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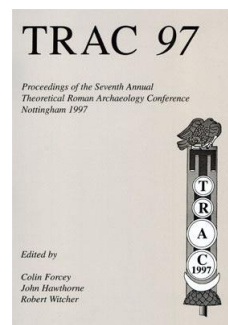
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Pottery and Paradigms in the Early Western Empire

by John W.J. Hawthorne

Introduction

It is commonplace for academics nowadays to talk of paradigms. Paradigms are difficult things; at once all-encompassing, and hidden, so that we have to think carefully before we realise where they are and what effects they might be having. Roman archaeology is a paradigm itself, and can perhaps be viewed as a parallel universe to a more nebulous paradigm, Roman studies. Each deals with the same period, the same people and the same places, but yet there is often very little overlap. Try finding a reference to Terra Sigillata in Dupont's *Daily Life in Ancient Rome* (1989) or a reference to *cena* in Hayes' *Late Roman Pottery* (1972). Each of these books deals very explicitly with the same themes – the material of everyday life – yet each stops where the conventions of its paradigm dictates. Within these paradigms there are of course further sub-paradigms, and it is the purpose of this paper to explore two of these. The first is Roman ceramic studies, and more specifically, its relationship with the second paradigm, economics. I wish to examine some of the ways in which interpretations of patterns of ceramic variation have been restricted by the paradigm of economics, and to suggest that by shifting our perspective away from economics to cuisine we can identify new and more interesting explanations of our data. Three of the main ceramic industries of the early western Empire are reviewed with the intention of demonstrating that some of the more significant changes in their productions may actually be the result of changes in eating habits, rather than changes in the economy.

Pottery and economics

Most people reading this volume will be familiar with the concept of the pottery supply graph, most famously used by Marsh (1981) to examine the supply of Samian to London, and more recently by Fentress and Perkins (1988) to chart fluctuations in the export of African Red Slip Ware (ARS) from Africa Proconsularis to the western Mediterranean. Figure 1 shows my own reworking of Fentress and Perkins' data. I have no quarrel with the methodology used to create these graphs, which simply involves counting the number of datable sherds per year from excavations and surveys. Rather it is with the interpretations of the resulting patterns that I would take issue. The problem lies with the implicit assumption that the resulting patterns are the result of changes in the economy. If there is a peak in a certain period it is assumed that there must have been an economic 'boom', and if there is a trough then there must have been some sort of economic crisis. Thus Marsh (1981) sees the decline of the Gaulish supply to London as resulting purely from the collapse of the industry, and Fentress and Perkins (1988) cite insurrection in Africa as the prime reason for the reduction in ARS supply in the third century. Some go even further: King (1981) seeks to explain the cessation of Samian importation with an argument worthy of the financial pages; costs, prices and markets feature heavily. More recently, Going (1992) has also examined the supply of pots to Britain and concluded that the patterns of peak and trough which can be seen are actually the booms and busts of a much larger economic 'long-wave cycle'.

Now, each of these arguments is well thought out and presented, and it is obviously fundamental that such issues are considered. The problem I have with these and the innumerable

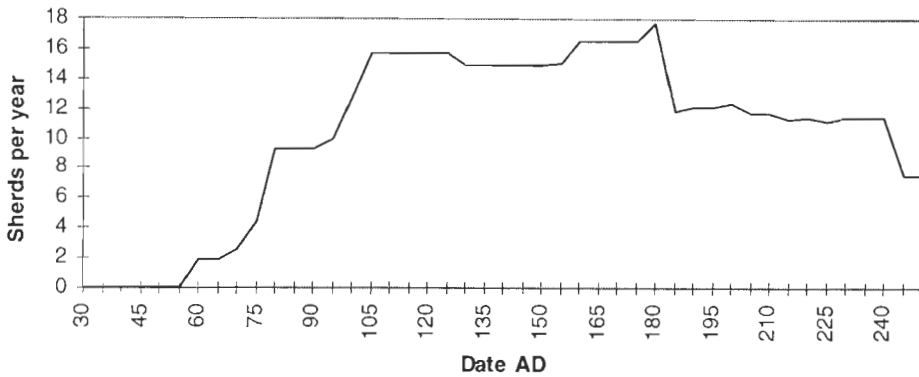


Figure 1. African Red Slip Ware: Sherds per year

similar papers is simple: why is it never suggested that the patterns which we are seeing might be caused by something as fundamental as changes in eating habits? If, in a certain century, it was the custom that everyone ate from three bowls, then that century will have three times as many as one where the norm was to eat from one (cf. Hawthorne 1996, 1997). There need be no more 'economics' to it than that. However, these are themes to which I shall return below. For now, we need to consider why there is this obsession with economics in the first place.

Some reasons for the economic paradigm

There are many reasons why patterns in Roman pottery should be interpreted in terms of economics, some obvious and some perhaps less so. Amongst the more significant must be the fact that the study of the economy more generally has a very long history. In fact, the study of the Roman economy can be traced back at least two hundred years to Mengotti (1797), and has since enjoyed several waves of popularity. The stable of scholars who have at some time examined the Roman economy include such heavyweights as Mommsen (1854–6), Weber (1891; 1897; 1922), Frank (1927) and Marx (1953). Marx's perception of the Roman economy was fundamental to his evolutionary view of the development of modern capitalism, and some of the most incisive discussions on the economy of Roman Italy have, in turn, been informed by Marxian economics (Carandini 1973, 1986). In short, the economy has long been seen as an important topic of debate; this long history has helped reinforce the current paradigm by imbuing the study of ceramics with a certain gravitas. Quite simply, economics is a respectable field of study: sensible and rational, often complex and undeniably important to the modern world. By looking at economics, we are using pottery as a means to an end; pot sherds themselves may be the lowly remnants of very humble items, but because we are using them to look at the Roman economy, their study is somehow ennobled. By contrast, the analysis of pots in terms of cuisine is perhaps too close our everyday lives to study for its own sake or to have any residual nobility about it.

There is more to this however; it is not just that it would be study for its own sake which mitigates against such analysis. It might also be argued that to focus on the quotidian aspects of pot use would seem by many to pay too close to the feminine side of things (cf. Tringham 1991). Archaeologists, and Roman archaeologists perhaps more than most, have tended to focus on the masculine, public-sphere variables, and this has encouraged the study of things which appear to

be exogenous to society, including economics (Meadows 1994:134). Although there are studies which emphasise that the distinction between public and private in this sense is largely a false one (cf. Moore 1988), the possibility that domestic patterning in ceramics may have been mistaken for 'public' patterning (i.e. economic patterning) does not seem to have been recognised.

A similar train of thought seems evident in the way in which we think about assemblage formation and recovery. These pots have lain in the ground for over 2000 years in many cases, and it seems self-evident that after all that time any chance of using them to reconstruct fleeting, ephemeral things like everyday life must have long since gone. Instead we must use them to reconstruct larger, more robust patterns, and what could be larger than the Roman economy?

A further, insidious, factor relating to the way we view the uptake and cessation of the use of Roman pottery is that we are conditioned to see it as 'normal'. Perhaps this is because we use pots ourselves every day and we cannot conceive of wanting to give them up. Modern western society as a whole also identifies with many perceived aspects of Roman culture. It might be argued that this is especially true of their apparent rationality and 'civilisation' in the face of the barbarians; the Romans were sensible people, like us. They would not stop using pots unless something bad happened, like an economic crisis. So goes the tacit reasoning.

Finally, we must also recognise that economics has endured as the principal paradigm for ceramic analysis for so long precisely because it appears to answer all the questions raised. Herein lies the rub: in order to advance beyond this economic functionalism, we need to begin to ask new questions. It is to asking new questions that I now wish to turn.

Pottery and cuisine: the Western empire

So how can thinking of pots in terms of cuisine help provide more interesting and convincing explanations of ceramic data than economics? Perhaps the most effective way to demonstrate the benefits of this approach is through a case study, or rather three case studies welded together. The aim here is to demonstrate how, by looking at pots in terms of cuisine and dining, we can join the seemingly disparate histories of three major ceramic productions together into a more coherent framework, and at the same time begin to integrate the data with other sources of evidence for social change. The industries which are considered here are those producing the various Gaulish wares which made their way into Britain (Marsh 1981; Tyers 1996; Webster 1996), Spanish samian ware (Mezqiriz 1961, 1981, 1983) and African Red Slip Ware (Hayes 1972, 1980; Fulford and Peacock 1984; Tortorella 1981). The time-frame for this analysis is from roughly the mid-first century AD until the late third. By using these industries the majority of the western Empire is covered: the Gaulish wares had a wide distribution in the north of the Empire, although the analyses below really only look at Britain. The African wares were traded all round the western Mediterranean, with considerable overlap with the Spanish wares in Spain itself. The Spanish wares were popular in Spain, although they were not widely exported.

The economic point of view

First, then, let us examine the traditional economic point of view. Quantified analyses of these three productions have been done over the last twenty years or so, at various levels of complexity. It is probably fair to say that the Gaulish wares in Britain have been subjected to the most sophisticated analyses on the whole (e.g. Marsh 1981; Willis 1997), followed by ARS (figure 1. Also see Fentress and Perkins (1988); Hawthorne (forthcoming a) for a new methodology), with Spanish samian ware languishing some way behind. When these analyses are put side by side and viewed from an economic perspective it becomes clear that there is a

considerable disparity between the north of Europe and the Mediterranean in terms of the flourish of production. The graphs for Britain and neighbouring provinces (Marsh 1981) show a peak in the late-first century, whereas the graphs for ARS show a peak in the later second century (Fentress and Perkins 1988; Hawthorne 1996a). Spanish samian ware, although not yet subject to such computerised analyses matches the African pattern with a peak in the later second century (Mayet 1984:96; Mezquíriz 1983:136). Following these peaks, each production subsides and reaches a nadir in the mid-third century.

These patterns are universally interpreted as representing some sort of economic crisis, usually tied up with local disruption in other economic spheres. The way in which this conclusion is reached seems to be as follows: it is widely acknowledged that there was some sort of crisis in the third century across the Western Empire (see King and Henig 1981 for a tip-of-the-iceberg collection of papers on this), and so these patterns are merely local representations of it. In the north of the empire where local economies were presumably not as robust as in the centre and south, the problems manifested themselves much earlier. The literature on these 'crises' is enormous, but starting points for Britain are Going (1992), King (1981) Marsh (1981) and Tyers (1996). For Spain, see Keay (1988), Mayet (1984:96), Balil *et al.* (1986:256) and Mezquíriz (1983). For North Africa, see Cambi and Fentress (1989), Fentress and Perkins (1988), and Février (1982).

Problems with the economic explanations

On the face of it these explanations would appear to be fine. However, each has been formulated within the paradigm of economics and so comes complete with a range of problems. Foremost amongst these is the fact that we too rarely question the equation between the availability of pottery and people's desire to buy it. In recent Romano-British studies it is almost always assumed that if pots are available people will use them (Cooper 1996:87; Going 1992:95; Monaghan 1995:152). In other words, the relationship between the quantity of pots in circulation and demand is constant. Demand is conceived of in terms of numbers of people and their spending power. With demand largely static, the only thing that will cause a hiatus in the archaeological record is a reduction in supply. This position has become increasingly popular in recent years, and has been explicitly argued for by Wickham (1988, 1989). This was a reaction against the school of thought dominant in the Mediterranean which has tended to ignore changes in supply (cf. Carandini 1986; Panella 1986).

However, there are dangers in stressing supply in this way, (although Wickham's aims may be partly heuristic), not least because it denies the possibility of people only using what they want. Similarly, to view demand solely in terms of the number of people in a region and how much money they have assumes that they actually want to buy the goods on offer. Our own everyday experience tells us that there are a range of factors which affect what we buy, not least the social circles in which we move (cf. Johnson 1996; Lee 1993; Orser 1996). In Roman ceramic studies, however (in both the demand-led and supply-led models), it is assumed that Roman pots were always sought after.

Also, despite careful examination of the concepts of life assemblages, death assemblages and the problems of different types of context formation (Aquilué 1992:39; Evans and Millett 1992; Millett 1987), there seems to be no admission that the quantities in circulation could be affected by eating habits. This is strange, because we have no problem with non-economically related changes in the quantities of other items. Epigraphy comes and goes, and we are happy to see this as the 'epigraphic habit' (Meyer 1990). Likewise there are changes in Britain from excarnation to cremation to inhumation in burial rites, and these are put down to changes in ideology and

social practice (Alcock 1996:45–50; Millett 1995:121–31). Pottery, however, is different. With pottery it is the economy which is the prime mover. When we do look at it in terms of eating habits, we tend to ignore the possibility that it is these very habits which are causing the *overall, absolute* changes in quantity (although Evans (1988) approaches this). Instead we focus on changes in the *relative* percentages of types within assemblages (for example Evans 1993; Bats 1988). This is a telling point: overall changes in quantity are seen to be the result of changes in the economy, but changes in the amount of different types *within* the overall amount are allowed to result from eating habits. In other words, the economy dictates how much there is, and eating habits modifies the sorts of pots we find. This is very weak, conceptually. I now wish to demonstrate how we can improve upon this by considering cuisine.

The perspective of cuisine

At the outset, it is probably worth stressing that this is only one possible way of looking at the data, and I have no wish to suggest that this approach is some sort of panacea which will explain all patterns in ceramic data everywhere. Rather, I hope that the arguments presented above will be accepted as reasonable, and that the ideas presented below might help to stimulate debate.

Reinterpreting these familiar ceramic patterns in terms of cuisine may at first sight seem ambitious, even impossible. The difficulty of reconstructing the past use of pots is well known (Henrickson and McDonald 1983; Moorehouse 1978; Streeten 1985:23). However, it is not necessary to know what was served in or on the pots, merely something of the manner of use. Indeed, the manner of use is probably more informative to us on the whole than what was eaten. What we are looking at, then, are aspects of cuisine. Farb and Armelagos define a cuisine as:

- the food selected from the environment
- the manner of preparation
- the flavouring methods
- the rules governing behaviour on how many meals per day, what times they are eaten, who eats with who, the level of ceremony and any taboos (1980:190).

We can add two further considerations to this, following Bats:

- the instruments for eating, i.e. cutlery, crockery and furniture
- the differentiation of the cuisine (1988:18).

These last two in particular give us our starting point; we can begin to look at the ceramic assemblages and see whether there is any evidence among the pots for differentiation of cuisines, or changes across time in the level of ostentation in dining which seems to be indicated (Goody 1984; Menzel 1985). The whole process can be done in a number of stages.

The first stage is to remember that we are dealing with pots from which people ate their meals, the finewares. A shift of perspective is required here, which is perhaps easier if the Roman pots that we scrape out of the mud are visualised alongside those currently on shelves at home. Given the overwhelming emphasis on economics and dating (Willis 1997), it is all too easy to lose sight of the fact that the Roman sherds are the remains of real vessels which once contained warm food. Accepting this is perhaps the most difficult step, but once it is firmly in mind it is easy to proceed. The next stage is to forget about the sherd counts for a moment, and focus on the forms that the pots took. For now we will not worry about the actual shapes, just the *numbers* of different shapes which have been identified in each production's repertoire. Figure 2 shows the number of open forms for each production across time. This graph has been calculated from Webster (1996) for Gaulish wares; from Mezquiritz (1981) and Tortorella

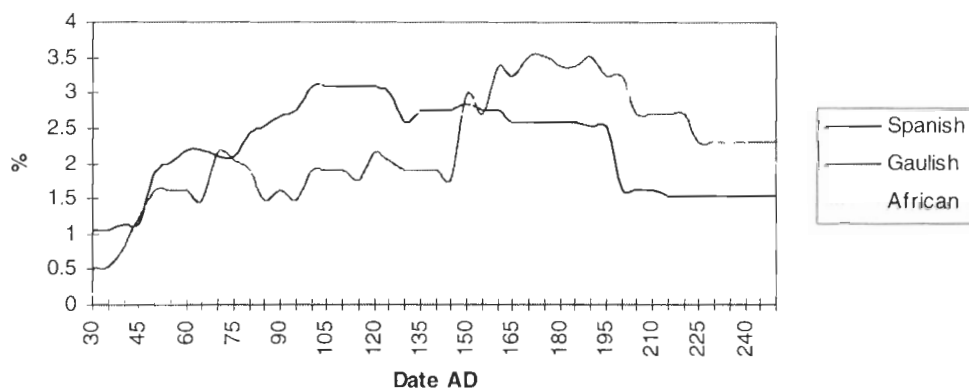


Figure 2. Relative changes in the numbers of forms in each production. The figures have been standardised to allow comparison

(1981) in the *Atlante della Forme Ceramiche* (Carandini 1981) for Spanish Samian and ARS; the *Atlante* supplements earlier work by Mezquíz (1961) for the Spanish wares and by Hayes (1972, 1980) on ARS. The numbers have been standardised to facilitate comparison

It is immediately apparent from figure 2 that there is considerable uniformity across the western empire in terms of the behaviour of the numbers of forms of vessels in circulation. Unlike the sherd counts which suggest a century's difference between the north and south of the Empire in terms of the decline in production, the form counts indicate that everywhere saw the most significant decline at the end of the second century. So what does this mean? Well, if we were approaching this from a traditional economic point of view we would say that a serious economic crisis hit in the early-third century and rising costs meant that production had to be rationalised in the form of fewer shapes, as indeed does King (1981:68). On its own terms this is not unreasonable, but we should remember that the relative effects of the costs in any industry are going to be set by the level of demand and the returns possible from the price. Pottery was cheap in the ancient world, as it is today, and it is unlikely that there was an economic crisis so bad that people's spending power could not stretch to pottery. In other words, if demand remained constant, the potters would have had the revenue they needed. In a similar vein, it is difficult to see how reducing the range of pots would have appealed to the market in such a scenario. Another explanation of the uniformity of decline of the numbers of forms is called for. I suggest a pan-western Empire change in dining habits.

Exactly what would be entailed in such a change? The actual details of the manifestation differ in each region, but the general principle remains the same. In essence, it is as follows: the first and second centuries were periods of intense social competition. Archaeologically this is also seen in the use of inscriptions by élites to tell everyone how rich and magnanimous they were (Meyer 1990), and public building in general. In terms of the production of pottery, this is reflected in a highly ostentatious cuisine, with use of a great variety of vessel types. Although the concept of dinner services has to some extent gone out of fashion in Terra Sigillata studies (Ettlinger 1990:45), nevertheless this period saw tremendously complicated arrangements for using different forms together. This is seen in the Gaulish wares in the similarity of rim and base treatment of forms which were intended to be used together (cf. Vernhet 1976). The same is true

of the Spanish wares (Mezquíriz 1981). In the African wares this notion of services does not seem to surface until much later, but it is interesting to note instead the size of the vessels, which change from small, individual-sized bowls, to large communal dishes (Hawthorne 1996, 1997). Altogether, this evidence points to dining as a form of display, even competition. The use of linked forms in the north and in Spain indicates complexity in the *idea* of the meal, if not always in its everyday practice. Similarly, the composition of the African form range with only small bowls is noteworthy, as the ancient Mediterranean was otherwise very fond of communal plates. This was certainly the case before, and can plainly be seen in the large Italian platters of the Arretine productions, and can also be seen afterwards in the later African wares. The absence of such large, communal dining vessels from the second century range is noteworthy and we might suggest that it reflects a period when the individual was more important than the group, when social competition was, perhaps more than at any other time, played out through meals. Given what we already know of Roman dining practices (Dupont 1989:269–86; Veyne 1987:186–88), it seems fair to conclude that this complexity in the ceramics was both a reflection and active part of the circus of status, rules and display that was the Roman meal. The same use of meals to emphasise social distinctions, and to subtly bring about changes in them is still common practice today. Appadurai (1981) describes exactly this in contemporary South Asia, where who sits next to who and who is served first are all matters of rank and power, not unlike more formal meals in the west.

This idea of 'competitive dining' is by no means new. On the contrary, it is a very well established idea, at least in circles where cuisine forms a more common focus (for general discussions of dining see Veyne 1987; Dupont 1989). It is also supported by the evidence from the remains of dining rooms themselves, which show a parallel change in this period. In the first and second centuries the dining room of the wealthy was the *triclinium*, an arrangement of three couches, with very strict rules governing who was allowed to sit next to who, based on rank and honour (Dunbabin 1991). In the early third century the *triclinia* of Africa, where the evidence survives best, show a marked increase in size, before going out of use almost completely and being replaced by the semicircular sigma couch, or *stibadium* (Rossiter 1991). The *stibadium* did not have such formalised rules for seating arrangements (Dunbabin 1991:129–30, 1996), and we can perhaps link its appearance with that of the change to communal-sized vessels around the Mediterranean and suggest that the nature of status display in dining was changing. Clearly, we can only generalise from this evidence so far down the social hierarchy – not everyone had access to *triclina* and *stibadia*. Nevertheless, this ties in with the changes in the northern forms and the general changes in epigraphy and public building mentioned earlier. For whatever reasons, certain groups of people at least may have been coming to regard the ostentatious dining of the later second century as something to be shied away from. Some reasons for this will be suggested below.

But what of the sherd counts? How can these changes in the form repertoire have any relevance to the sherd counts, which have been the focus of the earlier parts of this paper? The answer to this requires the use of a new methodology. It will be recalled that the Gaulish wares show the most significant decline in the late-first century, and the Spanish and African wares in the late second. This is interesting in the light of what we have just seen about the numbers of forms, because if the *size* of the forms is examined a new pattern emerges. I have already argued elsewhere that a more convincing explanation for the decline of the African sherd counts than the usual economic one is that the size of the vessels in the third century increased to such a size that far fewer pots were needed (Hawthorne 1996, 1997, forthcoming a) for a detailed explanation of the mathematics of these calculations, including the interplay between vessel capacity, breakage rates and archaeological occurrence). This is all the more interesting when it

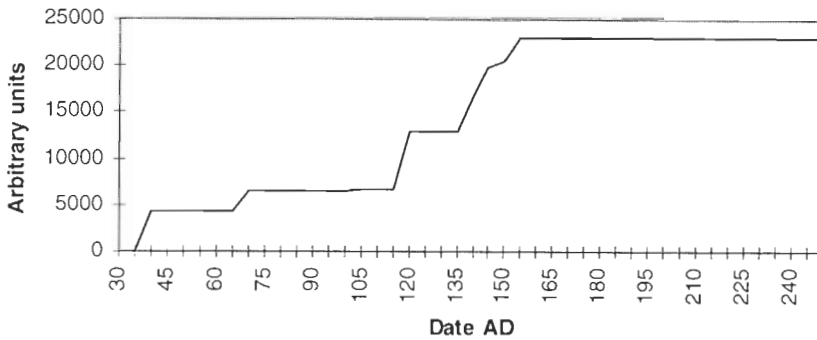


Figure 3. Change in the volume of Samian bowls

is seen that the same pattern occurs in the Gaulish wares, although not in the same way. In the second century the ARS form range was dominated by small bowls, which were almost completely replaced by large dishes in the third century. The same is true of the Spanish forms (Mezquíriz 1981:147). The Gaulish form series was much more complex, but the most common items, the bowls, show a very significant increase in size at exactly the time that the sherd counts decline (figure 3). In other words, there were fewer second century bowls because they were of such a size that fewer were needed to hold the same amount of food as the first century bowls. Figure 3 was calculated using the AutoCAD Advanced Modelling Extension and the profiles in Webster (1996). The change in size of the bowls can be clearly seen by eye in Webster's chapter divisions, but in any case, sceptics should remember that the capacity of a vessel is calculated as a cubed function: in other words, a small difference in profile size makes a much greater difference in capacity.

Looked at from this perspective then, it becomes possible to see that the pottery supply graphs we are so familiar with may not be the straightforward reflections of economics that we had thought, and may in fact be more the result of changes in eating habits. It remains then to look at this idea more closely and suggest reasons why these culinary changes might have been occurring.

Some reasons for the changes in cuisine

Cuisine, and more particularly change in cuisine, has been looked at from several points of view. The most famous analyses are probably those of the structuralist Levi-Strauss (1968), which resulted in his 'culinary triangle.' This identifies three states of being for food (raw, cooked or rotten) and equates each with a particular method of food preparation. However, the final model required so many compromises between categories that it is doubtful whether it has any explanatory power. Even leaving aside more general criticisms of structuralism (e.g. Hodder 1986: 35–56) it has always been the case that structuralist analyses have been weak when it comes to explaining change, as they tend to produce a descriptive framework in which change is initiated by exogenous forces (Mennel 1985:13–15). Structuralism then, is perhaps not the best course to take. In any case, Romanists have always felt more at home with straightforward functionalist and adaptationist approaches (indeed some might say that the reason for the vitality of TRAC is that it provides an alternative to just such views). Functionalist approaches, with a strong hint of environmental determinism, are widespread in archaeology in general, such as

Vlajaszek (1993) on Papua New Guinea and indeed the whole of Farb and Armelagos (1980), although a more developed economic determinism is also evident, as with Gibson and Smout on post-medieval Scotland (Gibson and Smout 1993). As is by now well understood, the principal problem with such approaches is that they do not allow change to occur through the ideational sphere (see Meadows 1995 for similar discussions). And it is perhaps here that we should be looking.

It would be very easy to link the change from ostentatious, individual, dining to simpler communal dining to changes in the economy of the empire as a whole, and say that people did not have enough money to pay for the lavish meals they had enjoyed earlier. This is not unreasonable, and if the arguments above about the changes in numbers of pots are ever widely accepted, this is probably the explanation that most people would favour. This is because it still clings close to the economy as the motor of change. However, some might feel cheated by this: it sees material culture as passive, in this case responding to the economy. I have already argued above that the complex dining arrangements were part of the active formation of social relations, and I believe that the change in dining habits in the late-second and early-third centuries is part of this same process.

Perhaps one of the most significant factors was the changing relationship between the rural rich and poor in late antiquity. It is striking that it is increasingly only the richer sites in the west Mediterranean which maintain the use of finewares. There are perhaps two factors at work here. Firstly, it may be that the rich were increasingly using their own villas as places to meet and entertain each other, at the expense of town houses. This would account for the increase in the occurrence of richly furnished dining room, today recognisable by their elaborate mosaics. This is a phenomenon which is attested throughout the western Empire, from the villas of Dorset, such as Hinton St. Mary, to the villas of Tunisia. To the rich, dining as a form of display was still important. The second factor, however, is that there is now a much stronger element of commensalism in it; we might interpret this as reflecting a desire to unite the dining groups in the face of an increasingly disunited and fragmentary social network.

This scenario sees the rich actively embracing the finewares as a means of maintaining their social relationships. The other side of the coin, of course, is what the less well off were doing. There seems little doubt that poorer people could afford imported pottery if they chose to. Pottery is very cheap, and there is no reason to believe that it was otherwise in late Antiquity. The disuse of the finewares by the poorer people, then, may also have something more to it than simple economics. It may well be that it was the increasing gap between rich and poor which was the key: whereas in the early Empire the poor had sought to emulate the rich in their dining habits, it may be that now they sought to distance themselves from them. A simple way of doing this would be to reject the pots which the rich used. To the poor the imported finewares may have carried overtones of an oppressive upper class of landowners, who gaily enjoyed parties while the poor struggled to pay their taxes. The imported finewares may also have carried with them a flavour of an old internationalism that was ever more irrelevant to the lives of the ordinary people.

A final factor may have been a brand of asceticism, derived from early Christianity. Christianity was quite firm on eating habits: meals were supposed to be communal and simple. Anything else was sinful (cf. Hawthorne 1997:33–5). In this respect the move to commensalism is readily explicable, at least in the Mediterranean. This may also account for the eventual abandonment of fine ceramics altogether. This would also explain the florescence of overt Christian symbols which come to dominate the decoration of the later Mediterranean wares (Hayes 1972).

Conclusion

In this way we can see that the changes in pottery may have actually resulted from more general changes in society itself, rather than in the economy. The key to this reinterpretation is to shift the perspective of analysis away from the traditional economic paradigm to consider a wider range of potentially active factors. It has been argued that one of the most important factors is cuisine, particularly the relationship between the quantities of vessels originally in circulation and eating habits.

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