

Comment on Whither Roman Archaeology?

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As one of a group of Institute of Archaeology (IoA) graduates taught by Mark who now hold academic posts in Britain, it is perhaps not surprising that I share some of his sentiments. I agree that Roman archaeology fulfils a key role in any understanding of European culture, and that we cannot ignore it because we might disapprove of imperialism. The IoA has a strong record of success in the research and teaching of Roman archaeology (at a quick count there are currently four professors and six lecturer/senior lecturer/readers in post in the subject who began their careers at the IoA). Mark is too modest to note that this success is partly a result of his inspired teaching (together with that of Richard Reece and John Wilkes). With Mark's retirement, we are indeed seeing the end of an era.

Having said this, I think it is a mistake to judge the health of Roman archaeology from the situation at the IoA alone. Academic subjects in particular universities often go through cyclical changes, and the prosperity of Roman studies needs to be seen against a broader background. The growth and diversification of the IoA has coincided with a decline in the role of Roman archaeology there, but elsewhere we have seen it thrive as other areas of archaeology have waned. In London itself, I would characterise the situation as one of shifting balances rather than decline. We now have Boris Rankov and Amanda Claridge at Royal Holloway, Ian Haynes at Birkbeck and John Pearce at King's College London – all, I think, in newly created Roman posts. Similarly, whilst traditional centres of study at Cardiff and Newcastle have lost ground in the subject, there has probably been an overall growth in the numbers of academic staff teaching Roman archaeology nationally. In addition to the thriving groups at Leicester and Reading mentioned by Mark, we should also note the recent new appointments in Sussex, at Kent (now with three Romanists) and Southampton, whilst in Cambridge my own election to the Laurence Chair saw it move from the field of Greek archaeology to Roman. Overall, my impression of the subject – both in London and within the UK as a whole – is that it is pretty healthy.

This does not mean that I am happy to see Roman archaeology playing a lesser role at the IoA than it did a few years ago. However, I do not think the answer is simply to set a quota for the number of staff that are needed. Rather, I think we need to work to demonstrate the importance of the subject and its enduring appeal. Where the subject is taught within a contemporary context, with attention to its place in the broader sphere of archaeological method and theory, it is thriving and making interesting new contributions. The one point I would add to those raised by Mark about the significance of the subject is the place of Roman archaeology (and Classical archaeology more broadly) within European archaeological traditions. Although there are differences in

emphasis and variations in how the academic boundaries are drawn, there are few of our European neighbours whose universities do not give considerable prominence to teaching and research in the archaeology of the Classical world (within which I include the Roman provinces). I would suggest that behind this emphasis is not a rejection of an interest in the archaeology of the broader world, but rather a recognition that both the richness of the evidence, and the strength and variety of the traditions of its study, make it an ideal subject for teaching and research. The IoA ignores this judgement at its peril, as excellent students will simply go elsewhere. I very much hope that when Mark retires, the Yates Chair might be reappointed, whether it is occupied by a Greek or a Roman specialist. This would signal the IoA's recognition of the significance of the subjects within world archaeology.