

Whither Roman Archaeology? Or Thither Roman Archaeology! Another London Perspective

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Whither Roman Archaeology? Nobody Likes Change!

When I began working at the Guildhall Museum (now the Museum of London) in 1974, London archaeology was buzzing. The museum's archaeological unit, the Department of Urban Archaeology, had been formed the previous year, and the Institute of Archaeology (IoA) was pre-eminent in its teaching of Roman archaeology, with the result that the IoA was feeding trained archaeologists through to the Guildhall Museum, which was responsible for excavating many Roman and medieval sites. Gradually in academia, however, studying Roman Britain came to be regarded as politically incorrect, and with vociferous exponents of theoretical archaeology and other spheres of research, Roman archaeology was no longer fashionable.

In addition, the lack of funding for postgraduate research (which only seemed available for theoretical archaeology) decreased the opportunities for object research and, as a consequence, few finds specialists remained in the universities. Such people can now be found working in museums or as freelance specialists subject to the vagaries of project funding. But museums, too, have undergone change. At both the Museum of London and the British Museum, 'Roman' has disappeared from department titles, and the number of Roman curators has decreased. So perhaps Mark is right and Roman archaeology is dying on its feet.

Whither Roman Archaeology? What Have the Romans Ever Done for Us?

So where is all this leading? Museums are very much aware of the need for public accessibility – our funding depends on it. As Merriman says, “[a]rchaeology is one of the most active of museum disciplines” (2000: 24) and, as such, we are well aware of the popularity and fascination that archaeology has amongst our visiting public. Public interest in Roman archaeology has not diminished, and the Romans are as popular as ever. Surveys at the Museum of London show the Roman Gallery to be the most popular for adults, and study days are always fully booked. The inclusion of Roman Britain at Key Stage 2 (7-9 year olds) and the popularity of Classical Civilisation in secondary schools provided museums with new opportunities, and school visits are heavily over-subscribed. Museums are the public presentation of the results of Roman archaeology, and we need to train the next generation to understand and interpret it.

Thither Roman Archaeology? What Goes Around, Comes Around.

[T]here is a growing, three-way divergence between the public and non-professional archaeologists...the increasingly professionalised world of field archaeology...and the world of academic, largely university-based research... (The last is increasingly taken up with profoundly important but too often arcane theoretical issues...)

(James and Millett 2001: 2)

It seems, therefore, that the fault lies within the university world in general and how it is organised and funded. Are students coming out of university suitably equipped for real-life archaeology?

A one-day conference entitled “Whither Roman Archaeology” held in London in 2002, was convened in response to a survey of university departments which revealed a fall in the number of Roman specialists and courses offered (Allason-Jones 2000). The subsequent lack of postgraduate funding has led to a staffing crisis, as has the change from funding core posts to short-term contracts. But you only have to read Simon James’ conference review to be encouraged by the evolution of Roman archaeology. He suggested that the present problems are due to “other archaeologists, hindered by *their* prejudices about what Roman archaeology is – or rather, was” (James 2003: 179). If it is a question of the attitude of our peers, how can we go about changing it?

Universities have at last recognised both the lack of and need for finds specialists. To this end, the Arts and Humanities Research Board (AHRB) have ring-fenced postgraduate doctoral research grants for 2004-2006, in Ancient and Medieval Materials and Artefacts, specifying “archaeological small finds, particularly those of the Roman period”. They have recognised that there is a declining number of researchers with the necessary skills “to capitalise on this resource”. It was also acknowledged that “currently, there are the academics with the expertise to train students...but...that action needs to be taken now before the UK’s expertise in this area is lost” (AHRB 2004, Section 19). Can universities ensure, however, that those postgraduate students are suitably prepared with a good background knowledge of the period at undergraduate level?

The London Perspective – The Way Forward for London?

Mark regretted the fact that there were fewer staff at IoA dedicated to the subject. The IoA now has to compete with other London colleges. What is lacking is a coordinated approach between the colleges and departments. With the re-distribution of resources, there are other areas and worthy lecturers who touch on Roman archaeology – for example, the MA in London Archaeology and postgraduate courses in Public Archaeology at IoA look at Roman London and its remains, and London’s undergraduate students visit and access the Museum of London galleries and collections.

Attempts are also being made to traverse the distinct divide between the academic and the ‘outside’ worlds. The appointment of Gustav Milne as research development officer at the Museum of London (linked to the academic world through his part-time

lectureship at the IoA) is making universities aware of the research and funding potential of the London Archaeological Archive and Research Centre (LAARC). The LAARC, described as the largest “unpublished site” in London (Nixon *et al.* 2002: 2), houses excavated material from Greater London and comprises the largest collection of excavated Roman material in the country. An assessment by the Museum of London, funded by English Heritage, is currently reviewing the quality and quantity of the Roman material from London, both in the LAARC and in the Museum’s reserve collections (Wardle 2004). It is hoped that the Londinium project, with an on-line object catalogue, will continue to provide a way forward in finds studies comparing Roman material on a regional, provincial and even empire-wide basis. The Museum is dependent on universities for Higher Education Institutions funding. A newly-created post of research-coordinator for the London Archive (funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)) will therefore assess suitable research projects and facilitate access for researchers, and the IoA will find itself in stiff competition with the likes of Reading and Newcastle. The future seems bright for Roman London finds research, subject to sufficient funding.

In conclusion, as Mark points out, there are unique advantages enjoyed by London to make it the premier site for Classical archaeology. (Shame on you, Mark, for not adding the Museum of London, its collections and archaeological archive to the equation to make it take the lead in provincial Roman archaeology, too!) The lack of a professorial chair should be addressed, as other universities seem able to create personal chairs or visiting honorary posts to increase the kudos of their departments. To avoid the present crisis in Roman archaeology at the IoA, management need to ensure a core team of a size that can offer both suitable theoretical courses and specialist finds courses. Future students will need a comprehensive knowledge of Roman archaeology in its local, provincial and empire-wide spheres to be able to thoroughly understand any Roman finds research. So, come on IoA, do you want to take the lead in the future of Roman archaeology or not?

References

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