

Relativism and the Frontiers of Empire: Critical Perspectives on Roman
Soldiers, Communities and Military Landscapes



ROMAN FRONTIER STUDIES

Relativism and the Frontiers of Empire

**Critical Perspectives on Roman Soldiers,
Communities and Military Landscapes**

Edited by
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Cover: Zodiac wall painting from the Mithraeum at Dura-Europos, featuring the figure with scales (Libra), symbolising the weighing of perspectives central to the volume's theme of legacies of cultural relativism. Dura-Europos is also a key focus of Simon James' research, making the image a fitting tribute to his influence on frontier studies. As a culturally plural frontier site shaped by empire and excavation histories, Dura embodies the challenges and opportunities of a decolonial approach to the Roman past. With many thanks to Lisa Brody and the Yale University Art Gallery for the permission to use the image.



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Dedication

The editors and authors of this volume have a common and special bond. They have all been enriched and inspired by the work of their friend, colleague and collaborator, Professor Simon James. It is to his leadership, inspiration and skill as one of the foremost Roman scholars of his generation that so many new perspectives have been possible on the Roman military and its communities. For over 40 years, Professor James' research has inspired generations of scholars and students. This volume is a testament to Simon's influence both on the field itself, and perhaps more importantly, on the members of our academic community who have had the pleasure of working with, learning from and knowing Professor Simon James.

Professor James' career started at the Institute of Archaeology of London, where he completed his first degree in Archaeology. At the same institution, he later undertook a PhD on the assemblage of Roman and Sasanian arms and armour from Dura Europos, Syria. It was this work that provided the foundation of his interests in, and many contributions to Dura-Europos studies and his collaborations with Yale University Art Gallery. Whilst studying the material, Simon worked as an archaeological illustrator and later took up the post of an educational curator at the British Museum, responsible for the prehistoric and Roman collections. During this time, Simon authored books on the subject of 'Celts' and the Iron Age. He also continued to work



Photograph of Professor Simon James working at Dura Europos

on his PhD, often on London buses whilst commuting to and from his work. His illustrations, both for the British Museum and those drawn for his PhD publication, have set the foundation of his advocacy for visual literacy and reconstruction in archaeology. Following a decade at the British Museum, Simon won a Leverhulme Trust funded Special Research Fellowship at the University of Durham to allow him to complete his work on the Dura-Europos arms and armour. While at Durham, he developed a fondness for the Northeast of England, and collaborations with colleagues in the area, on Hadrian's Wall and beyond. Durham was also where he met his wife, Jill, his next-door neighbour.

In 2000, Simon James joined the School of Archaeology and Ancient History at the University of Leicester, first as a Lecturer. He was swiftly promoted to Senior Lecturer in 2002 and a Reader in 2005, becoming a Professor of Archaeology in 2012. Simon started working in Syria in 1998 and over many years devoted to the study of Dura-Europos he developed a fondness in the archaeology, the people, culture and cuisine of the region. Between 2001 and 2010 he was an associated researcher with la Mission Franco-Syrienne d'Europos-Doura. During this time, Simon undertook a new survey of the Roman military base and valuable fieldwork research on its archaeology. 2004 saw the publication of Simon's work on the arms and armour from Dura-Europos as the Final Report Volume VII of the Dura-Europos reports. Time spent with the Franco-Syrian expedition provided material for his subsequent work on the appraisal of archival records of the archaeology of the Roman military base portion of the Dura-Europos site. Simon's research has had a significant international footprint. He held an Ida Beam Distinguished Visiting Professorship at the university of Iowa in 2004, and in 2006 the Archaeological Institute of America sponsored his Samuel H. Kress lecture tour in the US. Simon was subsequently elected Life Corresponding Member of the Archaeological Institute of America in recognition of achieving eminence in his field of archaeology. His second major monograph produced whilst at the University of Leicester was dedicated to the role of warriors and weapons in the development of the Roman Empire, and in 2019 he published his long-anticipated volume on the Roman military base in Dura-Europos. Professor Simon James' time at the University of Leicester resulted in several PhD students, who have been inspired to pursue research on Dura-Europos and Roman frontiers.

Aside from achieving multiple academic accolades, Simon has also made a continuing effort to support the academic community through service in organisations and committees, both within the UK and abroad. He has held the roles of the Chair of Publication Committee of the Council for British Archaeology, served as a member

of the Council of the Royal Archaeological Institute and was a member of the Council of the Society of the Promotion of Roman Studies and a member of the Society's Archaeology Committee. Simon's passion for the heritage of the Near East, also led him to be actively involved in the Palestine Exploration Fund, serving as a member of the Executive Committee and of the Grants Committee. Simon also served as an assistant editor for *Levant*, the journal of the Council for British Research in the Levant, further showing his enduring commitment and enthusiasm to the region and its history.

In addition to many achievements gained during his career at the University of Leicester, Simon has also devoted time and effort to supporting initiatives that promote interest in Roman armies among the public and those that benefit both serving and retired military personnel. In 2012, he became the President of the Ermine Street Guard, the oldest Roman military research and enactment group in Britain. In 2019, he co-founded and later became a specialist advisor of Wings to the Past, an initiative to support resilience amongst serving personnel and their families. During his academic career he also collaborated with, encouraged, supported and led projects involving Operation Nightingale, whose logo he designed. The connection with modern militaries took a new course in 2014, when he became the director of the Ancient Akrotiri Project, conducting maritime archaeology research at RAF Akrotiri in Cyprus, in collaboration with the Ministry of Defence, the Defence Infrastructure Organisation, the Sovereign Base Area authorities and the Department of Antiquities of Cyprus. The collaboration with the Ministry of Defence led to further survey work in Dhekelia, another SBA area in Cyprus. In 2017, the DIO selected Ancient Akrotiri Project as the Runner Up for the Sanctuary Awards in the Heritage Project Award category, testifying to Simon's contribution to heritage protection in the area. Simon has also been dedicated to public communication of archaeology, having authored several accessible books whilst working at the British Museum. In 2024, he provided input into a popular book accompanying the British Museums' 'Legion life in the Roman army' exhibition book.

Simon has been a prolific writer throughout his career, with his work covering topics as wide as military equipment studies, the 'Celtic' Iron Age, Dura-Europos, Roman Britain, Late Roman Empire, visual competence and reconstruction in archaeology, maritime archaeology, violence in ancient societies, Roman Germany, early Medieval building methods and archaeological theory. These achievements are no doubt influenced by his belief in the value of allowing and finding serendipity in research, but also his commitment to a regular early morning writing schedule. This volume is a result of Professor James'

many contributions to our field, his leadership, enthusiasm, good-will and a sense of humour, which have all endeared him to many colleagues. We dedicate this volume to Simon and hope that the fires of curiosity, exploration and discovery he has lit in so many continue to push the boundaries of our knowledge of the Roman army, communities and military landscapes.

Thank you to our funders.

The authors are extremely grateful to the Vindolanda Trust for providing its support and funding towards this volume. Many of the papers within this edited volume are enhanced by their discussion and use of material that has come from this iconic Roman site on the northern frontier of Roman Britain.

