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Review Essay

Exhibition review: *Legion: Life in the Roman Army*, British Museum (1 February – 23 June 2024), and *Women Doing Everything, Everywhere, all at Once*, Verulamium Museum (8 March – 4 July 2024)

How do we think about the Roman empire? According to a TikTok meme that garnered over a billion views by September 2023, and gained mass traditional media coverage, women were surprised to find that men think about the Roman empire at least five times a day (Kosarin, 2023; and e.g. Maher, 2023; Sands, 2023). US YouGov promptly ran a survey finding that men spend more time thinking about the Roman Empire—and World War II—than do women (Rossell-Hayes, 2023). Uncontroversial then, to note that Roman studies can have an intensely contemporary social context, and that this context engages with two UK exhibitions held this year: British Museum's *Legion: Life in the Roman Army* (https://www.britishmuseum.org/exhibitions/legion-life-roman-army) and Verulamium Museum's *Women Doing Everything, Everywhere, all at Once* (https://www.stalbansmuseums.org.uk/whats-on/women-doing-everythingeverywhere-all-once). Both exhibitions overlapped in their broad topics but responded to the needs of their contemporary audiences in very different ways, in particular concerning gender and the Roman empire. *Legion* broadly tended to equate Roman army life with soldiers' perspectives, which was satirized by an iteration of the original TikTok meme: 'Girlies, if you're single and looking for a man, this is your sign to go to the British Museum's new exhibition, *Life in the Roman Army*, and walk around looking confused' (HRHGeorgiana, 2023). The British Museum clumsily appropriated this on its Instagram, thus losing the satirical context and feeding into gender stereotypes of a Roman empire for men, resulting in criticism particularly from archaeologists (including myself) that became an international media story. By contrast, *Women Doing Everything* explicitly sought to disrupt public perspectives of a Roman empire primarily involving men, both in antiquity and as archaeologists. This review essay, therefore, seeks to consider some of the different ways in which both these exhibitions engaged with recent scholarship and this contemporary public context.

Most visitors to *Legion* probably first encountered the exhibition through its marketing materials. These promised a how-things-really-were 'story of the life of a Roman legionary through their own eyes and those closest to them'. Broadly, this

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is what the exhibition delivered. Taking the perspective of an Egyptian soldier, Claudius Terentianus, the exhibition constructs its narrative from his recruitment to the marines *c.* 110 AD through his successful promotion to a legion until his ultimate retirement. After introducing Terentianus, his experiences are offered a foil as visitors are funnelled through several sections that represent different aspects of army life: Joining the army; Ranks and roles; Dressing for battle; Camps and campaigns; Fort life; Enforcers of occupation; Retirement.

Children were catered for through a 'Horrible Histories' tie-in (recognizable to many British visitors from the Terry Deary book series) with the invention of 'Rattus', an army rat as an engaging and obviously fictional guide through the exhibition. Distinctive yellow backgrounded 'Rattus' cartoon panels followed the adult-orientated narrative of recruitment and army life, and with some exceptions (below) complemented well the adult-orientated exhibition texts. Legionary bases were not described by the exhibition, other than in Rattus' description of fort life including bases for pampered legionaries that could have amphitheatres. The important question of archaeological survival was also introduced by Rattus' imagining how many shields must have existed and why only the Dura *scutum* is left. Separate children's activities—including apparatuses for lifting a soldier's pack weighing 27 kg and for measuring your height to see if you were tall enough to be a Roman soldier—also appealed to many adult visitors and gave a lice-and-all sense of soldiers' lives.

The choice of an Egyptian marine-to-legionary's story situated well the spectacular objects the exhibition displayed, and there were eye-catching examples of the weapons and dress associated with soldiers in the Roman army, including: crocodile-skin armour from Manfalut, Egypt; a painted *scutum* from Dura Europos, Syria; *lorica segmentata* armour, and a sword and scabbard from Kalkriese, Germany. Particularly effectively displayed was the *draco* standard with its reconstructed fabric 'wind-sock' blown as it might have been in use. Alongside these, cases containing smaller objects from everyday life add to the general picture, such as a red sock from Egypt, a dice tower from Cologne, officers' wives' correspondence from Vindolanda, and military diplomas. Although the sheer diversity of Roman soldiers was evident throughout the exhibition with the choices of monuments and inscriptions, both the diversity of the soldiery and the aesthetics of what was originally painted stone could have been further communicated; for example, through coloured light projection displays on the stones themselves (as currently seen at the Great North Museum's *Hadrian's Wall* altar permanent display and at the British Museum's *Ashurbanipal* exhibition in 2018). In a similar fashion to the soldier on Trajan's column who was visually highlighted at the exhibition entrance, light projection could have emphasized the presence of non-combatants such as grooms and children that the monuments include but marginalize.

The object presentation relied on spectacle, and a dominant visual element in the exhibition was provided by long, hanging red banners. Such banners, however, do not have Roman antecedents; the only surviving Roman banner (*vexillum*) is in the Pushkin Museum, Moscow, and it is unfortunate this could not be displayed (Schmöger, 2004). Irrespective of the museum's intentions, the effect of the exhibition staging was potentially to evoke the symbols of Nazi rallies and pageantry that continue through much popular and fictional presentation of the Roman army in film and computer games, and on social

media (Winkler, 2009: 126; Cosgrove, 2014). This exhibition further missed the opportunity to challenge popular presentations of the Roman army for its visitors by including a reception element (which was a substantive part, for example, of its recent *Celts* and *Nero* exhibitions). It was through its marketing and social media, however, that the much greater number of people engaged with *Legion* without visiting it, and visitors' expectations were set. This makes the exhibition's aesthetics, and arguably aspects of its narrative equating the Roman army with its soldiery (more on this below), problematic when substantial numbers of those holding and promulgating extremist political viewpoints continue to invest considerable interest in the Roman army (Trevezant, 2024).

By choosing to tell the story of Terentianus, a rank-and-file soldier, *Legion* follows a strand of the military community approach largely developed in the 1990s, and firmly established by a conference at Birkbeck in 1997 (Goldsworthy and Haynes, 1999). Terentianus was a real marine, whose letters were excavated at Karanis by the University of Michigan in 1928 (Strassi, 2004: 225, n. 4). Within the military community approach, however, wider questions about civilians and their roles were underdeveloped, with insufficient attention given to the marginalization of these people within the material evidence, although Carol Van Driel Murray's work in the 1990s established the presence of military families within as well as around forts and fortresses (Breeze, 2018). Numbers of non-combatants with the army were not small: geophysical surveys indicate that extramural settlements could be double or triple the size of a fort (Walas, 2015: 19); and small finds from garrison sites recurrently indicate that a substantial number of people travelled with soldiers, even on campaign. Contrary to the exhibition panel entitled 'Fort life', soldiers, and their wives' names on diplomas suggest both often came from the same places, rather than soldiers marrying local women or freed slaves (Greene, 2015).

By equating Roman army life to soldiers' lives, however, these more recent perspectives were not evident in *Legion*. In particular, the marginalization of non-combatants within the material evidence tended to be compounded rather than challenged, with some interesting exceptions such as an exhibition panel highlighting what may be Roman women on Trajan's column torturing captives. Opportunities not taken in the exhibition to highlight the substantial presence and support roles of enslaved and free servants included the display of horse armour; this only very briefly mentions the grooms responsible for maintaining it. Servants travelled with the army in sizeable trains, and flags similar to army standards were used to organize these into a military structure; many servants were probably used in combat as well as perhaps defending camps with spears (Speidel, 1989: 243–45; Roth, 1999: 91–92; Vishnia, 2002: 265–68; Liv. *Per*. 67; Tac. *Hist*. 2.87; 3.33.2). The significance of their presence within the army is obscured by soldiers' inscriptions, which do not mention them, and by a lack of inscriptions of their own (Speidel, 1989: 239–40). In fact, with some exceptions such as weaponry and some dress items, the status of those using the small finds found in military bases (and consequently the spaces also) is normally unclear (Allison, 2013).

The decision to focus on soldiers may be behind some important factual and interpretational distortions, which also offered opportunities for exploring the complexity of Roman army life that were not taken in the exhibition. For example,

the Palmyrene man called Barates who put up a tombstone at South Shields for his freedwoman wife, Regina of the Catuvellauni, was probably a merchant. The exhibition, and *Legion* opening-related press articles, describe him as a soldier. Soldiers normally highlight their status on monumental inscriptions, and his inscription does not give him any status (Carroll, 2012: 286). A later museum blogpost by Mary Beard discusses the evidence but omits that the name Barates is common in Palmyra (Cantineau et al., 1930–49; Beard, 2024). The suggestion that the South Shields Barates is the same man as the Palmyrene *vexillarius* at Corbridge relies on two undated inscriptions and the reconstruction of the *vexillarius*' name (R.P.W., in *RIB* 1171). Similar difficulties exist with the skeleton of the anonymous victim found at Herculaneum, who may have been a marine. Both the *Legion* press release, which says 'he is believed to be one of the marines commanded by Pliny the Elder caught up in the eruption of Vesuvius while attempting to help citizens flee', and the more cautious museum label tell a good story about his identity and helpful activities. There is, however, a pattern of ascribing definite statuses and activities to Pompeian and Herculaneum human remains that do not withstand subsequent re-examination of the evidence (Campbell, 2020). The re-evaluation of skeleton no. 26, and associated belt and sword, has yet to be published. Caution is therefore warranted both over his status and more particularly over any role in Pliny's so-called 'rescue mission', which is reminiscent of the modern myth of Pompeii's Herculaneum gate soldier (https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-57055163). Other inaccuracies and ambivalences include describing Paterna, a woman known through a single, fragmentary letter found at Vindolanda, as an apothecary. Paterna's status is unknown, and the translation of this tablet is ambiguous; it can be translated either that she will bring medicines for a fever or bring slave girls free of fever (n. 6 of commentary *Tab Vindol*. 294).

Soldiers' perspectives were included in multiple contexts ranging from violent aggressors to family members. Terentianus' experiences were empathetically conveyed through translated excerpts from his letters featuring in monumental text on the exhibition wall panels:

> 'Longing for transfer, he wrote home for supplies, struggled to fit in with his comrades and was injured suppressing a revolt.'

By contrast, the empathetic approach accorded to Terentianus made the presentation of the enslaved woman that Terentianus was seeking familial permission to buy particularly jarring. The excerpt in monumental text read:

> 'He sent me word about a woman, with my consent he was buying one for me.'

The empathy that is invited towards Terentianus does not extend to the enslaved woman discussed. Aligning the term 'consent', which has a specific and well-recognized meaning in contemporary English in the context of engaging in consensual sexual activity, with a man purchasing an enslaved woman for purposes which would include non-consensual sex (in modern terms, rape), also lacks sensitivity towards exhibition visitors. Similarly, empathy with Roman soldiers created some difficulties of dealing with violence in an exhibition that was targeted towards children and families. For example, in the section 'Aftermath', which included discussion of the torture and enslavement of captives, a 'Rattus' case text entitled 'Celebrating winning is an important part of being a Roman soldier (aren't we

great?)' asked children 'Can you spot the triumphant scenes of victory on these Roman coins?' and 'How would you celebrate your success?'. This case contained a terracotta 'Campana' relief depicting the public display and humiliation of enslaved prisoners and the highlighted coin was an *aureus* commemorating Claudius' campaign in Britain that the adult-orientated text explained displays 'human-like trophies of captured arms and armour'. Notwithstanding these substantial issues, *Legion* was a spectacular exhibition that covered the lives of Roman soldiers well, despite being partially produced in the context of continuing substantial difficulties imposed by the pandemic.

Turning to Verulamium Museum's *Women Doing Everything, Everywhere, all at Once,* this was the second of a planned series of temporary exhibitions with modest budgets with which the museum aims to reach new and diverse audiences by telling novel stories, introducing fresh voices, and celebrating alternative objects. A strong curatorial direction was offered by guest curator Lexi Diggins, both within the exhibition itself and through marketing and press statements that set out the exhibition's aims and rationale and her own connection to the material. The wall panel introducing the exhibition stated:

> 'In the past women were overlooked and their achievements diminished, and it still happens today. As a female archaeologist I wanted to highlight the extraordinary contributions made by women at Verulamium over the millennia.'

The introductory panel explained the two-part nature of the exhibition. Firstly, it sought both to recover the history of women archaeologists excavating St Albans from the 1930s to the present; in the Wheelers' excavations of Roman Verulamium (1930–1934) over half of the archaeology team were women. Secondly, the exhibition sought to introduce four Roman and/or Iron Age women with (variable) connections to St Albans who 'changed their social status, travel, marry non-locals, make things, and worship local goddesses'. These were: Boudicca; Regina, the Catuvellauni freedwoman commemorated at South Shields; Flavia Cunoris, whose silver-gilt figurine and a votive plaque dedicated to Senuna were found in the Ashwell hoard (*Brit*. 53.21; 36.29); and Sabina, whose name was scratched into the bottom of a samian pot excavated at St Albans in 1958 (*RIB* 2501.479). Taking a multiplicity of perspectives within the approach allowed the exhibition to resist offering a single overarching narrative. Dealing with the specificities of the material avoided suggesting that women in the past and present were the same. Instead, visitors were encouraged to make lateral connections and to consider the viewpoint that archaeological findings are often somewhat contingent and provisional, subjective, and may need to be updated.

The first part of the exhibition was situated within the museum's entrance gallery, with further material from both elements integrated within the museum's main collection. This encouraged visitors to connect the exhibition materials to the wider collection; for example, the presentation of Sabina (below) was situated next to the pot bearing the graffito of her name inviting thought about who might have made and used the other ceramics within the museum. The entrance gallery—a wide corridor that leads to the main exhibition halls—contained a series of engaging wall panels with photographs and texts that gave a narrative history of the excavations. Interspersed with the panels were cases containing some of Tess Wheeler's and Kathleen Kenyon's excavation notebooks, the latter with her pencil drawing

of a pot during excavation and a section drawing. A local teenager, Helen Carlton-Smith, became involved in the excavation and kept a lively diary of events. The diary and her trowel were displayed with her cartoon drawing: 'The story of 3 ambitious maidens by 1 of them'. The case label says Tessa Wheeler liked this so much it was put up in the tea shed. Meticulous archaeological illustrations by Helen and her mother Queenie, a local artist, offered a glimpse of the post-excavation process. Interspersed with these cases and panels were audio exhibits of excerpts read from Helen's diary. The combination of wall panels, cases, and audio were effective in giving an overview of archaeological practice at the time aimed at non-experts and in evoking a sense of what it might have been like for these women to take part in the excavations.

The exhibition's rationale of redressing the balance of attention on women's contributions in archaeology justified its celebratory tone. The panel texts were precise in explaining the contributions that the archaeologists made, for example, Tessa Wheeler's managerial and training roles, as well as her technical innovations to allow mosaics to be removed successfully from the ground. Photographs and explanations of this removal process were displayed in the gallery alongside the 'Shell' mosaic that was excavated using these techniques, conveying succinctly and directly an important part of how the objects arrived on display. A wall panel discussed the typically gendered roles within archaeology at this time and showed how, on this excavation, both men and women often worked on the same tasks. It also gave some insight into social and class relations, with miners brought in to assist with excavation, and the (lack) of ethnic diversity, with excavators travelling from the US, as well as 'Nat' and Mr Varma, whom it is thought were from India, although no rationale was given for this attribution. Future work could explore further these diverse social histories.

A wall panel discussed the impact of women archaeologists on archaeology and the development of women's careers, including Ione Gedye's foundational role in setting up the Institute of Archaeology's repair department. Penny Guido (formerly Piggott née Preston) was photographed excavating the hypocaust with the observation that she had been poorly portrayed in 'The Dig' (dir. Simon Stone), a Netflix film about the 1939 Sutton Hoo (Pitts, 2021). *Women Everywhere* relied on photographs by excavation photographer 'Cookie' Cookson; he later joined the Institute of Archaeology and took as his assistant Vera Conlon, who went on to teach students and in 1973 published a textbook *Camera Techniques in Archaeology*. As the exhibition panel noted, not all the women Tessa Wheeler trained could be listed, and the visitors were pointed towards the public-facing *Trowelblazers* project if they wanted more information (https://trowelblazers.com/). The task of considering women within the history of archaeology is large; *Beyond Notability* (Harloe et al., 2021–24), a major AHRC-funded project investigating women's contributions to the shaping, practice, and institutionalization of archaeology, history, and heritage (1870–1950), in July 2024 had database entries for 902 women (Harloe et al., 2021–24).

Women Everywhere also used experimental archaeology effectively to produce engaging and realistic portrayals of the ancient women, including through audio, intended to be inclusive of visually impaired visitors. A display case for Boudicca, for example, held a replica of a carnyx, played by the archaeologist and ancient world specialist James Lloyd used in an audio landscape, as were the sounds of experimental archaeologist and potter

Graham Taylor's pottery studio (Taylor, 2013). Scripts produced by the museum and voiced by actors with these accompanying soundscapes brought these women imaginatively back to life. Gary Erskine, a graphic artist, produced engaging portraits of Boudicca, Regina, Flavia, and Sabina (as well as Tessa Wheeler, and the wall panel designs). These depictions communicated imaginatively how the ancient women might have looked, both through their physical appearance reflecting the diversity of their origins, and their dress, while remaining grounded in extensive curatorial research. A clear distinction was, however, retained between the more experimental and creative communication elements, and the factual information presented. The exhibition guide booklet included a page about experimental archaeology and its role in the exhibition. Panel texts gave straightforward accounts of the evidence and what we do and do not know about popular questions; for example, about Boudica's appearance, and about where she died. It was straightforward in dealing with Roman violence; her panel read: 'They flogged Boudica, raped her daughters, and enslaved her household.' An image of Regina's tombstone gave a translation of the inscriptions and simply said that Barates 'was from Palmyra in Syria and Regina was a Catuvellauni', noting the likelihood that the sculptor was Palmyrene due to the fluency of the Palmyrene script, while the guide booklet suggested he may have been involved in Mediterranean trade and invited visitors to learn more by visiting the 'Merchants and Markets' section of the permanent exhibition. Occasionally these presentations did oversimplify some of the complexities. It is questionable whether the Sabina whose name was scratched into the bottom of a samian pot after firing was an apprentice craftswoman as she was portrayed by the exhibition; such graffiti are generally interpreted as indicating ownership, although women and children are posited among the workers at La Graufesenque, where some potters could write names and numbers (Adams, 2003: 689). The presentation of Sabina, however, remains a possible if not the most likely scenario, and the exhibition materials clearly communicated that her story was an imaginative reconstruction. The accompanying panel text, repeated in the exhibition guide, accurately informed visitors that there is evidence of women, and girls' involvement in pottery making within Gaul, from where Sabina's sherd originated.

Overall, the strengths of this exhibition were grounded in the need to be explicit and discursive about updating popular views about both the Romans and archaeology, in ways that supported visitors in considering this for themselves. *Women Everywhere* was engagingly and creatively presented with clarity about what was known and how, what were experimental reconstructions, and what was a reasonable if speculative case. How the history of archaeology itself links to the material exhibited and the conclusions drawn up to the present day was also convincingly shown, with visitors who wanted more information given pointers towards the excellent *Trowelblazers* project (https://trowelblazers.com/). Through discussion of the excavations, and archaeological techniques and sources, visitors were encouraged to think about how our knowledge of the past is produced, and how this affects the stories we tell.

Both exhibitions highlight the need for great sensitivity both in exhibitions themselves, and in their marketing, towards the difficult subjects that the Roman army inherently evokes. Contra the TikTok memes discussed in the introduction, there is a great diversity among people who are interested in Rome, which

includes children, military veterans, and people who have experienced male violence. The choice of spectacular objects that showcased the diverse ethnic origins of Roman soldiers was a strength of *Legion*, whereas *Women Everywhere* used imaginative reconstructions to portray women originating from North Africa and Syria. By taking multiple perspectives, however, including those of the victims of Rome's armies as well as excavation histories, *Women Everywhere* was able to be more matter-of-fact about historical violence and slavery, and discursive about what we do and do not know, in a way that was more inclusive of these wider audiences.

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Inscriptions

(Abbreviations as used by *Roman Inscriptions of Britain Online*)

Brit. 36.30 <https://romaninscriptionsofbritain.org/inscriptions/Brit.36.30>

Brit. 53.21 <https://romaninscriptionsofbritain.org/inscriptions/Brit.53.21>

RIB 1171 <https://romaninscriptionsofbritain.org/inscriptions/1171>

RIB 2501.479 <https://romaninscriptionsofbritain.org/inscriptions/2501.479>

RIB Vol. II: 2501: Graffiti on Samian Ware. <https://romaninscriptionsofbritain.org/instrumentum/2501>

Tab.Vindol. 294 <https://romaninscriptionsofbritain.org/inscriptions/TabVindol294>

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