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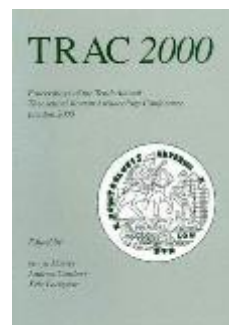
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Paper Information:

Title: An Archaeology of Food: A Case Study from Roman Britain
Author: Gillian Hawkes
Pages: 94–103

DOI: http://doi.org/10.16995/TRAC2000_94_103

Publication Date: 29 March 2001



Volume Information:

Davies, G., Gardner, A., and Lockyear, K. (eds) 2001. *TRAC 2000: Proceedings of the Tenth Annual Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference, London 2000*. Oxford: Oxbow Books.

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An Archaeology of Food: A case study from Roman Britain

Gillian Hawkes

School of Archaeological Studies, University of Leicester

8.1 Introduction

The analysis of faunal remains from both Iron Age and Romano-British sites may well be established, but this work has mostly been conducted to recover information about the economy and husbandry regimes practised. Another important point to raise, is that animal bones and other classes of finds have rarely been looked at with regard to their cultural and social significances. They are also mostly studied in isolation: finds reports often do not consider the relationship that certain artefacts may have had with each other. It is particularly rare to find the study of ceramics to be integrated with that of animal bones and plant remains. In addition, the animal bones and other finds from Roman sites have mostly been studied from a Romano-centric viewpoint, *i.e.*, assuming that people eating Roman foodstuffs were Roman or desired to be more like the Romans. This paper aims to address some of these issues, and to put forward a methodology which will enable the study of these different forms of material culture. This will thus provide us with a framework for studying food in a socially meaningful and theoretically-informed way. The model integrates the different classes of data which would have been associated with a meal, both in its preparation and consumption, and therefore seeks to explore areas beyond the simple economic and environmental interpretations of remains. This model helps us to study meals from the perspective of those eating them.

The purpose of this paper is to outline the methodology devised to analyse food from Romano-British sites. It will also briefly consider how the model can be applied to the data. The case study which will be used is that of the site of Dragonby in North Lincolnshire (May 1996). The case study will illustrate how such an approach can help us to gain insights into the foodways of Roman Britain.

Post-Colonial theory has had a significant influence on Roman scholarship in the past ten years. Although first developed within the field of literary criticism, it has now been successfully applied to a wide range of other disciplines, including archaeology. Although this study of food is not wholly informed from a post-colonial perspective, the basic arguments, such as viewing Roman Britain as a colonial context and ascribing a proper weight to the rôle of the native poor, have been influenced by it. The concept of discrepant experience, meaning that depending on where you stand within a colonial situation your perception of that situation will be different (Said 1993), has also been important in constructing the background to this work. This idea can also be applied to material culture, for example, depending on its context of use the artefact may have had different meanings to different groups within society. Just as an event can have differing meanings and be open to different interpretations,

so too can artefacts. The use of post-colonial theory has been in many ways a de-constructive one, highlighting the colonial overtones within past study of the Roman Empire (Webster & Cooper 1996). Many other areas of theory are more relevant to the study of food and material culture in particular consumption theory (Appadurai 1986; Bourdieu 1984) and anthropology (Goody 1982).

Although anthropology may have received much censure in the light of post-colonial critiques of its eurocentric bias (Ashcroft *et al.* 1998), it addresses everyday issues, such as food, in greater depth than other disciplines. As long as it is used in a sensitive way, anthropological literature can provide us with many insights into how food is used in the construction of identity and how food is central to life, not just on a nutritional level. It is not just concepts gained from post-colonialism that can be useful in this study of food, but also issues which are related to post-processualism, such as the need for contextuality. Other issues such as identity can play a rôle in such a study. If food is central to life and to the construction of identity then we must take full account of the many regional, ethnic and gender identities which may have been present in the past. Furthermore, there were also many different and often unequal power relationships present which influenced people's perceptions and actions (Scott 1990). These may be traced through their use of food as an expression of identity or status. The use of contextual archaeology can help us to gain new understandings of old problems. For example, it can be suggested that it is not the source or origin of pottery which is important but rather its context of use. Thus, it is not the simple presence or absence of Samian within a site which is significant but rather how it was used and by whom. Therefore, from this theoretically-informed perspective, it must be borne in mind that even though people were using Roman material culture and ingredients it did not mean that they wholeheartedly consented to Roman rule, or even that they were cooking and eating Roman meals.

These considerations, as mentioned above, are particularly relevant to the study of Romano-British artefacts which may have had multiple identities and meanings. We must also recognise that other factors influenced the choice of material culture used, like utility and availability as well as status and the perceived attractiveness of an object.

8.2 Romano-British food

Based on these theoretical considerations, a model has been constructed to study food in Romano-British contexts (Table 8.1). The model has been based on the processes involved in the cooking of a meal. The model is divided into two main stages: food procurement and food preparation. These have been subdivided into different phases which take account of the meal process. The first stage is that of food procurement, *i.e.*, obtaining the different ingredients such as meat, dairy products, cereals, vegetables, flavourings and the utensils needed for the food's preparation. The next stage has been labelled the food preparation stage. This stage goes through the different types of activities which would be needed to prepare, cook, serve and eat the food obtained in the first stage. It is important to note here that the main thrust of the model is based on the integration of the different types of data: animal bones, botanical remains and ceramics. Although other sources of data are available, such as structural evidence, these categories have been chosen as they are directly related to the food being prepared and consumed. Areas of analysis have also been identified within these stages. It is not sufficient to characterise the diet of a site on

Process	Evidence
<i>Meal Stage 1: Food Procurement</i>	
husbandry regimes	age-at-death profile
supply	pottery (amphorae),
(pottery and flavourings)	botanical remains (exotica)
hunting, fishing	wild animal remains
agriculture	plant remains
<i>Meal Stage 2: Food Preparation</i>	
1. Initial Processing	
meat	butchery
chaff, husks, cereals	grains
dairy products	husbandry regimes
	pottery
2. Initial Storage	
smoking/curing of meat	hole through scapula
grain storage	structural evidence
	botanical evidence
3. Meal preparation	
meat	butchery (filleting); skeletal element representation
flavourings	amphorae
preparation vessels	mortaria
4. Cooking methods	
pottery	forms and fabrics; size of cooking pots; native/imported fabrics
size of joints	fragment size
type of joints	skeletal element representation
5. Serving and eating	
pottery	size, form and fabric
6. Other Information	
	size of animals
rituals associated with food	context of deposition

Table 8.1: Model used to study food in Romano-British contexts.

the basis of the species proportions of the different livestock present, rather one needs to consider all the different issues associated with the use of animals for consumption. These include age at death patterns, skeletal element representations, butchery, size of animals and the fragment size of bones. Traditional pictures of the Roman diet have been largely based upon the use of species proportions (see King 1978, 1999), but the methods of quantification here need to be carefully considered. The use of meat weight as a guide to the actual contribution made by any given species to the meat component is central to this model. Within these stages specific artefact types have been highlighted. For example, are mortaria present and, if so, in what quantity and from what date? Such artefacts have, after all, often been cited as evidence for the Romanisation of the food.

The second part of the model is based on the theoretical frameworks which have informed this work. Therefore, we need to be critical of so-called markers of 'Roman-

ness'. As mentioned above, different artefacts in different contexts can be read in multiple ways and this needs to be constantly borne in mind before ascribing the overly simplified labels of 'Romanised' or 'Unromanised' to a site. The quantity with which goods are present will be considered very closely, for example, the presence of olive oil could superficially be seen as evidence for a more Romanised diet. However, when evaluated, it may be the case that only two oil amphorae were actually present on the site, hence olive oil would have had very little impact on the cuisine. Obviously it could be stated that olive oil was not necessarily used in food preparation but rather for lighting or beauty treatments. This is however, a related but different issue and will not be discussed in any greater detail here.

Roman material culture was widely used and is present on almost all sites of this period. However, this need not imply that native practices were superseded or discarded but may still have continued, incorporating and altering the new ingredients and ceramic vessels within an existing framework. Food, as has been shown from anthropological research, is a very deep-seated part of the cultural identity of a group (MacClancy 1992). Therefore, as will be discussed in the case study, people are often conservative about what they are willing to eat and are often wary of 'new' or 'foreign' foodstuffs.

This model helps to integrate the different classes of material culture associated with a meal and incorporates the basic theoretical principles outlined above. It helps us to see parallels in the separate and different classes of material culture which would otherwise not be seen. This will become evident in the case study which is outlined below. It removes food from the realms of subsistence and highlights its social and cultural significances. These can often be more important to a group than mere nutritional requirements as examples from both historical archaeology and anthropology have demonstrated. Food taboos in many societies also play a large rôle in determining what can and cannot be eaten. These have often not been established along nutritional lines but rather upon ritual, religious or ideological ones (Goody 1982).

8.3 Dragonby: a case study

In this section I will briefly outline how the model has been applied to the site of Dragonby located within the Corieltauvian territory close to the River Humber (May 1996). The site was occupied from the late La Tène to the medieval period and has been interpreted as an *oppidum* site which is substantiated by the presence of high quality imported pottery and other artefacts in both the pre- and post-conquest periods.

From the varied strands of evidence analysed and discussed, we can see how the inhabitants of Dragonby partially and in a negotiated way, adopted new practices and foods. The animal bones were analysed by Harman (1996, pp. 141–58), and the fish remains by Jones (1996, p. 164). The initial (published) data have formed the basis for this re-interpretation in the light of the model and the theoretical framework outlined above. There is very little change in the meat consumed, beef being the most common in both periods, followed by mutton and pork. Horse is also present in quite large proportions which may be indicative that horse was actually eaten. However, there are many different ways of quantifying the data beyond the analysis of species proportions, and one of these methods is that of meat weights, which provides a measure of how important each species was in terms of its contribution

Species	Min. no. of individuals (%)		Meat weights (%)	
	Iron Age	Romano-British	Iron Age	Romano-British
Cattle	22	27	61	68
Sheep	63	59	26	21
Pig	14	13	12	9

Table 8.2: Meat consumption at Dragonby.

to the available meat on any given site. This method of quantification will be used throughout this study of food and is based on the figures published in Vigne (1992). The results obtained using these different methods of quantification are very different as is illustrated in Table 8.2.

From this we can see that there is very little difference between the species favoured for consumption in the Iron Age and the Romano-British period. However, what is clear is that sheep dominate the assemblages when using minimum number of individuals whereas when meat weights are employed then it is cattle that can be seen to dominate. This can be simply explained as cattle have more meat available for consumption than sheep or even pigs. It can be suggested that this method of quantification provides a picture of species proportion which equates more readily with the actual importance that these species had. It can therefore be suggested that beef dominated the meat diet. However, it must be considered that meat was not the only product available for consumption; products such as offal and marrow may also have been important.

Other issues such as husbandry regimes, butchery, skeletal element representation and the size of bone fragments all need to be considered. These can reveal information about the actual joints consumed on site and whether there were any changes in the type of joints favoured either in different periods or in different parts of the site.

Another important issue when dealing with the faunal remains is that of butchery. Although no evidence from Dragonby was available, this should be borne in mind for later research. Did the pre-existing Iron Age butchery pattern of small cut marks made with knives continue on rural sites, or did it change into a more Roman-style method with larger cut marks? It could be suggested that similar butchery patterns continued on rural sites as it may have been the same group of people doing the butchery, or it may have changed, as it did in the larger urban settlements. However, it needs to be considered whether or not a change in butchery methods meant a change in the types of cuts of meat eaten. Even though butchery techniques may have changed, the joints of meat consumed may have remained the same.

The plant remains were analysed by van der Veen (1996, pp. 197–210) and the data published in the report has formed the basis for this re-interpretation. The plant macrofossils recovered from the site indicate that the cereal crops cultivated stayed the same from the Iron Age into the Roman period, with six-row barley being the most common, incidentally a crop not known in Roman Italy. Some exotic flavourings were also present such as coriander, summer savoury and poppy seeds as well as woad. These may have been cultivated in the surrounding area after initial importation. Although woad is technically not a food crop, being mainly used as a decorative aid (Caesar, *de Bello Gallico* V, 14), it is nonetheless relevant to this survey as the plant itself is not native to Northern Europe but rather to South Eastern Europe (van der Veen 1996, p. 199). Its presence together with the other three exotic herbs indicates

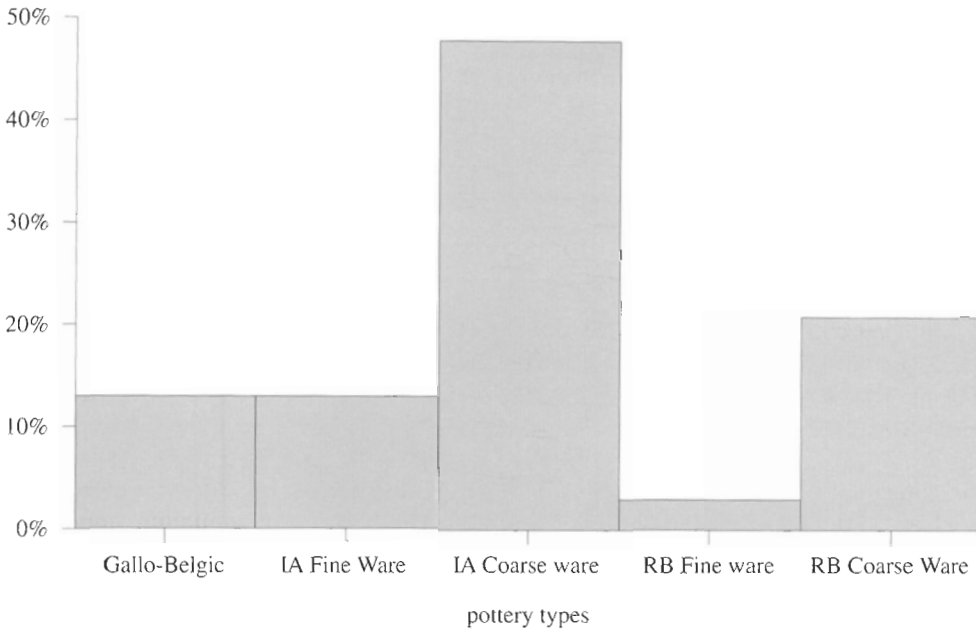


Figure 8.1: The early Roman pottery assemblage from Dragonby.

long-distance trade and contact with the Mediterranean world. Many other native flavourings and foods were also present such as elderberry, sloe, hazelnuts and juniper.

The Roman ceramic assemblage was analysed by Gregory (1996, pp. 513–608) and the data presented in the report has been used in this re-interpretation. The assemblage as a whole can be considered to be fairly conservative, much in the same way as the animal bones and plant remains suggest. As well as Samian, there are other fine ware imports present, although Roman pottery does not appear until some 50 years after the conquest and even then only in limited numbers (Figs. 8.1–8.2).

Most fine wares, as well as coarse wares, were locally produced. The Samian present on the site was well used and repaired and can therefore be seen as a cared for possession. *Mortaria* are introduced relatively early and are also well used and show signs of burning. Their presence however, need not automatically imply that the people using these objects had adopted Roman-style eating patterns, but rather that these were fitted into and adapted to already existing food patterns. However, their relative scarcity, both here and on other sites, would suggest that they were not in common circulation or use. Therefore it can be suggested that their presence may not be indicative of a great shift in food preparation. Even though this material may occur in relatively small quantities, it cannot simply be ignored. If these items were, for example, the preserve of a small élite group then they would occur in small quantities. Therefore, although these objects may not have made a huge impact on the daily food habits of the subordinate groups, they would still have played an important rôle in the construction and maintenance of the élite's rôle in society. The presence and use of these imported flavourings and ceramics could be established through a detailed contextual and spatial analysis of sites. However, as most finds reports are written in isolation, there is often very little contextual information on what occurred in the same contexts. Therefore, this integrated approach achieves a more detailed picture by cross referencing and brings together items of material culture which would in the

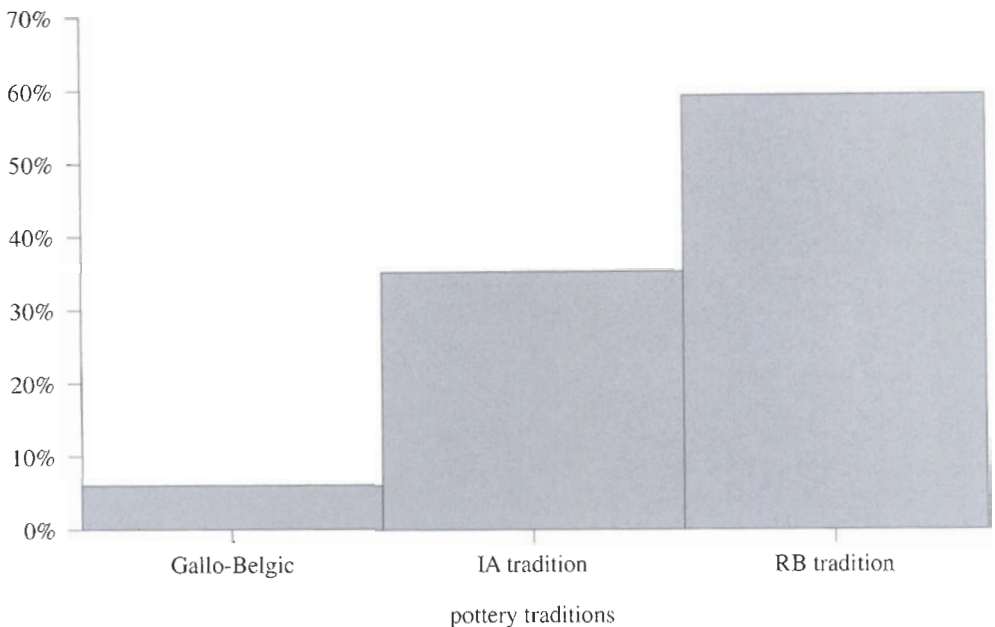


Figure 8.2: The second century Roman pottery assemblage from Dragonby.

past have been intimately related with each other. Even though the limitations of the archaeological data should be acknowledged, such a holistic approach can assist in the study of everyday life by examining these interrelated objects.

The presence of exotic, imported foodstuffs and flavourings also occurred on a limited basis. These can be identified in the archaeological record through the plant remains mentioned above and also indirectly through amphorae (Fig. 8.3).

These goods may only have been employed on special occasions or by a limited group of people thus making very little impact on the everyday eating habits. The issue of the presence of imported foodstuffs needs to be seen in the light of how they were incorporated into the cooking and eating habits of the native population. The question remains as to how they would have known the authentic Roman-style way of using these exotic flavourings. It can be suggested that such knowledge would not have been easily available in a world where news travelled only as fast as a person could run or ride a horse. Even today in a world where news is widely accessible, the recent introduction of the first zebra crossing in the Shetlands was still a cause for concern for local people as most had never used or seen one. There is all the more reason for this to have been the case in the Roman world and these exotic foodstuffs are likely to have been used in the same way as native foodstuffs that tasted or looked the same.

An example from North America can further highlight this issue of different groups in society eating different things. In nineteenth century Sacramento, different classes within the Chinese immigrant community can be identified from their respective food ways (Courtney 1997). For example, the rich Chinese consumed meat butchered in the traditional Chinese manner and ate it off imported Chinese porcelain. The lower classes on the other hand were eating cheap meat butchered in the American way and consumed this from cheap British earthenware plates. Thus if we did not have the detailed documentary information, we might, when using traditional methods of

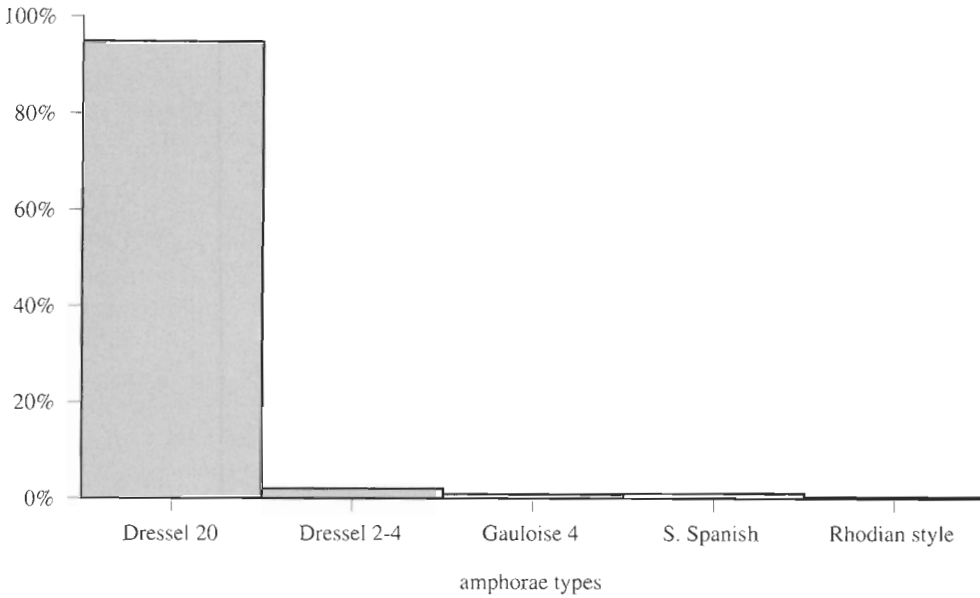


Figure 8.3: Proportions of amphorae present at Dragonby (early Roman period).

interpretation, suggest that these poor deposits derived from poor Americans (Courtney 1997). Although this example cannot be extrapolated directly for Roman Britain, it serves to highlight the fact that the use of material culture for food is more complex than a polarised view of Romanised and Unromanised.

Dragonby was obviously not a 'poor' site with many high-status artefacts present, and the consumption of pork in quite large quantities in both the Iron Age and Roman periods has been suggested as an indicator of high-status (see Grant 1989, p. 137). Although the detailed evidence is not present on this site, it can perhaps be suggested that different 'food communities' were present. Therefore, whilst the richer people on the site were using the imported wares and thus valued flavourings, foodstuffs and ceramics, the vast majority of its inhabitants were eating in a similar way to their predecessors before the conquest. Although this approach could be criticised for being normative, it needs to be considered in the light of Medieval and Tudor foodways, where status was displayed by how many exotic spices and flavourings were added to a meal. Thus it could be suggested that Dragonby was not a homogenous settlement, but a place where people had differential access to commodities and consumed these in their varying ways. However, on the whole its inhabitants seem to have been rather conservative in their foodways, adding or experimenting with some of the new foodstuffs now available. The issue of conservatism in food is one that has been widely explored within both historical archaeology and anthropology. In the Caribbean, slave women would cook and eat the same food as was traditional in their areas of origin (Bush 1990). MacClancy (1992) suggests that identity in many cases can be constructed through the food that is eaten or, as more often the case, not eaten.

8.4 Conclusions

A holistic study of this nature can reveal that the presence of Roman goods does not necessarily equate to Roman-style practices, or to the adoption of a Roman way of life. Food is and was important to people and formed an important element in the construction of their identities. We have seen that the people at Dragonby, at least, were conservative about what they ate, often not changing the basic pattern very much, and the presence of Rome may not have been noticeable for quite some period after the conquest (at least fifty years, if the evidence of the wider dissemination of Roman pottery is taken to be significant). Thus the Imperial administration may have been of little importance to what people ate, except for the limited addition of exotic flavourings.

Although this is merely a preliminary and brief outline of my research, it has highlighted the benefits of conducting a holistic and theoretically-informed study of everyday activities. Such a model can help to turn the passive peasants found inhabiting Britain in the acculturative models of Romanisation into active participants shaping, choosing, adapting and maintaining their identities within a colonial situation.

Acknowledgements

My thanks go to Dr Annie Grant, Dr Jeremy Taylor and Dr Simon James for commenting on earlier drafts of this paper.

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Gillian Hawkes
School of Archaeological Studies
University of Leicester
University Road
Leicester LE1 7RH
gh23@leicester.ac.uk