

## 6 A reply to Preece: The Second Time Around

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**The empirical methodology predominates in reality everywhere, seeming to risk ignoring known elements seen by archaeologists creating knowledge. Visualisations and discussions engage readers.**

I would firstly like to thank Preece for allowing me the opportunity to comment on his reply to my constructive comments (Roberts 2010) on his original article (Preece 2010). In this short reply I will attempt to move our debate forward constructively and outline my own position more clearly, hopefully provoking wider debate. I suspect that both Preece and myself agree that this debate will only prove useful if it interests others in archaeology.

### Roman Archaeology

Preece rightly attacks my lack of attention to the theoretical developments of Roman archaeology in my previous article. This was simply due to a lack of space, so I drew on urbanism as the example that Preece (2010) had previously selected, and suggested that new studies may have led us towards a more nuanced understanding of urbanism in Roman Britain. I would agree that some recent studies of urbanism in Roman Britain (e.g. Mattingly 2006) have placed significant emphasis on identity and perhaps acculturation (the two are by no means inseparable) but that earlier studies failed to acknowledge the role of the individual or of groups with elements of shared identity, thereby denying themselves explanatory access to a significant factor in change over time. Of course, certain factors of urban development brought to prominence by earlier studies are still widely acknowledged to have played a major role in urban development, such as the logistical demands of the military. The work of Rogers (2008) for example, moves the debate forward, bringing considerations of identity, religious practice and landscape into the urbanism debate, allowing a more nuanced approach to be taken in understanding the foundation of some Roman towns. Whilst Rogers (2008) takes account of the military's forceful role in urban development, he does not exclude the agency of the existing inhabitants of Britain from a role in shaping development in the context of Roman conquest and the conflict, tension and violence associated with it.

Arguments such as that put forward by Rogers (2008) widen the compass of our understanding without departing from a basis in archaeological investigation. The dichotomy Preece (2011) sets up between post-processualism and data-gathering is not borne out by the emerging consensus, which as Preece (2011) suggests, has the agreement of the vast majority of academics, but importantly does not (contra Preece 2011) equate to agreement with the relativistic anti-excavation theories of some (more avowedly) post-processual scholars. The 'post-processual' consensus that is beginning to emerge is only a consensus in the widest possible sense, and is only 'post-processual' in the way that it has moved on from processualism by widening the topics of debate and accepting some of the better-founded critiques made of the paradigm (e.g. lack of explanation for

change over time, lack of consideration of agency or identity, over-emphasis on systems), along with some of the strengths of processual thought (e.g. clear methodologies, statistically assessable data where relevant or possible, quality archiving and recording, and deep engagement with economic and environmental concerns).

### **Holistic Contextualism**

Holistic contextualism, then, might be said to be archaeological practice and thought that tries to engage with the material remains of the past in multiple ways, both through multiple field survey methods (e.g. Earl 2009), and conceiving of multiple understandings of the past in the past and the present. Multiple does not, as Preece (2011) rightly suggests that some assert, mean a relativist stance in either the present or the past, but acknowledges the complex and interacting actors (both human and non-human) which shape the formation of the archaeological record, both in the present and the past, and the role of archaeologists in translating the material record through quality practice and critical thought. Of course this is difficult, but attempts have been made with some success, such as Walsh (2008), and Webster (2001) regarding the interaction of multiple agents/actors in the past (these are not synonymous terms but there is not space to discuss this issue in the detail it merits in this piece), and Farid (2000) regarding the archaeological process in the present. This vision of the practice of archaeology therefore partially agrees with Preece (2011) in his assertion that archaeologists have a meaningful role to play in interpreting the past to the public, but also acknowledging that public knowledge or understanding may on some occasions rightly cause us to question assumptions we have made, or contribute new knowledge to our understandings that change our interpretations.

### **Further Debate**

I hope that the above paragraphs have sufficiently delineated my position for the purposes of critical debate in future, and in return I would challenge Preece to come forward with his own vision for how archaeology should be undertaken. If Preece is serious regarding the rebirth of classic processualism then he needs to not only critique its kaleidoscope of successors, but also find an answer to the criticisms now widely accepted by the academic community, and demonstrate its continuing relevance. Hopefully, however, Preece will attempt to move forward towards a new framework so that further debate can be undertaken with a useful and relevant outcome.

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