

Roman Archaeology in the 21st Century

Andrew Gardner

Lecturer in Roman Archaeology
Cardiff University

The immediate response of any Romanist to Mark's appeal for more jobs in our field must be supportive, particularly when one is – like myself – at an early stage in their academic career. Disciplinary or personal self-interest are, however, not very secure grounds on which to base that support, and a fuller appraisal of the relevance of Roman archaeology is required. Mark argues this point himself and highlights some general features of Roman studies which ought to be part of its appeal. In this piece, I would like to amplify these aspects of Mark's paper, from a rather different standpoint, by addressing the academic relevance of Roman studies in 21st century archaeology, and how this might intersect with the interests of both other disciplines and a wider public. It is certainly the case that academic priorities in UK universities have shifted over time, and are likely to continue to do so in the future, especially as changes being initiated by the present government to the funding of higher education in the UK come into effect. In this context, all specialist fields will be forced – quite rightly – to examine their place in the creation of knowledge and understanding, and in the training of professionals in those fields. I want to argue here that Roman archaeology is, perhaps contrary to appearances from the outside, already in a strong position to do this.

To a considerable extent, this is due to the way in which debate about archaeological theory has progressed within Roman studies. There is no doubt that the theoretical convulsions affecting many other parts of the discipline from the 1960s to the 1980s, originating primarily in the study of prehistory, passed Roman archaeology by. Nonetheless, the last 15 years have witnessed a significant amount of catching up. Two of the pioneers of this revolution were both, incidentally, connected to the Institute of Archaeology. In 1988, Richard Reece published *My Roman Britain*, a book both challenging and entertaining, and one of the most theoretically-sophisticated archaeology books never to be considered (even by its author) as a 'theory book'. In 1990, Martin Millett – a former student at the Institute – published *The Romanization of Britain*, a book which consciously broke with the textual traditions of Classical Archaeology and brought the study of Roman Britain into contact with, particularly, contemporary processual approaches to social and economic life.

Since this point, the floodgates have opened. In 1991, the Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference (TRAC) was established by a mixture of academics and fieldworkers, led by Eleanor Scott. This open forum for the discussion of ideas about the Roman past is still going strong (<http://www.romansociety.org/trac.htm>). More importantly, its agendas – dominated, it is probably fair to say, by broadly post-processual themes such as meaning and identity – are exerting increasing influence over mainstream Roman archaeology. This is evident in the sessions at recent Roman Archaeology Conferences

(RAC) which, while held in Britain, are important events for scholars from across the former Roman empire and beyond. The forthcoming RAC, to be hosted in Birmingham in April 2005, will include sessions on the archaeology of the life-course, Roman imperialism in the contemporary world, and on numerous aspects of material culture studies, such as regionalism and identity, and interpretative methods. The fact that the annual TRAC event is always held in tandem with the biennial RAC, when the two cycles coincide, has assisted this cross-fertilisation. The themes discussed by Romanists at these and other events, and increasingly reflected in published research, sit firmly within the scope of theoretically-informed archaeology of any stripe: social dynamics, identity issues, relationships between past and present, and the practice and politics of research.

If the speed of the theoretical catch-up in Roman archaeology is admirable – yet perhaps still under-publicised – there is also merit in the way this has been achieved. A feature of the conferences just mentioned has been their relatively high level of engagement between different interested parties, with students, academics, and finds, museum and excavation professionals, all involved. The arguments over whether particular ideas are helpful or fruitless, and even over the relevance of a thing called ‘theory’ – which have occurred in all fields – have been informed by a broad range of perspectives within Roman archaeology. The extent to which ‘critical self-consciousness’, to borrow Clarke’s (1973) phrase, has penetrated the field is illustrated by the conference which Mark’s title refers to – “Whither Roman Archaeology?”, held at the University of London’s Senate House in November 2002, where issues of relevance and of the field’s future were openly considered from different angles (Gardner 2003; James 2003). The wide participation in debates about theory in Roman archaeology have kept two things at the forefront: the importance of exploring ideas in conjunction with the vast range of material culture (including texts) with which the Roman world presents us, and the need to remember the multiple audiences, in Britain and elsewhere, who are inspired, repelled, or simply interested by the empire whose culture and institutions have been so heavily appropriated in the constitution of the modern West.

The strengths of the kind of Roman archaeology that the present situation promises for the 21st century, then, are that it is thoughtful, critical, material and multi-vocal. There is no doubt that this process of development is still on-going, but I think it puts the field in a good position to contribute, at the very least, to current debates in archaeology – and indeed Classics – about the themes mentioned above. Moreover, these are all themes which are of interest across the social sciences, and to which archaeologists can collectively contribute – as is already happening in the nascent field of ‘material culture studies’, which has a strong focus in the Department of Anthropology, UCL (Attfield 2000: 35). It is to be hoped that this will be a trend of the new century, so that theoretical developments pursued through archaeological studies – whether Roman or Neolithic, European or Chinese – will have more of an impact on the disciplines from which those theories have typically been drawn. In terms of training, Roman archaeology is not just useful, as Mark indicates, for people to get jobs in a particular country’s heritage industry, but more broadly as a field which presents particular kinds of problems that can develop students’ critical skills. The relationships between artefacts and texts, for instance, or the role of individual human actors in a large-scale social struc-

ture, are topics which Roman society can provide excellent examples for illustrating, in the context of courses in archaeological theory and method.

More generally still, the invigoration of Roman archaeology that the developments I have referred to are fostering is vital to the wider role of archaeology in society. Mark implies near the beginning of his paper that one cannot be picky about which parts of the past one attends to, but this is what all of us, as individuals, tend to do. Mark suggests that these choices are partly down to 'political correctness', but I would prefer to see the matter, in less reactionary terms, as simply down to relevance. Indeed, this is what Mark goes on to suggest with his defence of the place of Roman culture in western history. There are certainly lots of ways in which this dimension of relevance can be expressed – imperialism is very much back on the agenda of political debate in view of events in Iraq, and indeed Richard Hingley (forthcoming) will shortly be publishing a book comparing Roman expansion with globalisation. I would add that, as well as similarities between past and present, Roman archaeology can be relevant by highlighting differences, and the critical developments in the field offer such a possibility. Encouraging people to look at a past in which they are interested from different angles can, I believe, help them to appreciate the complexity of the present, and how much freedom they have to influence the shape of the future. I would, therefore, challenge the 'back to basics' tone I detect in parts of Mark's paper. Rather, I would suggest that the positive changes of the past 15 years – enfolding, as they do, some of the long-standing strengths of the field – provide the real impetus for Roman archaeologists to make their field an integral part of archaeology departments in years to come.

References

- Attfield, J. 2000. *Wild Things: The Material Culture of Everyday Life*. Oxford: Berg.
- James, S. 2003. Roman Archaeology: Crisis and Revolution. *Antiquity* 77, 178-184.
- Clarke, D. 1973. Archaeology: The Loss of Innocence. *Antiquity* 47, 6-18.
- Millett, M. 1990. *The Romanization of Britain*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gardner, A. 2003. Debating the Health of Roman Archaeology. *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 16, 435-441.
- Reece, R. 1988. *My Roman Britain*. Cirencester: Cotswold Studies III.
- Hingley, R. forthcoming. *Globalization and Roman Culture: Imperialism, Unity and Diversity*. London: Routledge.