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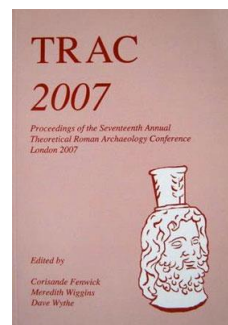
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Humour in Roman Archaeology

Ben Croxford

Humour in context

At first appearance, subjecting humour in relation to archaeology and Roman archaeology in particular, to serious consideration may appear facile or unwarranted. There is, however, a genuine need to consider the possibility. In doing so it is first necessary to define what is meant in each instance and even to justify the interest. The interpretation ‘in humorous vein’ (Bishop 1983: 44) appeared in relation to the unusual treatment of the Camomile Street soldier, a sculpture found in London. This seemingly casual proposition at the end of consideration of other more usual motivating factors for deposition, that humour could have been responsible, begs the question of whether it is actually feasible to seriously consider such a possibility and what place humour has in relation to archaeology as both a discipline and evidence source. This paper is concerned with some particular possible instances of humour intersecting with archaeology, specifically some unusual deposits from fourth and fifth century Roman Britain. The restricted timeframe and focus, however, should not obscure the wider implications of such thinking. Humour is a very real and complex element of human behaviour; its possible expression in the past and preservation to the present are justifiably worthy of our consideration.

Humour as a subject is both complex and difficult to define but nonetheless considerable study has been directed at the phenomenon in other parts of academe. The field of humour studies, populated by ‘jollytologists’, is a thriving one. The International Society for Humor Studies and their journal (*Humor – International Journal of Humor Research*), are devoted to promoting the subject and carrying out examinations of the role of humour, examples of culturally specific types of humour, as well as its benefits in relation the field of medicine. More fundamentally, philosophers such as Hobbes, Bergson, Kant and Schopenhauer have proposed various structures or theories explaining the way in which humour works, as has Freud. Considerable effort has been expended in classifying the types of humour, ranging from accidental occurrences to intentional buffoonery to calculated and complex word play or satire (Atkinson 1993: 11). Such interest has very much focused on the psychological cause and effect of the event or experience with competing notions of whether it is superiority, coping or simple relief that forms the essential basis (Atkinson 1993: 10). Away from the mechanics of the phenomenon, attention has been

drawn by historians to the existence of humour in the past, though each consideration seems to open with the suggestion that humour in the past has not been widely engaged with. This constant renewal of interest aside, examination, particularly in relation to antiquity, has fixated upon one form of humour, specifically its use in rhetoric (see Cameron 1993; Corbeill 1996; Bremmer and Roodenburg 1997a).

As the basis of the modern historians' interest we may identify the four significant considerations of humour in the ancient world by ancient authors. Works by Aristotle, Theophrastus, Cicero and Quintilian did much as the more recent efforts of the philosophers have done; that is, identified the types and causes. They also serve to demonstrate the existence of humour and an awareness of its usefulness. Cicero's *De Oratore*, II.lvii–lxii, is the source of reference where the consideration of humour as a means of power is concerned (cf. Corbeill 1996; Graf 1997), setting out as it does the types of verbal humour and the ways in which they may be applied for greatest effect in debate. It is here that we may note the disjuncture between past considerations of humour and the concern of this paper. 'Cicero discussed humour for an upper-class readership, which had to amuse the public without losing its dignity' (Bremmer and Roodenburg 1997b: 4), producing a handbook with particular aims. Furthermore, he was a member of the elite based in the heart of the late Republic at Rome. The humour evidenced in his writings is therefore a very specific one, both in cultural and functional terms. We cannot base a definition of 'Roman humour' on this alone or even propose the existence of 'a Roman humour'. We must not forget the distances in space, time, status and even culture that separated Cicero from most of the inhabitants of the Roman Empire. The subject of the historians' studies differs from the everyday humour that must have been more common and which forms the subject of interest of this paper. The focus here is on the possibility of humour being archaeologically evidenced. To consider this requires examination of our understandings, the physical constraints of archaeological preservation and the possible barriers to comprehension and recognition. The distinctions between humour in the past, humour about the past and humour in archaeology as a profession are not complex in essence but are frequently misunderstood or overlooked.

Humour in archaeology

Archaeology is oftentimes an especially humorous profession and subject. The 'trench humour' on site punctuates (and even enables) day-to-day work, whilst most academic spoken presentations feature some form of humour. The use of less than entirely serious illustrations is one such possibility (the adventures of Asterix being a particularly rich vein for Iron Age feasting and early Roman conflict subjects). More common is the inclusion of comical or topical references, and even on occasion actual jokes. Intra-departmental settings allow for such expression to be fully exercised with entire papers occasionally given over to humorous topics. This humorous side to academia is rarely presented to the general public and in more formal settings such as conferences or in print, humour is greatly curtailed. The most notable exception relates to the titles of papers. Puns, modifications of well-known phrases and other such careful wordplay appear even at the highest levels of academia. Besides such occasional flashes though, humour is otherwise restrained or even absent. In many ways this situation is not unique to archaeology and is a product of professional pride or notions of acceptability pertaining to the academic image or ethos. The common reticence and uneasy relationship with humour as a subject and means of expression has not prevented some unusual forays. In 1992, the *Archaeological Review* from Cambridge produced a volume entitled *Digging for a Laugh*. The collected papers were largely

light-hearted interpretations or applications of serious consideration to jokes. Simon James offered an evaluation (and defence) of his allegedly ‘flippant’ style of presentation (James 1992: 299). Paul Bahn provided a synopsis of humorous archaeologists and archaeology in humour, seemingly listing every last *Two Ronnies* sketch to ever even touch upon the profession (Bahn 1992: 319). Besides some anthropology of jokes (Davies 1992) and amusing carvings (Laird 1992), the humour was distinctly modern and firmly based in the present. Attention was very much upon how archaeology may be humorous rather than humour archaeologically preserved.

As with the historians’ interest in humour, archaeologists have been restricted in their interaction with humour, though to a greater degree. The humour to be found in a cleverly-worded title or one of Simon James’ cartoons pertains to modern situations and mindsets, being essentially observational of current circumstances or understandings. The presence of archaeologically recovered objects or data in such situations is largely co-incidental. True consideration of humour in the past on an archaeological basis would consist of instances in which a deposit or object is thought to have served humorous purposes in the past, completely separate from any modern understandings of it or jokes made about it. Such occasions in which past humour is considered or expanded upon are rare, and there are a series of likely factors that can account for this. In part, the professionalism and gravitas of those within academia prevents such thinking. The same factors that limit the use of light-hearted illustrations or examples in presentations preclude the proposal of humour as a serious possibility. One notable exception is that whilst on site or in more convivial environs (i.e. the pub) ‘joke’ interpretations can be advanced. These often simply entail suggesting that the agent in the past dug a certain shaped hole or made a particular deposit ‘for a laugh’. This is often because no better or ‘sensible’ interpretation is forthcoming. On occasion such thinking can be recorded on context sheets. Some of these abortive interpretations do therefore enter site archives but are never published or presented. Such marginalia, or more correctly marginalized data, will no-doubt make fascinating (and confusing) reading for future researchers but constitutes the end to such avenues of thought. There is a distinct sense of acceptable narrative where interpretation is concerned despite any pretence of fully including the interpretative thoughts of those actually undertaking the excavation. Aside from such intellectual barriers, there are other obstacles that make difficult the examination of humour in the archaeologically evidenced past. Quite simply, there is the problem of preservation. As with so many ephemeral and fleeting human interactions, humour does not often produce tangible remains.

Archaeological detection

The existence of humour in the past is un-doubtable. Our first problem must surely be that humour was probably largely verbal. Given the various types of relationship or cultural practice actively sought (and found) by archaeologists today, it would clearly be unwise to immediately discount the possibility of identifying past humour in some form. Principally the issue is one of production of archaeologically investigable traces. The most obvious must be the preservation of humour by writing (the works of Cicero and their limited relevance aside). Graffiti offers a veritable wealth of possibilities with ribald expression in this medium as common in antiquity as today. Examples from Roman Britain, however, appear to be largely restricted to simple obscenities (Raybould 1999: 141, 356). Humour could also be expressed in material culture. The visually rich Roman period provides ample prospect and Mitchell’s forthcoming *Archaeology of Humour* (looking at Greek material culture) is comparable proof of this. Even Roman Britain

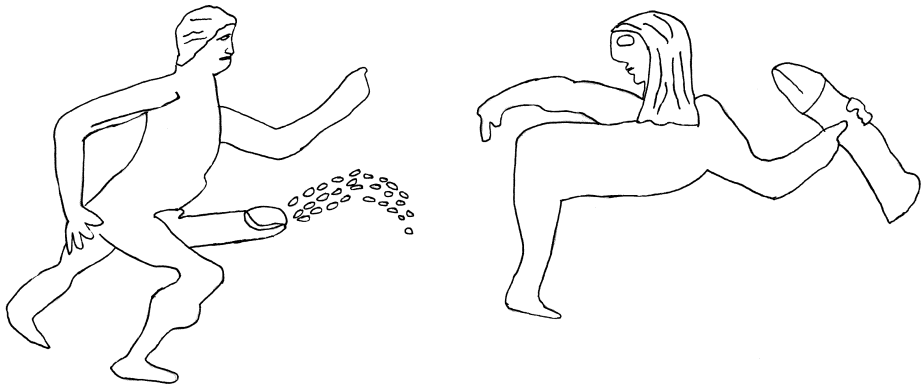


Figure 1. The principal figures on the Horsey Toll vessel.

has produced objects decorated with what are thought to be humorous overtones. It has been suggested that the Horsey Toll vessel (Fig. 1) might have been both titillating or openly erotic and humorous at the same moment to the Romano-British viewer (Johns 1982: fig. 80, 96). It is certainly amusing to many modern audiences and it is possible that this tends to override the possible dual meaning that might have existed originally. Indeed, it is common for pieces displaying similar scenes to be regarded in the first instance as humorous (e.g. Webster 1989: 9). Such objects are by no means particularly common though and preservation via means of depiction alone is a poor situation where our efforts to locate humour in the past are concerned. Another possibility is that functionally humorous objects could have been produced. Theatre masks may be read as one such example. A crude but useful analogy might be drawn with the Red Noses produced in their millions for each Red Nose Day in the United Kingdom (over eight million in 2007 alone). Though not particularly funny in themselves, they were used for humorous purposes (though admittedly with an ultimately serious intent). Their greatest value lies in highlighting the impermanence and difficulty of interpreting such simple pieces. Garments and additions to the body (horns, hats, ears or tails) offer a bounty of humorous potential but are unlikely to be archaeologically preserved. Where items or traces of personal embellishments of an unusual nature are archaeologically encountered, they are more likely to be described as of a ritual function. This is not to suggest that all examples of priestly regalia such as the pieces from Wanborough were for less serious purposes but that amongst such material there might exist some misidentified cases.

The examples considered so far demonstrate the potential for humour to be archaeologically preserved. The recognition and interpretation of this remains a separate issue but more importantly we have yet to consider the chief concern of this paper. The many Red Noses in landfill sites did not reach that position as a direct result of their function. It is highly unlikely that any were buried in a humorous fashion. Indeed, we must ask, is it at all possible to bury something for humorous purposes? Certainly in modern society few things are committed to the ground during a joke or any similar related activity. Elaborate hoaxes are the rare exception that proves the rule. Piltdown Man is one such possibility; certainly his 'cricket bat' can only have been a joke (Russell 2003: 179–182). Such aberrations, actually produced by archaeological interest in the

first place, are clearly far from the norm. Certainly, modern norms have little relevancy where the past is concerned though and we must entertain the possibility that some deposits were made for humorous purposes or in a humorous fashion. The problem therefore becomes one of recognition, what would indicate such a deposit to us?

The Camomile Street soldier

Found in 1876 and unusually well recorded for this time, the Camomile Street soldier has attracted interest predominantly for its artistic merit and military nature (Price 1880; Bishop 1983). The tombstone of a Flavian *beneficiarius consularis* (Bishop 1983: 43), it was reused laid out supine in the foundations of a bastion added to the walls of Roman London in the fourth century. The most interesting feature of this reuse was the positioning of the head between the ankles of the figure at the time of deposition. The obvious parallel is the custom of decapitated burial not uncommon amongst the cemetery population of later Roman Britain (Philpott 1991: 77–88). Bishop made this connection and rightly rejected the then common perception of the act, as ‘it is difficult to envisage circumstances in which a three hundred year-old statue [*sic*] could be viewed as having criminal associations or being punished for wrong-doing’ (Bishop 1983: 44). He proceeded to reason therefore that the act itself, referring to all instances of decapitated burial, was performed to the other party in each case i.e. the victim. The conclusion reached was that ‘the treatment afforded to the statue [*sic*] [was] a deliberate symbolic act, either in humorous vein or as atonement for damaging the memorial’ (Bishop 1983: 44). Views on the purpose of decapitated burial, those performed with flesh and blood bodies, are more complex than this simple dichotomy of transgression (Philpott 1991: 84–87). For our purposes here though it is the seemingly casual introduction of the ‘humorous vein’ as a possibility that is of greatest interest.

Having proposed two possible reasons for deposition, Bishop’s attention quickly turned back to his principal concern with the sculpture, its depiction of military equipment and its origins. We are left to infer how the treatment of the sculpture might have been either atoning or amusing. Indeed, this is a fundamental issue in the attempt to recognise humorous deposits in general: we must answer the awkward question of exactly how they were intended to be funny, the requirements for acceptability being so much greater than for ‘ritual’, ‘funerary’ or ‘rubbish’ as interpretations. The term ‘ritual’ serves as a definition whose mere application frequently curtails further consideration of intention where such deposits are concerned. This is no doubt sensible in a great many instances. The precise purpose of the more enigmatic ritual deposits is unlikely to be obvious or reached by speculation alone. Humour, by contrast, as an unusual and potentially unwelcome interpretation, cannot stand alone as explanation and label. Here we encounter another of the obstacles to interpretation, consisting of the language barriers that separate us from the agent in the past. Such issues of language are more than simply the difference between spoken fourth-century Romano-British Latin and modern English. There exists a potential for considerable difference in humour between us, a gulf perhaps greater than the linguistic one. We will return to this point below.

Of dead bodies and dead jokes

Despite the concerns of truly being able to appreciate a fourth-century joke, let alone a humorous deposit, we must explore the possibilities as they relate to the Camomile Street soldier. As

the repositioning of the head appears to have occurred in reference to the similar practice performed in some funerary situations, we might infer that the humour derives from treating the sculpture as a human body. Implicit within such a proposition is that sculpture was not commonly approached or treated as the real bodies it so closely resembled might be. This makes the clearly targeted and body-part-specific interaction with other sculptures (Croxford 2007) somewhat difficult to account for. Consequently, it is the particular rites and their accordance to a non-standard recipient that are more likely potentially humorous. This perversion of the burial custom is twofold as it is given both to an inorganic body and to someone unlikely to have fulfilled the usual criteria, being an unfamiliar individual already dead for nearly three hundred years. This does not strike the modern observer as particularly funny and thus is demonstrative of the cognitive language barrier. Our ignorance concerning the reasons for normal decapitated burial makes the interpretation of this distortion doubly difficult. For example, one possibility is that the rite was in general humorous in some fashion. It might seem unusual to propose that decapitation burial was performed for humorous ends but the possibility is not as outlandish as might first appear. Certainly we may say that the Romano-British population had a considerably different relationship with and perception of the dead and the corpse itself. We may infer this from the unusual (to modern tastes) interactions and treatments afforded to cadavers. The act of decapitating a dead body is in itself completely beyond acceptable today but was often performed, and skilfully in many instances, in the fourth century. Other treatments meted out to the dead are equally repellent to current sensitivities and highlight this potential for dramatically different modes of understanding.

The chicken-headed man of Baldock

The seemingly endless cemeteries at Baldock in Hertfordshire have provided a catalogue of ghoulish manipulations. These include and are not limited to, reuse of graves, interference with partially decomposed remains, manipulation and conjunction of burials and some frankly unusual positioning (see Fitzpatrick-Mathews 2007; Fitzpatrick-Mathews and Burleigh forthcoming). Consequently, such is the evident degree of difference in approach that humorous interaction is conceivably possible. In fact, Baldock has produced one particular decapitated burial that frequently strikes even the most squeamish of modern viewers as amusing. In 1999 a group of four graves were found at Hartsfield School in Baldock containing a minimum of six individuals. Two of the inhumations were decapitated but one was particularly unusual (Fig. 2). The principal occupant of one grave was a man possibly around his sixties at the time of death; he had been decapitated. He was laid out supine with his feet to the north and the detached head by his feet. He was apparently buried in a coffin but was not the first or only interment within the grave. Still partially articulated remains of the previous tenant(s) had been pushed aside and towards the foot end of the grave to make room for the confined burial (Fig. 3). Contemporary with this later intrusion was the deposition of a neonate in the southeast corner of the grave. The bones were atop sherds of a bowl that has been paralleled with Going form E3, described as a bowl-jar (Going 1987); it is thought to date to the late fourth or early fifth century. The neonate is certainly associated with the decapitated burial as sherds from the same vessel were found within the coffin. These were at the top of the neck, where the head once was. A chicken had also been placed here (Fig. 4).

The notion of replacing someone's head with a chicken has a certain timeless quality to it where humour is concerned. Besides the amusement this often seems to provide, the next



Figure 2. The unusual burial from Hartsfield School, Baldock. By kind permission of Heritage Network Ltd.



Figure 3. The head by the feet of the man and the displaced but still partially articulated remains of the earlier burial(s). By kind permission of Heritage Network Ltd.



Figure 4. The chicken bones and pot sherds in position at the top of the neck. By kind permission of Heritage Network Ltd.

reaction (amongst Romanists at least) is to draw a parallel with the other well known chicken-headed man from Roman Britain. There is a unique Romano-British mosaic from the Isle of Wight that famously features a figure with a chicken head. The Brading Villa mosaic shows this figure standing in front of a building, either on a hill with a path leading to it or on stilts and with a ladder providing access. Two apparent griffins appear to the right of this scene. This has been variously interpreted as an image of Gnostic importance, as Iao or Abraxas (Henig 1995: 220–221), and even as something drawn from fairytales (Ling 1991: 17). There is a fundamental difference between our two chicken-headed figures though in that the burial does not have a chicken-head but a chicken *for a* head. This difference is further accentuated when it is noted that the chicken used in the Baldock case is, in fact, also headless.

The principal features of the burial strike modern observers as amusing in the first instance. Whilst this case is therefore an instance in which humour may be observed it is unlikely that

the positioning of the constituent parts actually arose from humorous intentions. The chicken, headless and atop sherds, is more likely a food offering. The potential implications of this choice and its positioning within the grave are not clear (see White 2007). It is likely therefore that the humour derived from this burial is accidental, as with other potential examples (see below). That burials seem to provide the best potential insights into the nature or even existence of humour as a formative motivation for deposition might seem unusual. Humour is certainly rarely associated with the funerary sphere, at least in the modern mindset. Emotions and emotional responses to events though are not uniform (Tarlow: 1999: 35). Efforts to consider emotion and variations in these within archaeology (Tarlow 2000) have not considered the possibility of permitted humour but do serve to highlight the possibility of such an occurrence. Indeed, we do not have to look far in search of what to us seem unacceptable expressions of humour in the Roman mortuary sphere. Carroll (2006: 148–150) has considered some of these unusual manifestations in a section entitled ‘Grave humour Roman style’ (an instance of humour in academic work as considered above). Plays on words within commemorative texts occur but more common are overtly humorous observations, which Carroll calls ‘dry humour’ (2006: 149). Such seemingly incongruous expression serves to demonstrate the error of assumption where the nature of humour in the past is concerned. By considering humour in relation to funerary activity we may directly challenge our preconceptions and enable us to more readily understand the possibility of detecting and appreciating humorous activity in the past. It also serves to highlight the complexities and differences of past and present readings as well as matters of comprehension.

Material puns

Attention has been drawn to an unusual piece of potentially observational humour relating to particular types of funerary deposits. There is a certain irony to the use of cooking vessels as cinerary urns in cremation burials; Fitzpatrick-Matthews has described this as a form of pun (2007: 165). It is possible that the use of ‘cooking vessels for cooked people’ may have been intentional and even served a role of including the deceased in the process of the funerary feast – placing them in the vessel used earlier to feed those in attendance. There are a number of issues to consider though in relation to this. The principal matter is whether the pun is one that the agents could have ‘got’ or been willing and able to make. It is possible that the connection never occurred to the people present at the funerals. As Fitzpatrick-Matthews rightly notes, the non-production of specifically funerary ceramic vessels makes such conflict with intended purpose not only inevitable but also highly complex (Fitzpatrick-Matthews 2007: 165). It is likely that form and availability were more important as factors in determining the vessel used in each instance, rather than any desire to make such a pun (cf. Biddulph 2005; also, more generally, see Miller 1985 for the various ways in which form and function may interrelate in connection with ceramics). This is not to entirely rule out the possibility that the amusing or unfortunate combination could be observed. The question is then one of appropriateness: was it possible for those involved to act upon this, to acknowledge it? A particular type of black humour is produced with the possibility of this pun being made in conversation at other times but perhaps not articulated at the graveside. Certainly similar situations exist today with death being a taboo subject but not one completely out of bounds for comedic efforts. We should note that these are restricted though and are rarely to be found during immediate funerary functions.

The most useful element of the possibly humorous choice of cinerary urn is the proposed phenomenon of material puns. The possibility exists that such structuring principles were more

common, perhaps being made in fields other than those pertaining to funerary activities (Keith Fitzpatrick-Matthews pers. comm.). The selection processes that determine the contents of deposits, or even the interrelation between items within structured deposits, could be subject to such observations made by the agents – connections similar to puns but perhaps never intended to be funny, merely appropriate. We might propose therefore that the often-unqualified choices that were clearly made in selecting items and means of deposition were of this form: complex word and associational ‘puns’ between circumstances and material objects or their symbolic connotations. The deposit encountered in a terminal of one of the southwest fort gate ditches at South Shields allows us to explore this further. The material includes the mutilated head of a sandstone statue (Croom 1994: 200) along with lion-head spouts from form 45 mortaria, cattle skulls and numerous circular pottery sherds (Snape 1994: 136). The recurrent theme of heads or faces was noted (Croom 1994: 200) but the choice of other pieces could not be explained (i.e. the presence of the circular ceramic fragments). Their importance was deduced from their association with the more obviously significant pieces (Snape 1994: 137) but this fails to reveal the reason for the deposition. Perhaps the structuring principle of this deposit took the form of an association generated by a pun. Our inability to determine the common factor could be the result of this barrier, one not simply of language spoken at the time of deposition that enunciated the choices made but one that formulated the association in the first place.

There exists a certain possibility that the decisions relating to all aspects of deposits were governed not by obvious associations but by complex and perhaps abstract word games. Even in instances where choice was somewhat limited and such humour perhaps thought unlikely to be expressed (i.e. the funerary situations) these puns could have been made, observed or even suppressed. This adds a further degree of complexity to any and all interactions with material culture, constituting one of the no-doubt numerous subconscious or contributory understandings of significance. The potential for ritual deposits to be structured by humorous observations or at least similar cognitive processes is interesting but does not strictly reveal instances of humour being directly expressed.

Conclusions

The seemingly offhand inclusion of a humorous potential amongst the possible interpretations for the treatment of the Camomile Street soldier was a rare instance of the entertainment of such a notion. It is not feasible in any one paper to completely explore all aspects of humour as it might be archaeologically evidenced. Despite this we might return our attention to this one case that sparked initial interest and consider the prospect in light of the possibilities looked at above. The soldier, as we have referred to him, was actually a military memorial relief carving nearly three hundred years old at the time of deposition. It was therefore not a normal subject for any form of interaction, least of all the rite of decapitated burial. The application of this particular custom could have been a result of a crisis brought about by the human form, funerary association and concerns of those present at the time of reuse. The positioning, as it relates to the body, was not the work of one individual, the weight alone preventing this. Amongst this group of workmen engaged in the elaboration of the city walls there could have existed a certain fear or sense of what was needed, some form of placatory action. This might have been for the protection of the building, themselves or for the good of the long-dead soldier depicted. Making an association no longer intelligible to us, it was decided to accord the rite of decapitated burial. In this way, the tombstone was deposited as it was found and the entire action was one of ritual and even

superstition, similar to other foundation deposits (see Merrifield 1987). The fact remains that this instance is unique and not so simply interpreted.

This piece is by no means the only sculpture or even tombstone reused in fourth-century Roman Britain. Where it differs is that no other piece has evidence of the manipulation of separated fragments at the moment of deposition, and certainly not the positioning of the divided head in such a fashion. More commonly, tombstones might be defaced prior to reuse. Efforts have been made to interpret some instances of such behaviour (Clay 2004) but cannot account for all such treatment nor this particular case. We might imagine the action to have been of a ritual nature, where that conveys some idea of the intended purpose, but it remains a unique instance of such an arrangement. It is this uncertainty and the similarity with a rite performed under quite different circumstances that enable the consideration of the humorous possibility. Whilst the majority of the piece had to be positioned by more than one person, the face constitutes a small fragment. This might have broken accidentally from the piece and its movement to between the ankles could have been a spur of the moment action performed by an individual. Whether this was for ritual purposes or amusement (personal or group) cannot be determined. The head may have been moved as a unique occurrence, informed by knowledge of the then current minority funerary customs and perhaps by a wry sense of humour. In this fashion the positioning was largely casual and probably accorded no great significance bar the fleeting amusement it provided to those present. The language that structured this deposition is irrevocably lost to us and consequently we must acknowledge the conflicting possibilities. Finally, we should note that the possibility of language games and connections, in addition to discrepant experiences of the same action, make our potential interpretations non-exclusive.

Humour is distinctly culturally dependent. Whilst it might be imagined that the population of Roman Britain would have thought like us where 'funny' is concerned, this is not guaranteed. There are profound changes in taste in humour just within Britain from the sixteenth century onwards (Bremmer and Roodenburg 1997b: 7). An analogy of difference in language has been used here to stress the disjuncture and difficulties of intelligibility. Whilst we may translate the Latin words of Cicero, often the joke itself must be explained or simply noted as now incomprehensible (consider the Loeb version of *De Oratore* II.ix.246). The difference in language is further stressed when the possibility of puns and ironic observations as structuring principles in deposition are considered. Modes of thought and of establishing connections considered irreverent or funny today might not always have been. Such puns, informing selection of object or means of deposition or even the positioning of constituent parts, must be the likeliest trace humorous intent will have left. The problem is that it is difficult to set out specific circumstances under which humour would have been the primary or a contributory factor in the generation of an archaeologically detectable deposit. The difficulty of accommodating this within our interpretations should not preclude the consideration of the possibility. We are unable to identify with certainty the meaning or purpose of many types of deposit and so should not be too exacting where the possibility of humorous intent is concerned. It is unlikely though that humour will ever feature highly in the list of possible interpretations advanced in any published archaeological account; the problem is distinctly one of understanding, acceptance and application. There are definite obstacles of intelligibility and the ever present danger that deposits or objects we identify as funny are only so because they conform to our notions of humour. We should, however, hope to see 'in humorous vein' appear more often, though certainly with greater consideration of where the humour came from and whether it was openly articulated, genuinely funny to all involved and a primary determining factor in the creation of the deposit. The well-developed

sense of humour evident within our profession should perhaps be allowed free-reign and the possibility of past humour in archaeology explored in greater detail. After all, the funny object or deposit encountered on site might well appear that way because it actually was.

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