the same time, the people who participate in TRAC must always be aware of where it sits in relation to other parts of Roman archaeology, other parts of Roman studies, and other parts of archaeology. I think that the functions TRAC serves will be valid for a long time yet, but I have also tried to suggest ways of expanding these to meet new challenges, because if TRAC is standing still then it starts to lose some of its vitality. These have emphasised diversity, which has always been a strength of TRAC but which is capable of being enhanced in numerous ways. Wider access, a broader range of themes, and more variety in formats might all help to ensure that TRAC retains its distinctive position as the critical conscience of Roman archaeology, and as an egalitarian forum where all ideas are welcome.

Ideally, of course, these would be qualities of all conferences, and of all archaeology. If TRAC's identity is starting to be fuzzy now, at what point will its success finally be measured

by its disappearance? This will only happen if the goals and agendas of one generation remain the same for succeeding ones, and this does not seem likely – or at least it should not be. The existence of a forum to challenge what might have been yesterday's trendy new idea, but is now today's orthodoxy, will always be necessary, and if that forum is a positive and encouraging environment for speakers from a range of backgrounds then all the better. Should this event be labelled 'theoretical'? We have already seen how labelling theory in a particular way may have helped to restrict its influence. The label, however, still makes a pertinent point in a discipline where – as with archaeology as a whole – there remains a widespread perception that the main tasks are descriptive and practical, rather than interpretative and intellectual. The necessary balance of equal respect for these different aspects of the subject has not yet been achieved (cf. Gardner In press). Does this mean, though, that 'theoretical Romanists' are doomed to talk to themselves, as some commentators have suggested they have largely been doing so far (Laurence 1999: 387; Woolf 2004: 420)? Again, I think that even if continued development is still needed, TRAC's influence has been felt well beyond its own sessions. If more work needs to be done to spread this, though – and it is certainly true that stronger connections need to be forged both with other archaeologists, as discussed above, and other classicists – then it is up to the individuals who take part in TRAC, and who use that arena to help them develop their work. Roman-themed sessions at conferences like TAG will not succeed in making these connections; only through lots of individuals participating in sessions on broader themes will others get the message that Roman archaeology is getting its theoretical act together. TRAC, though, will always play a key role in linking these people through the Roman side of their work. As a continual source of alternative viewpoints, and as a venue where Romanists can meet and discuss ways of driving their discipline forward and contributing to dialogue with others, I would say that TRAC has much potential yet to fulfil.

Institute of Archaeology, University College London

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the editors for their invitation to write this contribution, and to the many fellow TRAC delegates, and other colleagues, with whom some of the above thoughts have been discussed over the years, including Patricia Baker, Hella Eckardt, Garrick Fincham, Ian Haynes, Richard Hingley, Simon James, Kathryn Piquette, Ellen Swift, Steve Townsend and Jake Weekes.

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