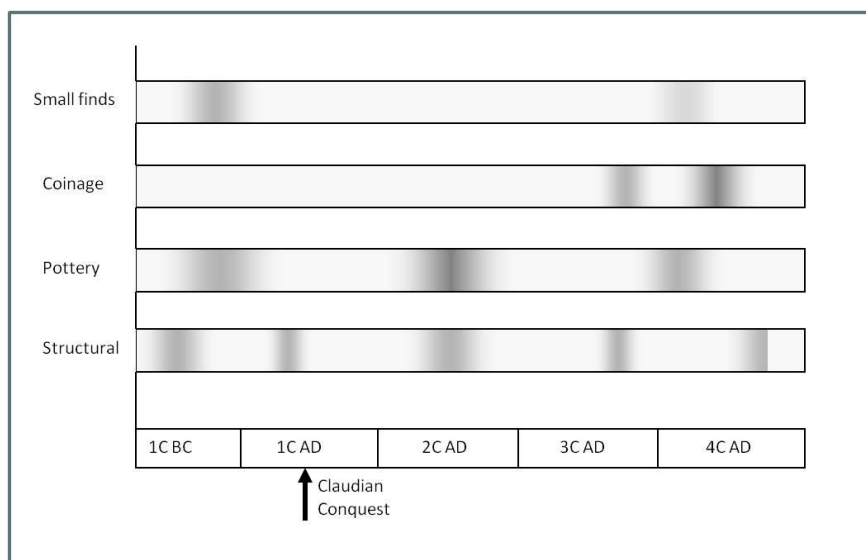


Contingent Persistence: Continuity, Change, and Identity in the Romanization Debate

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Comment: Andrew Gardner, UCL Institute of Archaeology

This excellent, thought-provoking piece presents conclusions with which I very much agree. The need for a temporalized perspective on cultural change in the Roman – or any other – empire should not need stating, but it absolutely does and Lara Ghisleni’s paper makes an eloquent and compelling case. She offers a sophisticated analysis of the stubborn persistence of certain deep, underlying archaeological constructs, and the necessity of exploring both ‘past futures’ where things could be otherwise (cf. Giddens 1979; 1984; Barrett 2004), and the intertwining of aspects of change and continuity in the lived experiences of people in the past. The first point reminds me of comments made by Matthew Johnson some time ago in relation to the wider debate on the innovation of ‘agency’ in archaeological theory (2004), such that powerful archaeological categories served to resist the full scope of the programme which theories of agency and structure might allow archaeologists to develop. These categories, as the means by which we divide and describe both things and people, remain an obstacle and are part of what creates the situation that Ghisleni describes in the first part of her paper. Her approach, in the second part of the paper, to the case-study material from the south-west of Roman Britain seeks to re-categorise this material and form new structures of comparison within it. This is a promising approach and one we need to keep pursuing. At the moment, work that seeks to engage thus, in reconfiguring the temporality of past material cultures, is out there (e.g. Chadwick 2004), but is somewhat fragmented. My own most recent contribution on this theme (Gardner 2012) argued for an approach that compared some of the temporal characteristics of material patterning on one particular Roman-period site, Cotswold Community near Cirencester (Powell et al. 2010), looking in particular for different tempos of change. Not published as part of that paper, but offered below, is a visualisation of some of the key patterns. Here, the shaded parts of each horizontal bar represent the periods of greatest intensity of transformation in particular domains of activity, as indicated by more rapid or significant material changes (thanks to Sue Hamilton for suggestions on this, which is also partly inspired by Going 1992: 97). This is still a work-in-progress but the point of including it here is to highlight that envisioning multiple temporalities where change and continuity are simultaneously happening in the past requires us to *re-visualise* how we describe past patterns. This might be one focal point for a more joined-up research agenda in the future.



In that paper, and in other work, I have made considerable use of Barbara Adam's perspective on temporality (e.g. 1990). Her approach is explicitly engaged with the paradoxical nature of time as 'repetition with variation', which fits well with this paper's focus on the difficulty of neatly delineating and opposing change and continuity; she has also written recently on the nature of contemporary futures (2010). Also relevant is the highly temporalized view of agency presented by Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische (1998), in an important paper that draws upon George Herbert Mead's philosophy to highlight – among other key points – the role of the future in shaping agency in a present moment. I mention these points of reference because, in relation to my earlier remarks about persistent obstacles, it seems to me that some of the more recent trends in archaeological theory have skated on past some significant insights of structurationist theory that might help us to remove these obstacles. Ghisleni's paper is very helpful because it reminds us how much deeper we needed to mine in our own disciplinary consciousness to really explore the implications of ideas that were not fully worked through, before attention shifted elsewhere. The fundamentally temporal character of agency defined by Giddens as the capacity to 'act otherwise' (1979: 56), and the equally fundamental temporal character of structuration as a process, are concepts that have still to be fully exploited to re-theorise our archaeological categories. I think it worthwhile to pursue this task further before dismissing such approaches and moving on into the – to me – more difficult waters of posthumanism and so-called 'object agency' (cf. Ribeiro 2016). This paper, therefore, deserves serious attention as an engagement with, and programme for, the challenging but exciting work we still have to do to balance continuity and change in our own discipline.

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