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Author: Karen I. Meadows

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14. You Are What You Eat: Diet, Identity and Romanisation

by Karen I. Meadows

The effects of the Roman conquest on the day-to-day lives of the majority of British people is, in many respects, little known. This contrasts with the phenomenon of romanisation which has received much academic attention and is considered to be reasonably well explored. How romanisation is conceptualised, however, has a direct effect on how the subject is approached. Romanisation is almost undefinable especially as it must have meant different things to different people. This is equally true of the present as well as the past. This paper is essentially an outline of a proposed route into the study of the diversity of romanisation. It will be suggested that the examination of dietary and culinary habits at the household level can provide a more diverse and penetrating view of the lives of the people living in Roman Britain. First, I will define what I understand by romanisation, and why the household has been selected as the primary locus for study. Following this, the benefits of looking at the dynamics of eating and drinking as a means to revealing the distinctive nature of romanisation in Britain will be discussed in detail. Finally, I will attempt to illustrate — by expanding upon existing case studies — how such an approach might contribute to the continuing dialogue over what was/is romanisation.

It is essential to avoid judgements about the form and process of romanisation in Britain. Romanisation has many different forms and encompasses all of the consequences — the occasional and the commonplace as well as the dramatic and the ordinary — brought about by the infiltration of the Roman world (Es 1983: 5). One of the main criticisms of studies of romanisation is that they have traditionally been viewed from a Roman standpoint, starting essentially at the point of conquest, working along a progressive scale of Roman-ness. This view has resulted in a rather static, one-sided characterisation of the phenomenon, and has discounted the roles and experiences of the majority of British people and their daily habits (Barrett 1989a: 235–6). The accumulation of daily life and the extent to which it is repeated is significant to the structure of society (Heller 1984; Gero & Conkey 1991: 15–6; Johnson 1989: 208). Day-to-day life and its socio-political-economic context are of course inseparable; ‘social structures . . . are the medium as well as the outcome of social practice’ (Moreland 1992: 116). But the analysis of the daily habits of life — ‘the ‘archaeology’ of the minutiae of the mundane’ (Miller 1985: 14) — is the fundamental level at which specific and diverse aspects of society and hence romanisation can be explored.

The household has been adopted as the primary focal point because it is a focal point in the enactment of daily life. The use of the concept of the ‘household’ can be extremely useful for archaeological interpretations. First, it immediately establishes the organisational and conceptual level at which the analysis is to be based. Second, an emphasis on the actions of people within a specific context as opposed to just the context itself, signifies a less contained view of domestic life — ‘people do not live in, or act exclusively in, single buildings’ (Rapoport

1990: 12). The non-contained nature of the archaeological record partly reflects this movement of people within their living environment, and the isolation of remains and features to individual houses and their associated buildings in space and time is problematic (Smith 1992; Maltby 1985; Branigan 1981; Hirth 1993). As a workable concept, the household is perhaps especially viable because, while its primary locus is the house and its associated environment, it does not expect 'artifact sets' to be confined to their 'activity areas'. This fluidity in the expectations of the archaeological record, does not eliminate the problem of deposition and association between artefacts and their contexts, but this is not a problem which is particular to household studies, it is a problem which faces all archaeologists who seek to construct a social pre/history.

The importance of the workings of the household to archaeology is now being realised with the movement away from the view that the domestic side of life is natural, familiar and constant (Tringham 1991: 100; Moore 1988: 55; Carsten and Hugh-Jones forthcoming). Archaeologists have tended to focus on the big economic and political picture, moving rather quickly from the so-called private domestic sphere into the public sphere (Tringham 1991: 120; Yanagisako 1979: 189). Specific studies of households, however, have revealed that the standard distinction between public and private life is not always quite so rigid (Moore 1988: 30; Yanagisako 1979: 191). An illustration of this can be found with the study of households in the Mantaro Valley in Peru immediately before and after the arrival of the Inka. Through studying the consumption patterns of both elite and commoner households, it was possible to recognise a change in the shifts of power. Prior to the arrival of the Inka, the elites were the predominant users of highly decorated storage vessels, and consumed a higher proportion of preferred foods such as maize, chili peppers and coca. After the conquest, the distinction between the two social groups through the use of these items was less acute. How these goods were stored also changed. The Inka constructed large storage buildings on the outskirts of the community which displaced the domain of household storage of preferred goods from the local elites to the governing Inka. It was concluded that the changes in consumption patterns reflect a shift in the control over access to prestige goods, where local leaders no longer derived their status from the community, but from the Inka state (Costin & Earle 1989).

The study of where and how people live can be used to generate new ideas about how people view their world (see examples in Parker-Pearson & Richards 1994; Samson 1990). For those interested in the effects of imperialism, as was seen above in the case of the Inka, the household can provide an ideal setting for studying localised effects and responses (Hastorf 1990: 262). In many agrarian societies the household is the basis for production and consumption — areas which are particularly sensitive to what is occurring in the community and beyond (Smith 1987: 297). It is an ideal unit for comparison and, as most people live in some form of dwelling, is especially suited to studies interested in crossing the social spectrum (Smith 1987: 297; Hirth 1993: 21). A study of households can also shed light on attitudes held by the group which may not find expression elsewhere (Ardener 1993: 14). Finally, their examination can help to reveal some of the traditions and customs which serve to socialise members in the ways of the group, community and/or region (Carsten & Hugh-Jones forthcoming).

The examination of Romano-British houses is not new to studies of romanisation. Roman and non-Roman types have been characterised, and their form and distribution have been used to assess the nature of the British response to the Roman conquest and how the Roman world was interpreted. Studies of households which have been analyzed in terms of their Roman-like

potential have not always stressed the possibility of the various cultural and social dynamics within and around the actual structures. When the social construction of Romano-British households has been stressed, interesting and varied interpretations has resulted. For example, it has been suggested that whilst the structure of many early Romano-British houses changed from rounded to rectangular, there was a continuity in use of peripheral private space and central public space within the household (Hingley 1990). It has also been inferred that the deviation from the classical villa construct in Britain points to a non-Roman type of occupation based on joint ownership by extended families (Smith 1978). Alternatively, in contrast to late Iron Age houses, the emergence of the basic corridor house has been seen to reflect the adoption of certain Roman-like standards of construction techniques and lifestyle, but not the adoption of the Roman custom of regular entertainment of guests or clients (Blagg 1990: 206). The redefinition of categories is perhaps an additional area where households can be useful units of study, as through their analysis it is possible to scrutinise conventional stereotypes. An investigation of the many types of Romano-British households would accentuate the dynamics of people living in Roman Britain.

An indiscriminate comparison of the workings of the household is not, however, a very practical or productive way of exposing the diversity of romanisation. My emphasis on diet and its culinary manifestations was brought about, in part, by the simple fact that all people eat and drink, and tend to do it in a particular way. But more than that, I wanted to explore a theme which was not only common to all households but also transcends them. While archaeologists have been captivated with how food was obtained and the extent of its relationship to the economy, less attention has been placed on the cultural dynamics surrounding its preparation and consumption (Hastorf 1991: 153). Food and drink undergoes a variety of transformations from production to consumption and the points of transformation can be significant to studies of cultural practices (Barrett 1989b).

Anthropological and historical studies of diet have shown culinary habits to be very informative. Goody, in *Cooking, Cuisine and Class* (1982), and Mennell, in *All Manners of Food* (1985), both illustrate how the production of food is influenced by the nature of the political economy and the historical and social development of society. Food distribution is tied up with the politics involved in food allocation, as well as, economic factors surrounding market forces, tribute and taxes. Food preparation is linked to gender relations, labour service and cultural and social ideas about the way food should be flavoured, eaten and served. Finally, the consumption of food and drink is affected by national and group differentiation and identity, group competition, notions of hospitality and sharing, together with the establishment of specific forms of etiquette, and food taboos. All of the above transformational processes could say something about the nature of romanisation.

I am especially interested in how groups differentiate themselves and establish their own identity within an imperial context through what and how they eat and drink. Both Mennell and Goody essentially wanted to determine why, in pre-colonial African state societies (Goody) and post-medieval Britain (Mennell), a differentiated *haute cuisine* did not emerge in the same way as it did in Eurasian states (Goody) and in post-medieval France (Mennell). Both show how the emergence of a differentiated cuisine is more complex than an association with social hierarchy. Factors such as the formalised control over the access to certain resources, the switching of cooking activities from the domain of wives, into the domain of servants or specialists with increasing status, cultural mores on what was considered acceptable culinary behaviour, and the extent of cultural literacy and emulation can all influence the range of

culinary differentiation (Goody 1982; Mennell 1985). While all of these factors might not be relevant or recognisable in Roman Britain, Goody's and Mennell's observations demonstrate the importance of context when determining the significance of how and why cuisines differ.

How and what people eat and drink is a form of communication (Barthes 1979: 169; Messer 1984: 224; Hastorf 1991: 135). The development of a cuisine involves a whole range of decisions leading from its 'raw' to 'cooked' state. These decisions distinguish cuisines and cultures — 'specific foods, their uses, and associations communicate, reaffirm, and aid in the construction of the cultural system, acting as a system of signs containing social messages' (Hastorf 1991: 135). In studies looking at the effects of imperialism, when one society is politically subsumed by another, individual and group interpretation of the rules and histories surrounding an invasive cuisine can vary substantially. The nature and extent of imperial contact, the status, occupation, traditions and preferences of the people involved, together with their propensity to follow culinary, as well as imperial, rules all influence the composition of cuisines (Messer 1984: 222–6). It is significant that cuisines do not tend to transplant themselves — through time or space — in their complete and original form (Revel 1982: 19) and it is in their various manifestations that the different types and layers of communication can be inferred.

Some of the most commonly cited evidence for the early romanisation of Britain are the remains associated with eating and drinking (Dannell 1979: 177; Trow 1990: 103). The large scale effects of the arrival of Roman-like goods on late Iron Age and early Roman society in terms of the economy, settlement patterns, and politics has been the subject of much debate (for examples see Haselgrove 1989; Sharples 1990; Cunliffe 1984). Of direct interest here, however, is why certain goods were the focus of importation and what effect the types of goods and Roman-like ideas had on the Romano-British household. A number of studies have stressed certain aspects of diet and culinary practises, such as the introduction of wine and olive oil, new types of table wares and changes in the consumption of certain foods, within the context of the overall romanisation of Britain (Dannell 1979; Williams & Peacock 1983; King 1984, 1991). The integration of the specific studies and the specialist reports which deal with the remains, artefacts and features associated with eating and drinking should enable a reconstruction of the dietary repertoire and culinary habits of households and provide a view to the nature of romanisation at the household level. The identification of specific clusters of food types and their methods of preparation and consumption would in turn accentuate the distinctiveness of the Romano-British cuisine. Through focusing on the quantities and frequencies of the different types of remains and not just their presence and absence the significance behind the conspicuous consumption of the household can then be inferred. These findings can then be compared with other households in the locality and households from other regions. The potential for this course of research might best be developed by concentrating on those areas of Britain which are considered to be the most romanised — the south; during a period in which new ideas about eating and drinking appear to be taking form — the late Iron Age to early Roman transition.

Examples of some of the areas open to exploration, can be drawn from some of the existing studies which look at specific aspects of diet and from studies which stress the importance of the household. King's work on animal remains, for instance, has shown that for the south of Britain 'non-romanised' sites have a higher proportion of sheep remains whereas 'romanised' sites have a higher proportion of ox and pig (1984, 1991). He goes on to reveal that this trend is

probably more a reflection of German and Gaulish influence than Roman where pig was dominant (1984:198). A comparison of the animal remains and household artefacts of the sites to see if there is a correlation between types of ingredients and types of cooking and dining practises could prove to be very interesting. Okun's study of diet and dining practises in the Upper Rhine area during the early Roman period found that although there was an increase in the use of pork, new ingredients, such as olive oil and *garum* and new ways of preparing food, such as the use of mortaria, on the whole food continued to be cooked using the same type of cooking pot and on the same type of hearth or fire as during the late La Tene period (1989: 114–122). She also shows that while Roman-like serving ware was commonly used, the Roman practise of using individual bowls for each dish was not adopted and instead there was a tendency towards larger — possibly communal — serving vessels (1989: 123). This suggests that the different combinations of Roman and non-Roman type ingredients and implements could be extremely informative. 'Non-Roman' or poorer households could, for example, be flavouring and serving their sheep in Roman-like ways using local ingredients and table wares. Alternatively, 'Roman' or richer households could be eating Roman food on Roman dishes but cooking and serving them in non-Roman ways. The integration of the material remains of households within the social context of eating and drinking could show the Roman/non-Roman divide, which pervades many studies of romanisation, to be more complex than previously thought.

In the study of Romano-British houses, there has been a general neglect of houses associated with the poor. This not only distorts our perception of the power structure in Roman Britain, but also directs the Romanist's attention away from the study of non-Roman type houses (Hingley 1989: 23–4; 1991: 96). The variability between the types of houses and degrees of wealth in Roman Britain, is far from standardised (Hingley 1989; Branigan 1981). Rounded houses were quite common in the south up until the end of the second century, and there is also evidence of wealth differentiation on non-Roman type settlements (see Hingley 1989: 31, 80; Leech 1982; Branigan 1981). It has also been shown that the apparent transformation of native farmsteads to romanised villas was highly variable in space and time (Branigan 1981). A focus on the diet and culinary habits of the various types of households, across the social spectrum, while serving to redress current bias, could also provide some insight into the relationships between social groups and possible changes in emphasis of power structures both before and after the conquest. If, in the study of the Inka discussed earlier, the focus had been on elite Inka-style houses alone, the power structure of the elites would have been distorted and the changing alliance and wealth of the elites and commoners — in relation to access to preferred foods — would have been missed. However, just as the division between Roman and non-Roman or rich and poor should not be viewed as absolute, nor should specific notions over wealth and manners of conspicuous consumption (Appadurai 1986: 40; Hingley 1989: 160). The 'social life of things' is determined, not by the things themselves, but by the people who use and ascribe a value them (Appadurai 1986). The comparison of the intra-/inter- regional variations in eating and drinking could help in the identification of communal and regional value systems and notions of identity.

Finally, given that the British did emulate certain aspects of the Roman world through the consumption of Roman-like food and drink, what do the type of goods selected by the British say about the British? It is possible that the goods may have been partly selected for their use in certain feasting practices (Dietler 1990; Maltby 1985: 61), — a consideration which has yet to

be examined more closely for Roman Britain. Hints have also been made about the possibility of a late Iron Age taboo on the consumption of wild animals (Dannell 1979: 178; King 1991: 16) — the existence of group or regional food taboos in the late Iron Age and Roman periods has so far received little attention. Revel has stressed that what is most striking about the cookbook accredited to Apicius is the importance of spices and herbs and the mixing of salty and sweet ingredients in Roman cooking (1982: 47). The presence of mortaria, sweet wine and salty garum might reflect a change in certain British tastes, or, on the other hand, suggest the selection of ingredients which were approximate to or enhanced existing tastes. That many of the artefacts and remain associated with eating and drinking are also found in burial contexts (Trow 1990: 103–4; Whimster 1981) could provide a lead into the cultural significance of specific foods and drink and their manner of consumption. The correlation of the types of goods used as offerings with the types of goods used in the household would help to reveal some of the different social and cultural contexts of eating and drinking. It may also help to trace the significance — in terms of romanisation — of apparently new tastes and forms of etiquette found in some Romano-British households, but not others.

In conclusion, the romanisation of Britain was unique to Britain. It involved Britain much more than it did Rome, and it is the British experience in all of its diversity that I would like to explore. A study of diet and culinary behaviour at the household level could help to unravel our preconceptions over the effects of the Roman conquest on the daily lives of the British people. In considering just three potential areas for exploration — the integration of the data surrounding eating and drinking, its social and cultural differentiation and its specificity to Britain — I hope that I have shown how new ideas might be generated about how the British interpreted and constructed their 'Roman' world.

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