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Paper Information:

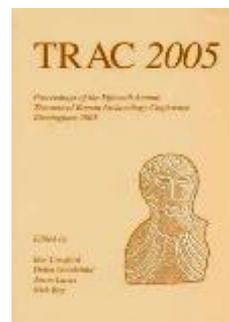
Title: 5 Years of TRAC – Reflections on a Journey

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Pages: 111–115

DOI: http://doi.org/10.16995/TRAC2005_111_115

Publication Date: 24 March 2006



Volume Information:

Croxford, B., Goodchild, H., Lucas, J., and Ray, N. (eds) 2006. *TRAC 2005: Proceedings of the Fifteenth Annual Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference, Birmingham 2005*. Oxford: Oxbow Books

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15 Years of TRAC – Reflections on a Journey

Eleanor Scott¹

I am flattered to have been asked to write this brief and perhaps inevitably anecdotal reflection on ‘TRAC Past’. Having read the accompanying pieces by Ray Laurence and Andrew Gardner and had the memories of my then archaeological world brought back into sharp focus, it is perhaps unsurprising that my own journey has taken me to a place where I am now ‘enjoying’ a career as a full-time politician. I say this because TRAC was first and foremost a political act. Indeed, years of experience of the hierarchical social topography of academic archaeology have served me well in politics, preparing me as they did for dealing with resistance to change, difference of vision, Machiavellian manoeuvrings and ideological saboteurs. I have always been a political animal, tilting perhaps at windmills on occasion, but passionate about egalitarianism and fair inclusion, and bemused by the ingenuity of arguments employed to maintain the *status quo*. The study of hierarchical states has given me a powerful interest in understanding the social glue that held such structures together and the ways in which change and reconfiguration have been resisted and effected.

However it is relevant to say that politics is a career that I ultimately chose over archaeology because it became impossible to combine a meaningful archaeological career with parenthood. I think, therefore, that I spoke and wrote with some prescience back in the 1990s when I warned that not only was Roman archaeology lacking in discourse about gendered power relations (Scott 1993: 7–11) but that its own structures were prohibiting women from competing on level terms in the discipline (Scott 1998). It is of concern, then, that Laurence still feels that ‘the study of women let alone gender remains under-developed not just within TRAC, but within Roman Archaeology as a whole’ (this volume: 121). Gardner, in looking to and advising about the future, is equally mindful of the need to avoid complacency: ‘Some recent commentators on TRAC’s published proceedings have remarked that female speakers are under-represented in these, and (although these points should not necessarily be connected) that gender has figured less prominently in TRAC sessions than it might’ (this volume: 131). It seems fairly clear that fifteen years ago TRAC was right to raise the dangers of the structural exclusion of women, and that its shaking of a fist (Scott 1993: 2–3) at the ‘post-feminist’ zeitgeist of the time has been largely vindicated.

The papers of Laurence and Gardner in this volume explore eloquently the relationships between and the dichotomies seemingly inherent in operational structures and the nature and visibility of discourse. In this respect my concerns in the first TRAC volume were *not* tilting at windmills, and remain as worrying an issue now as they did in the early 1990s. That both Laurence and Gardner identify TRAC as a potential vehicle for meaningful change is a cause for optimism, and the main potential presumably lies in the current work being expounded on specific identities and life-courses as the discipline brings the organic parts of the cloudy meta-narrative into sharper focus. As for the operational and structural aspects of the discipline that have served to exclude or redact the voice of women archaeologists and reduce their experiences to a treadmill existence, it is within the remit of the TRAC Steering Committee to examine what has changed over fifteen years and whether the progress made has been good enough.

Laurence’s exploration of the possible structural dichotomies of TRAC leads me to recall why TRAC was ever a conference at all. I explained some of the thought processes that went

into setting up the first TRAC in the resulting volume (1993: 1–4), but it might be helpful here to complete the telling in the company of Laurence and Gardner's exceptionally astute comments. It is true as indicated in the introduction to the first TRAC volume that 'the plot was hatched in East Jerusalem in the summer of 1990' and that 'I organised TRAC because I wanted to attend it' (Scott 1993: 1, 2). I was carrying out post-doctoral work based at the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem. Many scholars' fieldwork plans in the Middle East had gone awry because of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and its dislocating effect on travel logistics throughout the region. This meant I spent more time than planned at base camp in East Jerusalem; and effectively, I had time on my hands. I had had some long talks with the prehistorian Brian Boyd who was seeking to develop greater conceptual integrity within 'Natufian' studies in the region, and we shared some of the same frustrations – but also hopes. We both respected a number of individuals within our fields as being 'movers and shakers', and it was Brian who said in respect of my frustrations with Roman archaeology in general but admiration for certain of its practitioners, 'Why don't you have a conference?'

There was of course an irony in trying to do something so different within such a traditional structure as a conference, but as a long-time devotee of TAG (Theoretical Archaeology Group) I believed that the format was feasible as an inclusive, radical forum. But there were of course going to be huge risks, the main one being that I might not be able to attract the key players that would give the conference the credibility and vivacity that would be needed to make it an experience that would carry value. (I know that value is subjective, and value in my eyes did impact on the character of that first TRAC.)

I was however fortunate enough to be in a position where I had built up relationships with some archaeologists who at the time either were either hugely influential or who were about to become so – and who were sympathetic to the need for some serious theoretical debate within Roman archaeology. As Gardner rightly points out, 'some of the key publications which helped to open up discussion of themes such as Romanisation (including Millett 1990 and Reece 1988) predated [TRAC's] establishment' (Gardner this volume: 128). Much of TRAC was dependent on my calling in personal favours – having friends or friends-of-friends who would agree to speak, discuss, chair, publish or contribute in other ways, including Martin Millett, Richard Reece and Ian Hodder. I was not so naïve as to think that TRAC did not need some serious cachet to succeed in the eyes of others (Laurence and Gardner address the issue of 'whose eyes?' at length in this volume) and the eclectic mix of speakers and contributors at the first conference in Newcastle upon Tyne was perhaps more carefully constructed than realised by some observers at the time. However, a hugely significant aspect of the conference's success was the quality of contribution from the unsolicited participants (both conference speakers and delegates), such as Sue Alcock and Peter van Dommelen. It was really exciting that so many ideas had come from around the real world as well as the Roman world into the same space in Newcastle that weekend fifteen years ago, and it countered an initial cynicism that the event would simply consist of the same happy band of northern radicals preaching to the converted.

The inclusion of archaeologists working in museums and units in addition to post-graduates and more established figures was not exactly deliberate, but certainly was not accidental. Rather it was the result of what I can only describe as the then 'Newcastle set-up'. Along with two other postgraduates² I had set up a series of seminars that owed as much to social networking as to academic content,³ and we pro-actively sought out the presence of archaeologists from all the various archaeological establishments in the city at the time – RCHME, English Heritage, the Unit, the museums, the local authority, and the various

subterranean enclaves of the Department. The tradition of multi-vocal inclusion was already established, quite genuinely, and it was my natural way of working to call for and accept papers from all sources, and for help to be offered from colleagues to make a new collaborative venture ‘fly’. Even the Head of Department,⁴ not a known supporter of theory but a man who was quite happy to ask the world to take off its coat and step outside, offered the venue, photocopying and postage etc. for free, which kept costs down. He and other colleagues offered hospitality and floor space.

The decision to make the conference a two-day rather than an one-day event was a difficult one, but a belief in the importance of social networking swayed the decision and the weekend option was selected. I had had no previous experience of conference organisation and it was all fairly hit-and-miss on the logistics front, and we only misplaced one delegate. The name ‘Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference’ does what it says on the tin, but it is fair to say that the word order was chosen to create a snappy TAG-like acronym.

The questions ‘Should the proceedings be published?’ and ‘Should TRAC run again?’ were discussed in open session on the Sunday afternoon, and it was a surprise that the answers to both were ‘Yes’. This created new logistical problems that were dealt with on the spot by delegates present, and TRAC passed to a different university and the proceedings were picked up by Ross Samson and Avebury until Oxbow came along. That there was no expectation that TRAC would be published or otherwise promulgated in those early days, or indeed continued, possibly explains that a few of the papers, published and unpublished, were hugely experimental and on occasion bizarre. In my view there is no easy answer to whether or not (or how) a filtering process should be applied, and the issue of access is still one that is wrestled with today (*pace* Laurence and Gardner, this volume). In my political career I argue that lost voices must be heard; in academia the landscape is very different, but it is always going to be difficult to differentiate quality control from elitism.

With hindsight, it is evident that as a series of conferences and published proceedings, TRAC has been extraordinarily successful. Not only has TRAC provided a prominent platform for graduate and post-doctoral students to explore and promote their original ideas, but – concomitantly – it has been instrumental in embedding theoretical development into the mainstream of Roman archaeology.

It is a ‘known known’ that Roman archaeology came relatively late to the theory table. When culture history was being rejected by prehistorians in favour of process and, subsequently, structure, the Roman establishment was largely oblivious. Theoretical notions were repelled by those who found them repulsive (e.g. Frere 1987). The danger was always going to be that when Romanists ‘discovered’ theory, they would borrow and not create. The enormous significance of TRAC has been that while there were indeed processual expositions of meta-narrative grandeur in the early years, the way in which TRAC has rapidly developed has meant that overall it has ensured that Roman archaeology has avoided this potential pitfall and made its own distinct and informed contribution to the maturation of theory within the discipline of archaeology as a whole. This cannot be over-emphasised. TRAC has allowed Roman archaeology to maintain its own identity whilst opening up a world of archaeology to Romanists and of course opening up Roman archaeology to the wider world of archaeology.

Looking back to the academic Roman landscape of 1991, I have a memory of it being the best of times and the worst of times: Roman archaeology was from Mars, prehistory was from Venus; practitioners of Roman archaeology had a ‘death wish’⁵ (Reece 1990) and ‘wouldn’t recognise a paradigm shift if it fell on them’ (Scott 1990). We Romanists had huge swathes of (dated) material culture to work with, but at times it seemed that all we were capable of doing

was creating fairy stories whilst making meaningless appeals to ‘common sense’. There was no mechanism for risk-taking that would help rather than hinder an academic career. It was this gap that TRAC sought to plug, although as I have indicated its longevity was certainly not predicted from the outset. Thus, whilst there was no explicit and deliberate strategy for TRAC to fracture the existing veneer of patronage within Roman archaeology, this was possibly inevitable once it became clear that the enthusiastic support of a number of particular individuals was enabling more than transitory political changes in the discipline. It has been startling but very satisfying to see a supposedly maverick event become so influential, demonstrating the ability of good ideas expounded by good people to refresh (gradually) an established system. New networks of international and cross-generational significance have altered and replaced the old. In this sense, the role of TRAC and its relationship to the wider academic debate in Roman archaeology has been significant.

It was not TRAC 1 itself that initiated change. It was far from a cataclysmic event. Rather, TRAC was a child of its time. Notwithstanding the fortuitous agency that allowed the first conference its character, it is the case that the right conditions came together and matured through time, until after a few years it became a ‘player’ and began to influence life around it. It reflected and actively affected the Roman academic cultural orthodoxy, setting and developing trends. And some early decisions made by TRAC supporters were very good ones indeed, such as the agreement that TRAC would be close to RAC but not be subsumed by it. The decision to publish the proceedings was not initially greeted with unanimous enthusiasm, but proved to be justified. And, pivotally, at the helm of both conference and publication are each year’s organisers, usually comprising a different cohort of postgraduates, giving the conferences and the proceedings a fresh flavour and the graduate students valuable editing experience.

Some of the most influential themes to have been thoroughly explored at TRAC and which are influencing wider academic debate include space, identities and histories. Generically, many TRAC papers were making a laudable mockery of the last gasp attempts of a smug, self-satisfied Roman establishment to convince us that the quantity of evidence alone available to Romanists could and should transcend the need for theory (discussed in Scott 1993). The theory-less papers being produced so frequently by ‘the establishment’ (e.g. Todd 1989) were not even thick description; the contents were as flat and two-dimensional as the paper they were printed on. In contrast, TRAC papers from the outset such as Alcock’s compelling re-examination of the ritual landscape of Roman Greece (1993) damned complacency and energised the inevitable push for different understandings of the distribution of power in the complex state that was the Roman world. Other papers that addressed the relationships between space, material culture, power and agency that appeared in those early volumes were influential in ensuring that the dialectic between TRAC, and other forums (notably RAC) was confident and positive.

Certainly I took a big career risk in organising TRAC, and the fact that such an experiment was a career risk is of course one of the reasons that it had to happen. It was not a question of if, but when, and who. I was never going to change the world – never going to be able to recalibrate a whole generation of older, established academicians. But that the first TRAC was adopted and adapted by an effervescent community of Roman archaeologists, and that the ‘project’ learnt, morphed and avoided death-by-self-reference over fifteen years, means that that first TRAC *did* play a small part in shaping what was to be the future, and that should give comfort to those who seek further change – notably those who so rightly call within this very

volume not only for an analysis of power structures in the past but also a redressing of the imbalances in the discipline's own power structures in the present and future.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the editors for taking the risk in asking me to write this contribution and for their helpful comments and corrections. I would once again like to thank the friends and colleagues who wittingly and unwittingly put petrol in the TRAC tank in the early years. 'Ask the world to step outside and take off its coat' comes from a poem by Roger McGough.

Notes

1. (Cllr) Eleanor Scott, Executive Member for Education, Children and Families, Portsmouth City Council, Civic Offices, Guildhall Square, Portsmouth, Hants. PO1 2AL.
2. Karen Griffiths and Nick Hodgson.
3. Which some would say is the story of my career.
4. The late, lamented Charles Daniels.
5. Richard Reece opened his review of Todd 1989 with the sentence "Some practitioners of Roman Britain evidently have a death wish, not only for their own jobs, but for the whole subject".

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