

RAC/TRAC 2026 Session Abstracts

RAC Sessions

>>>RAC1

Public Archaeology of the Roman Empire: from Engagement to Participation

Session organisers: Marta Alberti-Dunn; Rachele Dubbini

Roman archaeology has captured the imagination of many different audiences throughout the 20th and 21st century. From blockbuster movies and TV series to a steady stream of both popular literature and scholarship, the archaeology of the Roman period can be seen as both a comfortable terrain for a nostalgic interpretation of the past, and a gym which has been used to exercise our post-colonialist academic muscles. Due to its trans-national nature and widespread appeal, Roman archaeology lends itself to a discussion of the different ways in which heritage professionals have managed access to, and the creation of new knowledge by non-professionals. This session offers both theoretical grounding to non-professional participation in the archaeology of the Roman world, and a space for its practical applications to be discussed. From volunteer participation to archaeological heritage practices on Hadrian's Wall in the UK, to the accessible excavations of the Appian Way managed by the University of Ferrara, in Italy, this session looks at how different countries have approached the public archaeology of the Roman world.

>>>RAC2

Bodies in Ritual Practices

Session organisers: Maureen Carroll; Emma-Jayne Graham

This session aims to explore relations between the human body and ritualised activities in different contexts in the Roman period, employing archaeology and archaeological science to aid in reconstructing processes and the lived experiences of those activities. In the funerary realm, the human body took centre stage in the interplay between the living and the dead. For example, the act of dressing the corpse and applying aromatic resins to skin and clothing for its display during the lying-in-state period enabled mourners to engage with the dead as if they were still alive. Furthermore, the sequences of cremation rituals (burning, collecting, and containing) were crucial performative actions, contributing to the experiences embodied in the living during these processes. In votive ritual practices, it was through the human body that prayers to the gods were channelled and divine assistance was received. Dedications such as anatomical votives in the form of human body parts and objects used in bodily care enable us to explore and characterise lived religious experiences involving complex combinations of humans, the divine, and material objects. Furthermore, bioarchaeological analysis of votive deposit assemblages containing articulated and disarticulated animal remains and cuts of meat contributes to an understanding of symbolic acts and the interactions between human and non-human bodies in ritual.

These few examples represent the sorts of things being done to/with/through bodies of different sorts (living and dead, human and animal) in different settings that this session aims to explore. Speakers will present fresh perspectives on activities and contexts involving the body, shedding light on the embodiment and sensory dimensions of ritual practices across the Roman empire.

>>>RAC3

Exploring regional dynamics in Roman settlement and landscape archaeology

Session organisers: Mark Groenhuijzen; Philip Verhagen

The study of the settlement landscape offers a distinct and valuable perspective in archaeology, transcending the level of the individual site and isolated find material. By examining broader spatial frameworks and temporal scales, these studies reveal how human communities organised, constructed and responded to their environment across diverse regions and time periods. Drawing from landscape archaeology, computational archaeology and related (interdisciplinary) fields, settlement landscape research provides a holistic understanding of the complex interplay between natural, cultural and social factors that shaped patterns of human habitation. This session aims to provide a platform for recent studies that explore the structure and typology of Roman settlement landscapes, their chronological evolution, the multifaceted factors that influence their formation and development, and the societal dynamics that result from the structure of the settlement landscape.

While computational methods, such as GIS, remote sensing, and spatial analysis, offer powerful tools to model and visualise complex settlement systems, this session invites a range of methodological approaches. We are interested in studies that employ both quantitative and qualitative frameworks to reconstruct and analyse past settlement landscapes and their respective communities. We place a special emphasis on offering space to studies from a wide geographical scope and potentially extending outside the Roman Period as well, to encourage a richer, more inclusive understanding of settlement landscape dynamics across human history.

>>>RAC4

Food trade and transportation networks in the Roman empire

Session organisers: Jessica Feito; Alexandra Livarda; Andrew Mclean; James Page; Patricia Vandorpe

Trade and connectivity were major factors of the Roman economy. The relative peace and stability that the Empire brought increased connectivity, mobility and trade, and resulted in the introduction of new goods, food items inclusive. This was facilitated in large part by the establishment of new transport networks, through which the movement of people and the trade of new commodities was achieved.

Food-related remains have the potential to serve as excellent proxies for trade: not only is food crucial for survival, and thus necessarily acquired and consumed by all members of society, the production and distribution of food also held a central place in the ancient economy. A variety of evidence types are used to study food trade, each with advantages and disadvantages. Ceramic and amphorae remains are durable and can be found in large quantities, often with inscriptions providing insight into their trade. Bioarchaeological remains are useful as they have short life spans and so offer a rare glimpse into life at the moment of deposition.

The now widely recognized link between food and identity renders food-related remains particularly suited to studying the expression of regional identities in a changing world. Meanwhile, new approaches to mobility and networks provide a means with which to explore trade connections at a greater scale, resolution and nuance than ever before. In this way, the study of food trade in the Roman Empire can offer valuable new insight into the intricate relationships between culture contact, exchange, and the uptake of new consumption practices.

This session invites papers focusing on the trade and transport of food in the ancient world using a variety of proxies and methods in order to create a rich forum of multidisciplinary discussions. Submissions featuring use of computational and bioarchaeological approaches to trade and mobility are especially welcome.

>>>RAC5

Innovation in archaeological studies of Roman mobility

Session organisers: David Roberts; Richard Madgwick; Sophy Charlton; Leah Reynolds; Rachel Spros

In recent decades there has been a proliferation of significant historical and archaeological work on mobility within, and into, the Roman empire. Major historical and interdisciplinary volumes on migration and mobility (Harland 2021; de Ligt and Tacoma (eds) 2016; Bertinelli and Donati 2004) have set out new, more sophisticated theoretical and methodological approaches to different manifestations of mobility in textual and epigraphic evidence from the Mediterranean and northern Europe. Artefactual and material science investigations of mobility have continued, moving beyond earlier simplistic conceptions of artefacts signifying ethnicity to conceptualise a more diverse range of mobilities through material culture. In bioarchaeology, Eckardt's *Roman Diasporas* (2010) was a landmark in the archaeological study of migration in the north-west provinces of the empire, providing the first extended application of combined isotopic, osteological and artefactual studies of mobility across a province, Britannia. Since then, isotopic studies of human mobility have proliferated across the Roman world, although often at a selective or site-specific level, in contrast to much larger studies in prehistoric (Parker Pearson et al. 2019) and early medieval archaeology (Hemer et al. 2016; Hamerow et al. 2024). The same patterns can be seen in recent ancient DNA (aDNA) studies; large datasets have been used to investigate prehistoric (Armit and Reich 2021) and early medieval (Gretzinger et al. 2022) human mobility at a population level, but the technique has not been widely applied in Roman archaeology (see Schieb et al. 2024 for an exception).

This session, organised by the Arts and Humanities Research Council funded Roman Britannia: Mobility and Society project, seeks to bring together innovative archaeological approaches to the study of mobility in the Roman world to nourish collaborative networks, and share best practice and cutting edge theory and methods.

>>>RAC6

At Empire's Edge: Rethinking the Limes of the Roman Empire

Session organisers: Saskia Stevens; Dominik Maschek; Wouter Vos

The Limes, traditionally understood as the fortified borders of the Roman Empire, has long been studied as a static military boundary marking the limits of Roman control. Modern representations also tend to underscore these characteristics. Recent scholarship, however, has emphasized the complexity and diversity of these frontier zones, challenging earlier dichotomies of "civilized" Rome versus the "barbarian" other. This session invites papers that critically reexamine the Limes as dynamic spaces of interaction, mobility, and transformation. From Hadrian's Wall in Britannia, via the Lower Germanic Limes on the Rhine, to the desert frontiers of the Near East and North Africa, the Roman borderlands were not merely lines of defense but vibrant arenas of cultural exchange, and economic activity.

We particularly welcome contributions that explore the Limes through interdisciplinary approaches to shed light on the lived experiences of soldiers, civilians, and indigenous peoples navigating these Limes borderlands. We are also interested in contemporary representations and processes of heritagization of the Limes, as well as the border discourses and securitization policies that are articulated through these frameworks. By situating the Limes within broader debates about imperialism, identity, and the permeability of borders, this session seeks to reconceptualize the edges of empire not as endings, but as points of encounter and negotiation.

Topics may include, but are not limited to:

- Borderland Communities: The lives of soldiers, settlers, traders, and local populations in frontier zones.
- Cultural Interaction and Exchange: Hybridity, resistance, and acculturation in border regions.
- Economic Networks: Trade, taxation, and resource extraction along the Limes.
- Symbolism and Ideology: The Limes as a tool of propaganda and imperial identity.
- Mobility and Movement: Patterns of migration, diplomacy, and conflict across borders.
- Comparative and Theoretical Approaches: Using models from border studies, postcolonial theory, or global history to rethink ancient frontiers.
- (Re)presenting the Limes: heritagization and representation of the Limes in visual culture, education, and public history from antiquity to the present.

>>>RAC7

Roman-period rock-cut tombs in the Eastern Mediterranean and their portraiture

Session organisers: Olympia Bobou; Rubina Raja

Rock-cut tombs are a distinct form of funerary monument. Cut into living rock or dug inside the soft rock, they are often considered an alternative to build tombs in areas where marble or other materials for the construction of tombs were lacking. This practical approach, however, does not account for the sudden appearance of rock-cut tombs in cities like Petra, Palmyra, Edessa (modern Urfa) in the Roman period. Three more factors must also be considered when studying such tombs. The first is the presence of prior examples, primarily from Egypt and the Achaemenid empire, of tombs belonging to members of the elite. The second is that these tombs often refer to domestic architecture in their layout. In that way, elite traditions and contemporary architectural practices are merged into the rock-cut tombs. Further adding to the impression of the tomb as a location similar to a house, is the presence of portraits in various media: painted, on mosaics, or sculpted. A final factor is that all these areas were unified in the early Roman Empire and so, ideas, people, and materials travelled freely within them.

This session aims to bring together scholars working on rock-cut tombs and portraiture from the Near East, North Africa, and eastern southern Mediterranean, and explore the rock-cut tombs and their associated portraiture as a Roman phenomenon, how old traditions were re-imagined in the Roman period, and untangle the local from the international in the Roman period.

>>>RAC8

Beyond the Quay: Urban Infrastructure and the Gateway Function of Roman Harbour Cities

Session organisers: Maurice Thurn; Alexander Clemens Reich; Ada Lasheras

Harbour cities played a crucial role in the Roman Empire as key nodes of trade, supply, and mobility. Functioning as gateways between sea and land, they merit particular attention. However, this gateway function cannot be fully understood by examining harbour structures alone — such as piers, quays, or breakwaters — but must be traced deep into the urban fabric of the cities themselves.

Recent research on ancient harbours has revealed a highly heterogeneous picture of harbour cities. Despite this diversity, their shared role as points of transshipment for goods and people remains constant. This raises important questions about the infrastructural solutions developed to meet these logistical demands. Where and to what extent infrastructure existed, how it was configured, and how it facilitated the movement and handling of goods and people within the urban space are far from self-evident. Where did ships dock? Where

were goods unloaded, stored, or processed? How were production centers, warehouses, and distribution facilities spatially organized within the city? And how did transport to and from the quayside function?

This session seeks to explore the infrastructure of Roman harbour cities beyond the immediate harbour installations and to examine the broader systems that enabled these cities to act as effective gateways between maritime and inland networks. We invite contributions that present current research on Roman harbour cities, with a particular focus on infrastructure.

Papers may address questions such as:

- What does the term “infrastructure” entail in the context of a Roman harbour city?
- How was infrastructure organized within the urban landscape?
- How was the harbour connected to the hinterland — and vice versa?
- Did harbour cities follow specific spatial or functional models? Is there evidence for infrastructural specialization based on the type of goods handled?

>>>RAC9

Water Management Models in Roman Settlements: Adaptation, Innovation, Challenges and Interdisciplinary Methods for Their Study

Session organisers: María del Mar Castro García; Davide Gangale Risoleo; Eugenio Tamburrino; Antonio J. Ortiz Villarejo

The urban development of Roman towns was often shaped by earlier settlements whose location and pre-existing structures influenced subsequent urban and infrastructural planning. This dynamic is especially apparent in cities established on elevated sites, whether due to their setting in mountainous regions or as a continuation of pre-Roman traditions favouring hilltop locations for defence, territorial control, or access to specific resources. While strategically advantageous, these elevated positions presented notable water management and supply challenges.

Introducing a Roman water culture in such contexts required tailored solutions, which at times involved adapting and integrating existing infrastructures alongside the construction of new hydraulic works to secure water collection, storage, and distribution in topographies of a particularly challenging nature. This session examines water management models in medium and small-sized Roman cities, contrasting those located in plains or newly founded settlements with favourable conditions against those in geographically challenging environments. At the same time, this session will promote discussion on the interdisciplinary approaches currently used to study Roman hydraulic systems—such as remote sensing, spatial analysis, physicochemical, geological, and hydrogeological analyses, hydraulic engineering, modelling, and digitalization—which are yielding innovative results that significantly advance our understanding of Roman water infrastructures and management strategies enhancing the reconstruction and understanding of ancient water management practices and open new avenues for their study, preservation, and dissemination within Roman archaeology. The application of interdisciplinary methods enhances the reconstruction and understanding of ancient water management practices. It also gives the chance to manage large amounts of data and opens new avenues for research projects, preservation strategies, and dissemination within Roman archaeology.

Contributions addressing case studies from the Roman world and technical or methodological approaches to water management are especially welcome, as they will enrich this discussion and foster collaborative research.

>>>RAC10

Supplying the Roman Army: Centralised or Decentralised Production of Military Equipment?

Session organisers: Martijn Wijnhoven; Matěj Kmosek; Marek Vlach; Balázs Komoróczy

The question of how the Roman army was supplied with military equipment has been debated for decades. Research by scholars such as Jürgen Oldenstein, Mike Bishop, and Jon Coulston has significantly advanced our understanding. The prevailing model suggests a shift from localized production in city centres during the Republic to increasing self-sufficiency along the northern frontiers under the Principate, culminating in centralised state-controlled *fabricae* in Late Antiquity. However, new discoveries and methodologies—particularly archaeometric analyses—have provided fresh perspectives, challenging long-held assumptions. These advances invite a reassessment of the extent and organisation of military production and supply, including the role of *vici* and neighbouring civil settlements, as well as regions beyond the *limes*.

This session welcomes papers that critically engage with these themes, offering new evidence and interpretations on the production and distribution of Roman military equipment. By bringing together diverse approaches and case studies, this session aims to refine our understanding of how the Roman army acquired its equipment, bridging the gap between traditional models and emerging evidence.

>>>RAC11

Queer Roman Archaeology

Session organisers: Tatiana Ivleva; Alena Wigodner

Queer archaeology is no longer new (Dowson 2000). In the last few decades, work to recognise gender and sexual diversity in the archaeological record has profoundly enriched our understanding of ancient identities and societal values, destabilising normative and binary perspectives. Queer approaches to the Roman world are flourishing in literary and historical studies (e.g. Surtees and Dyer 2020), but queer Roman *archaeology* remains piecemeal, splintered and understudied (see Eger 2007; Barnett 2012; Pinto and Pinto 2013; Power 2020). It is the goal of this session to develop momentum for this important work; we seek methodological and theoretical means for expanding the interpretative potential of the archaeological record when it comes to queerness, broadly defined as that which is oppositional to the norm. Contributions are invited that develop queer engagements with the Roman world through any aspect of material culture (including art and inscriptions). Potential topics:

- methods for exploring how non-normative, nonbinary, and fluid expressions of sexuality and gender intersect with other markers of identity including age, class, disability, and ethnicity;
- barriers or risks to studying queerness in the archaeological record, as well as unique opportunities afforded by a material approach;
- the negotiation of normativity and queerness in Roman colonial contexts, and the way non-normative performances of gender and sexuality intersected with the exercise of Roman power and local agency;
- application of queer theory to the Roman-period material record beyond exclusive focus on gender and sexuality;
- queering fieldwork processes or data collection/analysis strategies;
- queer approaches to heritage work in the Roman world.

>>>RAC12

Societal impacts of the Roman construction industry during the High Empire

Session organisers: Sadi Maréchal; Konogan Beaufay

The aim of this session is to examine the societal impact of construction industry in the Roman imperial period. Construction works and building logistics have long been approached from an economic perspective, focussing on aspects such as the cost and transport of building materials, or the necessary manpower. Valid as these approaches are, less attention has been paid to the impact these projects had on the urban fabric in which they unfolded, or on the lives of the people that were directly or indirectly involved. Contributors are encouraged to approach construction industry from a human-focussed perspective, which can include all types of people concerned (commissioners, contractors, paid and unpaid labour force, end users) and at all stages (conception, site preparation, construction, finishing, demolition) of the process. Themes may include:

- The origins, status, working and living conditions of the workforce;
- The management of construction and demolition sites;
- The circulation of building materials and resources within towns, both for supply and disposal;
- The legal framework of construction;
- The environmental impact of the construction industry and its effects on society;
- The role of the construction industry on workforce employment, on the economic development of cities and countryside, on the economy at large, on the urbanisation of the Empire;
- The role of construction in the transformation of neighbourhoods, such as gentrification, social segregation, or social displacement;
- The role of technology in construction and what this leads to in social terms (e.g. larger rooms);
- The effects of the provision of resources, facilities, and infrastructures on the inhabitants of the Empire

In contrast to numerous previous studies, we encourage presentations of modest and small-scale building projects. The geographical scope encompasses the entire Roman Empire, with particular interest for case-studies in the provinces.

>>>RAC13

Roman Britain

Session organiser: Peter Guest

Since its inception, the Roman Archaeology Conference has included an open session dedicated to the archaeology of Roman Britain, but for the 2024 conference in London the session focused on the contribution of commercial and independent organisations to the study of Roman Britain. This proved to be very popular with speakers and delegates alike, and the Roman Britain session included 7 excellent papers on a variety of Romano-British sites.

This session aims to build on the successful 2024 format. Speakers are invited to present the results of archaeological projects, including excavations, initiated or led by commercial contractors, independent archaeological organisations, and local societies or communities (including multi-partner collaborative projects). Presentations can be on any project, large or small, but proposals will be encouraged to explore how their results have contributed, or could contribute, to the study of Roman Britain, including RAC2026's main research themes such as new scientific applications in Roman archaeology; the latest approaches to urbanism; the role of networks in cultural and economic exchange; and theoretical frameworks aimed at decentring and decolonising Roman archaeology.

>>>RAC14

Locally Crafted Empires. A new approach to locally produced portrait sculpture and its societal contexts

Session organiser: Rubina Raja

The session Locally Crafted Empires (LoCiS) will investigate intersecting identities under changing imperial regimes by analysing locally produced representations of individuals (portraits). LoCiS situates its point of departure in the regions of the ancient world that usually are termed peripheral to the Roman world. While still being viewed as provincial and often poorly made, intersecting and evolving identities are embedded in these regions' diverse portrait cultures. However, no attempt has been made to comprehensively collect and study these thousands of portraits in a cross-regional perspective but they have mainly been used as a backdrop to accounts of "impact of empire" on the peoples of the "periphery". These representations, however, present a *globally unique material basis* from which to understand the perceptions and dynamics of human self-representation under conditions of political and cultural transformation. Accordingly, the LoCiS session, which emerges from a Semper Ardens Advanced Grant project of the same name, focuses on situating these regions' rich locally produced portrait cultures in a new light, drawing on intersectionality and imperial impact studies with global outlooks to disentangle local-regional-imperial dynamics and trajectories.

LoCiS' main research questions are:

- how do local and regional entanglements with, and responses to, different imperial hegemonies express themselves in the several thousand extant portraits of individuals crafted in local materials by local communities?
- what do these portraits tell us, when studied in a *longue durée* perspective, about intersecting identities on individual, local and regional levels?

>>>RAC15

'Curating the Romans': Collaborative approaches to interpreting Roman archaeology for the public in museums

Session organisers: Glynn J. C. Davis; Antony Lee; Frances McIntosh; Eva Mol; Vinnie Nørskov

Museums represent a rich resource for researching the Roman world, with institutions large and small across Europe and beyond curating vast repositories of material culture evidence. These encompass antiquarian finds, casual and (increasingly) metal-detected discoveries, and the enormous products of systematic archaeological fieldwork. Every year, public and academic researchers of all levels engage with museum collections through displays, stored collections, and online resources.

Despite their public profile, museums and their staff can become detached from the academic research conducted within and around them. Especially, since the development of theoretical archaeology in the twentieth century, the research in academia and in museums have developed into differing trajectories. In Britain, they are often considered only as facilitators of access and information rather than proactive research partners, or as the passive hosts of temporary exhibitions of 'research results'. Though often facing stringent financial and staffing constraints, museums can be keenly aware of the exciting yet hidden research opportunities their collections offer. Despite recent calls for the creation of more meaningful academic partnerships and outputs across the archaeological ecosystem, museums generally remain peripheral when research projects are being designed.

The session seeks to explore positive collaborations between museums (and other heritage venues) and the wider archaeological sector in presenting Roman archaeology to the public. The organisers invite contributions, especially from beyond Britain, which highlight innovative and inclusive collaborations, the enriching and sharing of museum data, and creative and engaging academic and public outputs. They

encourage papers that present new approaches to rethink and reinvent exhibitions and communication of the Roman past. Through dialogues begun at the session and continuing beyond, it is hoped that new relationships across the wider world of Roman archaeology can be forged.

>>>RAC16

Archival Fieldwork: Filling the Gaps

Session organisers: Jen Baird; Rubina Raja

The archival turn in archaeology has demonstrated not only that archives can be rich resources for studying the ancient world, but also that they can be archaeological sites themselves, with all of the challenges for study and engagement that traditional fieldwork holds. Archival fieldwork is under rapid development and in recent years much new research has tackled case study sites and institutions, which hold such material. This session aims to bring together scholars (including archivists, those interested in digital approaches, and historians of archaeology) to consider current methodological approaches to archaeological archives.

Archaeological archives are often characterised by dispersal of materials – not only dislocated from their places of origin, but also dispersed often across several institutions – as well as by a diversity in material(s), and often incomplete and partial. What methods do we need to be able to address such challenges in utilising archaeological archives, both to understand better the ancient Roman past, and the history of the discipline? Are there examples of best practice of archival fieldwork? Should archival practices be part of archaeological pedagogy?

>>>RAC17

Villanous problems - excavation, archives, ethics and innovation

Session organiser: David Roberts

Roman 'villas' remain one of the most totemic forms of site in public discourses of Roman archaeology in the north-west provinces, and are very commonly the focus of excavation. In the UK this is often by community or academic research projects. Whilst we continue to excavate villas apace, there remains a very significant proportion of previously excavated examples which languish without full publication in (at best) museum archives, or (frequently) private archives of groups or individuals. In recent decades, commercial archaeology in the UK has also undertaken many villa excavations, and has sometimes found moving to full publication challenging. None of these problems are unique to this class of Roman site, but the combination of villas' often rich material culture, environmental assemblages and architectural elaboration, with their repeated selection for excavation, perhaps means that they bring these issues into focus particularly sharply.

This session seeks to consider innovative theoretical, methodological and organisational approaches to analysing and publishing these sites. The aim is to illuminate these issues and spark inter-provincial and interdisciplinary dialogue on such approaches and questions, whilst also demonstrating a diversity of approaches to successfully moving from archive to publication where much, or all, of the archive was generated decades ago and is incomplete or challenging, and/or funding is insufficient. Furthermore, this session will consider the ethics of continuing to excavate these site. Recognising that the interpretation of villas remains highly centred on elite people and lifeways, can these innovations in archival analysis be combined with new, more symmetrical, theoretical approaches?

>>>RAC/TRAC18

The art of assessing burials – from developing methodologies to incorporating scientific analyses

Session organisers: Hannes Flück; Kaja Stemberger Flegar; John Pearce; Brina Zagorc; Rebecca Nashan

This session consists of two defined parts.

The first part seeks to address the methodological issues that are regularly encountered across the Empire and throughout the entire Roman period – those related to data unification. For working with different documentation standards, and for combining legacy data with the latest approaches such as bioarchaeology, Roman funerary archaeology needs a “gold standard” to enable large scale comparisons.

We welcome papers dealing with:

- finding common analytical denominators for legacy and modern burial excavations;
- developing flexible grave typologies for (supra-)regional comparative research;
- developing interpretative models for large cemeteries;
- methodological and interpretational problems arising from the implementation of modern analyses;
- how to tackle legacy excavation data, which can be vast in quantity but intractable in structural or methodological terms;
- critically applying the datasets that are acquired through bioarchaeological approaches, with focus on their contextualisation, interpretation, and discussion about the pitfalls of the methods.

The second part of the session aims to emphasise the opportunities, potential and limitations presented by an interdisciplinary approach to unlock the potential of funerary data. Specifically, it aims to focus on employing scientific methods, osteological and traditional antiquarian analysis on Late Antiquity thanks to inhumation burials that offer a greater potential for such interdisciplinary work.

New publications of late antique cemeteries unlock exciting research opportunities. The increasing implementation of science in the form of C14 dating, pXRF-analysis of ceramics, stable isotope analysis and aDNA is gaining attention, in addition to archaeological and historical assessment. These methods enable an in-depth study of social structures, kinship/family structure, provenance and resulting networks, biological sex, gender and the diversity of ancient societies in general. Therefore, the combination of different techniques and analyses allows archaeological research to understand these sites in their entirety which in turn affects our perspective on Late Antiquity. Papers for the second part of the session are welcomed focusing on chronological studies as well as socio-cultural backgrounds exploring diversity (e.g. ethnicity, gender studies) of Late Antique societies.

>>>RAC19

Lives worth living? Life courses in the Late Roman Empire

Session organisers: Lisa Duffy; Thomas Matthews Boehmer

The last two decades in Roman studies have witnessed ‘a dataset massively expanded by development-related excavation, the consolidation and proliferation of analytical techniques, and the exploitation of funerary data to explore the representation of individual identities and the dynamics of Roman society’ (Pearce, 2017: 1). This growing body of evidence presents opportunities to explore the fabric of lived experience in the later Roman world (200 – 450 AD), moving beyond traditional historical narratives. However, research on the later Roman period remains dominated by discussions of imperial decline, elite power, and urban architecture, and often marginalises the wealth of bioarchaeological and funerary evidence available—particularly from late Roman towns. There is also the issue that the gulf between bioarchaeologists and Roman archaeologists has resulted in studies of human remains that lack exact and explicit contextualisation within the late Roman period. As Reece (1982: 348) observed over four decades ago, and as continues to be a problem, there is an awkward ‘separation of bones from bodies, and bodies from cemeteries and finds’ which limits our ability to reconstruct the diverse experiences that shaped late Roman society.

This session seeks to bridge these disciplinary divides by bringing together bioarchaeological and funerary perspectives to examine how individuals and communities structured and experienced their social and biological lives. The session wishes to show how the narration of stories about people in the Late Empire makes it appear more effervescent, though not less strange. We are especially interested in studies that consider how aspects such as the life course, occupations, kinship, and regionality were articulated in funerary practices and embodied experiences.

We invite contributions that address the following themes:

- the integration of skeletal (human and animal) and funerary evidence to explore lives in the 3rd – 5th centuries AD;
- the role of regionality in shaping biological and social lives in the late Roman world;
- identities and the life course in late Roman Britain;
- methodological approaches to contextualising bioarchaeological and funerary data in the wider landscape of late Roman/Antique archaeology;
- moving beyond disciplinary silos.

>>>RAC20

Marking Belief: Coexistence, Continuity and Change in Late Antique Graffiti (3rd-6th Century AD)

Session organisers: Ilaria Bucci; Christina Videbech

The centuries spanning the 3rd to the 6th AD were a formative period in the religious and cultural history of the Mediterranean and Western Asia. This era witnessed profound shifts in political authority, social organisation, and religious practice. The gradual rise of Christianity, culminating in its establishment as the imperial religion, profoundly altered the religious landscape. Yet, this was not a straightforward or uniform process. Pagan, Jewish, and diverse Christian communities continued to coexist, interact, and compete, often leaving subtle and sometimes overt marks of their presence and resilience.

This session seeks to explore how graffiti – found in a variety of settings and surfaces – reflected and responded to the religious dynamism of Late Antiquity. Found especially in urban contexts, and often located in spaces imbued with cultic, communal, and social significance, these traces offer valuable testimony to the religious identities, practices, and aspirations of individuals and communities. We are particularly interested in how these traces served as expressions of individual and familial identity, devotion, resistance, and negotiation, and how they shed light on the enduring presence and interaction of multiple religious traditions. In an age when Christian institutions were consolidating authority, and pagan and Jewish communities were adapting to shifting political realities, graffiti provided a space for continuity, contestation, and the marking of identity within the physical and spiritual landscapes.

This panel will present a range of case studies – including but not limited to religious images and texts across the territories of the Roman empire – exploring graffiti as a medium of religious expression and social commentary. By examining these often-overlooked texts, symbols, and images, the session aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how individuals and communities navigated the transformations of Late Antiquity, and how material traces of graffiti help us trace both rupture and continuity across this diverse religious milieu.

>>>RAC21

Times of Transition: Questioning regionality, 'crisis' and collapse in the Northwestern provinces of the Roman Empire c.AD 230-300

Session organisers: James Dodd; Berber van der Meulen-van der Veen

The 3rd century is an important juncture in the archaeology of the northwestern provinces. Traditionally viewed as a 'negative' vortex of political stress, barbarian raiding and agrarian crisis, it is often brushed over, falling between the study of the Early Empire and Late Antiquity. The appearance of new military installations, depopulated zones and destruction horizons do not tell the entire story. Mono-casual explanations have been repeatedly used to explain the evidence for depopulation and destruction and there has been limited examination of the region holistically with concepts of 'global crisis' still strongly embedded into our narrative.

This session examines the 3rd century as a whole and will bring together researchers covering *Britannia*, *Gallia Belgica* and the Germanic provinces to examine the processes and archaeology behind this transformative period. The papers in this session will be selected to look at the socio-economic, political and historical development of the provinces in the 3rd century AD and focus on deconstructing the grand narrative of crisis by balancing the evidence and establishing clear regional trajectories. The 3rd century has been seriously neglected in recent years in favour of the Early Empire or the 4th-5th century, the last major conference on the topic being held in 2009. This session will rectify this and provide a new stepping stone for understanding change and inertia in the 3rd-century northwest.

Potential themes are:

- Issues of (dis)continuity and regionality;
- Material culture studies;
- Historical narratives and archaeological vagaries.

>>>RAC22

Finding the fifth century

Session organisers: Kelly Clarke-Neish; Eleanor Ghey; Ellen Swift; James Gerrard

The fifth century has been underrepresented in the Western European archaeological narrative. One of the factors involved is the difficulty of dating its associated material culture. Another is the teleological thinking that sees the fifth century as either the end of Rome or the beginning of the Middle Ages, notwithstanding sustained scholarly interest in 'Late Antiquity' more broadly conceived.

Hoards are one of the most visible indicators of this period of rapid social and economic change, but a reliance on numismatic dating has tended to situate their interpretation in the earlier part of the century. New work (e.g. Swift 2024 and Blackwell et al. forthcoming) is refining chronologies in this period and extending our understanding of both Roman-style material culture characteristic of the fifth century, and the survival and reuse of earlier material. In turn, this facilitates a reappraisal of cultural and social diversity across the period.

This session aims to explore the distinctive nature of fifth century society within and beyond the former western provinces and investigate approaches that move beyond framing the period in terms of top-down narratives to reveal the complex and varied nature of society in a time of change. We are also interested in challenging traditional perspectives arising from the disciplinary boundaries of 'Roman' or 'Early Medieval' archaeology to encourage the development of fresh interpretative frameworks.

Papers are welcomed that engage with the material culture of the 'long' fifth century in the former provinces of Britain, Gaul and Germany and neighbouring regions outside the former Empire. Contributions can be

focused on any category of object(s) and/or materials and papers which apply both quantitative and qualitative approaches are especially welcome.

TRAC Sessions

>>>TRAC1

Crafting Connections: Communities, Identities, and Practices in the Roman World

Session organisers: Eniko Hudak; Nicole Berlin; Amy Baker; Adam Sutton; Amy Miranda; Cheyenne Eversole-Spina; Rebecca Nashan

Craft production in the Roman world offers a powerful lens through which to examine social structures, knowledge transmission, and identity formation. Far from being isolated economic activities, crafts were deeply embedded in networks of apprenticeship, community belonging, and cultural expression. This session brings together three thematically related panels to explore how artisans and their work shaped—and were shaped by—the broader social and political dynamics of the Roman Empire. From communities of practice to regional variation and provincial identities, these contributions interrogate the social lives of makers and materials. Together, they offer new approaches for integrating theoretical frameworks and archaeological evidence in the study of Roman crafts.

The first panel discusses connectivity through crafts and creation of dynamic communities of practice across the Roman Empire. It explores how shared activities among artisans created communities of practice—groups formed and sustained through collective knowledge, skill transmission, and embodied interaction. It invites papers that draw on case studies from Roman ceramic production and also beyond, specifically those that foreground the role of micro-styles and object variability in identifying these communities archaeologically. This panel aims to emphasise human-object interaction as a valuable proxy for tracing human-human relationships and aims to refine our methodologies for recognizing such dynamics. In doing so, it contributes to a growing body of scholarship that views craft as a key site for understanding social life in the Roman world.

The second panel zooms in on art and craft production in the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire, where long-standing Greek and Mesopotamian traditions continued to shape local production practices under Roman rule. It aims to analyse regional craftwork through a theoretical lens to challenge reductive, top-down models of Romanization and highlight local agency and innovation. The panel invites papers that are particularly interested in the glocalization of material culture—how local and imperial elements merged in distinctive forms of artistic expression in the eastern provinces. By doing so, the panel aims to contribute to a broader decolonizing effort within Roman archaeology by re-centering marginalized communities and provincial experiences.

The third panel examines the social and cultural identities of craftspeople working in Roman provincial contexts. While previous research has often focused on typologies, workshops, and tools, this panel emphasizes the people behind the practices—how artisans negotiated identity, status, and belonging through their work. It invites papers that draw on archaeological, epigraphic, and visual sources to consider how craft embedded individuals in broader social, economic, and political landscapes. The panel highlights the diversity of provincial craft experiences and promotes interdisciplinary approaches to understanding identity in the Roman world.

Taken together, these panels demonstrate the value of craft-focused research for understanding Roman society from the bottom up. They reveal how artisans operated within and across communities, navigated regional traditions, and forged identities through creative engagement with materials. By bringing theoretical

innovation into dialogue with empirical evidence, this session advances the study of Roman craft beyond economic production to a rich field of social practice. Craft was never merely about making—it was about belonging, remembering, and negotiating one's place in a changing imperial world.

>>>TRAC2

What it is to be Roman: Experimental Archaeology and Living History

Session organiser: Alexander Iles

The diversity of studies, experiments, and public engagement offered by Roman experimental archaeology is immense. Large datasets, well-documented excavations, and rigorously translated ancient sources enable detailed studies to be carried out on a myriad of aspects of Roman experience. Experimental archaeology offers an opportunity to test construction methods, resource gathering, food and drink recipes, and object construction or even simulate living conditions in Roman accommodation (as documented in: *Experimental Approaches to Roman Archaeology*) to better understand Roman life. It offers many opportunities for multi-disciplinary research of Roman archaeology.

Unlike experimental archaeology, focused upon scientific, replicable studies, living history focuses on an experiential approach to archaeology. These displays are theoretical, providing experiences, primarily for the public, often in living history centres or museums, or in local history festivals, including reenactments of historical events. These displays should be seen as a way of engaging researchers asking questions of status, power and ritual within the Roman world and how these are understood by modern audiences. How do modern audiences respond to a depiction of an imperial delegation, or at the other end of Roman society, when a living historian depicts a slave? What is the experience of religious or cultic practices? Ancient displays were intended to evoke a response from the audience. Living history displays offer a medium for modern audiences to experience the Roman world in ways that clash or engage with established narratives of Roman civilisation, questioning established narratives. Living history, grounded within archaeology, offers this, enabling archaeological theory, especially in the areas of ritual, processional theatre, post-colonialism and hierarchies, to be depicted and engaged with by the public.

Papers are invited to this session, which wish to present research on Roman experimental archaeology or living history and public engagement depicting historical events or aspects of Roman life.

>>>TRAC3

Dry data? Archaeology on the arid fringes of the Roman empire as inter- and trans-disciplinary research

Session organisers: Anna-Katharina Rieger; Gaëlle Tallet

Doing archaeology in arid regions offers advantages such as preservation and visibility, but it can suffer from scarce data spread across vast, hard-to-access areas. This is particularly true for research in parts of the MENA-region that were once within the Roman Empire. Long-standing studies along the Roman-Parthian/Sassanian frontiers in Syria and Jordan, the Egyptian oases, or alongside Nabatean or Palmyrean trade routes into the Arabian Peninsula has increasingly adopted interdisciplinary approaches. Evolving from „classical“ working with textual as well as material sources, a methodological and theoretical tool set evolved over the last few decades from geo-archaeology, remote sensing and various scientific dating methods.

The knowledge gained from these – in Mediterranean perspective – marginal regions for the overall understanding of economic, political and socio-religious history cannot be overrated (Bourgeois et al. 2024; Bravard et al. 2016; Campmany Jiménez et al. 2022; Driessen – Abudanah 2018; Vetter – Rieger 2019). In light of current challenges such as desertification, insights into past economic strategies can inform today's sustainability and resilience efforts, beyond arid zones.

The panel seeks to explore emerging trajectories shaped by the described approaches: For instance, AI-applications have begun to facilitate surveys strategies (Ben-Romdhane et al. 2023), albeit requiring significant computational capabilities and generating large datasets. Despite of availability of refined scientific dating methods (Dunseth et al. 2017), national regulations and lab capacities restrict their application in the mentioned regions, leading to limited comparability and approaches. Additionally, while palaeo-climatic data offer higher resolutions in the Mediterranean and the MENA-region, they necessitate normalisation. Specialized studies on pottery and content analysis, aDNA, and isotope studies play pivotal roles in understanding economic production, exchange of commodities, connectivity, and mobility, however need to be integrated to historical interpretation (e.g., Mattingly 2023). Finally, in rapidly developing desert zones, questions of cultural heritage, inclusive archaeology and ethno-archaeology with all its implications from restauration, musealisation to decolonisation need to be addressed. These considerations contribute to broadening the interdisciplinary spectrum in order to gather as much data as possible from arid, data-scarce environments.

The contributors are encouraged to critically reflect on methods, approaches, material categories, or specific sites to delineate the current state and potential future directions of the field or research. They should contextualise the marginal situation within the Roman Empire's perspective, integrating it into a broader historical narrative and considering our academic positions when researching MENA-regions. Ultimately, archaeology in arid zones can evolve from an interdisciplinary to a transdisciplinary practice of material historical research. to effectively study data-scarce landscapes.

Questions include:

- How can arid areas of the MENA-region be seen from a perspective of Roman Archaeology?
- How can AI, digitalisation and big data sets broaden approaches to arid landscapes?
- How can paelaeoclimatic data be normalised?
- In how far does geo-archaeology in arid regions need the specialisation of hydro-archaeology?
- How are pottery studies developing and what impact does this have on arid zone archaeology?
- How can built on local knowledge of (in some MENA-countries(marginalised people of arid zones?
- How can we deal with infrastructural development in desert zones impacting (often little visible) heritage?

>>>TRAC4

Ritual Deviation and Variance in Roman Cults: Interdisciplinary Theoretical Perspectives

Session organisers: Blanka Misić; Abigail Graham

The Romans considered that performing religious rituals correctly was vital for their success. Rituals were structured, complex, and causally opaque; any deviance from correct ritual proceedings risked resulting in ritual failure and in the need to repeat the ritual until a favourable outcome was achieved. But should we automatically assume that ritual variance or ritual deviation led to ritual failure? While a ritual needed to maintain a certain structure to ensure continuity and successful transmission, at the same time a ritual had to adapt to new environments and worshippers in order to effectively spread and persist. This session invites interdisciplinary scholars of religion and ritual to explore how religious rituals transformed and persisted in the Roman world. We encourage applicants with diverse theoretical perspectives from sensory archaeology, cognitive study of religion, anthropology, religious studies and related disciplines to present their research in this session in order to advance the field and provide cross-disciplinary insights to the following questions:

- How can interdisciplinary theoretical perspectives help us understand better ritual variance, ritual deviation and/or ritual continuity in the Roman world?
- How can a ritual change while maintaining continuity?
- How does variance and/or deviation in ritual proceedings impact the learning, remembering, and/or transmission of rituals?
- How can ritual variance/deviation/failure affect individual and/or collective ritual experiences of worshippers?
- How can repetition of ritual result in ritual variance?
- How can ritual variance/deviation/failure be traced in the material record?

We invite papers dealing with these and related questions on ritual variance, ritual deviation, ritual continuity, and ritual failure.

>>>TRAC5

Water Cultures Beyond Roman Italy

Session organisers: Henry Clarke; Giacomo Savani

Water was a powerful resource in the Roman world, with a complex set of symbolic and ritual associations perhaps even more important than its many practical purposes. It played a pervasive role in religions and rituals, particularly given the sensory implications of water and water infrastructures. Different types of water, from springs to fountains to rivers, could be imbued with different cosmological roles and importance. Water also had a unique influence on people, bringing them together in distinctive ways and facilitating interactions in diverse settings, from urban areas to the countryside.

Water sites and infrastructures provide a unique opportunity to explore how various individuals and social groups in the Roman world interpreted, used, and interacted with water in complex and sometimes conflicting ways. In this session, we aim to examine different theoretical and interdisciplinary approaches to water and water cultures across the Roman world, from the Near East to Britain. We are interested in methods that include phenomenological and sensory perspectives, as well as studies informed by post-humanism and new materialism.

We are particularly eager to de-centre the narrative of the Roman Empire, focusing instead on the human-water interactions and lived experiences of diverse social and cultural groups outside of Rome and Roman Italy. We seek to understand the comparative experiences of different social groups, both elite and subaltern, and whether certain groups were excluded from specific interactions with water due to their status, power, and resources. For example, the privileged access of the elite to water suggests that they engaged with it differently than other groups, potentially missing the social interactions that water afforded to subaltern communities. Ultimately, our goal is to achieve a deeper understanding of the central role that water played in local societies and cultures throughout the Roman Empire.

>>>TRAC6

FRAGILE IMAGES: The Fragility, Instability, Ambiguity, and Self-Reflexivity of Images in Roman Art

Session organisers: Annette Haug; Lidia Chiné Zapater; Marlis Arnhold

The session introduces the project FRAGILE IMAGES (ERC Grant No. 101141247) based at Kiel University, Germany, and invites to challenge the dominant notion of images as powerful actors. Moving away from the prevalent focus on the affective, persuasive, and immersive image the contributions focus on the temporal

instability, semantic ambiguity, and/or ontological self-reflexivity of images. Starting from the gaze as a mediator between image and viewer, between activity and passivity, between power and weakness, we propose to intertwine a praxeology of showing with a praxeology of viewing. This radically new approach brings together a Visual Studies perspective and a cultural-historical approach and applies them to Roman imagery from the 2nd century BC to the 4th century AD. Based on archaeological and written evidence of this period, the contributions of this session explore the potential of 'fragility' as a pictorial quality. For this the one or other aspect may be emphasized:

- Temporal instability alludes to any processes of image creation and transformation, but also encompasses their biographies, translocation and the changes of both their spatial, functional and social contexts. This likewise includes ephemeral images such as reflections and shadows.
- Semantic ambiguity tackles the role of polyvalence, openness, and indeterminacy in images. Thus, we acknowledge that images may stimulate more than one meaning, offer contradictory meanings and even perform without communicating anything at all.
- Ontological fragility addresses the self-reflexivity of images, i.e. on meta-images. These are images that address, reflect upon, or question their ontological status (pictoriality). They do not communicate in a propagandistic, catchy, or one-dimensional way but in a subtle and complex one; they require an intensive process of reflection. We claim that this is not (only) a (post-)modern phenomenon, but also was an ancient strategy.

>>>TRAC7

Beyond names and numbers: Quantitative epigraphy and the discovery of historical patterns

Session organisers: Petra Heřmánková; Tomáš Glomb; Vojtěch Kaše

Roman epigraphy has traditionally focused on qualitative analysis of individual inscriptions, with scholars engaging in restoration, translation, and contextual interpretation. While this approach has yielded invaluable insights, it often overlooks the potential of these inscriptions as a collective dataset capable of revealing broader historical patterns and social dynamics.

This session explores how quantitative approaches to epigraphic evidence can transform our understanding of Roman society and culture. By applying computational methods, statistical analysis, and data visualisation techniques to large epigraphic corpora, we can address inherent biases in the surviving record, quantify uncertainty in our interpretations, and restore missing contextual information. These distant reading approaches enable us to uncover patterns undetectable by traditional methods, revealing demographic shifts, tracing cultural diffusion, and identifying evolving linguistic conventions across time and space that would remain hidden through close reading of individual inscriptions alone.

Papers might address:

- Natural Language Processing (NLP) techniques for reconstructing and extracting semantic meaning from fragmentary texts;
- Distant reading methods for identifying previously undetected linguistic or thematic patterns;
- Statistical methods for mitigating selection biases in the epigraphic record;
- Computer-assisted restoration of damaged inscriptions and prediction of missing content;
- Digital methodologies for integrating epigraphic data with spatial and archaeological longitudinal data to uncover cultural and societal patterns in geographical space.

We welcome contributions that explore theoretical frameworks for interpreting quantitative epigraphic data, methodological innovations in digital epigraphy, or case studies demonstrating how computational approaches have yielded new historical insights. The session aims to demonstrate how quantitative methods

can complement, rather than replace, traditional epigraphic scholarship, providing new avenues for interrogating these crucial primary sources.

This session invites archaeologists, historians, digital humanists, and computational linguists to engage in interdisciplinary dialogue about the future of epigraphic studies and its potential to reshape our understanding of Roman society through the lens of big data analysis.

>>>TRAC8

Graphs have feelings too: Empirical approaches to theoretical problems in Roman archaeology (and vice versa)

Session organisers: Owen Humphreys; Peter Bray; Michael Marshall

In this session, we invite papers that explore the complex intersection between theory and data. We are all familiar with the tropes of quantitative and theoretical archaeologies; that one generates data with no meaning, and the other generates ideas with no proof. If this was ever true, it is increasingly less so. The embedding of theory into archaeological training and practice has led to explicitly pragmatic approaches emerging. Many are increasingly appreciating how advances in theory, methodology and data have emerged and operated in tandem, opening up new opportunities for diverse and meaningful explorations of social questions.

As the diversity of experiences examined by theoretical movements has expanded, so too has the volume of data available to Roman archaeologists; from almost anecdotal factoids about key discoveries, to vast datasets created by synthetic research projects, commercial excavations, the PAS, and new scientific techniques. Computer databases, GIS, and digital dissemination have been powerful forces shaping the discipline. This data brings with it new opportunities for exploring the complexity and scope of the Roman period, but also poses new challenges for research design, data organisation and storage, data analysis and interpretation.

We see empirical data not as an unbiased arbiter of truth, but as a complex resource, shaped by practice, through which we can explore the variability of experience and agency in the past. At the same time, we believe that empirical data requires integration with theoretical frameworks, new and old, that explicitly engage with the complexities and opportunities afforded by this data. We welcome studies drawing on quantitative, typological, metric, statistical, or landscape studies, or scientific analysis techniques. We invite papers which explore not just the interpretation of data, but also the role of theory in generating research questions and designing methodologies, or the complexities of archaeological practice within data science.

>>>TRAC9

Church Economies: Archaeological and Palaeoenvironmental Approaches to the Economy of Religious Institutions in Late Antiquity

Session organisers: Julia Koch; Catherine Keane

Wine and olive presses, grain mills, and pithoi for the large-scale storage of grain are regularly discovered in late antique church complexes during excavations. Similarly, monastic sites across the Late Roman provinces also bear remains of agricultural processing and storage facilities. These features of the ecclesiastical landscape – together with small finds such as bread stamps and analyses of botanical remains – provide new insights into the agrarian economy of the Early Christian church: the phases of establishing economic power; the spatial setting and organisation of agricultural storage, production, and redistribution; the integration of productive facilities in Late Roman cityscapes, rural monasteries and larger economic networks; the scale of ecclesiastical economic power; the variety of natural resources allocated within these places; and fading economic capacities.

This session aims at tracing the economy of the early church through archaeological discoveries and seeks to discuss the modes of economic storage, production and/or redistribution which can be associated with the Late Roman and Early Byzantine church in both the eastern and the western Roman Empire. We invite paper proposals to explore any aspect of the agrarian economy of the Early Christian church, especially:

- archaeobotanical analyses of the agrarian resources stored/processed at Early Christian sites;
- the spatial and temporal contexts of economic storage, production, and redistribution facilities;
- their integration in Late Roman cityscapes/rural landscapes and local/supraregional networks;
- the scale and possible impact of ecclesiastical economic power; its phases of boom and bust.

By discussing and comparing available archaeological data, we seek to determine relevant conceptual approaches to analysing the economic actions of religious institutions, drawing on self-sufficient subsistence, schemes for provisional supplies and charitable institutions, trade and commerce, or sacralised taxation.

>>>TRAC10 General session

Chair: Anna Walas

If your topic does not fit within the remit of any of the advertised sessions above, please consider a submission to the General Session.