

Debating Roman Imperialism: Critique, Construct, Repeat?

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Introduction: Another Theoretical Health-check?

TRAC has given us 25 years of inspiration, engagement – and sometimes controversy – and in the process has made a massive impact on Roman archaeology and on the careers of many Roman archaeologists, including my own. One of the great strengths of TRAC as a community over this period has been its reflexivity, and it has become customary to reflect on the state of the conference and of our field, whether in publications of or about the proceedings, or in keynote lectures such as that which this paper derives from. Here, I aim to take a different approach to this kind of exercise, starting from a position of confidence in the vitality of the TRAC community, but then comparing what has been happening in theoretical Roman archaeology with broader trends in archaeological theory. This exercise reveals that the agendas in Roman archaeology that TRAC has helped us to develop have distinctive strengths, as well as interesting omissions, but above all it shows that there is a common trajectory from a period of high-energy critique to one of more peaceful application, accompanied by a degree of theoretical fragmentation. In evaluating the positive and negative aspects of this state of affairs, I think that significant insight can be gained into where we should be heading in the future. In particular, I believe that we need to open up a more honest dialogue about the underlying tensions that beset archaeological thinking, in Roman studies as much as anywhere else, and develop ways within the TRAC community to resolve these tensions, in order that we may more effectively communicate with other archaeologists, other classicists, and the wider public.

My conviction that TRAC is in a healthy state therefore does not mean that there are no problems or challenges, but rather that these are widely shared across archaeology, and that in fact, TRAC is in a good position to lead the way in resolving them. The success of the 25th annual conference at the University of Leicester, whether measured in numbers of delegates or lively sessions, or indeed a good party, is reflective of the many positive roles that TRAC continues to play within Roman archaeology. The shape of the conference has morphed somewhat since its founding, but that is only to be expected, and certainly notable achievements have been scored over the last quarter-century. The TRAC community has remained consistently open and inclusive. It has reached out internationally, inspired other events, and has incubated some of the most innovative approaches in Roman archaeology. Yet, there have been times when the reflexivity that has been part of TRAC's ethos from the beginning has risked tipping over into anxiety and a lack of self-confidence. Critical reflection is present in the introductions to many published proceedings, and in the reviews of those proceedings (e.g. Laurence 1999; Webster 1999; Swift 2007; Gardner 2012; Revell 2014), as well as in the special papers commissioned for

the 2005 volume (Gardner 2006; Laurence 2006; Scott 2006), the plenary sessions or keynotes at various meetings (e.g. at UCL in 2000, Newcastle in 2011, and King's in 2013; see Allason-Jones 2012), and some of the other publications appearing in recent years addressing the state of Roman archaeology as a sub-discipline (e.g. Woolf 2004; Versluys 2014; *cf.* also Gardner 2003; James 2003; Laurence 2012: 20–3). Individually all of these contributions make important points – and having written some of them myself I can hardly disown the genre – but collectively, and because these are almost exclusively voices within the TRAC community rather than outsiders who might help us shift our perspective, they convey an impression of excessive introspection. This risks being unhelpful. Certainly, anxiety about the prominence of explicit theory at TRAC, for example, has had mixed results in changing things. I think that this is because this particular phenomenon, among others, is part of much broader trends, and if we are to really get to grips with these then we need to start from a position of greater confidence that really empowers us to engage with the wider archaeological world. TRAC as an institution has access to the talent and resources to justify such confidence (*cf.* Revell 2014), and there are a number of practical ways to make the most of this as the institution evolves in the future.

What these are, and how they might be implemented, is the subject of the latter part of this paper. In the intervening sections, I aim to demonstrate that we can draw strength from the fact that we are not alone in the kinds of issues we face, by comparing – naturally in a broad brush fashion – trends in archaeological theory with those in theoretical Roman archaeology. This will show that while there are distinct dynamics in each domain, with those approaches considered most relevant to the Roman world having particular characteristics, there are similarities in overall trajectory and in some of the discourse of theoretical frustration. For example, Miguel John Versluys' report of a theory-averse reaction to the 'Romanisation' debates among current students (2014: 4–5) echoes similar remarks on perceived theoretical dogmatism generating hostility to 'theory' as a concept elsewhere (Bintliff 2011: 8–9). Similarly, fragmentation is a common theme, of some longstanding, remarked upon in the Roman context by Greg Woolf (2004, writing of regional and other specialisms as well as theory; *cf.* Laurence 2012: 22–23) and others surveying the post-'Romanisation' landscape (e.g. Gardner 2013; Pitts and Versluys 2015: 5–6), and in the wider discipline by a number of commentators from Matthew Johnson (1999: 177–187) to Koji Mizoguchi (2015: 15–16). Indeed, to some extent these are issues that have been around as long as archaeologists have been explicitly engaged with the conceptual underpinnings of their discipline. I will later go so far as to argue that they relate to persistent tendencies in the inclinations of archaeologists, essentially between leading our research with material or with ideas. These kinds of divisions have increasingly been masked by thematic approaches to the past, particularly evident in widespread conference organisation formats, which can certainly be a useful approach but can equally be seen as fudging the problem. Other crucial underlying issues that I would like to highlight in the course of this paper are the wide range of different objectives archaeologists have when they explicitly cite theory, the various ways in which comparison works (particularly, for our purposes, in relation to different empires), and whether multi-vocality, a rightly lauded aspect of recent archaeological debate, always entails meaningful dialogue. These kinds of issues present challenges to all archaeologists as we try to move our discipline forward, and insofar as TRAC has connected Roman archaeology into wider debates, they are challenges for our community too – albeit that this connection is rather one-sided, with limited acknowledgment by other archaeologists of the progress that Roman archaeology has made (e.g. Johnson 2010, which makes only limited reference to recent Romanist scholarship; *cf.* Morris 2004; Woolf 2004: 420; Gardner 2013: 2–3). The way forward, as I see

it, is to work to turn this relationship around, such that TRAC leads the way in showing, not necessarily how to solve insoluble problems, but at least how to work creatively with the tensions inherent in our discipline and engage new audiences in the enterprise of better understanding the (Roman) past.

The Wider Context: Recent Trends in Archaeological Theory

Summarising the last 50 years of developments in archaeological theory, in order to place the development of TRAC into a wider intellectual context, is clearly a tall order. In a short paper like this, I can only present a very crude characterisation of the state of the field now and its historical trajectory, based in no small part on my experience of teaching archaeological theory at UCL for some years. The reader is referred to various recent reviews for much more thorough treatments (e.g. Hegmon 2003; Johnson 2006; Preucel and Mrozowski 2010; Hodder 2012a; Gardner and Cochrane 2011; Mizoguchi 2015; Gardner, Lake and Sommer forthcoming). In a nutshell, though, and as has already been mentioned, there is a clear trend towards fragmentation of theoretical agendas and groups of scholars over time (Fig. 1). Whether this is a linear or a somewhat cyclical phenomena is a moot point; David Clarke (1973: 7) commented on the fragmentation prevalent in traditional archaeology in the mid-20th century, and at a global scale there have always been more distinct trajectories than a focus on Anglo-American theory might suggest, but certainly many commentators have charted the developing diversity of archaeological thought from the period of the New/processual archaeology onwards (e.g. Thomas 2000; Trigger 2006: 519–528; Johnson 2010: 231–233; Hodder 2012a: 1–8; Mizoguchi 2015: 15–17). This process is complex, and is not simply a matter of the proliferation of sub-schools of thought, but also involves recursive points of influence between agendas (such as the impact of post-processual thought on the ‘cognitive processualism’ championed particularly by Colin Renfrew, e.g. 1994), as well as changes in nomenclature over time (e.g. the rebranding of post-processualism as ‘interpretive archaeology’ from the early 1990s; see Shanks and Hodder 1995: 4–5). These phenomena occur because each way of doing archaeology is a living tradition, and theoretical developments in our field rarely represent a complete paradigm shift which makes all previous ideas obsolete (*cf.* Trigger 2006: 5–17). A further important dimension to this process of fragmentation is a change in the nature of debate, captured in the most apposite form of caricature in the cartoons by Simon James and Matthew Johnson which illustrate the latter’s 1999 introduction to archaeological theory (Johnson 1999: 183–184). A fairly lively set of debates about the goals of archaeology in the early 1980s (even more so than in the early 1960s) – involving a fair amount of polemic and posturing, maybe, but at least showing that the stakes were important – had given way by the 1990s to a more tolerant multi-vocality. Whether this signalled a more mature phase, or rather a retreating of groups of scholars to their own bunkers of self-reinforcing complacency, remains open to question; certainly, the prevailing lack of dialogue between the major current traditions of evolutionary and interpretive archaeologies is quite easy to characterise in the latter terms (Kristiansen 2004; Gardner and Cochrane 2011: 11–16; *cf.* VanPool and VanPool 2003; Johnson 2011). This situation has a number of other implications and effects.

Some archaeologists have reacted to this state of affairs by arguing that the notion of archaeological theory as a particular domain of discourse is, or ought to become, redundant – that ‘theory’ is dead, and that we should proceed by simply picking the best conceptual tools for a particular job (e.g. Bintliff 2011; *cf.* Pearce 2011). A related point is that part of the reason for the current state of fragmentation is a high turnover of ideas, with a competitive zeal for

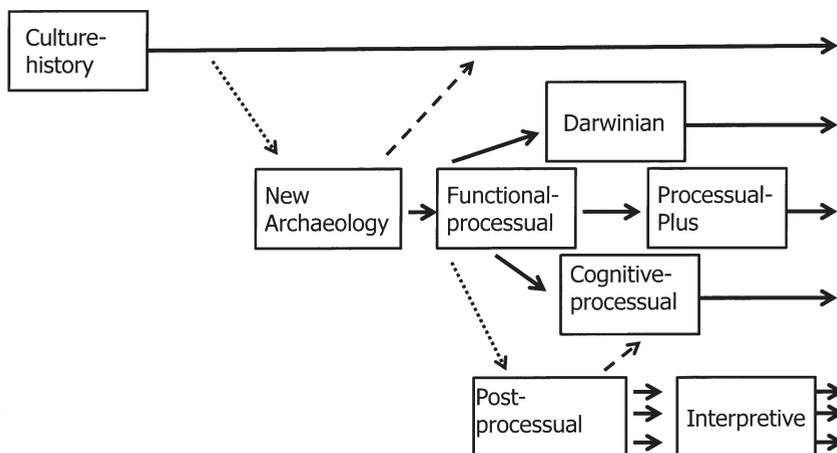


Figure 1: Schematic (and thus highly simplified) representation of the diversification of theoretical archaeology over time. Broken lines indicate more reactive or indirect relationships between schools of thought, the most antagonistic with dotted lines.

new theoretical perspectives leading to earlier ideas becoming unfashionable with unseemly haste. This not only makes long-term critical engagement with a particular research programme increasingly uncommon, but also may be turning students, and others, off of ‘theory’ because it appears to comprise a highly unsettled body of material and seems dominated by overly dogmatic positions (Bintliff 2011: 8–9; Mizoguchi 2015: 16). While I firmly believe that any proclamation of the death of theory is exaggerated, and unhelpful, threatening to take us back to a naïve sense of empirical security that avoids big questions, the accelerated turnover of ideas is a potential problem. Whether this is influenced by structural features of the academic employment situation, as I suspect, or even broader factors generating the fragmentation of identity in late Modernity (Mizoguchi 2015: 12–17; *cf.* Hall 1996: 3–4) – or simply something more benign like increasing intellectual curiosity among archaeologists – it has clear consequences for any disciplinary unity around problems or paradigms. Too much unity would of course be equally problematic, and pluralism is definitely a good thing, but some points of cohesion are still needed, or at least clear dialogues between different groups, because an atomised discipline is a weak one in the face of pressures from outside (wherever archaeologists work), and because building more complete accounts of the past takes collaborative effort given the extraordinary quantities of material we have to work with today.

This picture of fragmentation, for me, overwhelms any sense of broad consensus developing around certain themes across different schools, though this has been suggested by some (e.g. Hegmon 2003; *cf.* Johnson 2010: 223–233). Often, such claims conceal important divisions (a further effect of the diminution of theoretical debate) and they can even be rhetorical moves to lay claim to more of the theoretical terrain (Moss 2005; *cf.* Tilley 1995 on Renfrew’s ‘cognitive-processual synthesis’). Indeed, some of the more prominent strands of contemporary theory have demonstrated ambitions toward unifying theory – even as they remain internally rather disparate – with some evolutionary archaeologists arguing for their approach as the most appropriate for

the discipline (e.g. Foley 2002: 38–39; Shennan 2002: 9–14). Coming from a very different background, Ian Hodder’s most recent book *Entangled* (2012b) seeks to draw together strands not only from the range of approaches dealing with ‘materiality’, but also aspects of evolutionary thought (cf. Gosden 2005: 198; Trigger 2006: 497–498; Johnson 2010: 220–7; Gardner 2011: 75–77; Hodder 2012a: 9–11). Such efforts to create a general theory for archaeology are unlikely to be successful, but at least these interventions allow us to debate the ideas and to grapple with different visions for the goals of archaeology. These are the important issues that make ‘theory’ still absolutely something to talk about, and within that discourse we need to find more of a balance between the highly fragmented and the grandly unified extremes. One other argument which points toward the need for such a balance is that, in recent years, a mechanism which rather fudges the underlying issues has been increasingly prevalent (particularly at conferences like TAG) – the thematic session. These enable speakers from different theoretical standpoints to contribute, which is of course valuable, but can also serve to obscure critical engagement with those differences in deference to the positive contributions made to the session theme, especially given the limited discussion time available in most current conference formats. Such sessions achieve something of the kind of balance I am advocating, but without enabling us to look more closely at the ideas we are using and the contradictions between them. Evaluating the pros and cons of leading with themes, ideas, or material in our conference meetings – and our publications, which will have different dynamics – is a key part of the process of opening up more effective dialogue in archaeology in general, and – as we shall now explore – at TRAC too.

Theorising the Roman Empire: A Comparative Exercise

Much of my current thinking about the development of ‘theoretical Roman archaeology’ both before and after the foundation of TRAC is presented in a recent publication (Gardner 2013: 1–9), so here I just want to highlight a couple of key points of that history to enable some comparison with the foregoing comments on the wider theoretical scene. One such point to note is that of course TRAC itself emerged in a context of greater explicit theorisation of Roman archaeology that goes back to the later 1970s and 1980s, and moreover, that even before this point traditional approaches were certainly theoretical, just not explicitly so. There are, in particular, many affinities between the principles underpinning ‘Romanisation’ theory and other forms of essentially historical explanation and the wider paradigm of culture history (Jones 1997: 29–39; Gardner 2014: 2–3). From the 1960s, the New Archaeology did have a methodological impact on Classical fields (notably in survey archaeology in the Mediterranean and in excavation practice in the UK), but it took longer to have a theoretical effect, for example in new approaches to ‘acculturation’, or the exploration of core-periphery relationships inspired by world-systems theory (e.g. Bartel 1980; Cunliffe 1988; cf. Dyson 1989). By the late 1980s, with post-processualism already well-established in other areas of British archaeology, this too began to have some influence, and the book which played a significant role in the early debates at TRAC – Martin Millett’s *The Romanization of Britain* – exemplifies quite well the fusion of approaches taking shape in the work of some archaeologists of Roman Britain (in particular) at this time (Millett 1990; cf. Hingley 2001: 112). While processual and increasingly post-processual interests continued to shape TRAC throughout at least its first decade – in terms of fairly direct borrowings of interests, concepts, and literature – during the 1990s, Roman archaeology also began to take its own distinctive theoretical trajectory.

The first significant phase of this pathway is dominated by post-colonial theory. Drawing on

an eclectic range of sources in post-colonial studies, which itself crosses disciplines like literary criticism, cultural studies, anthropology, and philosophy, Roman provincial archaeologists began to explore native resistance to Roman rule, then to look critically at Roman-period texts and other forms of representation as discourses of imperial ideology, and finally to develop sophisticated approaches to the multiplicity of identity-shaping processes apparent in the Roman world. The first of these approaches actually has roots that predate TRAC, in some work in Britain (e.g. Hingley 1989), and elsewhere (e.g. Bénabou 1976 [2005]; Brandt and Sloftstra 1984), and as TRAC became established the other trends developed and indeed started to overtake this ‘nativist’ strand in importance. Colonial discourse analysis, influenced particularly by the work of Edward Said (e.g. 1978), figured prominently in the 1996 *Post-colonial Perspectives* volume (Webster and Cooper 1996) as well as at TRAC in this period. In addition to finding application in reconsiderations of authors like Tacitus, or sculptural evidence (e.g. Forcey 1997; Ferris 2003), such approaches were also an element in the increasing historiographical interest in the imperial roots of Roman archaeology which took off in the same period (e.g. Hingley 2000). With respect to the Roman period itself, approaches which moved beyond the Roman-native dichotomy into more hybridised realms of identity included Jane Webster’s work on creolisation (e.g. 2001), and David Mattingly’s work on discrepancy (e.g. 2004), again with influence from Said (1993). The post-colonial phase of Roman archaeology is far from over, and there are still important themes and debates in the source literature to pursue (Gardner 2013: 5–6), but one thing that is quite notable about this really important and productive strand of theoretical Roman archaeology is that it has not really joined up with other applications of post-colonial thinking in archaeology as a whole. These are generally much more about heritage issues in post-colonial countries (e.g. Smith 2004; Gosden 2012; *cf.* van Dommelen 2011). Indeed, a recent *Handbook of Postcolonial Archaeology* (Lydon and Rizvi 2010) includes very few references to what has been going on in Roman archaeology in this area – a highly indicative symptom of some of the communication problems mentioned in the Introduction.

The same is less true of the other, more recent clear trend in Roman archaeology, which has to do with the application of theories of globalisation. This term started to appear in the context of Roman studies around the turn of the millennium (e.g. Witcher 2000; Laurence 2001), but its application – accompanied by a certain amount of critical debate – has developed really over the last decade (e.g. Hingley 2005; Naerebout 2007; Hitchner 2008; Pitts 2008; Pitts and Versluys 2015). As this is really quite a short time in scholarship, the coherence of a globalisation programme is still somewhat limited, but in general terms, the framework is preferred by some as a way of capturing both the distinctive mobility and connectivity enabled by the Roman Empire as well as the high degree of local variation (e.g. Pitts 2008); and by others as simply a more up-to-date comparative frame of reference than the modern form of imperialism that shaped the thinking of the founders of provincial Roman archaeology (e.g. Hingley 2015; Witcher 2015). The spectrum of approaches found under this umbrella within Roman archaeology also reflects the great diversity of potential source literature about globalisation in the contemporary world, which comes from a range of disciplinary perspectives – from anthropology to economics – as well as drawing on distinct theoretical traditions, such as world-systems theory, and indeed different political views on how globalisation should be judged. This makes it an interesting, if controversial, development, but more importantly for our purposes here, one which, on the one hand, further fragments our discourses about the Roman world, and on the other, does connect us to the agendas of at least some other archaeologists interested in ‘globalisation’ in other ancient contexts (e.g. Jennings 2011). This then leads us on to some of the key points of

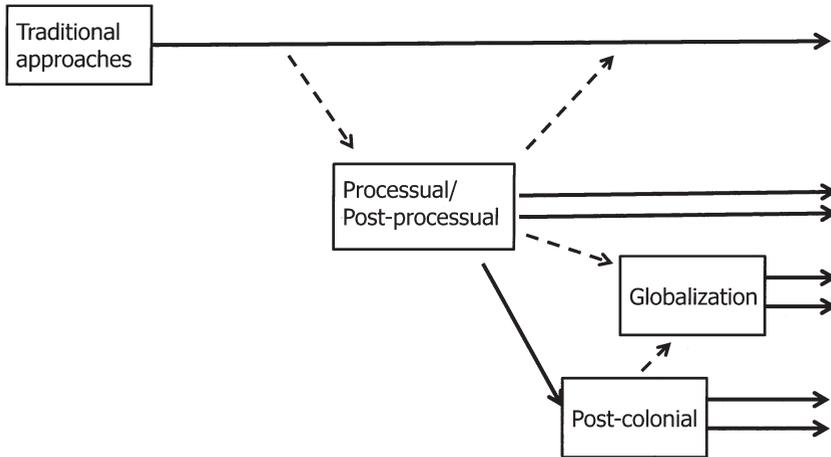


Figure 2: Schematic representation of the diversification of theoretical Roman archaeology over time.

comparison between the contemporary theoretical landscape in Roman archaeology (Fig. 2), and that discussed in the previous section.

In brief, there are several points of contrast, particularly in terms of which theories have developed most traction in Roman archaeology, and indeed, which other possible pathways have been largely ignored (such as phenomenology or Darwinian archaeology, with few examples of engagement – e.g. González-Ruibal 2003; Biddulph 2012). However, overall I would argue that there are many similarities, which are evident both in broad publication patterns and what goes on at conferences like TRAC and TAG (*cf.* Cooper 2012 for a much more systematic analysis of such matters in prehistoric archaeology). These include the overall trajectory from a period of high-energy debate, perhaps too polemical but certainly with a feeling that the stakes were important, to a more reflective period of tolerance of diverse approaches. In Roman archaeology, post-colonial theory largely fuelled the critical phase, reflecting the centrality of concepts of imperialism in Roman archaeology, but fulfilling the same role as the broader suite of post-processual approaches – with which it has much affinity – elsewhere. Fragmentation of agendas is intimately bound up with this process, as the previous grand narrative is demolished and no single framework – such as globalisation – commands enough support to replace it; the high turnover of ideas and the anxiety this generates (already discussed above) are also significant elements. An increasing prevalence of theme-led or material-led, rather than idea-led, sessions at conference meetings seems also to be evident at TRAC as much as at TAG, either as a response to, or symptom of, the former developments. It is also interesting to note that TAG, like TRAC, has developed an international dimension, with conferences in the US, Scandinavia, and elsewhere, in an effort to broaden participation – though again this may be consistent with the trend toward fragmentation, even if the intention is rather the opposite. Indeed, there are pros and cons in most of these phenomena, and these will be explored in the next section, along with the possible underlying causes – because, while there may be an aspect of cyclical fashions in scholarship, there may also be particular deep-rooted tensions in the practice of archaeology that explain these widespread trends.

Unifying Problems and Common Tensions

Rather than explore areas of our field that need fuller theorising, therefore – issues like agency, practice, institutions, materiality, or temporality – I want to focus on the broader matter of how we work theoretically in (Roman) archaeology. Some of the key questions were flagged up in the Introduction to this paper: what are the different objectives of using theory; how do we use comparisons; what is the best starting point for theoretically-informed work; and how can we generate more debate across different theoretical traditions? There is no simple answer to any of these questions, but I think we do need to start being more explicit about their importance insofar as they currently implicitly structure how we work, and have generated some of the problems alluded to in the preceding sections (*cf.* Mizoguchi 2015). Certainly many of the fracture points between schools of thought relate as much to the different possible objectives of deploying theory as to the contents of any particular theoretical framework. Distinctions between explanation and understanding are fundamental to the processual/post-processual divide and may also be relevant to the globalisation/post-colonial agendas in Roman archaeology, in each case the former more distanced and positivistic, the latter more experiential (e.g. Hodder 2012a: 6–8; *cf.* Krishnaswamy 2007: 2). ‘Theory’ may also refer to ways of re-describing phenomena, or be bound up with differing judgements of social realities (*cf.* Gardner 2013: 3). Both of these senses are fundamental to the particular nature of cross-cultural comparison that archaeology, and certainly Roman archaeology, employs.

Comparison between different societies of the past (whether ancient or more recent) is explicitly part of much archaeological work, and is a popular way of looking at the Roman Empire in a wider context (e.g. Tainter 1988; Alcock *et al.* 2001; Scheidel 2009). While more commonly associated with the positivist end of the theoretical spectrum, in pursuit of broad-scale generalisations, ethnographic comparison has remained an important part of post-processual/interpretive method, albeit somewhat in defiance of its contextual agenda (e.g. Fowler 2004; *cf.* Spriggs 2008). All archaeology, though, also tends to invite – if not demand – comparison between the past and the immediate present, and in Roman archaeology this is a clear theme in much of the TRAC-era debate. To some, this seems to boil down to a simple question of whether we like or dislike the Romans (Selkirk 2006), but while a more nuanced perspective than this is certainly what we may wish to aspire to (Mattingly 2014: xxv–xxvi; Witcher 2015: 217–219), we also need to bear in mind the different kinds of audience we wish to communicate with, and consider how to make that critical message as widely relevant as possible. ‘Theoretical jargon’, though often an over-stated problem, may not be the only potential obstacle here (*cf.* Allason-Jones 2012: 4). It is interesting to note, for example, that the left-leaning political orientation of many academic archaeologists (as subjectively judged, though *cf.* James 1998: 202–3 for a degree of support) may be at least somewhat different to that of a proportion of those in the wider world who identify archaeology among their interests (see <https://yougov.co.uk/profiler#/> for some data on this – search ‘archaeology’). More seriously, at a time of rising nationalist movements across Europe, which might be expected to draw one type of connection between past and present, we quite urgently need to review the debate over how archaeologists engage with identity politics, and be prepared to challenge those comparisons which promote intolerance, xenophobia, and militarism. We can only do so if we are clear about how we use theory to interpret the past in ways which are comprehensible in the present.

Such clarity is likely to be enhanced if we also debate more openly the relative merits of different ways of ‘doing’ theoretical archaeology. I have noted above that theoretical debate,

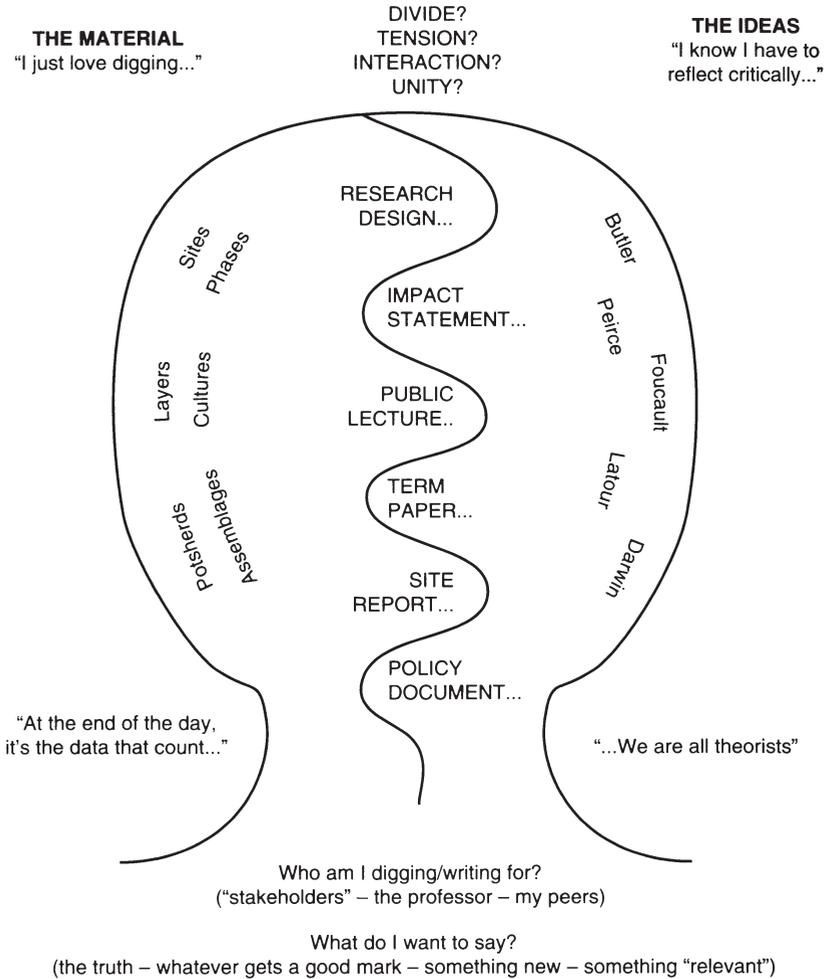


Figure 3: Matthew Johnson’s cartoon illustrating some contemporary – but also deep-rooted – tensions in how we think about archaeology (Johnson 2010: 228; reproduced with permission).

particularly in the context of conference meetings, has somewhat receded because of an increased tendency for sessions to be structured around bodies of material or themes, rather than ideas – so, ‘The archaeology of landscape’, for example, rather than ‘Marxist approaches to social organisation’. All of these approaches have merits, and certainly a thematic structure for grouping work by scholars using different theoretical frameworks is beneficial by virtue of its inclusivity. However, I would argue that ideally we need to retain a balance between these three different approaches, because otherwise we are losing the opportunity to debate the merits of different theoretical frameworks, and this significantly exacerbates the trend towards fragmentation, which I have discussed throughout. To some extent, this is a situation that has developed particularly in the period since the 1990s, which, for a variety of reasons, and as already discussed, has tended towards an atmosphere of politely ‘agreeing-to-disagree’ rather than hard-edged theoretical

debate. Yet it also relates to an arguably much deeper and more long-standing tension between ideas and material with which archaeologists have always struggled. In the second edition of his introductory theory volume, Matthew Johnson (2010: 228 [Fig. 13.3, caption]) added a cartoon illustrating this tension ‘in the mind of every archaeologist’ (Fig. 3), suggesting that this was the current manifestation of the waxing and waning of debates between wider schools of thought, but also reflecting an underlying archaeological condition (2010: 219–220). Indeed, there is good reason to think this is a fairly common dilemma in a number of disciplines in the human sciences, and we can go back, for example to William James, writing at the beginning of the 20th century as he set out the principles of philosophical pragmatism, for a very similar description. James distinguished between ‘tough-minded’ philosophers, with a preference for the empirical, and those of a more ‘tender-minded’, idealistic disposition (1907 [1995]: 4). James went on to argue for pragmatism as a philosophy that harmonised between these poles, and perhaps an emphasis on themed sessions has become a habit that works in such a fashion. We need, though, to ask if it is not time to develop some new habits that refresh our engagement with both material and ideas, and most importantly with each other.

Conclusion: Collaborative and Pragmatic Futures

I think that the key to this is to turn multi-vocality into dialogue. A community of scholars with ever-fragmenting theoretical agendas, all talking past each other, is not much of a community of scholars at all. Without aspiring to any sort of false unity of our discipline, I nonetheless believe that we should be seriously and sincerely debating the ideas as much as the material, talking about consistency and contradiction between theoretical frameworks and languages (*cf.* Johnson 2010: 231–233), and getting down to the fundamentals of what different visions of the Roman past mean in the present. In this way we can build a stronger network of communities within and beyond the TRAC umbrella. Part of this involves finding ways of working more collaboratively, but to generate these we need to be bolder in how we organise our discussions at conferences, with concomitant innovation in publication. There are numerous sources of inspiration for such moves. Within scholarly communities like the nascent field of digital humanities, a range of alternative session and conference formats have been developed over the past few years, involving more unstructured debate time and less rigid adherence to the *c.* 20-minute paper format (see <http://www.unconference.net/>, <http://thatcamp.org/>); explicitly dialogic formats have already been tried on occasion (see Mattingly 1997) and ought to be repeated. There is also considerable scope for spin-off workshop style meetings from TRAC (rather like TEDx events; <https://www.ted.com/>), as the Standing Committee has already proposed at a recent AGM, which might readily be ideas-led.¹ The new series of themed TRAC volumes is a welcome development, because whereas themed sessions might have become a little too dominant on the conference scene, as discussed above, this series represents a new way of presenting TRAC papers and has the potential to enable more dialogue between contributors; idea- or material-led volumes would be equally fruitful. We should also look for ways to engage more openly and directly with the structural opportunities and constraints across the various contexts in which Roman archaeologists work – from self-employed specialists to university academics – and the effects of career structures (or lack thereof) on the development of intellectual agendas and collaborations. In these kinds of ways, we can adopt the pragmatic attitude of bringing our practice of theoretical Roman archaeology closer to our aspirations, and use TRAC to set new agendas in its very structure.

¹ A pilot event is in the works at the time of writing (organised by Lisa Lodwick and the author)

Above all, by recognising that we are not alone in wrestling with some crucial dilemmas at the heart of any kind of theoretical archaeology, we can start to bring these tensions to the fore in a positive, creative spirit, and set an example for others. After 25 years, TRAC already has an impressive legacy. If we think hard about how to develop the conversations it engenders and multiply their effects, we can make sure that the next 25 years will be just as successful.

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