EXARC JOURNAL 2018/3
15 Articles | Open Access

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Unreviewed Mixed Matters Article:

Conference Review: TRAC, a Place for an Experiment in Roman Studies 2018

Persistent Identifier: https://exarc.net/ark:/88735/10358

EXARC Journal Issue 2018/3 | **Publication Date:** 2018-08-25

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The annual Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference (TRAC) took place from the 11th to the 15th of April 2018 alongside the biannual Roman Archaeology Conference (RAC) at the University of Edinburgh. As the title suggests, the underlying objective of this workshop was to re-examine the role of experimental archaeology in Roman studies: a consequence of the abundant yet often obscured nature of this archaeological and historical sub-discipline. Organised by Tatiana Ivleva (Newcastle University) and Chaired by Heather Hopkins, TRAC

agreed that a more focused session was long overdue. As such it was decided that a workshop would be ideal, to promote both a focus on the methods and results of experiments in Roman studies, as well as further group discussions of the concerns of the field. And so it did!

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The workshop took place on the morning of Saturday the 14th of April and was composed of seven rich and diverse papers from England, Scotland, Italy and Spain. Most of the papers intended to demonstrate the success of experimental archaeology in proving or debunking theories based on otherwise limited historical accounts or problematic archaeological remains. Yet, all of the papers revealed the growing concern for how these studies are adopted by and included in academic circles. The speakers and their papers were as follows:

Lee Graña (The University of Reading) 'Past and Future of Experiments on Roman Studies'

Bill Griffiths (Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums) 'Towards a Set of Guidelines for Roman Re-enactors and Academics'

Heather Hopkins (Independent Scholar) 'Contrasting the Roles of Experience, Experiment and Expertise in Experimental Archaeology: A Case Study Reconstructing the Dyeing Industry of Pompeii'

Claire Walton (Butser Ancient Farm, Hampshire) 'Out of the (Academic) Frying Pan, and into the (Experimental) Fire! - Experiments on a Roman Hypocaust from the Perspective of a Classical Archaeologist'

Matthew Fittock (The University of Reading) 'Off with their Heads! Broken Figurines and Religious Practice in Roman Britain'

John Reid (Trimontium Trust, Melrose) 'Recreating Roman Ballistic Warfare: Challenges and Opportunities'

Eduard Ble Gimeno (Universitat de Barcelona/ARTIFEX S.L.) **Jose Miguel Gallego Canamero** (ARTIFEX S.L.) and **Pau Valdes Matias** (Universitat de Barcelona) 'Following the Steps of the Roman Republican Legion. The Experience of the Via Scipionis Project'

From a theoretical perspective experimental archaeology is, on the one hand, an important scientific method of testing the hypotheses that fuel and are in turn fuelled by theoretical analyses; for this reason, TRAC was an ideal medium through which to gauge its popularity in Roman studies and ensure a broader acknowledgement of its potential. On the other hand,

experiments are one of several processes in archaeological investigations and are naturally buried under the broader context of a complex study, especially in highly restricted presentations and publications. Indeed, outside of the workshop, several sessions (both TRAC and RAC) had papers where experiments were included. Nevertheless, these were often anecdotal and pictorial remarks to attract the audience to a broader project and its results. While the wider field of prehistoric experimental archaeology is supported by a growing and resourceful community, there is a notable decline over the last decade in the popularity of experimentation amongst Romanists. Thus, one of the advantages of an experimental workshop was the opportunity to obtain feedback from peers with an understanding of Roman history. It was soon evident that failures and successes of individual experiments resonated in the experiences of the collective delegates and attendants.

The first paper aimed to directly highlight the many challenges that were faced when including experiments in broader academic research. The absence of a collective Roman experimental group, the exclusion of experiments by many classicists, and the inherent taboos associated with re-enactments and demonstrations, are a few examples. The papers by Bill Griffiths and Heather Hopkins elucidated on these issues; from which the latter was a sobering reminder of how interdisciplinary experiments can be disregarded by dogmatic and outdated institutions. While several people agreed, some international delegates stressed that this was not a concern in their respective countries (e.g. Denmark). As such, it was possible to regionalise the various challenges that face Roman studies, which provided some attending delegates with alternative resources and contacts to pursue. A question that lingered was whether this is a British problem.

The juxtaposition of marginalised small-scale experiments on the one hand and popular and successful large-scale projects on the other, was also demonstrated at the workshop. Claire Walton, John Reid and Pau Valdes Matias demonstrated the success of architectural projects with experimental objectives (Butser Ancient Farm), intricate investigations of complex archaeological sites (hill-fort warfare), and in depth phenomenological assimilation (the physical implications of Roman marches); successes that are measured by the level of popular support and empirical results with academic potential. Such a contrast can make it difficult to judge the state of Roman experimental archaeology at face value, yet many continue to voice their concerns and struggles in the field.

The proverbial light at the end of the tunnel was revealed in the solidarity of attending delegates. It is clear that many of the challenges we face are inherent flaws in a system that requires re-evaluation, something that is possible through projects such as these. The benefits that all conferences provide to their attendants was amplified exponentially at Edinburgh. As such, similar gatherings should be promoted in future.

To that end, Tatiana Ivleva's workshop has set the foundations for a second workshop on Roman experimental archaeology, to be held on the 22nd and 23rd of September 2018 at Vindolanda. TRACamp is a two-day TRAC event supported by Roman Vindolanda Fort and Museum, Historic England and EXARC, and sponsored by the Vindolanda Trust and the Council for British Archaeology. Attendees will be able to present papers and posters and/or demonstrations and hands-on-experiments. As well as providing a unique networking opportunity for Romanists, the workshop will promote the discussions that started at Edinburgh with the goal of producing a more cohesive front with which to tackle the issues and current concerns over Roman experimental archaeology.

Keywords conference
experimental archaeology
review

Country United Kingdom

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