
TRAC Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference

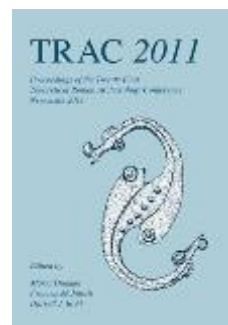
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Introduction: The Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference Turns 21

Eleanor Scott

The plenary session, ‘Retrospective Discussion’ which I chaired at the Newcastle TRAC in April 2011 marked the twenty-first anniversary of a conference that was designed as a probable one-off and which has run every year since. As the original creator and organiser of TRAC, I was absolutely delighted to return to the fold for a very fine weekend of theoretical archaeology amongst Romanists old and new. For the Retrospective, I shared a platform with Martin Millett and Richard Hingley and a very lively and enjoyable hour and a half it was, too, of anecdotes, Q&A, discussion and reminders of just how much TRAC has achieved and just how far Roman Archaeology has come over the past generation.

Some of the previous characteristics of Roman archaeology that we reminded ourselves about during that Retrospective were most likely unknown to younger scholars. The moment that I mentioned—with knowing nods from Lindsay Allason-Jones and Carol van Driel-Murray—that it was, ‘back in the day,’ frequently possible to be the *only* female speaker at an entire Roman archaeology conference, there was some startled laughter. We should never underestimate or overlook TRAC’s achievement in creating an egalitarian vehicle for men and women alike. Further, TRAC’s achievements lie not just within itself, but in what it has propelled others to do. Take RAC (the Roman Archaeology Conference), for example. TRAC’s influence was not just that it was felt necessary by some to create this mainstream response, but TRAC caused that response to be shaped in such a way that it created yet another significant platform upon which female archaeologists might be heard equally with male, and about strategic issues as well as operational ones.

During the Retrospective Discussion we touched on an issue that it was really only possible to do with the benefit of a generation’s hindsight. The question was posed: was the first TRAC an over-reaction to a non-problem, or was it useful and necessary? Richard Hingley and Martin Millett were quite certain. TRAC has mattered, and mattered significantly. It has stripped away much of the self-involved stratification and self-importance of the subject, and taken us away from a place where senior scholars got up and left a conference hall when a postgraduate took to the platform, and brought us to a world where fresh new ideas are valued for the message and not the perceived social characteristics of the messenger. The audience at the Retrospective were in agreement that a scholar’s particular narrative did not have any natural authority simply because of their position in the world, and TRAC had helped to eradicate this unwanted academic elitism within the discipline. Equally, women working in archaeology had their work re-valued from being ‘just’ whatever it was—‘small finds’, ‘gender stuff’, ‘babies’—to being actual archaeology. Crucially, ownership of ideas and the study of bodies of material became open to all. Nobody ‘owned’ the interpretation of Hadrian’s Wall or hoards or Italian landscapes. Postgraduates in particular were and are welcome to come along and turn established knowledge on its head, and demonstrate and connect with layers upon layers of meaning within the data and within the texts and within the subsequent modern narratives. The

result was that TRAC helped to establish professional careers that otherwise might not have been established.

That being said, TRAC does need to maintain a healthy balance between being a confidence- and career-enhancing platform for postgraduates and being a valued academic conference with some key-note speakers scattered throughout. What it is not, and should never be, is a seminar for the submission of research outlines for group discussion. As I stressed during the Retrospective, the original TRAC was inhabited by a large number of already established contributors, as well as those who would go on to become established and ‘elevated’ within their fields whether that be in the field or in academia (or both). One way or another, we were mostly professional archaeologists. I had just completed post-doctoral research funded by the British Academy and was working for RCHME. The roll call from the first TRAC conference, which I read out, is interesting: Sue Alcock, Brian Boyd, Geoff Carter, John Casey, Simon Clarke, Jon Coulson, Peter van Dommelen, Kevin Greene, Karen Griffiths, Richard Hingley, Ian Hodder, Kurt Hunter-Mann, Martin Jones, Rick Jones, Martin Millett, Richard Reece, Rob Rippengal, Ross Samson, Sarah Scott, Pat Southern and Greg Woolf. This first conference line-up was a real mix of contributors (and contributions), from the UK, the Netherlands and the USA, and it started a tradition that worked extremely well. I also thanked many others who were part of the culture of the time in and around Newcastle that was questioning traditional Romanism, whether it be excavation methodologies and interpretations, or academic narratives, such as Paul Bidwell, Nick Hodgson and Tony Wilmott. The fact that attendees such as Wilmott and van Driel-Murray were prepared to contribute quality papers to TRAC 2 and beyond helped to create a series with—to use the modern term—‘traction.’

The TRAC tradition, it was clear from the Retrospective, is also predicated on it being a friendly place. TRAC may be edgy, but it is safe. No-one gets ripped to shreds at TRAC. No-one’s ego is allowed to take precedence over a researcher’s presentation and learning process. This, it emerged, was a critical factor in TRAC’s continued success. Yet it has not driven down ‘production values.’ Far from it—the content of the papers at TRACs in recent years has been very rewarding and the contents of the peer-reviewed volumes excellent. This volume proves these points. The ten papers selected to represent the conference not only look at the possible meanings of the ways in which the archaeological data presents itself but reach fascinating conclusions and suggest future research avenues. I have particularly enjoyed how they have taken possession of strands of some established areas of research, from *terra sigillata* to Vindolanda, and shown how framing questions in alternative ways allows the data to be better, or differently, understood. TRAC as ever is an invitation to come and talk about not just which complex data sets one is studying, but *how* they are being studied.

For example, Van Oyen’s paper on *terra sigillata* brings to us a sophisticated conceptual landscape rather than simple pottery production, development and distribution. Weber asks if *terra sigillata* has yet given up to us all possible information on the Roman economy, and in interrogating the data she reveals how much more there is to be discovered about consumer patterns and decision-making; Biddulph also effectively emphasises actors and agency, and examines evolutionary traits and deposition in a radical way. Green’s paper on the social role of women on a military frontier is a riot of information on different social and historical contexts, and looks at gender writ large within social and military space; whilst van Driel-Murray examines displacement and mobility with particular reference to the Batavian context in a typically sparkling and detailed piece of work. Alongside this, looking at the military role in and the meaning of ‘romanisation’ in the Lower Rhineland, Mata shows how closer engagement with anthropological and ethnographic scholarship by Roman archaeologists can

stimulate their historical imagination and enhance archaeological interpretations. Rohl, looking ahead to new possibilities in the study of the Antonine Wall, takes a word so beloved of archaeologists—region—and subjects the representation of region to scrutiny through analysis of the ‘deep maps’ of chorography, and once again layers of meanings are revealed to us rather than flat description. The cultural and historical representation of place, space, and routes through it, is discussed by Mulryan, in his developed and penetrating account of narrative led itineraries in the late antique landscape. Also valuable is Garland’s analysis of the social impact of, and the social meanings behind, the variance in landscape boundaries in the Chichester region across the late Iron Age and Roman periods. All the papers look at perception, representation, and ask the evidence for *more*. They have built on comments made and discussion enjoyed at the conference, and are the stronger for it.

Allason-Jones’s paper was the ‘state of the nation’ plenary performance at TRAC 2011 and while she rues the excision of ‘the jokes,’ it remains an entertaining gallop across twenty years’ terrain. I like Lindsay’s exhortation to ‘boldly go,’ to be ‘cross’ and ‘passionate’ about Roman archaeology and matters arising. It is also timely that she refers to PPG16. The possible demise of developer-funded rescue archaeology, and the politics of high-end archaeological policy-making, was discussed at the Retrospective, and revealed how much TRAC’s heart remained as much in the field as in the lecture theatre.

Dear TRAC, it is a privilege to know you.

Acknowledgements

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