

## EDITORIAL

# From TRAC to *TRAJ*: Widening Debates in Roman Archaeology

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The publication of this first issue of the *Theoretical Roman Archaeology Journal (TRAJ)* is an indication of the accomplishments that the Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference (TRAC) has had in the past (nearly) three decades. In the editorial for this first issue, the guest editors celebrate the successes of TRAC, but also reflect back upon its history to re-examine the field of Roman studies today. While Roman studies has become more diverse and inclusive over time, a lack of racial/ethnic and gender diversity is still apparent. The editorial here addresses this lack of diversity in an attempt to encourage scholars to engage more directly with such difficult issues.

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## Growing-up TRAC

Welcome to the latest home for those fond of theory and Roman Archaeology! The first issue of the *Theoretical Roman Archaeology Journal (TRAJ)* is the result of nearly three decades of dialogue and development in theoretically-based research, demonstrating the impact that the Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference (TRAC) has had on academia globally. It must not be forgotten that when TRAC was founded, it represented a radical movement in Roman scholarship—the first TRAC event was hosted at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne in 1991. Eleanor Scott (1993a: 7) organised this first conference to combat the *status quo*, as a ‘patriarchal hierarchy of Establishment figures [was] especially evident in Roman archaeology’, resulting in a lack of theoretical engagement, which she argued characterised the field. Since that first meeting, TRAC has been on a journey towards inclusive dialogue and theoretical engagement within Roman archaeology; today, 27 years on, the *TRAJ* articles here are available on an open access platform published by the Open Library of Humanities (OLH), which allows readers access to new research and to participate actively in online conversations.

The TRAC community is a vibrant group of scholars at all stages of their academic careers and, as we can personally attest, provides a welcome point of entry into the world of theoretically engaged Roman archaeology. As two doctoral candidates, originally from the United States and who completed undergraduate degrees at liberal arts institutions, TRAC has supported our initial ventures into the international scholarly community and provided opportunities to develop further our academic research. The organisation of TRAC 2017 held at Durham University and the guest-editing of this first issue of *TRAJ* (volume 1 2018) have been valuable experiences which have allowed us to contribute to the longstanding development of this dialogue. TRAC Durham was a great success as 196 registered participants representing 25 countries attended 14 different sessions and two workshops over four days to listen to 120 total paper presentations. TRAC Durham was also the first such event to offer on-site sessions, in which delegates were able visit archaeological sites in the nearby region—these included Roman Corbridge, Peel Gap and Chesters, Arbeia and Segedunum, as well as Housesteads and Carrawburgh.

The first issue of *TRAJ* adheres to the inclusive nature of TRAC and contains publications from fields within the humanities and the social and natural sciences. The articles within this first issue feature varied research topics from the Republican period through to Late Antiquity and cover a vast geographical area from northern England to the Middle East. The individual and collective contributions of the articles are discussed in

more detail in the *'In This Issue'* section below. The publication of the first issue of *TRAJ*, with such a wide scope of research, is an indication of the success of the initial aims of TRAC set out nearly 30 years ago. Scott (1993b: 1) designed TRAC 'to be a structured but essentially [an] egalitarian arena for discussion of the introduction and operation of theory in Roman archaeology.' In this capacity, Scott widened the range of perspectives offered and voices heard in Roman Archaeology.

## Archaeology Today

TRAC was founded to encourage a theoretical dialogue within the broader field of Roman studies and nearly three decades thereafter, the conversation is enthusiastic and diverse. The broader field of archaeology today is engaged socially, with a concerted effort to highlight marginal groups and voices, but as Scott (1993a: 12) noted, archaeologists were then, and are still, the pawns of 'social engineers'. In the complex geo-political situations of the present-day, people who study history have an important role to recognise the changing nature of how the past informs modern politics. The ceaselessness of debate within the field of archaeology, particularly in regard to theoretical and political engagement, is part of the richness of the discipline. In a world entangled with the political, economic, and social consequences of the rise of nationalism, we feel it is more important than ever to critically engage with the politics of the past.

For well over 20 years, some scholars have worked to decolonise the archaeological discipline, which likewise extends to the field of Roman archaeology. In this instance we are taking decolonisation in its broadest sense beyond the standard Roman versus native discourse to include issues of race/ethnicity and gender. The aim of this effort has been to produce new narratives through the analysis of material culture that highlight power imbalances or structural inequalities, and to re-focus attention on research groups previously neglected—women and/or slaves, for example. The introduction of postcolonialism into Roman archaeology was a way to move beyond the limitations of the powerful colonial paradigm of 'Romanisation' (Mattingly 2011). An active postcolonial debate has emerged, but Versluys (2014) believes that the efforts of Romanists to 'do away with Romanisation' have actually stifled theoretical creativity in how scholars view change revolving around Rome.

A question remains, however. Has academia succeeded in decolonising the field of archaeology? The term 'decolonisation' is a different way to express what Eleanor Scott identified in 1993 as a need to overcome a patriarchal hierarchy within Roman scholarship. In regard to the success of the TRAC community, the answer would appear to be positive; TRAC has engaged scholars of different backgrounds, ages/career stages, and opinions in a continuous dialogue about the Roman past. The hierarchical patriarchy of Roman studies, nevertheless, persists and helps to perpetuate two major points of inequality: race/ethnicity and gender.

To be truly decolonised, it is important for academics to engage thoroughly in difficult conversations regarding these systemic issues found within the field. A 2013 Chartered Institute for Archaeologists (CiFA) report noted the 99% of professional archaeologists in the UK were white. The remaining 1% were identified only as 'other' ethnicities (Dave 2016); this helps to highlight the lack of ethnic diversity evident in Classical archaeology, including at conferences such as TRAC. The statistics are not only indicative of the systemic issues at hand, but the fact that in this particular instance racial/ethnic minorities were collectively grouped into an 'Other' category, which fails to value the unique contributions of individuals who identify as a racial or ethnic minority. For Classical scholars, the notion of a collective 'Other' may evoke Greco-Roman mindsets towards the 'barbarians', peoples frequently incorrectly homogenised by ancient authors. Grouping racial minorities as an 'Other' category when gathering statistics diminishes individual identities and helps provide continued support for a system of white supremacy. The term 'white supremacy' here refers to *'a political-economic social system of domination. This system is based on the historical and current accumulation of structured power that privileges, centralizes, and elevates white people as a group'* (DiAngelo 2016: 145). The fact that CiFA is collecting this specific data, however, is a step in the right direction. The lack of racial diversity seen in Classical archaeology is not unique to the field, but rather reflects larger systemic issues in which cultural constraints limit the ability of minority groups to access higher education. This does not absolve the field of archaeology from responsibility, however. Rather, it should spur both conversations and actions regarding the ways in which the field helps to perpetuate these disparities. Engaging in critical self-reflection represents a first-step in addressing the systemic inequalities that exist in the field. This process is essential when working to provide opportunities and increase the representation of minority groups.

While the conversations centred around gender inequalities appear to be much more present than those about racial inequalities, we should note that the lack of racial diversity identified above is still embedded within the discussion of gender. A number of recent archaeological conferences inspired questions of gender

imbalance. At the XIX<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Classical Archaeology (AIAC) in Cologne/Bonn (May 2018) the original programme had nine keynotes speakers, all of whom were male; this was amended only following criticism online. Additionally, as Richard Hingley has recently noted in regard to the XXIV<sup>th</sup> International Limes Congress in Serbia (September 2018), although there was a session on gender in the past the initial discussion was dominated by men (**Figure 1**). While there is a difference between being a woman studying the past and studying women in the past, the latter is still seen as a specialist niche area, while research not explicitly targeting women is implied to be about men. How can we embed the presence and impact of women in the past into all aspects of research? Likewise, there are still varying conscious and unconscious biases against women throughout academia, a problem persistently evident in archaeology (Shiple 2018).

This lack of diversity is apparent across Classical archaeology, be it at conferences like TRAC, in the field, or within the ranks of academia. These inequalities are not unique to Roman studies or Classical archaeology but are indicative of broader cultural and structural systems. Theoretical Roman archaeology has had successes, such as the creation of *TRAJ* through the momentum generated by TRAC. The decolonising mission of Roman archaeology, or indeed of archaeology as a whole, however, is not complete, particularly now that we must come to terms with a new political reality.

Earlier in the year *Antiquity* published a debate on the relationship between politics and archaeology, given the resurgence of nationalism and reactionary populism in places like the US and UK (and now Brazil). González-Ruibal et al. (2018a) argued that archaeology must be further decolonised and that the popular model of postcolonialism through multivocality is no longer tenable in this environment. In the debate that followed, Hamilakis (2018) agreed that we must shift from 'ethics to politics' and away from theories like multivocality, although he cautioned that it might be too universalising of an approach. In their response (González-Ruibal et al. 2018b), and again in his keynote at the 24<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the European Association of Archaeologists in Barcelona, Spain (September 2018), González-Ruibal amplified the argument that archaeologists have to 'combat the neutralisation of politics in archaeology brought about by multiculturalism on the left and archaeological science on the right.'

In other words, the field of archaeology must remain political to produce research of benefit to society in the current environment—an environment in which the past, present, and future narratives are controlled by the right—and in order to 'rearm to face a capitalism that no longer requires scientific legitimacy', archaeology must be political not to negotiate conflict, but rather to accept it and 'fight for a better world' (González-Ruibal 2018). This idea inspired great debate within the pages of *Antiquity* and at the EAA. There is a parallel between what González-Ruibal is experiencing now and what Eleanor Scott experienced with TRAC—her idea for integrating theory with Roman archaeology also encountered resistance, but it is now mainstream (cf. Hingley 2014). We wonder whether González-Ruibal and his colleagues might experience a similar process. Scott fought for a better world with TRAC, and the launch of *TRAJ* in 2018 represents our recommitment as scholars to build on this foundation.



**Figure 1:** @IARHeritages, <https://twitter.com/IARHeritages/status/1037976853338836992> (Used with the permission of Richard Hingley @IARHeritages).

One way we can move forward is by continuing to think critically about infrastructure and practice within Roman archaeology in addition to theory and politics. As an example, the increasing digitisation and open access publications of sources related to Classical and Roman archaeology is an important initiative for the discipline. The online resources available today have great potential to generate increasing participation and interest in Roman archaeology from the public. As Bagnall and Heath (2018) note, however, the quality of resources available without cost to an individual is frequently contingent on their institutional membership. Many projects and databases like *EAGLE*<sup>1</sup> that took advantage of the earlier funding opportunities also have poorer user interfaces and are not updated to meet demands. The result is that many not-for-profit sources have limitations, but those like *JSTOR*,<sup>2</sup> which are institutionally-sponsored or behind a paywall, do not. Likewise, the Historical Environment Records (HERs) in Britain were initially well funded, but due to budget restrictions these records are no longer comprehensively updated, nor as accessible. As Bagnall and Heath (2018: 186) address, the data are available but ‘can only be used in ways the creator thought of’ once the project ends and maintenance of online resources ceases. While open access publications and other digital resources are encouraged, we must take care in regard to the ways in which resources create new limitations with Roman archaeology despite improving access.

We must also take care in how we construct new narratives about the past; we need to be conscious of the long-standing biases that still persist within Roman studies today. The theoretically engaged scholarship that TRAC supports is more politically and socially aware, but the topics we study and the choices we make about theory are just as important as the kinds of research questions we choose to ask. The Romanisation debate is dead in TRAC but alive and well elsewhere in the field, since it is still being applied uncritically in modern scholarship and especially in popular scholarly publications (e.g. Davidescu 2013). The increase of open access scholarship and digital resources are allowing for students at less-wealthy academic institutions, as well as individuals no longer affiliated with a college/university, to access such materials. This is increasing the diversity of voices within Roman archaeology, but as noted above this should not be presented as a *fait accompli*. In fact, this is one of the unintended consequences of multivocality that González-Ruibal cautioned against—that a pseudo-history based on outdated theories like Romanisation can proliferate since our work is so accessible.

## In This Issue

The articles in this first issue of the *Theoretical Roman Archaeology Journal* reflect the long-standing ethos of TRAC and collectively demonstrate a sample of the theory-based and interdisciplinary research currently being undertaken in the field of Roman studies. The papers feature theoretically engaged topics that offer historical, geographical, and typological diversity, spanning from the Roman Republic to Late Antiquity and from Britain to the Near East. While each article addresses a different topic, common themes can be highlighted both from what is written, and what is absent. For example, aspects of gender, social, and cultural identities are addressed in articles about material culture from the *Civitas Icenorum* in Britain (Harlow), mortuary practices in the south-eastern Alps (Mason and Županek), and spindle whorls from Vindolanda and Corbridge (Alberti). In addition, sensory experiences are also considered in other discussions about funerary sites around the Bay of Naples (Graham), Roman glass across the western Empire (Cassibry), and religious dining experiences in the Near East (Kamash). Finally, two contributions discuss Roman frontiers—(Breeze) examines the general importance of studying frontiers and (Kolbeck) discusses the evidence for civilian suppliers to the army on the frontier in Britain. The contributors for this issue represent a diverse group of scholars at varying stages of their respective academic careers. This brief review is just a sample of some of the research appearing in this first issue.

While the papers cover many regions of the Roman Empire, the absence of particular areas is noteworthy. This first issue of *TRAJ*, while it cannot be comprehensive, does not feature much discussion about certain areas of Roman history and the Empire, particularly North Africa, Iberia, Eastern Europe, and Late Antiquity. The majority of the articles here focus on research topics centred on the late Iron Age and/or the late Republican and early Imperial periods with a concentration in Western Europe. David Breeze did provide a brief examination about the Lower Danube and Dacian territories in a broader discussion of Roman frontiers; his paper stands alone in such discussion, however. Zena Kamash’s article also stands apart with an investigation into the religious dining practices and collective memory in the Middle East.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.eagle-network.eu/eagle-project/collections/>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.jstor.org/>.

*TRAJ* opens a new episode in the history of the TRAC movement, and we encourage you to join in this conversation. Any journal is constrained by what is submitted and if your subject area is not represented here, or if you feel strongly about the absence of particular subject areas in Roman archaeology, please consider sending your work to *TRAJ* for future issues.

## A Special Thanks

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- The *TRAJ* Editorial Committee
- The *TRAJ* Advisory Committee
- The Open Library of Humanities

Further general and contact information is available at <https://traj.openlibhums.org/>. If you have any suggestions or comments for how *TRAJ* may be developed further, please do get in touch.

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## Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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