

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

# Postnationalism and the Past: The Politics of Theory in Roman Archaeology

Emily Hanscam

Department of Archaeology, Durham University, UK  
[e.r.hanscam@durham.ac.uk](mailto:e.r.hanscam@durham.ac.uk)

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European archaeology faces two significant challenges: the intractability of old national narratives about the past, combined with the resurgence of reactionary populism, and the need to update the toolkit of social archaeological theory to meet the challenges presented by the current global political climate. The theory of postnationalism offers one way of addressing both the present political situation and the need to rejuvenate archaeological theory to meet this danger—it provides both a warning of how nationalism continues to influence research and an entreaty for archaeology to embrace its political nature. By exploring the history of scholarship and politics in Roman archaeology in Romania and the public reception of Roman studies in Britain through the lens of postnationalism, this paper argues that while the past has always been and always will be political, archaeology as a discipline is at a watershed moment—archaeologists must become unapologetic political actors.

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## Introduction

Roman scholarship has frequently both supported and been inspired by nationalism and other political movements across the former empire—from the creation of the Romanian national narrative based on the Roman past in the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the links between Roman Britain and British imperialism in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. There are many discernible links in the history of Roman archaeology between the study of the Roman past, the use (or not) of theory, and contemporary politics. Developments in archaeological theory over the past few decades have recognised this relationship between the study of the past and politics of the present, highlighting the need to critique practice and theory in terms of contemporary social and political contexts. And yet, while Roman scholarship is targeting themes like multiculturalism, multivocality, globalisation, and hybridity, in the interest of both diversifying narratives about the past and progressing scholarship beyond theories like Romanisation, the relationship between politics and research has changed rapidly since 2016. In the post-truth era of Trump and Brexit, archaeologists like González-Ruibal et al. (2018a; 2018b) and Brophy (2018a; 2018b) argue that archaeologists must be ready to intervene in public debates, and González-Ruibal (2018) in particular argues that the liberal, multivocal model of social archaeology is no longer tenable in this political climate.

Unlike the well-studied relationship between archaeology and nationalism (see e.g. Arnold 1990; Dietler 1994; Díaz-Andreu and Champion 1996; Meskell 2002; Hamilakis 2007; Kohl et al. 2007), a relationship born during the Enlightenment but still persisting today, the current themes (those criticised by González-Ruibal) in Romano-British scholarship are more a critique of than a reflection of contemporary politics, similar to the 1980s in the UK when post-processual archaeology was in part a reaction to Thatcher (Yoffee 2003: 862). In the era of Brexit, politics and society have become more xenophobic and right-wing, contrary to themes currently being explored in Roman archaeology (Hingley et al. 2018). Research which suggests that Roman Britain might have been more diverse than previously thought continues to draw criticism in popular media (Beard 2017), possibly because former narratives about the past built on theories like Romanisation are so entrenched. There is therefore a disconnect between research and public reception. At the same time, there

is a new risk that archaeology in general is losing the focus on the political and social context of research, given the proliferation of aDNA studies, which are seen as creating value-free knowledge about the past (see e.g. Heyd 2017; Furholt 2018). As is evidenced by several sessions held at the Theoretical Archaeology Group conference (TAG) in December 2018, the resurgence of positivism is of great concern to a wide group of archaeologists.<sup>1</sup>

There are two main problems: the continued survival of the old national narratives about the past coupled with the recent reactionary populism in politics, and the need for archaeologists to find a new way of effectively challenging the political status-quo. The theory of postnationalism is one way of potentially addressing both the current political climate and the necessity to rejuvenate archaeological theory—it is a warning of how nationalism continues to influence research and an entreaty to consider how we can best support humanity presently. By exploring the history of research and politics in Roman archaeology in Romania and the public reception of Roman studies in Britain, this paper will argue that while archaeology has always been and always will be political, we are at a watershed moment in the discipline in which archaeologists must also intentionally engage with politics. While recognising that archaeologists/intellectuals and ‘the public’ are not in constant opposition, nor are they homogenous groups with unified views, this paper treats them in admittedly basic terms in order to highlight the present political climate.

The Roman past is political throughout the borders of the former Empire, but Romania is a particularly valuable example for a study targeting archaeology, nationalism, and Romans; it is the only nation in Eastern Europe which employs the Roman past for its national foundation myth (Boia 2001a). We should remember that nationalist movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, similar to later postcolonialist movements, began with liberal and emancipatory agendas—in Romania’s case it was the desire for liberation from the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Ottoman Empire. National identity in Romania has been at varying times based on the continuous presence of either a Latin population (Romans), an Iron Age population (Dacians), or a combination of the two (Daco-Romans); the migratory tribes like the Goths, Huns, Avars, Bulgars, Magyars, and Slavs who came later are not seen as ancestral to the nation, as they are in neighbouring nations such as Hungary or Bulgaria (Boia 2001a: 107). Romanian nationalism based on the idea of a common ethnic identity has proven to be extremely resilient (Cinpoș 2010: 4), and Romania is frequently described as a ‘Latin island in a Slavic sea’ (Boia 2001b: 36). Much of this has to do with Romania’s relationship to the past, specifically the Roman past, as modern Romania contains the Roman provinces of Dacia and Moesia Inferior, the latter of which became Scythia Minor in the late third/early fourth century AD (**Figure 1**). Of these Dacia has been the most significant to Romanian nationalism, because of its past as a ‘failed’ Roman territory,



**Figure 1:** Roman provinces and modern Romania. (Map: Christina Unwin. Reproduced with permission).

which the Empire was only able to hold between 106 and 275 AD. The relative briefness of the Roman presence does not, however, appear to have impacted upon the Roman myth of origin. For this paper I will limit this discussion to the circumstances surrounding the creation of the Romanian nation-state in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and the subsequent changes to the Romanian national narrative this inspired. Even today the Romanian national narrative is premised on the myth of Daco-Roman ancestry which greatly influences Iron Age archaeology in Romania (Popa 2015).

British identity is also inextricably tied into notions of civilisation and barbarism—discourses have at times drawn on ideas reinforced by the ‘Romanisation’ narrative employed in British Roman archaeology, or contrasted the Romans as civilisers with the local (native/barbarian) resistance to Roman rule by figures like Boudica (Hingley 2011). Furthermore, during the Victorian period and through the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the British imperial mission was explicitly linked to the colonising power of the Roman Empire, and Britain’s Roman past was seen as a ‘resource of immense contemporary political value’ (Hingley 2000: i). Because of the efforts of Hingley, Mattingly, and the founders of the Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference (TRAC) during the 1990s, the political nature of the Roman/native past in Britain is now widely recognised within modern scholarship (see e.g. Hingley 2000; 2008; 2011; Mattingly 1997; 2004; 2013; Scott 1993; James and Millett 2001; Gardner 2013), something which has not happened nearly as significantly in Romanian archaeology. Does this mean that (Roman) archaeology in the UK is a ‘success’ story? Although British archaeology has responded to the postcolonial critique much more strongly than Romanian archaeology, in many ways British identity remains entangled with the Roman past, and public narratives about the past have not fully absorbed its critique (Bonacchi et al. 2018; Hingley et al. 2018).

This paper will firstly compare postnational theory to the social archaeology theoretical toolkit (multiculturalism, multivocality, etc.), briefly covering how both evolved and why postnationalism might address the perceived inadequacies of social archaeological theory to combat the reactionary populism of Trump and Brexit. It will then compare the development of the Roman-based Romanian national narrative during the 19<sup>th</sup> century to how Roman archaeology has been drawn into Brexit debates over identity and migration. Finally, it will present a vision for what a postnational Roman archaeology might look like and how all archaeologists might rise to meet the political challenges of the present-day.

## Postnationalism—in Theory

The theory of postnationalism provides a means of finding a common humanity; postnationalism is understood by Sarmela (2015: 1671) as the global state to which humanity will eventually progress, by Appadurai (1996: 158) as a tool to critique nationalism, and by Sutherland (2012: 45) as linked to theories of hybridity and new ways of understanding relationships. Postnationalism was first developed during the early 2000s, initially linked to globalisation because scholars believed that the latter would eventually lead to a postnational world (Özkirimli 2005)—in this respect it was a description of the direction the world was heading towards. Appadurai (1996: 158) writes ‘we need to think ourselves beyond the nation,’ which led to postnationalism as a critical perspective or tool to critique nationalism. At times scholars have believed that the world was in a postnationalist age (Habermas 2001; Sassen 2003), or that the European Union was a postnational polity (Della Sala 2013: 157), but by 2015 this is seen as an optimistic view of a bygone era (Eriksen 2015: 655).

Postnationalism remains as a theory, but differing views proliferate. Sarmela (2015: 1673–1674) for instance believes postnationalism is the global state or the natural end point of civilisation, writing that it is a ‘neoliberal economic ideology’ meant to turn the world into a ‘post-local world economic system,’ and the European Union is proof that ‘ideological differences have narrowed’. There are a number of issues with her arguments: firstly, she does not question methodological nationalism (the logical fallacy that being organised into nations is the ‘natural’ state of humanity), secondly she takes the idea of linear progress as a given, and thirdly she does not account for the resurgence of ideological differences (right-wing politics) which had early origins in the late 2000s.

My use of postnationalism aligns most closely with Appadurai (1996) and Sutherland (2012), I understand it as a lens on the past that reminds us to look beyond the default assumption of nationalism, thus discouraging the basic ‘Us vs. Them’ identity through opposition. Postnationalism also reminds us that archaeological research must remain within its socio-political context—it is both a warning of how nationalism continues to influence research and an entreaty to consider what presently is of greatest use to humanity. I would argue that reinforcing commonality and empathy ought to be of the highest priority, along with a healthy scepticism for generalisations about categories of identity.

It is not a new idea that we must recognise the impact of politics, society, and our own personal biases on research into the past. The postprocessual movement of the 1980s in archaeology began as a reaction against the 'dehumanising' science of processualism (which itself was a reaction to culture-history), bringing social and political issues back to the forefront of archaeological practice (Trigger 2006: 444). Shanks and Tilley (1987a; 1987b) argued that the practice of archaeology is political and subjective, and as such critical self-reflection must have a significant role within the discipline. Relating to the ongoing wider postmodern discourse within the social sciences, including Foucault's (1980; 1982) discussion on the relationship between power and knowledge, postprocessualism was supported by other challenges to the patriarchal archaeological status quo.<sup>2</sup>

Harris and Cipolla (2017: 3) challenge the perception of 20<sup>th</sup> century paradigm shifts in archaeological theory, arguing that in practical terms archaeology requires aspects of culture-history (emphasis on typology), processualism (emphasis on science), and postprocessualism (understanding of the complexities of past meanings and identities). They also argue that archaeology is currently impeded by the persistence of Cartesian dualisms in trying to understand the world, dualisms like nature/culture, fact/interpretation, past/present, change/continuity (Harris and Cipolla 2017: 5). These dualisms—like methodological nationalism and Hingley et al.'s (2018) insistent dualities—prevent us from being critical about how we see the world. This is also important when it comes to politics and archaeology today, it is not so much a question of identifying biased/unbiased archaeologies, but a matter of continuing to challenge the underlying assumptions of archaeological work.

One of the biggest assumptions, recently pointed out by González-Ruibal (2018) and González-Ruibal et al. (2018a; 2018b), is that the theories associated with social archaeology (defined as archaeologies concerned with the relationship between the discipline and society), still constitute sufficient political/public engagement. 'Multivocality' for instance, has become a buzzword which, while it was formerly a necessary solution to the hierarchical nature of knowledge production about the past, now conceals structural inequalities and generally pacifies voices rather than supporting them (González-Ruibal 2018). Multiculturalism is too strongly linked now to neoliberalism, highlighting racial differences while ignoring class inequalities (González-Ruibal et al. 2018a), and frequently focuses on minorities to rewrite the past in a positive light (González-Ruibal 2018).<sup>3</sup> In other words, the postcolonial critique which was an appropriate challenge to positivistic views on the past is no longer sufficient, and we must 'rearm' with a more explicitly political archaeology.

We can find plurality in the past, but we must take care to avoid the danger well-known from Roman studies that is a 'malleable and self-serving' understanding of the Roman Empire (as either oppressive or inclusive) depending on what we wish to see in the present (Witcher 2015: 205). The current state of global politics necessitates studies that counter xenophobia and nationalism, and it is important to be particularly critical of entrenched beliefs that support division. This is necessary to more effectively challenge the resurgence of far-right politics that provides simple answers for complicated problems, with the ambition of fostering a global society that is more tolerant of difference and less concerned with national identities. A world less focused on ethno-territorial identity and the threat of immigration by 'others' would be more just and safer.

The historian David Cannadine (2013: 261) argues that our presentation of history has been dominated by an 'exaggerated insistence on the importance of confrontation and difference' which 'is a disservice to the cause of knowledge' and 'misrepresented the nature of the human condition'. He points out that we have continually used mutually exclusive categories of identity (such as nation, race, or civilisation) to understand the past as an endless series of conflicts, while there is just as much evidence for collaboration, conversation, and unity. This is echoed in a recent book by Appiah (2018: xiv), which notes that categories of identity like nationality are 'legacies of the way of thinking that took their modern shape in the nineteenth century, and it is high time to subject them to the best thinking of the twenty-first'.

The uncritical projection of multiculturalism into the past may have reinforced these exclusive categories, emphasising the existence of minorities in places like Roman Britain, when it is not really helpful in communicating the complexity of the territory to the public (Beard 2017). For the past 30 or so years it was enough to recognise that the social/political context of research existed—now, we must recognise that the political context has changed so rapidly we must likewise update our response as archaeologists.

This is where I believe postnationalism might be helpful—the key point being that postnationalism as a theory is not about overthrowing nation-states as political bodies, but is a theoretical exercise meant to reinforce the importance of the social/political context and to offer an alternative view of the past forgoing exclusionary, diametrically opposed, or 'insistently dual' (sensu Hingley) categories of identity,

like the civilisation versus barbarism dichotomy frequently found within Roman studies. Postnationalism is not meant to act as a national/postnational dichotomy (despite what is implied), it is instead all about relationships—about how people can accept differences, find commonality across them, and coexist.

### Nationalism and the Romans in Romania

The Romanian national narrative dates from the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, with the first recorded instances of intellectuals linking the peasants of the ‘Romanian’ territories—Wallachia, Moldavia, and Transylvania—to the Romans who had colonised the province of Dacia in Antiquity (Boia 2001a). The idea gained particular traction during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Wallachia and Moldavia began to argue for independence from the Ottoman Empire which had ruled over the region for centuries. In order to achieve independence, politicians and intellectuals in the territories appealed to the Western European powers on the basis of their shared Roman heritage—the ‘Romanians’, as the sons of Rome, clearly belonged with the enlightened, civilised West rather than the despotic, barbarian Orient (Hitchins 2014). It was an effective appeal, and resulted in the establishment of the United Principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia in 1859, and the independent Romanian principality in 1877.

Texts published during the early-mid 19<sup>th</sup> century show the conviction behind the myth of Roman ancestry—in 1812 Petru Maior published *Istoria pentru începutul Românilor în Dacia* (*The History of the Origins of the Romanians in Dacia*) which was not meant as a general history but was specifically a response to the criticisms levied against the Romanians by foreign historians (Hitchins 1996: 211). Maior (1990: 173) wrote that:

‘Many foreign writers, urged by an evil spirit, wish to insult with their pens the Romanians, grandchildren of the old Romans; these are the people who in the past urged the barbarians to hate the Romans and their masters; or to envy them; the brave conquerors of the entire world; now and then, they research something and tell obvious lies about the Romanians ... My plan is not to weave the entire history of the Romanians, but rather their beginnings in Dacia, that Dacia about which old writers wrote, so that when people see what noble ancestry the Romanians have descended, they shall follow in the footsteps of their forefathers ... Those who wished harm to the Romanians ... want to make us believe that in the days of Aurelian all the Romans left Dacia, and that the Romans that are now on this bank of the Danube were not born of the Romans who were left in Dacia by Aurelian, but of those that centuries after him crossed the Danube and came here, to Dacia. We will set out to demonstrate that their opinion is born out of envy.’

This text also shows the sort of ‘imposter syndrome’ experienced by those making claims for the Romanian’s Roman ancestry—scholars like Maior had to account for the fact that the Romanians were in a relatively uncivilised state compared to the rest of Europe. They were able to do this by arguing the Romanians had sacrificed their civilisation ‘on the swords of the Ottomans’, defending the West against the Eastern threat, telling a story of subjugation, of decline, and most critically an undesired integration into the Oriental world, which was couched as an ‘interruption’ in the normal pattern of national evolution (Boia 2001a). In 1840 Mihail Kogălniceanu founded the *Dacia Literară* literary review which ‘aimed to promote a sense of unity and purpose among all Romanians living within the historical boundaries of ancient Dacia by cultivating a genuinely national literature’ (Hitchins 1996: 193). In 1853 August Treboniu Laurian published his *History of the Romanians* which began with the foundation of Rome in 735 BC (Laurian 1853), and furthermore attempted to create a nonsensical ‘artificial language’ out of Romanian purified from non-Latin elements (Boia 2001a: 87).

Laurian published immediately before Wallachia and Moldavia achieved union in 1859, and his work marks the end of the pure-Roman ancestry myth—once the Romanians began to achieve political independence, the call for an indigenous ‘autochthonous’ (Dacian) identity likewise began to supersede the colonising Latin identity. Dacia was more of a ‘manifest destiny’, a call to the homeland in accordance with the contemporary idea that people’s souls are formed by the soil on which they are born (Verdery 1991: 211). According to the principles of ethnic nationalism, if Romania wanted to claim the territory of Transylvania from Hungary, they had to prove that their people had an older claim to that land. Since the Romans had a well-known date of arrival into the Carpathians, the Romanians had to use instead the less tangible longevity of the Dacians to pre-empt the Hungarian Magyars. Hungary had previously justified ownership of Transylvania by claiming it was empty when the Magyar nomads entered in the late 9<sup>th</sup> century AD.



The Dacians were also politically powerful—Verdery (1991: 36–37) writes that ‘unlike Latinism, Dacianism meant *independence* in politics, for pre-Roman Dacia had been powerful within its region and had even exacted tribute for a time from Rome.’ As the Dacians began to appear in the Romanian histories written by scholars like Bogdan Haşdeu or Ion Brătianu, archaeological work also began to appear as a means of accessing the Dacian past (Enea 2012: 94). The mission of Romanian archaeology was to stir up the Dacian substratum, previously overshadowed by the brilliance of the Romans, as a way of emphasizing the pre-Ottoman Romanian past. G. Tocilescu published in 1880 the first synthesis of Romanian history that stressed the Dacians over the Romans, *Dacia Înainte de Romani* or *Dacia before the Romans* (O Riagain and Popa 2012: 60).

A fundamental shift had taken place—because of the initial success of Romanian nationalism, a different narrative was now being advanced to further promote the Romanian cause. Both the narrative of Roman ancestry and the narrative of Dacian ancestry had specific political goals that involved claims about identity and migration. The Romans clearly linked the Romanians to Western European civilization, implying that the later migrations (Slavs, Avars, Magyars etc.) through the Romanian territory in Late Antiquity and the Early Medieval Period did not affect this identity. The Dacian narrative also claimed that migration did not affect the indigenous Romanian identity, be it the Roman migration or the later Slavic. It did not need to link the Romanians to the West, because this had already been achieved. Instead, the Dacian narrative could begin to assert claims for territory like Transylvania which had other strong competing narratives.

These narratives have since coalesced into one: the narrative of Daco-Roman continuity, which asserts that Romanian identity is the combination of Dacian and Roman elements (Boia 2001a). This narrative still impacts Romanian Iron Age scholarship greatly—while a younger generation of scholars asserts the importance of archaeological theory and recognition of the socio-political context of research,<sup>4</sup> the continued uncritical, positivistic upholding of the narrative of Daco-Roman continuity<sup>5</sup> has created a sense among the general public that their ‘Daco-Roman’ heritage is unquestioned (Popa 2016). Pseudo-scholarly texts likewise proliferate, like Davidescu (2013) which is the self-published magnum opus of a Romanian-American young man who is pursuing higher education in the sciences but decided to ‘prove’ that the Romanians are the ‘Lost Romans’ in his spare time.

So long as Romanian history is understood as fundamentally tied to the Roman past, alternative narratives will be limited. The Romanian language does provide evidence that there was at one point a Latin-speaking population living in the area; however, there are also significant Slavic elements present within the Romanian language today (Maiden et al. 2013). In other words, the language should not be taken as clear evidence for Roman continuity as it frequently is (see e.g. Sala 2005), because it also evidences the influence of Slavic and other migratory peoples.

To summarise, Romania represents a strong example of the long-term influence of national narratives based on the Roman past—narratives constructed around identity and migration. In a nation named after the Romans, it is understandably difficult to maintain any degree of separation between archaeology and politics, but so long as the current myth of Daco-Roman continuity remains unchallenged, little progress will be made inside or outside of academia. Postnationalism reminds us that we should not fall into the trap of methodological nationalism, and assume that it is natural for a nation called ‘Romania’ to exist in the first place; it is even more imperative in this context that we question the conditions the name ‘Romania’ imposes on the study of the past.

## The Romans and the Brits

The origin myths of Great Britain (England, Scotland, and Wales) likewise focus on peoples from the Iron Age to early Medieval periods (Jones 1997; Hingley 2011). Here, the focus is on the British (rather than English, or Scottish) identity because like ‘Romania’ there is an etymological link to the Roman past—the name Britain is derived from the Latin *Britannia*, which is itself linked to a 4<sup>th</sup> century BC Greek term. Norman Davies’ (2000) history of ‘the Isles’ points out that many Brits do not know what ‘Britain’ is.

British identity was also formed through opposition—the ideological contrasts with neighbouring countries like France and later with the colonies of the British Empire (Kumar 2003: ix). When the UK voted to leave the European Union in 2016, the notion of Britain as an ‘island nation’ opposed to its European neighbours returned in force (Bonacchi et al. 2018)—the Leave vote itself was a largely non-metropolitan English phenomenon (Gardner 2017: 6). That being said, it is unclear whether it is precisely correct to consider Great Britain as a nation-state, or whether ‘Britain’ as a place really exists at all—given the United Kingdom is a nation-state composed of the union of four nations (England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland), then

Great Britain (England, Scotland, and Wales) is at best a multi-national state. 'British' identity is therefore complex, but it is a common term used in popular media, and Gibbins (2014: 4) feels that English, Scottish, and Welsh identities are more regional identities than national, and they are too interwoven to identify distinct discourses within British identity.

The key for a postnational view of the British past lies in how archaeological work is received by the public, unlike in Romania where it depends more on a critical overhaul of archaeological theory. Current academic studies of Roman-Britain adopt a critical perspective on the past, encompassing multiple generations of archaeologists and varied institutions including: J. Creighton, H. Eckardt, A. Gardner, P. Guest, R. Hingley, L. Lodwick, D. Mattingly, M. Millett, M. Pitts, L. Revell, R. Witcher, J. Webster, G. Woolf (to name but a few). Although they do not all agree about the specificities of theory and methodology, all have published from a critical perspective.

The problem is the disconnect between the results of this research and how it translates into modern British culture, something which Eckardt (2017) addressed in her keynote speech at TRAC 2017 in Durham. She argued that some members of the public appear to be reacting in increasingly negative terms towards research that highlights the multicultural identities of the inhabitants of Roman Britain (Hingley et al. 2018; cf. Brophy 2018a; 2018b). A good example of this is found in the publication, display, and inclusion in British school curriculum of the 'Ivory Bangle Lady' burial, a Roman-period lady of North African descent discovered in York (Leach et al. 2010). As Eckardt and Müldner (2016: 216) describe, the Ivory Bangle Lady became a focal point of a debate about immigration in the past, with public discourse focusing on her 'exoticness' and racial identity rather than the nuance in the research (cf. Brophy 2018a). The comments on a 2010 Daily Mail article '*Revealed—the African queen who called York home in the 4<sup>th</sup> century*'<sup>6</sup> are likewise revealing. The article is sensationalised but does include a number of quotations from Eckardt alongside visually striking images, and also predictably, inspired a backlash of comments from readers. To quote one commenter,

'The fact that a single foreigner may (or may not) have visited Britain in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century does not make Britain a historically multiracial society or undermine the status of the indigenous population of these islands. It certainly does not justify the attempts by York Museum to seek to misrepresent history with that ludicrous picture of a multiracial society, which did NOT exist.'

There are additional examples of similar behaviour by some members of the British public, which suggests that this discourse is integrated into British society. One such example is the criticism directed at Mary Beard in 2017 when she defended the inclusion of a black soldier in a BBC cartoon of a 'typical Roman family'. As J.K. Rowling commented on twitter: 'A historian gave her expert opinion on ethnic diversity in Roman Britain. What Happened Next Will Not Amaze You.'<sup>7</sup> When the Financial Times published an article titled '*Remains of Roman London reveal ancient melting pot*' in May of 2018 on the new Museum of London exhibit 'Roman Dead', one below-the-line comment included the accusation that the exhibit was an 'attempt by the curators to indulge in their own ideological agenda'; another questioned the lack of a 'golliwog' for a cover photo.<sup>8</sup> In this context, Hingley et al. (2018: 2) explore what they term 'insistent dualities' in British identity (e.g. civilization vs. barbarism) and how they relate to interpretations of the past. What is perhaps most troubling is the fact that, like J.K. Rowling's comment suggests, we are not at all surprised that this continues to happen—when did we start expecting the often extreme levels of criticism towards the tolerant views which are espoused by archaeological research?<sup>9</sup>

These comments highlight the disconnect between expert authority and the reception of research by the public (see Brophy 2018a; 2018b). Hopefully these views are not held by a majority, but those who do comment clearly feel threatened when their perception of the past is challenged. As experts on the past, it is difficult for archaeologists to strike a balance between speaking with authority and not wishing to 'dictate' the 'truth' about the past—the latter linked with imperialism and other repressive power structures (Jameson 2003). What is therefore the best way to advance a postnational narrative, given what we know about how: 1) the history of Roman archaeology in Britain as a means to reinforce notions of imperialism (Hingley 2000: 2) the fact that archaeologists are increasingly pursuing research that overturns long-held beliefs about the 'ethnic' composition of Roman Britain; and 3) the extremely negative reaction of some of the public to this research, partially due to the current xenophobic political climate? I believe one possible solution is to take the advice of González-Ruibal (2018) and Brophy (2018a) and encourage the public engagement of British Roman studies and politics.<sup>10</sup>

## Postnationalism—What Are we Trying to Accomplish?

In putting our research into operation, firstly, we need to clarify our aims—are we trying to get the public to respond positively to our research, or are we trying to raise awareness (positive or negative) so that the results of the research are eventually embedded into the national consciousness? Arguably the latter is more appropriate, given that by observing the behaviour of people online, we are frequently seeing comments written as a knee-jerk or reactive response. It may be that people revise their opinions of research over time and may come to hold more moderate views. This is not something, however, which we will necessarily be able to observe online.

National narratives formed over centuries and, consequently, they are resilient and will be difficult to overturn. Postnationalism is especially at risk of rejection simply because of the terminology that implies it is the reversal of nationalism. When the US began to be identified as 'postracial' after the election of Obama in 2008 (Cannadine 2013: 216), for example, this inspired a backlash in the form of the Trump presidency that in turn has reversed all progress. Trump is the far-right reaction to the postracial United States, which suggests that the Obama presidency was the initiator of the postracial movement, rather than the sign it had succeeded. While 'postnational' and 'postracial' are different phenomena, they are both premised on the idea that something has been 'moved beyond'. Therefore, in order to truly be 'post', the phenomenon has to survive the subsequent knee-jerk reaction, when tensions will be much more severe, in which it appears that all progress is lost and society retreats backwards. What happens to the Trump presidency/post-Trump US will determine the fate of the idea of 'postracial' America. Was it naïve? Would a liberal successor to Trump prove that we truly have progressed—having survived the worst thing 'racial' America had to throw at the idea of Obama, and 'postracial' America?

Postnationalism is the same, as demonstrated by the public reactions to the recent so-called 'liberal' scholarship of Roman Britain. Postnational scholarship has a further risk, that as when nationalism guided research, are we once again 'mining' the past for evidence of what we want to see in the present? To some extent, this is a fair criticism, but the value of what is being attempted outweighs this criticism. Let us briefly review the situation, given that:

- Archaeology is complicit in the creation and continuation of nationalism.
- Despite the reflexive turn in scholarship, national narratives remain.
- Archaeology will always be political.
- We cannot control which agendas our research support.

Therefore, if we choose to emphasise certain themes in our research that overturn nationalist interpretations, we cannot guarantee wide public acceptance of them. We can, however, target our criticism at what we know to be flawed, like the theory of Romanisation, and persist in bringing this critique into the public sphere. Part of the issue is that while new advances or discoveries in archaeological research are widely published in popular media, theoretical trends in the discipline are not. What news source would publish on post-processualism rather than female Viking warrior burials or new graffiti at Pompeii? Clearly, theory, especially when articulated through discipline-specific jargon is interesting only to (some) academics. But given that archaeological theory, as demonstrated above, is reflective of and important to contemporary society, this is a communication gap we need to bridge. It also does not help to keep employing neoliberal language in our interpretations, as words such as 'multicultural' can inspire an immediate knee-jerk reaction from the public.

## Communicating Postnational Scholarship

What if the relationship between archaeology and politics was more widely known? Would there continue to be such challenges to the idea of a multicultural Roman Britain? Would more people be aware of why Romania has the name Romania? In my personal experience, very few people in the US or UK make the connection between the name Romania and the Roman Empire, even despite some having travelled to Romania. There has been a massive corpus of work published on archaeology, nationalism, politics, and the need to problematise research—yet this critique has not made it into the public consciousness; theoretical trends in archaeology are both reflective of society and can have a great impact on society. Despite this, it is difficult to convince even undergraduate archaeology students of the importance of theory, much less the general public (cf. Johnson 2010: x). The first issue is the word 'theory', a word that implies—in popular parlance—something is a) an unproven proven fact<sup>11</sup> or b) has no impact in the real world. Postnational



scholarship ought to emphasise instead the four 'givens' outlined in the previous section, but the challenge will be to do so in a way that does not then lead to a rejection.

There are also many buzzwords embedded within archaeological discourse, that make the subtext apparent to most within the discipline—words such as processual, post-processual, culture-history, phenomenological, positivistic, entanglement—all of which have significant baggage attached. Yet this baggage is invisible to those outside of the discipline, and when taken at face value the implications are lost. Take for example, the statement of Vulpe (2004: 5–6) which outlines Romania's archaeological achievements 'under the theory of culture-history'. If this were published in the popular media, the reader would not understand what this entailed. If instead, Vulpe had explained that in Romania, archaeological work had looked at the past in a way explicitly meant to identify the archaeological cultures associated with the Romanian ancestors, then at the very least the general public would have a better understanding of the motivations of Romanian archaeology.

Archaeologists need not only to make a distinct effort to communicate our latest exciting 'finds' but also our advances in thinking—there also needs to be an awareness of the wider public discourse regarding the past and politics. If we remove the theory-specific language (keeping it 'in house'), and instead highlight the relevance of our work as clearly as possible, contrasting it to the old assumptions (e.g. a culturally homogeneous Roman Britain), then we will start building a discourse of socially relevant research. This does not avoid Brophy's (2018a; 2018b) 'Brexit hypothesis', but it might mitigate some of the worst excesses associated with it—in the UK, archaeologists would do well to learn from the US tradition of 'activist archaeology' (McGuire 2008; Stottman 2010; Atalay et al. 2014).

Likewise, academics often have public social media platforms, such as twitter, which enable us to communicate more informally and frequently, creating a dialogue of commentary in addition to the discovery of finds. I am advocating that archaeologists become increasingly outspoken, especially when we see criticism mounting against new narratives about the past (such as the 'Roman Dead' exhibition) that result from our attempts to produce socially-informed research.

We also need to become more confident regarding our position as 'experts', as demonstrated by a recent twitter thread in which a female historian, Dr. Fern Riddell, had to defend herself against an inordinate number of critics when she reinforced her usage of her academic title.<sup>12</sup> Frequently, archaeologists/historians are in a position wherein we are very aware of the social commentary regarding our work, or the wider historical context of a current event, but we do not always choose to speak up, or have the time to speak in ways that are heard outside the boundaries of our discipline (and will not just descend into twitter madness). Because of our knowledge about the past we have unique perspectives on current events, and we need to develop strategies in which we can better deploy them. This may then give us more opportunities to communicate how archaeology and politics relate. It is a tall order, but a necessary and central one to postnational scholarship and to archaeology as a discipline in a neoliberal world.

## Conclusion

Neither González-Ruibal et al. (2018a; 2018b) nor Brophy (2018a; 2018b) specifically addresses Roman archaeology, but the points they raise about the need to update our theoretical and professional approaches are relevant for all areas of the discipline. What Brophy's (2018a: 1650) 'Brexit hypothesis' argues for archaeology has already been proven particularly true for the British Iron Age/Roman past—he states that it is a given now that 'any archaeological discovery in Europe can—and probably will—be exploited to argue in support of, or against, Brexit.' Bonacchi et al. (2018) harvested 1.4 million posts and comments on Facebook sites relating to Brexit, finding a profusion of remarks linking the Roman Empire and the European Union.

Likewise, as nationalism resurges, it is important that we question the ideas about the past which support nation-states like Romania. The fact that there is a nation-state in Eastern Europe which was founded on the premise that its people are the 1,000 years-plus direct descendants of the Romans should continue to give us pause. Although the Romanian national narrative has since evolved into a more complex combination of Dacian and Roman identity, this is still an extremely narrow and exclusive claim to the past. Because of this, archaeology in Romania continues to be heavily impacted by the old Enlightenment-era national narratives. Postnationalism, on the other hand, reminds us to continue to question this relationship between a nation-state and the past, while encouraging us to not accept the current status-quo of reactionary populism. While it was perhaps a bit naïve for scholars to assume that the European Union signalled the shift to a 'postnational' state, we should not likewise fall into the trap of methodological nationalism and assume that the nation is a natural state.

Archaeologists have known for at least three decades that once we publish our data about the past, it will be used in ways we did not intend and do not agree with. This reality is one of the reasons why social archaeological theory developed, proposing to ask questions about the past which were both transparent about personal bias and did not further oppressive colonialist narratives. The postcolonial critique and attempts to decolonise archaeology will continue, but what González-Ruibal (2018) points out and this paper supports, is that some of the theories which developed as part of this critique are not as powerful as they once were in the current political climate. With the ascent of reactionary populism and ‘fake news’, we have to be even more aware of how our research about the past is drawn into politics. It does not matter how theoretically engaged our research is—it will still be used as fuel to divide people. We can also not allow our voices as academics to be drowned out by those who misconstrue the past—the phrase ‘typical liberal bias’ should be our cue to stand up and defend our expert knowledge.

Outside of archaeology, the notion that a person can afford to ‘not get involved with politics’ is no longer tenable. In today’s world that is a very short-sighted, privileged position—the unfortunate reality is that with the right-wing governments in power, the day-to-day life of many are dramatically affected with the loss of security, of civil rights, of faith that the government will act in their best interests. We must all advocate for political change both professionally and personally, taking action against the anti-expertise movement which characterises the post-truth environment we are in.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> <https://tagdeva.wordpress.com/sessions/>.

<sup>2</sup> These challenges mostly took the form of feminist and indigenous archaeologies (see e.g. Conkey and Spector 1984; Gero and Conkey 1991; Trigger 1990; Layton 1994).

<sup>3</sup> The ideas of González-Ruibal et al. (2018a) were initially published in a discussion series in *Antiquity*, and as the discussion shows, they were subject to criticism. Hamilakis (2018) agreed with their basic argument that archaeology must be further decolonised, which they then clarified: ‘Our point, however, is that decolonising archaeology is insufficient: a rearming to face a capitalism that no longer requires scientific legitimacy—because it dominates all other ideological, political and economic apparatuses—is badly needed’ (González-Ruibal et al. 2018b: 526). González-Ruibal (2018) echoes the initial arguments made in the *Antiquity* discussion series, but is more explicit—this actually corresponds more closely with the unedited version of González-Ruibal et al. (2018a) which is currently (Oct 2018) available for download at [https://www.academia.edu/36486520/Against\\_reactionary\\_populism\\_towards\\_a\\_new\\_public\\_archaeology](https://www.academia.edu/36486520/Against_reactionary_populism_towards_a_new_public_archaeology). The reader will note the significant differences in tone between the original and the version published in *Antiquity*.

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. Niculescu 2002; Murgescu 2003; Palincas 2006; Anghelinu 2007; Doboş 2008; Dragoman 2009; Popa 2015.

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. Vulpe 1998; Lica 2006; Opreanu 2006; Grumeza 2009; Spinei 2009; Ardevan et al. 2017.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1254187/Revealed-The-African-queen-called-York-home-4th-century.html>.

<sup>7</sup> [https://twitter.com/jk\\_rowling/status/893900445931974656](https://twitter.com/jk_rowling/status/893900445931974656).

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.ft.com/content/ffe053b8-59c0-11e8-bdb7-f6677d2e1ce8>.

<sup>9</sup> A session at the TAG 2018 conference in Chester targeted this issue, titled ‘Britain has had enough of Experts’. <https://tagdeva.wordpress.com/sessions/britain-has-had-enough-of-experts/>.

<sup>10</sup> I should also note what González-Ruibal addressed during the discussion after his EAA keynote: he was asked whether archaeologists should explicitly become activists and he responded that it depends on the context, noting that for his own work on the Spanish Civil War he cannot publicly call his work activism as he is already accused of political bias merely because he has chosen to excavate civil war mass graves. He said that we must stress that we produce objectivist knowledge, while remaining politically engaged.

<sup>11</sup> See the criticism levelled against the ‘theory of evolution’ or the ‘theory of climate change’ for examples of how the word ‘theory’ is frequently misconstrued to suit political agendas.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-44496876>.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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