# Report on the Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference (TRAC) 2023 Exeter

# Summary

Hosted at Exeter for the first time by a group of research PGRs in Archaeology and Classics/Ancient History, TRAC2023 continues the tradition of encouraging communication and engaged research by offering a diverse range of sessions, invited talks, and workshops, and promoting Roman Studies in the Southwest of England in the international subject agenda. The sessions (https://trac2023exeter.wordpress.com/sessions/) collated the latest interdisciplinary research from diverse academic backgrounds with topics ranging from Roman water engineering to pop-culture.

This report describes the objectives, implementation and outcomes of TRAC2023, held at Exeter in April (27-29th).

# Objectives

The 2023 edition of TRAC, held at the University of Exeter in April 2023 had a number of core and local objectives:

**Core**

* Maintain TRAC2023 as the largest forum of discussion for post-graduate and early career studies in Roman archaeology.
* Provide a framework to explore theoretical and practice-related challenges in approaching Roman archaeologies.
* Encourage networking, collaboration and connect PGR/ECR with established and senior researchers.

**Local**

* Develop valuable outreach, management and communication skills for the members of the **TRAC 2023 Local Organising Committee (LC)**
* Encourage the development of a Roman studies research nucleus at UoE, to rival those at Newcastle/Northumbria Universities or King’s College/UCL.
* Raise the profile of local institutions at UoE such as HASS or the Digital Humanities lab, as well as the local museum (RAMM).
* Balance finances as to obtain a profit which can then be reinvested in further conferences aimed at Classical and Roman archaeology.

# Acknowledgements

We are particularly grateful to Professors Dr. Ioana Oltean and Dr. Martin Pitts for the extraordinary and valuable support, guidance and feedback they have offered over the 6 months we took to prepare and deliver TRAC 2023. We would like to also thank the **Roman Society** for their conference grant to help us with expenses, as well **TRAC Standing Committee (SC)** for the great dissemination of the conference and content they have provided for TRAC 2023. We would also like to thank Ozren Domiter and Phillip Smithers for their feedback and advice as previous organisers of TRAC2022 Split and TRAC2019 Canterbury.

Last, but no least the staff at HASS have been incredibly helpful, from budget issues to IT support, especially Tracy Agett and Alex Walsh.

# What is TRAC?

Established in 1991 the Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference (TRAC) aimed to foster a network of ideas and original approaches. Currently, TRAC is the largest international PGR/ECR-led forum for testing and discussing the latest theoretical developments in Roman studies, with TRAC2023 attracting researchers from a broad spectrum of disciplines (social sciences, humanities, engineering, computer science) within the University of Exeter and elsewhere.

The primary objective of TRAC2023 was to develop a socially engaged, digitally-driven research initiative, culture and interdisciplinary collaboration within Roman Studies and particularly Archaeology at the University of Exeter and beyond.

# TRAC2023 – development and implementation

## Format

The preparations for TRAC2023 took approximately 5 months, from November 2022 to April 2023, with regular weekly meeting held to provide updates, divide tasks and discuss next steps.

The **TRAC LC** opened the call for sessions in late November 2022, aiming for 6-8 themed sessions (agreed on a traditional format 6-7 papers per session, also accepting double or half sessions); one general session; and one poster session. A call for workshops was not extended as there were already plans for 4 workshops:

* Felix Sadebeck’s (University of Exeter) IMPERFECT workshop was targeted at PGRs/ECRs with incomplete research concepts, helping participants transform these into academically sound and fundable projects. This workshop used discussion and role-play in small groups to tease ideas and encourage academic debate.
* A workshop organised by the editors of TRAJ, Francesca Mazilli and Katherine Crawford aimed to address the traditional low uptake in post-conference publication rates and to encourage PGRs/ECRs in Roman Studies to publish research in conference proceedings. The panel was completed with presentations from Will Bowden (editor of Britannia) and Rob Witcher (editor of Antiquity).
* A workshop delivered by the curators of archaeology collection at the Royal Albert Memorial Museum (RAMM) about their recent community and public engagement projects.
* A round-table discussion, moderated by staff from the Digital Humanities Lab on the ethical and practical problematics of synthetic data and the (mis)use of AI.

An early point was to strive for at least some elements to be hybrid, especially the keynote speakers. This was established in order to encourage a smaller but more compact networking opportunities between the members of **TRAC LC** and UoE staff and encourage speakers to visit Exeter and UoE.

The dates were set for end of **April (27-9th)**, after the Easter break/ end of term, and as to no coincide with another classics online event on the 20th-22nd April.

The importance of advice from previous organisers of TRAC and the TRAC SC cannot be underestimated. Both previous organisers for TRAC 2019 and TRAC 2022 helped organised in-person events. However, general advice also applicable to TRAC2023 included launching the call for sessions as soon as possible, setting up contact details (email address) and streamlining the communications between the **TRAC SC** and **TRAC LC**. Two aspects of their advice struck us out: that we should ask the University what it can do for 0£ and start negotiating from there; and that potential participants will not be thrilled about an online conference. Consequently, these two became key objectives for TRAC 2023.

To address the latter issue, **TRAC SC** and **TRAC LC** decided to use gather.town, a lesser known but much more versatile digital platform, as the venue for the conference. The potential experience factor that we could offer participants to make them less apprehensive towards digital conferences won over the costs difference and the user competency. To mitigate these issues, the **TRAC LC** prepared a welcome to gather document, offered pre-conference training and practice sessions and increased the ticket price by 5 £ to cover for the extra costs.

In order to help us organise TRAC2023, we have looked for a quote from Eventexter for this event, but this proved completely unfeasible for our small budget. For instance, for a webpage with ticketing options setup they quoted 350£ +15£ per participant which is, quite frankly, preposterous. However, on this specific issue, once a UoE internal budget code to TRAC 2023 was issued, organising an Onlinestore for participants to register came at no extra cost. This was achieved solely with the help of Prof. Ioana Oltean and the support of the IT department.

Lastly, a code of conduct was designed to ensure that participants will behave and if there are any problems they will be swiftly addressed by TRAC Local Committee and TRAC SC, with the possibility of banning users who misbehave. A separate paragraph was introduced to discourage any potential conflicts, especially since we had two Russian presenters. It was proposed that, similarly to other History and Archaeology conferences this year and their code of conduct, we should ask these two to remove their affiliations. Following advice from the University, as well as previous publication of the affiliations in TRAJ and TRAC webinars, we have decided to allow the two speakers to keep their affiliation and waive their conference fees to avoid any potential conflicts.

## Budget and funding

Post-pandemic, but even before, **TRAC SC** has had limited finances to help organise annual conferences, and so all the budgeting was left to the host universities. This was also the case with the Local Organising Committee at UoE. After intense discussion, we decided to plan for an early-bird price of 20£ and for approx. 70 participants. Since our projected expenses surpassed that, we applied for 1700 £ from the RNLI grant. Our project however, being at it’s 31st edition, was considered unfit for funding from this source. Another, successful application was made to the Roman Society, the main funders of TRAC, for 175£.

This perilious financial position was thankfully covered by both the departments of Archaeology and Classics, which agreed to cover each up to 2000£, in case of financial loss. This ‘safety net’ was instrumental in allowing us to focus on the scientific program and dissemination.

Publishing companies were also approached as potential sponsors for the conference or a poster prize. However, all 3 we contacted were quite apprehensive about online conferences, as they indicated previous experiences were underwhelming and did not reach their projected engagement. The poster prize was instead funded through a Go-fund- me page, established by **TRAC SC** in the memory of Dr. Lisa Lodwick (1988-2022).

The Onlinestore allowed us to collect fees without having to pay for a processing fee (approx. 1.7£ per person quoted by Eventim), however we did have to ensure that alternative payment could be made directly to the TRAC SC account. This was especially useful for one participant from Serbia who could not register, as the dropdown menu only had former Yugoslavia (a country that hasn’t existed since 1992). This was identified by the IT department as a third party supplier issue and that an upgrade and a fix will take place only after the conference.

## Scientific programme

The complete program included 10 themed sessions, one general session, one poster session, four workshops and 2 keynote talks. Initially, another session focusing on Roman Africa was proposed, but sadly this had no submissions. A total of 69 papers were submitted, and all were approved by the session organisers without modifications. 2 presenters later withdrew their papers, giving lack of time to prepare a presentation as the reason. After an extension to the call for posters (initially only 3 submissions) we received 8 poster proposals. A full list of abstracts and the conference program is available [here](https://trac2023exeter.files.wordpress.com/2023/04/trac2023-programme-2023-03-31.pdf).

Our first keynote speaker, Penelope Alisson, chose to use this opportunity to discuss her own research, over the last four decades. Her gradual development and the diverse projects Penelope engaged with showed an academic journey stemming from consumption-oriented approaches to broader applications on material-culture to better understand social practices. The ‘case studies’ included investigating Roman wall-painting, to researching household behaviour, then women in Roman military contexts, and lastly to her current research project on Roman pottery – the Arch-I-Scan Project. This unusual way of using one’s own career as an object of study was welcomed both by early-career researcher, anxious about their own academic pathways, and by more senior colleagues reflecting on their own legacy.

Tony Wilmott was the second speaker to be invited to Exeter. His excellent presentation on the major excavations that have taken place of two British amphitheatres- at Chester and Richborough- truly captivated the audience. The presentation discussed and contrasted the similar plan and purpose, the contrast in scale, structure and materials, whilst also examining the different locational contexts and meanings of these buildings. An essential aspect of the talk was also to touch upon the purpose and behaviour of the users of the amphitheatre buildings.

## Outreach and dissemination

The preliminary stages of outreach and dissemination of the event (Location and the open call for sessions) were announced, by **TRAC SC** on the official TRAC twitter and Facebook account.

Part of the event specific branding included the design of a logo and a webpage for TRAC 2023, the latter especially critical since the official TRAC webpage went offline in mid-December and has stayed so since. The logo was inspired by a Roman antefix (decorative roof tile) retrieved from the thermal baths complex excavated in Exeter in the 20th century.

The webpage was used to publish submission details, session abstracts, advertise the keynote speakers and workshops and instructions to join the virtual space in gather.town. The website was designed in wordpress, for free, which meant that it could not be indexed on Google for some months (as of 8th May, it can be found on searches for TRAC 2023 Exeter), until it reached enough engagement (<https://trac2023exeter.wordpress.com>).

The call for papers and poster was open in mid-January and advertised on the webpage, as well as the main TRAC accounts. Dissemination was also done on email lists of Classicist and Roman archaeology in UK and US.

Inside the UoE HASS departments, most of the outreach was by word of mouth, although some dissemination was done through the list of Archaeology and Classics HASS PGR email lists.

# Outcomes

## Participation

Participation was largely as expected from an academic oriented conference, with 115 out 142 registered delegates affiliated to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Non- HEI affiliated participants formed a mixture of professional affiliations, such as museums, specialists with commercial archaeology companies or non-affiliated/ retired participants.

Although the post conference survey was completed by less one third of participants (43 of 142), the subsample reflects the broader trends observed. Approximately 2/3 of the participants were presenters, a trend also observed in the questionnaire.

Another trend, somewhat unexpected, was that over half of the participants have never been to TRAC, reflecting anecdotal evidence that Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conferences have a relative smaller retention rate of returning participants compared to other similar conferences. In order to verify this aspect and design a broader approach to further address the returning rate of participants, further data analysis will be needed.

Participation by scholars based in the UK was by far the largest (86 out of 142 participants) followed by a balanced mix from Spain (10), US (9) and Italy (8). Rusia, Croatia, and Portugal are in the secondary tier, each with 3 participants. Austria, Australia, Germany, Sweden, Netherlands, Poland and Slovenia each had two participants, while the last countries on the chart were each represented by one scholar.

## Scientific dissemination and networking

The varied nature of themes and topics presented at TRAC2023 is truly representative of the state of research and interests in 2023. Interdisciplinarity has reached new grounds, with one session dedicated to researchers from non-archaeological or classics backgrounds. The impact of the Roman legacy on modern pop-culture was also a hot topic, whilst the session dedicated to sustainability reflected the commitment of TRAC to advance and implement the Sustainable Development Goals established by the UN in 2015. More ‘traditional’ sessions, concerning ritual and material culture were also encouraging, as a number of new theoretical approaches have recently stemmed here.

Networking was one of the major enjoyed aspects of TRAC2023, indicated by 15 participants out of 32 who responded to the survey question. Given the huge diversity of HEI and non-Hei participants stretching from the US to Australia it is hard to dispute the positive impact TRAC2023 had in bringing researchers together to discuss, network and simply catch-up with each-other.

## Innovation

The gather.town forum has been by far the greatest innovation brought to TRAC2023. This was the first time for TRAC2023 to go fully online, and the first time gather.town was used as a primary virtual venue for an archaeology conference in the UK. Most of the reported issues related to screensharing, which was slightly different to Zoom and Teams, with this creating some discomfort amongst participants. Other issues such as problems with audio/ video were also reported, although these had mostly to do with browser and firewall permissions on work and personal computers, which are a bit more difficult to diagnose and implement during conference, especially remotely. Connectivity and internet issues are common on other platforms, and these could not be addressed by the **TRAC LC.**

## Online conferences post-Covid19 and participant satisfaction

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **What was your favourite aspect/moment/talk/interaction or experience at TRAC2023?**  | **What can we do to improve your experience?** |
| -networking/ catch-ups | -screen sharing; general gather.town guidelines |
| -networking/catch-ups-breakout tables (private space) | -inability to fully replicate in person - more passive content (i.e virtual tours) |
| -chairing the session | -avoid parallel sessions |
|  | I think that all was fine! |
| -Gather.town as a novel venue | -upload ppts in advance |
| -Penelope Allison's keynote -networking | -add round-table style introduction before session start |
| -Keynotes | -extend discussion time at AGM |
| -Sessions on materiality of Roman roads and on sustainability | -Publish the book of abstracts in the TRAJ please  |
| -Ray Laurence presentation! | -Encourage interaction within participants... |
| -Tony Wilmott's keynote | -poor gather.town UX due to disability-would return to a simpler Zoom format |
| -The Good, the Bad and the Klingon session | -stay professional and attentive |
| The people make the conference and TRAC always attracts the best researchers in our field | Two days felt too short for how much fun we were having :) |
| -gather.town as novel venue-networking/ catch ups | -session/panel poor time-keeping  |
| -networking  | I'm really happy with the experience  |
|  | Unable to connect to gather.town or Zoom |
| -the consumption and materiality session |  |
| -Networking and discussion  | -excellently organised  |
| -The Good, the Bad and the Klingon session -Tony Wilmott’s keynote-DigHums workshop | -improve screensharing and Gather.town guidelines-organise smaller places where participants can discuss freely -Great experience! |
|  | -avoid parallel sessions |
| -Sian Therese's talk- poster room and the break-out spaces | -improve screensharing and Gather.town guidelines-great conference and congratulations to the Exeter team and TRAC committee! |
|  | I like everything, so I don't have any demands or pieces of advice. Stay true to yourself, I think. |
| -Tony Wilmott’ keynote | -improve screensharing and Gather.town guidelines |
| -Session 1 |  |
| -engaging with new research | -lack of recorded keynotes |
| -Lisa Lodwick in memoriam session and sustainability session-The many pottery-based papers! -Gather.town interaction, networking, | Use gather town again :) |
| -poster room | -gather.town movement. Fix set-up or guidelines |
| -networking and catch-ups | I think you all did exceptionally well! |
| -virtual museum and posters room -networking and discussion | -improve screensharing and Gather.town guidelines (especially DND function) |
| The great facilitation of my session by the TRAC committee | I like the sound of gathertown but could get it to work on my work computer |
| -networking and discussion  | -improve publishing workshop with real examples |
|  | had a great time ty! |
|  | -Movement in gather.town |
|  | Lower fees if fully online event |
| -networking and catch-ups |  |
| -networking and catch-ups | -More hybridity |
| -virtual venues and networking |  |
| -the wide-ranging topics | -advertise more |
| -presentations and discussion | -improve the technical aspects |
| -Penelope Allison’s keynote |  |

Participant satisfaction appears quite high, with over half respondents giving maximum grades for both TRAC2023, and to likelihood of participating in future online conference, signalling that in terms of post-pandemic online conferences prospective participants appear less apprehensive than anecdotal evidence suggested. However, we need to bear in mind that self reporting tends to be skewed in favour of very positive or very negative experiences (think rating/comments on Amazon or delivery apps).

## Finance



Finance wise, TRAC2023 managed to make a profit both for the Archaeology department in HASS and to TRAC SC, for them to support future conferences. A number of 35 bursaries were made available due to the generosity of the **Roman Society**, to make sure that anybody who would wish to join TRAC2023 could do so. The base ticket price appears to have been reasonable for the great majority of the participants, with only two applications for a bursary. The Archaeology Committee grant from the Roman Society was used to cover some of the costs with the keynote speakers. The nature of the other costs and income have been detailed above.

# Conclusions

TRAC stands as the largest international PGR/ECR-led forum for testing and discussing the latest theoretical developments in Roman studies, with TRAC2023 attract a diverse range of established and senior researchers from a broad spectrum of disciplines (social sciences, humanities, engineering, computer science) within the University of Exeter and beyond.

In a time where investment and global interest in Roman archaeology is suffering a contraction, we would argue that the maximum amount of resources ought to be dedicated to significant impact initiatives such as TRAC2023, to encourage and nurture a brighter future for Roman Studies.

TRAC2023 has been a tremendous success both in terms of innovation and the diversity and quality of the papers, keynotes, posters and workshops. Anecdotal evidence (pending broader historical TRAC participation review) suggests that an increased number of scholars from the US, Canada and Australia accessed TRAC2023 compared to previous editions. Also present was a large number of non-HEI affiliated delegates, proving the unique role of TRAC as an open venue to a diverse audience.

The feedback was overwhelmingly positive both in the post conference questionnaire and in the emails received after. However, it is obvious that there are numerous suggestions and clear room for improvement both in the use of gather.town and in general conference management.

Finally, we are tremendously thankful to the **Roman Society**, the **TRAC SC** and the staff at **UoE** for their support, guidance and offering us the opportunity to develop valuable outreach, networking and communication skills as part of our PhD programs.