
TRAC Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference

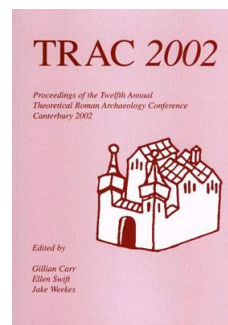
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A brief comment on the TRAC session dedicated to the interdisciplinary approaches to the study of Roman women

Patricia A. Baker

Introduction: why study Roman women?

This paper is intended only to be a comment on the session 'Interdisciplinary approaches to Roman Women' held at TRAC in 2002. The session, unfortunately, did not attract many speakers (only two, originally three). When I noticed the lack of interest I originally intended to cancel the session, but with further consideration I felt this would not be fair to the two participants. I also thought that rather than be defeated by the lack of interest the seminar should be held as an opportunity to open up discussion about why women in the Roman world are not being paid much attention in modern scholarship, and question why a session inviting scholars specialising in Roman woman from other disciplines did not elicit greater participation from those scholars. The original intent of the session was to bring together scholars who study Roman women from archaeological as well as non-archaeological approaches, such as philology, art history, philosophy and history for example. As someone with a specialism in the archaeology of ancient medicine, I must interact with scholars on an interdisciplinary level, and it has been noticed that there is often an air of indifference, and in some cases even hostility, both from and towards scholars with a different expertise. The same is noticeable with the study of Roman women: examinations made in the fields of philology and ancient history relating to women are rarely referred to by archaeologists, and, on the other hand, archaeological material is rarely mentioned by non-archaeologists. The indifference generally seems to be caused by a lack of understanding of how separate disciplines are studied and approached. Although TRAC is an archaeological conference, it is one that provides an arena in which theoretical interpretation can be openly discussed, and by allowing for interaction between other areas of study that operate in theoretically interpretative and informed manners, scholarship on Roman women can only be made richer, more informed and interesting. Thus, a session based on interdisciplinarity would have been a means to initiate such discussion.

Another intention for the session was to invite conversation between scholars who specialise in studies of Roman communities in the Mediterranean with those who examine the Roman provinces. Generally TRAC papers tend to focus upon provincial Roman archaeology; nonetheless it is the Theoretical Roman, rather than Theoretical provincial Roman, archaeology conference. In relation to this particular topic scholarship has been done on women for both regions, but again conversation between the two does not seem to have been forthcoming – a geographical divide still exists. It was hoped to bridge this gap, too, since it cannot be expected that Roman women lived and acted in a vacuum either as a single entity encompassing the entire Roman world, or as uniform sets of women living in separate provinces without contact or any influence from Rome or other provinces, cities or groups of people. It therefore made sense that specialists should be in contact with one another rather than remain separated. In spite of the intentions to broaden the discussion on Roman women and make archaeological evidence open for discussion by non-archaeologists, the interest has not been forthcoming, and questions must be addressed as to why this is the case.

There are possibly three general reasons for the lack of participation. The first may have been because the Classical Association conference (CA) was being held at the same time. It is possible that some speakers at the CA might have volunteered papers for TRAC if the timing of the two did not conflict. Yet this is not necessarily the main reason. Somewhat exceptionally, I am someone who fairly regularly attends both conferences and at each there are always different groups of participants; rarely does one see someone who would normally attend TRAC at the CA, and vice versa. This second reason is possibly indicative of the geographical division already mentioned, in that there is a definite divide between those who are Classicists studying the Mediterranean and those who study the Roman provinces. The third contributing factor for the lack of interest, and for the session as a whole, is more likely due to the paucity of people studying Roman women. Few scholars seem to focus their work on women, and as someone with a strong interest in the subject (Baker 1999), it is apparent that there is not much published material to draw upon, and what there is mainly comes from the study of women in ancient Greece rather than Rome. This problem of limited attention has been noted in a recent paper by Hill (2001) on identity in Roman Britain, where it is pointed out that women are rarely mentioned or considered as important elements in the province and they generally tend to be overlooked. This holds true not only for the study of women in the Roman provinces, but for the entire Roman empire. It is this third aspect that requires further consideration. Why, after three decades of gender and feminist archaeological and anthropological criticism on the subject of women in general, are Roman women not being studied?

A brief review of the study of Roman women

There are relatively few works on Roman women, and from a specific archaeological perspective there are even fewer studies to be found. The general concentration of works on the subject of Roman women tend to be on Roman laws and politics (e.g. Gardner 1985, 1986; Savunen 1995), the Roman family (e.g. Corbier 1991; Dixon 1992) and investigations on the depiction of Roman women in art (e.g. Kampen 1991; Mikocki 1990, 1995). Overall these studies generally tend to focus upon women of the upper classes and those who held imperial status. There seems to be a lack of concern for the common woman, possibly because there is more obvious evidence available for the empresses and the upper class women. Yet, there are a number of means by which one can attempt to learn about the 'average' woman, rather than simply concentrate on imperial females. Although in-depth philological studies can inform us on Roman women, archaeological evidence can be used to learn much about the mundane aspects of daily life and attitudes towards females that might not have been recorded in the written record. One of the few attempts to initiate a study of women in Roman archaeology was begun by Allason-Jones (1989), who looked specifically at women in Roman Britain. Although the study was innovative for the field of Romano-British studies, consideration was not given to scholarly work that had been undertaken on gender and women in both anthropology and prehistoric archaeology (e.g. Ardener 1975; Ehrenberg 1989; Ortner and Whitehead 1981; Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974; Sørensen 1988). By the time Allason-Jones' book was written there was a vast amount of literature in the theoretical areas of feminist and gender studies, which pointed out that simply 'adding' women to studies was not a strategy for understanding them in their cultural context. Unfortunately, this is ultimately what Allason-

Jones' book has done, in spite of all the conscientious intentions to break away from the traditionally male-based study of the Roman world. Rather than seeing the book as a starting point for studying Roman women from an archaeological perspective and moving on to critically question the Roman, or more specifically, provincial cultural understanding of women in the Roman period, Allason-Jones' study seems to be taken by some scholars as being the ultimate and final statement on the subject. As mentioned, simply discussing women was something critiqued by feminist anthropologists in the 1970s and early 1980s (e.g. Strathern 1981) when it was argued that women had to not only be mentioned, but also considered in their cultural context, asking what it meant to be female in a particular culture. Allason-Jones book does not attempt to answer this in much depth, and it is this point that needs to be addressed in future studies on women. There have been attempts to examine women more critically in Roman Britain as mentioned in Hill (2001: 15–16), with works by Hingley (1990), Scott (1995) and van Driel-Murray (1995), and there is also the unpublished PhD thesis by Rodgers (1998) on women and art in Roman Britain, for example. These are exceptional, however, and in general little has been done from an archaeological point of view. To look at the subject more critically, there is a need to further discussions of Roman women using a far more interdisciplinary approach, as this will open discussion amongst a wider community of scholars.

The problem is compounded by the fact that the study of Roman women is continuously discussed separately in conference sessions dedicated solely to women, rather than being incorporated into mainstream sessions at conferences. This reflects the situation at the TAG (Theoretical Archaeology Group) conferences up until the early 1990s, where sessions on gender and feminism were not only separated from mainstream sessions, but in some instances men were excluded from participation and attending. This only served to make feminist and gender studies the exclusive domain of female scholars. Traditionally the study of women (and children, although the topic is not considered in this paper, but it suffers from similar problems [e.g. Moore and Scott 1997]) has been separated from the rest of scholarship because it was the only means by which to develop the subject. Quite early on this separation was deemed to be problematic by anthropologists; in the 1970s it was pointed out that women are an integral element to society so should not be discussed in isolation (Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974). Questions were later raised about why the study of women was being sidelined and not included within the main conference sessions that ultimately involved (implicitly or explicitly) the study of men. According to Strathern (1981: 683), men are considered by western scholars to be the mainstream component in a society, therefore, what they did in the past has always been considered a societal norm, and thus, until recently, little thought had been given to separating studies of masculine roles in books or conferences (e.g. Foxhall and Salmon 1998). The reason postulated by Strathern is because men are perceived as having a particular place in history and are therefore studied in the forefront, rather than having to be discussed in a separate subculture or even ghettoised, as are women. This says more about modern viewpoints of women, and how it is projected onto understandings of women in the past. There is often the assumption that if there is little obvious or apparent evidence in the historical (here meaning all evidence of the past) record then there is little use in studying something, because it is considered that it was not important in the past. It demonstrates a modern preconception about certain sections in societies, reflected back onto past societies; that is that women are seen as second class citizens and not deserving of much attention. They are frequently portrayed as being tied to the household without much say in their society – entirely lacking in effective agency. Unfortunately, Allason-Jones book and recent paper reinforces this (e.g. 1989; 2000).

There is a view that female power/agency operated at a mundane level, that of the domestic sphere, but it did not extend beyond this level. This image of Roman women has been carried through scholarship without much attention as to how it was created, or without questions being raised as to whether the common understanding of Roman women related to how they were understood by their societies.

Although women in the Classical world are less visible than men, this could be an issue of representation created by scholars, who are generally men and who do not find it necessary to locate the female. Perhaps scholars should be looking for the possibility of less visible women and the habituated or intrinsic power they might have held. Anthropological studies have shown that often minority groups in societies have frequently demonstrated an invisible power (e.g. Friedl 1986; Ilcan 1996). At the moment it cannot be said with certainty that all women in the Classical world were seen as minority groups, given the scholarship and assumptions made about them. Such agency is not so immediately apparent, but upon closer examination significant and meaningful power relationships can become visible, and the invisible minority will often control the more visible in certain aspects of their lives, demonstrating that they are not fully subordinate. One example of this comes from an anthropological study made by Friedl on the position and power of women in the village society of Vasilika, Greece between the 1960s and 1980s (Friedl 1986). The main thesis of her work points to the structural opposition, or polarisation in a Greek village society where men are seen as being dominant and women subordinate. She challenges the outward appearance of the society and looks closely at the roles women play in this particular village. In general the women of Vasilika are associated with the private (the household), whilst men are linked to the public sphere in places such as the *kaffenion* (coffee shop) and therefore are more obvious in the public domain. Since men are visible to the outside observer and women are not, it is the male authority that is apparent; yet, upon close inspection, Friedl noted that the outward appearance of life in the village was producing the wrong impression, because she learned that the women in the village held power because they control the household, and ultimately the household controls the public sphere. Thus, Friedl's work teaches us not to focus all attention on what seems immediately apparent, because the invisible may be equally important, if not more so; this might hold true for women in the Roman world.

Friedl's work along with many other studies, although influential on our understandings of women, have not achieved an amalgamation of scholarship on males and females, that is true gender studies. There is still a separation between gender and feminist studies and what is seen as mainstream scholarship. This was commented on in 1996 by del Valle in her introduction to *Gendered Anthropology* where it was noted that it is not only studies on women that are relegated to subdivisions, but studies of genders (13–16). Gender studies, although questioning gender identity rather than simply female identity, are somehow associated with scholarship on women. Male anthropologists, according to del Valle (1996: 13), claim they cannot study gender because they will not understand women, but even when they study men rarely are issues raised about the cultural construction of masculinity (for an exception see Foxhall and Salmon 1998). Strathern, as quoted in del Valle (1996: 14), argues that it is not simply that women are excluded from studies by men, but that gender studies do not apply to the paradigm of modern thinking because we are dealing with a male world and a male way of thinking. Without a complete change in academic thinking, will gender studies always be relegated to the sidelines of academic importance?

Suggestions to improve studies of Roman women

Much has been made about gender being a performance, this is to say that gender is created through human behaviour and action. It is not completely biological, but rather it is something that is learned and acted out in accordance to the rules of a society (Butler 1993 and for a further discussion of this see Busby 2000). To understand the ways in which people conceive gender and the ways in which practices and dispositions are engendered, one must try to gain access to how different societies play out their engendered roles. For example food production is often associated with female activity. The questions must be asked how is the task engendered, how is food made available and who makes it and why? From an archaeological perspective, much could be made of clothing and the ways in which outward styling contributed to the construction of gender. One could examine where certain items might have been worn, which could also be useful in the context of burials. Moreover, space and temporality must be addressed, for, as mentioned earlier, the Roman empire was not a single entity, but one of vast cultural variation and temporal periods. We must not expect that women in Britain were the same as those in Italia, Hispania or Germania. Even within the provinces themselves, variation was to be expected, and one cannot expect that the roles of women would have remained static through time. New interactions would have been made between different groups and changes within a society would have occurred. A complex hybrid of situations created through a colonial experience would most likely have occurred. We who study women in the Roman empire are lucky in that we have a potentially vast amount of information available to us to make the most of our understandings, and archaeologically we have a rich field. There are for example, a number of relief sculptures that depict women doing jobs in markets, and girls playing games that provide us with another view into the Roman world, a view that does not seem to be taken advantage of in many studies. We also have to look far more closely at our material remains to see if they can be defined in terms of gender, or at least gender association. Moreover, consideration must be given to the cultural diversity in the Roman empire, which could imply that there might have been many different gender relationships in operation. Even if women were tied solely to household activities this actually makes them very visible in the archaeological record in relation to productive activities. Thus, one could build upon the work of Allison (1997) and look to production activities, deposition, use of pottery and other 'household' items. Furthermore, the archaeology can be enhanced by other fields of study: epigraphic remains that mention women, historical sources and even poetry and plays can all provide more of an insight into the Roman world. All of these sources should be incorporated to study women from all perspectives in the Roman world. We should not divide archaeology, history and philology, each should be considered to have an equal degree of validity and inclusion. Moreover, self-critical theoretically aware arguments with the inclusion of critiques on feminist and gender studies must be incorporated into our research. To deny them will not advance the study of Roman women. Finally, I would suggest that scholars specialising in Roman women and/or gender should consider presenting papers in mainstream sessions at conferences (and not just TRAC), as a means of demonstrating the importance of considering women in scholarly studies. This would make studies of women more accessible, and known to scholars with other specialisms, which may be a means to open up this field of research.

Although the aims of the session were not met, it did lead to an interesting discussion on how to carry the field further, but with the small attendance only those few who are aware of

these issues were able to comment; thus it seemed necessary to point this problem out in writing. It must be made clear that there is still much work to be done on integrating the study of Roman women into the broader realm of classics, and this can only be done through interdisciplinary discussion.

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