

MAKING ROMAN PLACES, PAST AND PRESENT

Papers presented at the first Critical Roman Archaeology Conference
held at Stanford University in March, 2008

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Preface

David Mattingly

The meeting of the Critical Roman Archaeology Conference (CRAC) held at Stanford University in March 2008 was a welcome (and overdue) development. The organisers of the conference and editors of this volume are to be congratulated for their imaginative vision and hard work in bringing this to fruition. However, it is important that this is seen as simply the first step in a larger project. Classical Archaeology in the United States has many outstanding strengths, but engagement with current theoretical debates in archaeology and the social sciences is one not generally associated with it. This postgraduate-organised event represented a pioneering attempt to bridge that gap and to encourage more theoretical approaches to the study of Roman archaeology. The event was to some extent following in the footsteps of the UK-based Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference (TRAC), now in its 22nd year, which has held annual conferences since 1991 and has mostly succeeded in publishing the proceedings. While initially shunned by most established academics and accused by some of academic faddism, there can now be no doubt about its impact on the subject as a whole or its largely beneficial effects — especially in re-invigorating debate, in helping to change research agendas, and in establishing new paradigms. Those of us who regularly attend both TRAC and its ‘grown-up cousin’ RAC (the Roman Archaeology Conference) have noted an increasing convergence in themes and audience for both events, reflecting how the TRAC agenda has become mainstream.

There are a number of reasons why it is important that US-based classical archaeologists should become more theoretically informed. Having taught Roman archaeology in both the US and the UK systems (at Michigan, Oxford and Leicester), I am well aware of the strengths and weaknesses of both and of the historical and structural circumstances that have influenced the rather different pattern of development on each side of the Atlantic. Roman archaeology is generally taught out of Classics departments in the US but within broad-based archaeology departments in the UK, which means that British academics and students are more immediately exposed to broader theoretical debates within archaeology. Nonetheless, UK-based Roman archaeology in the late 20th c. was still seen by many as somewhat out of step with the increasingly theory-driven archaeological discipline, remaining conservative and intellectually stale. That is now changed, in part due to TRAC. There has been considerable debate in the UK in the last 20 years about the future direction of Roman archaeology, stimulated by the ‘pressure from below’ that TRAC exemplifies. Some of this has been soul-searching and rather alarmist — based on some well-known centres of Roman studies encountering temporary crises because of falling postgraduate numbers or staff retirements not being followed with new hires. Yet, when one looks closely at the national picture, Roman archaeology in British universities seems as strong as it has ever been, and, measured according to a variety of yardsticks, on an upward trajectory. Whereas the 1980s were a period of limited development and non-replacement of retiring staff, the 1990s and 2000s have seen an expansion of the UK University system and an overall increase in the archaeological student body. The total number of staff in university posts teaching Roman archaeology has grown consistently across this period and the research interests of the group as a whole have also shifted. While study of Britain in the Roman empire remains a uniquely British academic fascination, it is by no means

as dominant as it was, say, 20 years ago. Most university academics also work on some other area of the empire; some do so exclusively. Postgraduate numbers have also boomed – and here one can point to the ‘TRAC effect’ as highly significant in creating a student perception that Roman archaeology is a ‘happening area’ of the discipline, where old certainties can be challenged and there is an intellectual energy for them to feed off. Higher postgraduate recruitment in Roman archaeology to some degree has been at the expense of some other periods of archaeology that once attracted the best and brightest students in archaeology.

For the most part, the traditional strengths of Roman archaeology (e.g., art, architecture, and the Roman army) continue to be represented in the research expertise of university staff, but overall there has been a significant broadening of geographical, thematic and practical areas of research (e.g., much more emphasis on landscape archaeology, economic themes, material culture and identity). Moreover, the recruitment of researchers from other academic traditions has enriched the UK’s scholarly community and increased its diversity (I can think of New Zealand, German, Dutch, Italian, Romanian, American, and Greek academics currently in post). However, this has not been at the expense of the TRAC generation, who have increasingly been making the transition from ‘sceptical postgraduates’ to established academics. For instance, 11 of the editors (to say nothing of the much larger number of authors) of the TRAC volumes published to date hold university posts, and many others are working in UK professional archaeology. Although the initial stages of the ‘TRAC revolution’ (as we might term it) were quite slow, the academic landscape of Roman archaeology has by now been largely transformed and revitalised.

S. Dyson’s *Pursuit of ancient pasts* (2006) had some harsh things to say about the continuing relevance and contribution of US-based Roman archaeologists to the wider international discipline. It is not simply the demise of the ‘big dig’ that is to blame for a diminished impact of American scholarship within Europe. The question can be asked to what extent Roman archaeology in the US is agenda-setting and eye-catching. There are exceptions, but given the total numbers of practitioners and the excellent postgraduate training they receive, it is fair to say that the US system ‘punches below its weight’. A degree of intellectual re-invigoration can only help. For this reason alone, the intellectual arguments in favour of Critical Roman Archaeology far outweigh the demerits. No doubt some will decry the introduction of ‘theory-speak’ and jargon as the harbingers of a wider decline in academic standards, and I would agree that theoretical debate is at its best when it is carried out in clear and comprehensible language; but it is equally apparent to me that linguistic purity does not guarantee critical integrity. Indeed, much established scholarship in the US remains remarkably unaware of the potential implications of post-colonial theory on discourse for the underlying principles of the discipline of classical studies. Understanding these debates is crucial for the future health of our subject.

There is an argument that the small classics department in a liberal arts college in the American Midwest cannot afford the luxury of employing a theoretically-informed Romanist, when there are so many of the ‘old faithful’ courses (Roman art and architecture, the Roman city, sport and daily life in Rome, and so forth) to be covered. What was very clear at the conference from which this publication derives is that the best of the CRAC generation will be able to offer both core strengths and new approaches. Courses on the Roman economy, Roman identities, Roman imperialism and its reception, and so on, can prove to be excellent student recruiters.

Others will provide commentary on the papers included in this volume. I shall finish by reflecting that the themes evoked for the conference and book are original and insightful. Place-making in the Roman world has important implications for our understanding of past behaviours and our engagement with modern perceptions of Rome. As I commented at the conference, more than half of the area of the Roman empire is occupied today by nation states that endured periods of modern colonial rule, and an even larger area has experienced some period of autocratic government in the past century. Small wonder then that the progressive and positivistic 'Western Civilisation' perception of the Roman empire is not the best fit for many who still live under its shadow. There are profound issues here relating to ethics and responsibilities that all classicists ought to be more aware of.

As CRAC develops in the future, we need to engage with a thorough deconstruction of concepts and terms — to help us better define things and to understand the underlying paradigms of our subject. Linked to this is the necessity for more profound historiographical study, to disentangle past biases and changing approaches. We can also gain insights from an analysis of the reception and re-invention of the Roman empire in contemporary society and the recent past. Classical studies could also benefit from a broadening of perspective, exploring multivocal and multifocal approaches, rather than simply the 'Western Civilisation' paradigm. This could be facilitated by extending our field of study away from great sites and élite material culture, to encompass a greater socio-economic range.

My personal vision of Roman research agendas includes the following themes: identity and material culture; power and its operation; imperial exploitation (of land, people and resources) and its effects; historiographical study (deconstructing historical discourse); bottom-up social histories; rural cultures and tasksapes; urban cultures and townscapes; economies of growth and exceptional characteristics; migration and diaspora; and regionality and landscape biography. All of these engage with established data sources, but encourage new lines of enquiry and analysis. Removed from my agenda is all reference to 'Romanisation', a tired concept that evokes all that is worst about the sterility of much recent debate.

In Britain and much of Europe the debate is moving on; this volume suggests that the US may still make a valuable theoretical contribution to the reshaping of agendas in Roman Archaeology in the 21st c.