
TRAC Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference

www.trac.org.uk

Paper Information:

Title: Shoppers' Paradise: Consumers in Roman Britain

Author: Iain Ferris

Pages: 132–140

DOI: http://doi.org/10.16995/TRAC1992_132_140

Publication Date: 31 March 1995



Volume Information:

Rush, P. (ed.) (1995) *Theoretical Roman Archaeology: Second Conference Proceedings*. Worldwide Archaeology Series, vol. 14. Aldershot: Avebury/Ashgate.

Copyright and Hardcopy Editions:

The following paper was originally published in print format by Avebury Press (an imprint of Ashgate). This volume is no longer in print, but hard copy editions may still be available from book dealers.

TRAC has now made this paper available as Open Access, after consulting the original publisher's rights office. Copyright remains with TRAC and the individual author(s), and all use or quotation of this paper and/or its contents must be acknowledged. This paper was released in digital Open Access format in April 2013.

SHOPPERS' PARADISE: CONSUMERS IN ROMAN BRITAIN

Iain Ferris

'I often wonder that it should be so dull', Catherine Morland said of history in 'Northanger Abbey', 'for a great deal of it must be invention'. Conversely, can the invented world, the realm of the novelist, contain historical insights, explanations and models that could be of use to the archaeologist or historian in writing his or her own academic narratives? Christopher Evans, in his paper 'Digging with the Pen: Novel Archaeologies and Literary Traditions', wrote that 'while inspiring, literature and literary criticism hold no ready-made formulae for the social sciences' (Evans 1989: 204) but also noted the existence of a fictional genre, which he called 'post-holocaust' or 'terrestrial' science fiction, in which reflections 'upon the role of material culture and identity' were prevalent (Evans 1989: 201). He interpreted such examples as instances of the individual bodying forth order out of chaos, 'the very solidity of things . . . appeal[ing] beyond the purely sentimental inasmuch as they embody time and can be personally/culturally symbolic' (Evans 1989: 201). The matter of the novel itself having the potential to be an archaeology of contemporary material culture was not considered.

In this paper it is proposed, firstly, to examine a number of novels that each evoke and enshrine the essence of the material culture of their particular era and which, in so doing, create visions of those eras which could be said to constitute historical documents. In these novels the authors consider the role of objects in relation to the people who bought, used and

discarded them and thus indirectly allude to the broader society or culture in which these various transactions take place. Secondly, attention will be focused on a number of anthropological and sociological studies of consumer societies, highlighting the mechanics and processes of consumption, before finally turning to examine the potential relevance of the novelistic and/or anthropological approach to the theoretical treatment of consumption in the Romano-British period.

The solid and ubiquitous material culture of Victorian Britain, a society so perfectly described by Henry James as 'the Empire of Things', can be evoked no better than through the writings of Dickens, Thackeray or James himself. In 'The Spoils of Poynton' James recounts the battle between Mrs Gereth, a widow, and her son over the contents of Poynton Park. To Mrs Gereth 'things were . . . the sum of the world' (James 1897: 20) and 'the old golds and brasses, old ivories and bronzes, the fresh old tapestries and deep old damasks threw out a radiance in which [she] saw in solution all her old loves and patiences, all her old tricks and triumphs' (James 1897: 43). The contents of the house were not merely an assemblage of artefacts but were rather 'the record of a life . . . written in great syllables of colour and form, the tongues of other countries and the hands of rare artists' (James 1897: 18-19); their very essence could not be captured or tamed in an inventory for it was rather embodied in 'a presence, a perfume, a touch' (James 1897: 180).

A different approach to the material world can be seen in Georges Perec's novel *Les Choses*, translated as *Things. A Story of the Sixties*, in which the novel's protagonists are realised, and their characters defined, almost entirely through an examination of their relationship with material culture. Their elevation from a bohemian student existence to the world of work was marked by an accompanying change in material lifestyle; 'they . . . burned what they had previously worshipped: the witches' mirrors, the chopping-blocks, those stupid little mobiles, the radiometers, the multi-coloured pebbles, the hessian panels adorned with expressive squiggles' (Perec 1965: 33-34) and they moved on to objects 'which only the taste of the day decreed to be beautiful: imitation Epinal pseudo-naive cartoons, English-style etchings, agates, spun-glass tumblers, neo-primitive paste jewellery, para-scientific apparatus' (Perec 1965: 33). Later in the novel, out of work, they leave France and take up teaching posts in Tunisia. While still surrounded by their possessions, the material paraphernalia that had previously given their lives meaning now seemed curiously alienating in a new environment and though it still 'exuded a little warmth' it was more of a

barrier than a bridge. Their host culture did not entice them and they bought nothing 'because they did not feel drawn to these things'. In essence 'it was wanting that had been all their existence' (Perec 1965: 119).

A more recent novel, Nicholson Baker's 'The Mezzanine', approaches the America of rampant consumerism and packaging-overload with a microscopic eye, much of the book consisting of a stream-of-consciousness, obsessive, inner dialogue about the design and significance of, for instance, drinking straws, shoelaces, sugar-sachets, milk cartons and so on. Billed as the story of one man's lunch-hour, the apparent triviality of these musings conceals a razor-sharp and amusing critique of the cult of the disposable and the hidden meanings of sometimes banal objects. To the narrator 'what was central and what was incidental end up exactly reversed' (Baker 1988: 92). Baker's investigation of the object as cultural sign or signifier is not a new phenomenon and perhaps the best examples of an almost obsessive search into the ramifications of the object as symbol are to be found in the works of Kafka, though these will not be considered here.

Some writers use objects to create a stage setting in an unashamedly nostalgic manner which triggers, when successful, recognition and response in the reader. One recent example will here suffice. In 'Motorama 1954' Bill Morris, while he fails to create a particularly engrossing or convincing drama, sets the scene with a virtual archaeology of the Fifties consumer paradise of finned-automobiles, ideal kitchens, cocktail and bar paraphernalia and deep-piled carpets, a mixture of the ubiquitous, and at times absurd, labour-saving devices of the day and the merely fashionable object or status symbol (Morris 1992).

Perec, Baker and Morris all owe something to the work of anthropologists, sociologists and consumer researchers whose approaches to material culture through personal observation and interview provide a dimension alien to the kind of object-led study to which many archaeologists are, by necessity, restricted. In particular, Douglas and Isherwood (1978) in *The World of Goods. Towards an Anthropology of Consumption* and Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) in *The Meaning of Things. Domestic Symbols and the Self* have shown that an understanding of the motives behind the acquisition of goods is crucial to an understanding of the wider social and cultural world, and vice-versa, for the two cannot properly be separated and it is perhaps unfortunate that we so often study the finds from, for instance, Roman Britain in splendid isolation. It has been said that 'consumption is the very arena in which culture is fought over and licked into shape' (Douglas and Isherwood 1978: 57). 'Goods . . . make and

maintain social relationships' (Douglas and Isherwood 1978: 60), and 'objects . . . serve to express dynamic processes within people, among people, and between people and the total environment. These processes might lead to either a more and more specific differentiation or increasing integration' (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981: 43).

An interdisciplinary approach to the analysis of consumption, interpreting patterns discerned by the study of basic historical data in the form of probate inventories – taken at the time of death and recording the household and/or trade goods of the deceased – has been taken by Lorna Weatherill in her book, *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture in Britain 1660–1760*, (Weatherill 1988), and I have suggested elsewhere that this study could provide a model for similar work on the material culture of Roman Britain (Ferris forthcoming). While the value of any model lies in the quantity and quality of the available data against which it can be tested, as Millett has pointed out our reticence to undertake theoretical studies of this kind seems untenable given the undoubted value of the database from Roman Britain (Millett 1990a).

Weatherill's analysis of her data allowed her to discuss a number of broader issues; both hierarchical and social ones, such as the roles of status, occupation and wealth in the processes of consumption, as well as geographical ones such as the significance of place of residence, forms of regional variation and the contrast between town and country. These discussions allowed for some analysis and perspective of changes over time, leading to an appreciation of the processes behind the spread of new goods throughout society. Time does not allow here for a full examination of the potential worth of a model based on Weatherill's work transposed back to Roman Britain but one or two parts of that model will be discussed, as they suggest that though obviously objects listed in inventories or objects recovered by archaeological excavation have different values, the broad framework of interpretation can still be applied.

Weatherill found surprisingly that consumption hierarchies and social hierarchies did not completely correspond, as might have been expected, with traders and merchants being higher in the consumption hierarchy, that is tending to be the earliest possessors of new types of goods, than the gentry and others of a higher social status, indicating that the oft-quoted theory of social emulation and display as a dynamic force behind the acquisition and ownership of certain types of new goods is perhaps too simplistic.

Visually, the role of the new object as status symbol cannot be better ex-

pressed than in the Bellini painting 'The Feast of the Gods', finished by Titian in 1514, in which the gods dine not off gold and silver plate but off Chinese blue and white porcelain, still a rarity in Europe at that time.

In Roman Britain we can, perhaps, map the possible routes for the introduction of certain types of key Roman goods by reconstructing the information-processing network of the time. Jeremy Evans, in his study of literacy in Roman Britain as reflected in the distribution of graffiti (Evans 1988), found that there were no great regional variations in this distribution but considerable variations depending on the class of sites represented, with a hierarchy of basic literacy declining from forts and towns to villas and other rural sites or settlements. 'There is a very real suggestion that villas may occupy a lower position in the social and economic hierarchy than the towns' (Evans 1988: 202).

Does the poor showing of the villas in this study suggest, as with Weatherill's findings on the secondary position of the gentry in the consumption hierarchies of her period, that there is some doubt as to the role of villa occupiers as influential social innovators in Roman Britain?

The second point to be raised here concerns Weatherill's findings on regional patterns of consumption and the possible explanations for regional differences. While she could not fully develop the theme, due to the limitations imposed by the nature of the evidence, she noted that 'attitudes to consumption and material goods can usefully be examined at a regional level, for in some areas people may have preferred to spend their resources on special occasions rather than in acquiring household durables' (Weatherill 1988: 45), and that in Scotland, for which there exists other documentary sources that can supplement the evidence of the inventories, there are well-documented instances of such conspicuous expenditure. 'Here surplus was consumed in excessive food and drink on a few occasions, rather than on durable goods or even clothing, again characteristic of a 'traditional' attitude to consumption' (Weatherill 1988: 67).

The general question of the regionality of cultures in Roman Britain is a topic that has been relatively understudied. Here I will limit discussion to a brief examination of one example only, that is the situation in the northern military zone. Here there existed not one but four distinct cultures; Roman culture, a distinct and separate Roman military culture, the indigenous local culture, and the culture of the *vicani* who were dependent on the military but who negotiated the space between the two dominant and predominant cultures of Roman and native. It has been suggested that the creation of this situation was brought about by the interplay between two

strands of colonial policy at work in the north, one encouraging cultural change but controlling the speed and nature of that change, and the other being the practice of social and cultural isolationism on the part of the immigrants, leading to maintained 'separate development' though under a unitary political and economic control (Higham 1989: 153). Millett though has warned of the dangers of assuming the existence of a comprehensive and unswerving policy of Romanisation; there were, perhaps, more elements of *laissez-faire* than social-engineering at play (Millett 1990b). In any case, other studies have indicated that the army was not an agent for a policy of Romanisation; rather, this was a separate civil and, presumably, emulative process (Blagg 1980; Evans 1988: 331-33).

The nature of the cultural intercourse between Roman and native in the north has been variously surmised. Bennett saw little or no contact between the two dominant cultures and indeed adopted the idea of a more-or-less seamless indigenous culture with a lifestyle and material culture that changed little from the Iron Age to the post-Roman period. He noted that some absences of Roman goods on native sites 'might indicate a conscious rejection of these goods by the indigenes' (Bennett 1983: 217) or that 'they could not afford such goods' (Bennett 1983: 209). Higham, looking at the area north of the Tees, thought that the local indigenous peoples 'were denied access to provincial civilisation even if some among them perceived a need to adopt it' (Higham 1989: 169) and that in the light of this 'the process of acculturation was thereby severely limited' (Higham 1989: 209). Once more, he considered the possibility of exclusion through poverty and noted that 'the process of pauperisation in many areas, particularly west of the Pennines, is reflected in the failure of the less well-placed communities to attract later prehistoric metalwork' (Higham 1989: 160).

In her study of Roman and native interaction in Northumberland, Lindsay Allason-Jones found that a number of small prestige items of Roman origin, such as intaglios, appeared on native sites but that few metal objects from the same source were present. However, she goes on to note that the later prehistoric culture of the area was also relatively free of such items and that it was 'probable that north of the Tyne wealth was calculated in terms of cattle or by even more intangible means. Perhaps they concentrated on wine, women and song rather than on decorated metalwork' (Allason-Jones 1991: 3), a point also raised by Bennett, who suggested a possible penchant for goods that leave little or no trace in the archaeological record, and by Hingley, who suggested that power, status or prestige

among native Romano-Britains could have been manifested by, amongst other things, something as intangible and undetectable as the control of followers (Hingley 1989: 145–47).

Weatherill's identification of regional or local, but otherwise well-integrated, cultures, which through tradition retained patterns of consumption based more upon ostentatious, and often relatively intangible, consumption through display or ceremony rather than on a lower-level acquisition of goods, and Allason-Jones' evidence for perhaps a similar set of cultural priorities in the Roman north are interesting to contrast and connect. However, it is almost impossible to fully define the role played in the mechanics of consumption in Roman Britain by the interplay between the differing value systems of the Roman and Celtic worlds. The lack of any satisfactory method of gauging the level of poverty, and its effects upon the native population in the Roman north, also make the connection difficult to verify on anything other than a theoretical basis. While poverty does undoubtedly lead to cultural exclusion and dispossession at a certain level of society, the poor can also, consciously or unconsciously, use goods as social fences rather than bridges with the construction of a 'culture of poverty', a term first coined by Oscar Lewis in the 1950s (Lewis 1959), in which spending on alcohol, on non-essentials and on conspicuous display, rather than on material goods and often even on essentials, is marked.

In the native cultures of the Roman north we may, in many cases, be looking at sites or settlements so low in the social hierarchy that to use them as indicators of negative contact between Roman and native may be misleading; such sites would be part of what Richard Reece has dubbed 'the sub-culture' of Romanisation, where little or no cultural change over time should indeed be expected (Reece 1990: 32). The true measure of poverty is not in possessions but in the degree of social involvement and Allason-Jones' data, leading her to surmise a considerable traffic of goods from native to Roman, seem to suggest that, leaving aside the very poor, on a regional basis there is an indication of a level of social involvement in the north perhaps over and above that required simply to satisfy the fulfilment of tax obligations. This brings to mind Heisenberg's principle that an observed system inevitably interacts with its observer.

In conclusion, it has been written that for the Roman archaeologist 'fornices and baths can tell more of ideology and symbolism than can seeds and sherds' (Jones 1987: 47), but in Roman Britain, by necessity of survival, the ornaments from the period block our view of the architecture. This paper has attempted to suggest that there may be value in the application of

anthropologically and sociologically derived models of consumption to the finds data from Roman Britain, and that more imaginative approaches to the writing of archaeological texts might result from a greater awareness of the construction of literary narratives. As Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, 'the poet, by an ulterior intellectual perception, gives [things] a power which makes their old use forgotten, and puts eyes and a tongue into every dumb and inanimate object'. Judging from the traditional approach to the study of artefacts from Roman Britain taken by the most recent book on the subject, with few attempts to look outside the geographical or chronological limits of the study, one would think that little had changed since the days of Collingwood and Richmond. There is a potential value in a more theoretical approach to the material culture of Roman Britain and in a move on from studies which are largely, to quote Stephen Spender in another context, 'time-obsessed, time-tormented, as though beaten with rods of restless days' (Spender 1951: 137).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS —————

I would like to thank Lynne Bevan, Jane Evans and Jeremy Evans for commenting on a draft of this paper.

Bibliography

- Allason-Jones, Lindsay 1991. Roman and Native Interaction in Northumberland. In Maxfield and Dobson (eds) 1991, 1-5.
- Baker, Nicholson 1988. *The Mezzanine*. Cambridge: Granta Books.
- Barrett, John C., Andrew P. Fitzpatrick, and Lesley Macinnes, (eds), 1989. *Barbarians and Romans in North-west Europe from the Later Republic to Late Antiquity*. Oxford: British Archaeological Reports (International Series 471).
- Bennett, Julian 1983. The End of Roman Settlement in North England. In Chapman and Mytum (eds) 1983, 205-232.
- Blagg, Thomas and Martin Millett (eds). 1990. *The Early Roman Empire in the West*.
- Chapman, John C. and Harold C. Mytum (eds) 1983. *Settlement in North Britain, 1000BC-AD1000*. Oxford: British Archaeological Reports (British Series 118).
- Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly and Eugene Rochberg-Halton 1981. *The Meaning of Things. Domestic Symbols and the Self*.
- Douglas, Mary and Baron Isherwood 1978. *The World of Goods. Towards an*

- Anthropology of Consumption.*
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo 'The Poet', in *The Best of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Edited by G. S. Haight 1941. New York.
- Evans, Christopher 1989. Digging with the Pen: Novel Archaeologies and Literary Traditions. *Archaeological Review from Cambridge* 8(2):185-211.
- Evans, Jeremy 1987. Graffiti and the Evidence of Literacy and Pottery Use in Roman Britain. *Archaeological Journal* 144:191-204.
- Ferris, Iain M. forthcoming. The Image is a Drawbridge. Objects as Ideas in Roman Britain. Proceedings of the Conference 'Finds from the Imperial West'.
- Higham, Nicholas J. 1989. Roman and Native in England North of the Tees; Acculturation and its Limitations. In Barrett, Fitzpatrick and Macinnes (eds) 1989, 153-174.
- Hingley, Richard 1989. *Rural Settlement in Roman Britain*. London: Seaby
- James, Henry 1897. *The Spoils of Poynton*. (1963) Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Jones, Richard F. J. 1987. A False Start? The Roman Urbanization of Western Europe. *World Archaeology* 19(1):47-57.
- Jope, E. M. 1973. The Transmission of New Ideas: Archaeological Evidence for Impact and Dispersal. *World Archaeology* 4(3):368-373.
- Lewis, Oscar 1959. *Five Families Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty*. New York..
- Maxfield, Valerie A. and Michael J. Dobson (eds) 1991. Roman Frontier Studies. *Proceedings of the XVth International Congress of Roman Frontier Studies*.
- Millett, Martin 1990a. *The Romanization of Britain: an Essay in Archaeological Interpretation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Millett, Martin 1990b. Historical Issues and Archaeological Interpretations. In Blagg and Millett (eds) 1990, 35-41.
- Morris, Bill 1992. Motorama 1954. In 'We're So Happy!', *Granta* 38: 13-86.
- Perec, Georges 1965. *Things. A Story of the Sixties*. Translated by D. Bellos (1991). London: Harvill.
- Reece, Richard 1990. Romanization: a Point of View. In Blagg and Millett (eds) 1990, 30-34.
- Spender, Stephen 1951. *World Within World*. London: Hamish Hamilton.
- Weatherill, Lorna 1988. *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture in Britain 1660-1760*. London: Methuen.