
TRAC Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference

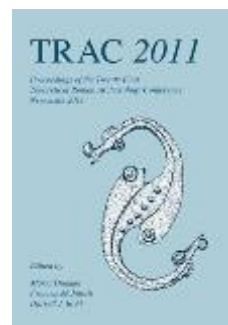
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She Said ‘Emic’

Lindsay Allason-Jones

The title of my paper comes from an artwork by Ruth Barker (Fig. 1), the Centre for Interdisciplinary Artefact Studies’ 2010 Leverhulme Artist in Residence. Her project, *Low Metamorphosis*, aimed to explore the potential of using performance and textual practice in relation to material artefacts and their current institutional contexts and interpretations. As she interrogated the relationship between the objects in the Great North Museum and ideas—between what a culture believes and the artefacts it produces—she became aware of the crucial nature of the objects that people produce and use over time and she now uses alternative media to ensure that the ephemeral nature of her performances has a legacy.

Whilst she was with us Ruth attended my lectures on artefacts, particularly those on archaeological theory from which she plucked various words, such as ‘emic.’ Whilst familiarising my students with the terminology of archaeological theory I have noticed that some of them find this terminology terrifying and switch off, whilst others get overly excited by the words to the extent that they forget what they are really trying to do. This matter of language is important and the subject of archaeological theory has been bedevilled by it. In museum exhibitions, in giving talks to the public, school children and undergraduates, as in television and radio programmes, one is trying to get complex ideas across to ordinary people and there is no point in using complex language because one will lose one’s audience immediately. So why do we use such language? Is it for our own benefit? So the funding bodies can feel comfortable and tick boxes? Or is it for the greater good of society? At the moment there is concern about the part *Impact* is to play in the next Research Assessment exercise. Archaeology, by its very nature, should have no difficulty in showing that it has impact but it can take many years before cutting edge research makes it through to the rest of society and when it comes to theoretical archaeology some of this time can be taken up with needless translation. Sadly, there are many academics who are wandering around intellectually naked, clad only in phrases such as ‘transcendent meta-narrative’ and ‘counter-hegemonic blocs,’ clouding the theoretical issue. May I strongly urge everyone to think very carefully about what they are doing, what they are trying to say, who they are doing it for, and who is ultimately paying for it?

The 2011 TRAC conference marked and celebrated the 21st anniversary of the first Theoretical Archaeology Conference which was also held in Newcastle. According to a review of the Second Conference Proceedings (BN.com (Barnes & Noble)), the ethos of that first conference was to provide ‘an essentially egalitarian arena for discussion of, and fighting over, the introduction and application of theory in Roman archaeology. Accepting the need for explicit awareness of theory in Roman archaeology, the contributors get on with the business of showing how a wide variety of perspectives and intellectual approaches offer new insights or alternative interpretations of a range of data.’ In other words, TRAC provides a safe place for postgraduates and others to air new and developing ideas in the hope of inspiring discussion without too much bloodshed.

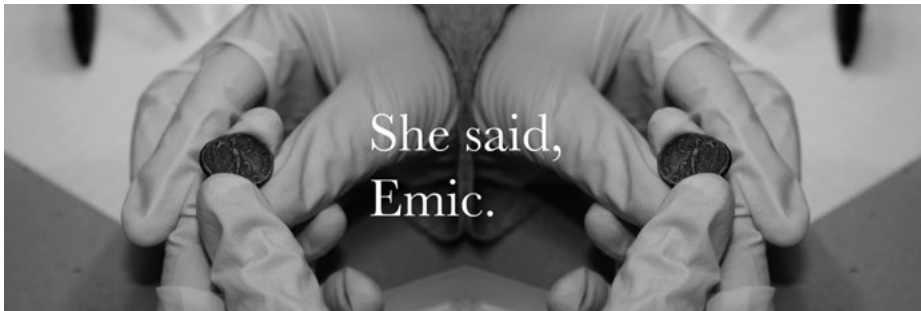


Figure 1: 'She said, Emic' artwork. Image courtesy of Ruth Barker, 2011.

I liked this summation of the ethos of the first conference. It makes it sound like we knew exactly what we were doing and set about it with energy. And that first conference was great fun, as have been the subsequent ones. But I do rather wonder, looking back, if all this energy and conferring has had a marked impact on our understanding and knowledge of the people and sites we are studying or not. Each new wave of theoretical archaeologists bustles onto the stage with a clutch of new words: processual, post processual, post-post-processual, phenomenology, structuration theory etc etc, and everyone looks suitably impressed and we witness the birth of a new fashion but do we actually know more or, more importantly, do we understand more, as a result?

Jane Webster, in a review of TRAC 6, identified 'a reflection of theoretical trends in other social sciences, but with a marked time lag' (1999). TRAC was first held because the Theoretical Archaeology Group had been established for some time and the Romanists were trailing behind. This has become the pattern: the social scientists develop a theory which is absorbed by TAG and then TRAC takes it on board. However, something invariably gets lost *en route*. This is, probably, because the social scientists' theories are created to explore and explain specific modern phenomena; when a theory is adapted to study an ancient scenario, whether that is prehistoric, Roman or later, it may not fit precisely or may not have been fully understood by the adapters. Once it has been disseminated at TAG or TRAC the resulting work can resemble an intellectual game of Chinese Whispers and before we know where we are, we are sending three and fourpence because we are going to a dance, rather than sending reinforcements because we're going to advance.

At the 1996 TRAC, John Barrett gave a paper called 'Theorising Archaeology' in which he discussed the 'silent other,' by which he meant those folk in the past who left no voice through texts and epigraphy, and he asked 'what secures our archaeological narratives of those silent lives from the charges which we now lay before earlier commentators' (1997: 1). He carried on, 'why is an archaeology of "post colonial perspectives," or any other perspectives..., able to recover a reality which others either failed or refused to see?' and, following Susan Alcock's comments about 'imaginary landscapes' (1993) he asked 'Why are we not also creating our own imaginary landscapes of liberal concern?' It is reasonable to use the theories of anthropology or sociology to try to uncover the lives of 'the silent others' but these theories can often simplify a very complex situation—what is true for one group may be completely untrue for another. We need always be aware that one ethnic groups' reasoning behind aspects of their lives may have seemed just as weird to their neighbours in the Roman period as they do to us today.

We all strive to approach our research in an objective way. However, that is not as easy as it might appear. We have all been shaped as individuals by our genetic structure, our family backgrounds, our upbringing, our education and our life experiences. No matter how hard we try, it is very difficult to slough off these influences when we approach our study of the past. There are times, however, when I wonder how hard some colleagues try.

John Barrett stated that ‘it seems a false hope that we might ever explain the past given the current uncertainties over our contemporary and future world’ (1997: 2). Looking back from these even more uncertain times, 1996 may in hindsight seem an almost halcyon period for archaeology. However, people always consider themselves to live through ‘interesting times’ with uncertainty all around them and look back to the good old days—this is also evident in the works of the Latin authors. John Barrett was of the opinion that creating a theory of everything was less believable in 1996 than it was in the 1980s but was it ever really believable, given that whether we are seeking to understand the world around us today or understand the lives of people in the past we are studying people and people are perverse creatures who don’t always follow the rules as we understand them? It is this perverseness that gets in the way of our peculiar search for the truth.

Over the past 21 years there has been a great deal of excavation, both as a result of PPG16 and research led excavations. The same 21 years has seen a marked improvement in how much information is published about the artefacts found in excavation and there have been some monumental and seminal syntheses, particularly in regard to sculpture and epigraphy. We now have a great deal more material to know more about and to fit into our theories, and the irritating thing about this sort of data is that there can be too much of it, to the extent that whilst one can come up with a satisfying theory to explain 500 objects, once you get to 500,000 there are invariably going to be a few objects that don’t fit your theory. Eleanor Scott in 2005 referred to ‘the smug self satisfied Roman establishment’ which existed when TRAC started, which felt that ‘the quantity of evidence alone available to Romanists could and should transcend the need for theory’ (2006: 114). On the contrary, the more evidence you have the more you need to use theory to make sense of it otherwise all you have are lists. That said, we must accept that we do not have all the artefacts that ever existed for the Roman period across the whole Empire and our theories must take this into consideration.

In Roman Britain the appearance of the Romans on our shores brought with it a written language (Tomlin 2011). Admittedly, literacy didn’t take immediately, and for some people it never took at all, but it is through the medium of the written word, whether on writing tablet, curse tablet or stone inscription, that we know the names of some individual people who lived in Roman Britain, albeit a minority. This gives us an edge on our colleagues in prehistory who can discuss generalities but cannot know, except in very rare circumstances, the names of the individual people they are striving to understand. Knowing about an individual, however, can lead us to forget that the Roman Empire was of considerable size and we know surprisingly little about how the different provinces interacted with each other and the government in Rome.

Various themes crop up regularly in TRAC conferences: gender, critiques of Romanization as a model, resistance, comparative colonialism, identity, agency, and ethnicity and as times move on, new themes take precedence. Jane Webster noted that just as an interest in gender issues has dropped in recent TRACs, so too has the proportion of female to male contributors (Webster 1999). The topic, however, did not start at a very high level. In 1993 Eleanor Scott expressed her concern that the study of Roman archaeology showed no ‘interest in gender relations and the experience of women’ but also noted ‘that women are still marginalised

within the profession of Roman archaeology' (Scott 1993: 2; see also Scott 2006: 111). In 2005 Ray Laurence commented that 'the study of women let alone gender remains under-developed not just within TRAC, but within Roman Archaeology as a whole' (2006: 121). I would agree that more needs to be done in this area but I would also urge that new slants on the topic need to be addressed rather than the same ones repeated. In 2006 Pim Allison and Thomas Becker first published their various work using artefact analysis and GIS to identify a female presence in the forts and fortresses in Germany (Allison 2006a; 2006b; 2008; 2009; Becker 2006). This was groundbreaking research which supported the theories expounded in TRAC 2 (van Driel Murray 1995; Allason-Jones 1995). Nowadays it can be accepted that there were women present in Roman military contexts and we really don't need to keep hammering away at this. The innovative work of 2006, however, has been seized upon by young scholars who have not always grasped the problems inherent in the methodology—problems which were quite clear to the original researchers—and have applied it with a lack of rigour. Becker laid out the primary need to first catalogue the finds (Becker 2006: 37); for, in all theory, it is essential to check the assemblage for oneself and not rely on published catalogues. The importance of what is not there also needs to be taken into consideration, such as recyclable material. Also, as Mike Bishop has stated, in reference to Roman military equipment, 'In order to understand what Roman military equipment can tell us, we need to feel comfortable about its taphonomy: in other words, how did it get into the archaeological record and what happened to it before, during, and after that event?' (2011: 115). This is equally so with other classes of Roman artefact.

Ethnicity is another topic that is popular in TRAC and can also get out of hand. Just because an object is unparalleled does not mean necessarily that it is ethnic. Equally, if an object has parallels in two regions we should not presume that this indicates that the two areas share an ethnic affiliation. Objects can be inspired by the designs of artefacts from other ethnic regions. The popularity of an artefact in an area need not imply that that is its original core area or that a large group of people have travelled there from the core area. It may suggest the movement of troops but may also indicate the movement of a single craftsman. Equally, the movement of people took time in the ancient world—if we take as an example the 5000+ Sarmatians who were drafted into Britain in the 2nd century A.D., it is unreasonable to presume that everything they used in Britain had been brought with them from their homeland. It will have taken months to shift that many men plus their families from southern Russia; artefacts will have been damaged *en route* and would need to be replaced—it is not entirely unreasonable to suggest that these travelling Sarmatians may have seen something they fancied in a province as they were passing through and bought it because it was attractive or a curiosity or a useful replacement for a damaged possession.

Gender and ethnicity studies are very valid, but if you as individuals are to move these topics on then you need to have some original theories and not simply take on other peoples' theories and worry them to death.

What to the future? John Barratt warned us not to deny the material realities of the contemporary world but I would also add that the realities he referred to are just as applicable to the ancient world and could bear attention, such as 'the huge inequalities of wealth,' 'the fragile ecosystem,' and 'the acts of genocide' (Barratt 1997). I would also draw attention to the fact that little work has been done on the impact the Roman invasion had on people as individuals. What, for example, was the effect on individuals of introducing coinage to a non-monetary economy, the impact on family life when some members start to work outside the home for wages rather than within the family milieu, the effect on people when they had to

conform to the artificial time constraints of set hours in a day and a calendar, rather than just to day and night or the seasons, the impact on family life when the children adapt more quickly to the new ways than their parents, particularly in regards to language, or the effect on people who had had a clearly understood tribal position when their new standing depended largely on the status of their town?

In 2005 TRAC ‘was identified as a potential vehicle for change’ (Laurence 2006; Gardner 2006) and in many ways we can think of TRAC as missionary work. In 1995 the decision was taken for TRAC to meet alongside RAC every second year. This was controversial at the time, and for some colleagues it remains so, but it does keep Roman Empire studies young and fresh and acts as a brake on those people who are tempted to provide a paper along the lines of ‘what I did in my summer holidays’, a habit which can so often lower the tone of archaeological conferences. TRAC is also an excellent training ground for postgraduates and young career lecturers—offering the chance to face a conference audience for the first time and to publish those important first papers and I am concerned that an increasing number of people give their paper and then don’t submit a written version for the annual publication. Remember the artist Ruth Barker’s view that we need to provide evidence for those who follow us and not indulge in fleeting and ephemeral performances.

Every five years or so TRAC invites someone to assess the ‘state of the nation’ of Roman theory. Each time this person emphasises that ‘TRAC today is not the same thing as TRAC then’ (Laurence 2006) and this is all to the good. If each TRAC followed the same ground then it would not be what TRAC should be. Ray Laurence’s contribution to TRAC 15 was entitled ‘21st century TRAC: is the Roman Battery Flat?’ and Andrew Gardner followed this by asking if TRAC had a future. In my opinion the battery is not completely flat and TRAC does have a future but only if this generation of young scholars doesn’t rest on the laurels of their predecessors. I would urge everyone to rediscover the fine suicidal rapture of TRAC 1. TRAC may be, at the age of 21, a venerable institution but it should not be a staid or conservative one. Do not just continue to inch forward tentatively but ‘boldly go.’ Try out new ideas, rock the boat, get cross, be passionate about your subject—that is what TRAC was about, should be about and, with enthusiasm and the support of a fine pantheon of gods, could and should be in the future.

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Note

This is a much abridged version of the 40 minute plenary paper I gave at TRAC 2011. As a consequence a lot of the jokes have been cut out, particularly as many of them were visual. I apologise to those readers who may be disappointed but a lecture is a performance and it is never possible, as Ruth Barker has taught me, to trap a performance and pin it to the page satisfactorily.

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