

**Roman Archaeology Conference/Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference, University of Durham, 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> April 1999**

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As has become the established norm, the third biennial Roman Archaeology Conference (RAC) was held in conjunction with the annual Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference (TRAC), resulting in an impressive concentration of Roman-oriented delegates on the banks of the Wear. Inevitably, the demands of scheduling combined with the ambitious range of subjects covered in the programme, meant that up to four sessions had to be run simultaneously, ensuring that difficult decisions had to be made over the choice of venue for any given period and raising awkward questions of etiquette as to the appropriate time to abandon one session in order to repair to another! Such dilemmas aside, attendees had the opportunity of listening to a broad spectrum of papers delivered from a diverse collection of perspectives which should have gone a long way to redress the false impression of Roman archaeology as a staid and predictable discipline.

Perhaps the most striking aspect to emerge from the combined conference for this reviewer, was the realisation of the degree to which theoretical topics have now permeated the 'mainstream', so much so that the subject of 'Archaeological approaches to resistance in the Roman empire' appeared as a session in its own right in RAC, rather than in TRAC, as might have been expected from past experience. This fusion (which the success of previous TRAC outings must surely be credited with) will eventually raise the question as whether the separate organization of the two conference bodies can (and should) still be retained.

The opening session on 'Romano-British research agendas' enjoyed pride of place as the sole event to be held on the first morning and attracted a number of speakers eager to advance particular areas/periods deserving of further study. Amongst them was John Creighton who was concerned "to invert" the conventional view of the Iron Age/Roman transition. Unfortunately, although cogent points were made regarding the ambiguous nature of several pre-conquest sites, the main argument that the "symbolism and instruments of political domination" were already in place as part of an overarching system of the hegemonic control of client kingdoms during the Augustan age, can hardly be thought of as a radical re-appraisal as there are plenty of analogues elsewhere in the empire (not least in Judaea). Simon Esmonde-Cleary, at the other end of the chronological spectrum, took the opportunity to attack linear conceptions of the transition from Roman to medieval, stressing instead that the collapse of archaeological visibility at the crucial period meant that thematic research based upon the subjects of 'power', 'ethnicity', 'ideology' and 'resources' was likely to be the most profitable avenue for further investigation. Meanwhile, Simon James argued strongly for the neglected field of Roman military studies to receive the same theoretical overhaul that civilian material has already enjoyed, with issues such as the army's view of itself, the effect of its exposure to imperial propaganda and the composition of 'military' communities all deserving further analysis. James'

emphasis on understanding the context of artefacts must have encouraged Lindsay Allason-Jones who delivered an impassioned *cri de coeur* on behalf of those finds specialists whose work is so often relegated to dry (and microfiched) appendices to excavation reports. The importance of objects to our understanding of culture and identity was also commented upon by J.D. Hill whose concern was to emphasize the very local level at which identities are created. Hill's surprise at the paucity of investigation into how gender relationships operated in Roman Britain despite a comparative wealth of information, was all the more noteworthy for the speaker's self-identification as an 'outsider' and should serve as a timely reminder of the importance of this issue for established practitioners in the field.

A singular example of the value of material cultural studies was later furnished by Hella Eckardt, whose TRAC paper entitled 'Illuminating Roman Britain', threw previously unconsidered light upon the humble Roman lamp and the socio-economic implications of its use. Not only would it seem that the choice of lamp fabric might serve to differentiate various social groups, but also the burning of fuel oil ("in effect, burning food") might be viewed as a form of status statement. The devil in the detail was also identified by Ellen Swift, whose demolition of the concept of homogeneity in cultural assemblages was accompanied by a welter of distribution maps sufficient to depress any typologist eager to stress the universal over the regional (or intra-regional).

Many other papers tackled broader themes and although it may seem invidious to highlight individual contributions, Sue Alcock's paper entitled 'The resistance of things', was particularly rewarding. In this, with the Idaean cave on Crete as an example, Alcock discussed the role of commemoration, a conscious evocation of the past, in evoking a sense of resistance amongst Rome's subject peoples. However, the notion of memory being employed as a tool of resistance ("nostalgia accorded teeth") may not always be reconciled with the complexity of the rituals being performed and the speaker saw no reason why such actions might not also be represented as a device of accommodation. In this sense, Alcock wondered whether modern social anthropological concerns over the 'colonization of consciousness' might exert excessive influence over our interpretations of the commemorative activities of our ancestors.

In general, the organizers of Durham 1999 should be congratulated for assembling another array of speakers with such divergent interests. On the negative side, the sudden re-designation of one TRAC component as a 'Roman army' session, caught out several potential contributors who would otherwise have wished to participate in the debate, and the absence of any list of delegates was an avoidable nuisance that made the name-badge an essential accoutrement at all times! These quibbles aside, the joint conference must be deemed a success, invigorating and enthusing all its participants and acting as a worthy display case for the continuing excitement of Roman-based studies.