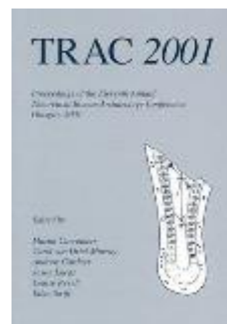
TRAC Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference
www.trac.org.uk

Paper Information:



Title: Consumer Theory and Roman North Africa: A Post-Colonial Approach to the Ancient Economy
Author: Garrick Fincham
Pages: 34–44

DOI: http://doi.org/10.16995/TRAC2001_34_44
Publication Date: 05 April 2002

Volume Information:

Carruthers, M., van Driel-Murray, C., Gardner, A., Lucas, J., Revell, L., and Swift, E. (eds) 2002. *TRAC 2001: Proceedings of the Eleventh Annual Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference, Glasgow 2001.* Oxford: Oxbow Books

Copyright and Hardcopy Editions:

The following paper was originally published in print format by Oxbow Books for TRAC. Hard copy editions of this volume may still be available, and can be purchased direct from Oxbow at http://www.oxbowbooks.com.

TRAC has now made this paper available as Open Access through an agreement with the publisher. 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.

Consumer Theory and Roman North Africa: a post-colonial approach to the ancient economy

Garrick Fincham

The study of consumption is an area of increasing interest in archaeology. Application is most advanced in historical archaeology (of particular relevance to this paper are Henry's (1991) models of consumer behaviour, but see also Gibb (1996), Yentch (1994), studies of North American consumption in the historic period, or Courtney (1997), which concentrates on the medieval period in England. Consideration of consumption has, however, also begun to permeate the world of Roman archaeology, firstly through the work of Going (1992) on the vicissitudes of pottery supply in Roman Britain, Cooper's (1996) analysis of the 'blank' generation of post-roman pottery non-consumers, and most recently a broader cultural approach deployed by Woolf (1998: 169–205).

However, there are problems in applying this concept to Roman archaeology. The problem begins (as ever), with a semantic quibble. If we are considering consumption, those who consume are 'consumers'. The difficulty with this term is that it has a highly modern feel, as we live today (we are often told) in a consumer society. To attempt to analyse 17th century America, let alone the Roman empire, using theory aimed at understanding modern consumption (and the behaviour of 'consumers'), is surely anachronistic. A Romanist interested in consumption must therefore come to terms with considering an issue that many may consider to be inappropriate to his/her field of study. However, this difficulty is generated principally by the not necessarily accurate modernist connotations of the word 'consumer', and if we state quite explicitly that (as is the case for the rest of this paper) we mean simply *someone who consumes a certain thing, regardless of how, or why*, then we can open up the discussion to different types of consumption, powered by different motives. Indeed, in this light, we can see that 'consumption' is already deeply embedded in the study of Roman Archaeology. Anyone who is a regular attendee of TRAC (a glance through the last few conference proceedings Fincham et al. 2000 and Baker et al. 1999) will realise that theoretical debates within Roman archaeology are dominated by the issue of 'Romanization'. However, one approach to Romanization is to treat the concept as a simple 'consumer behaviour' model which essentially states that natives consumed Roman material culture in an attempt to 'become Roman'. If Romanization is viewed in this light we can see that, far from consumption being an anachronistic concept, an admittedly

flawed model of consumer behaviour is already embedded in Roman archaeology.

Before proceeding, we must pause to consider how 'consumption', an activity that 'uses up' the products of the economy, relates to traditional, production based studies of the Roman economy, either general (e.g. Green 1986), when considering specific sectors of the economy (Lewit 1991), or specific commodities like olive oil (Mattingly 1985, 1988) or corn (Rickman 1980). Even when attention is given to where a commodity is destined (e.g. Rickman 1980: 156–197 on corn distribution) the social consequences of such extraction for the area from which such a commodity is derived (and thus the effects on consumption patterns within that source area) are not considered. Where consideration is given to the social consequences of extraction (e.g. Mattingly 1997; Mattingly and Salmon 2000), the focus has been upon broad issues of imperialism, such as consideration of native attitudes to Roman, and whether subordinate populations engaged in resistance, or seized the opportunities empire afforded them. The study of consumption, however, offers a different perspective upon the economy of the empire, because it provides the other half of the equation, an element usually glossed over by production-based studies. We may know where, for example, a particular type of pottery was made, the range over which it was marketed, the range and date of forms produced, but if we do not understand consumption, we cannot know how what was wanted influenced what was supplied, and as Courtney (1997: 98) states, producers and consumers always exist in complex reciprocal relationships.

A second element that I wish to introduce at this point, is discrepant experience. This is a key concept, deployed by E.W. Said (1993) in his influential work *Culture and Imperialism*. Like most key concepts it can be simply defined: your perspective upon the world is influenced by your position within it. The example that Said (1993: 35–50) gives is that of the different experiences of the French conquest of Egypt, viewed in a quite different light by an Egyptian as by a Frenchmen – the same historical event, but two utterly distinct perspectives.

I would suggest that what is true for power-relations is no less true for consumption (in its broadest sense). If (as Appadurai (1986) asserts) 'things' have social lives, and the meaning of an object may change as it passes between different social circumstances during its lifetime, then we may conceptualise those different social locations of consumption as *discrepant consumerism*. What this would mean in practice is that the mode of consumption of the individual is influenced by factors external to that individual, like wealth, social status, perceived origin of the object to be consumed, but that those influences combine within the social realm to help generate a unique perspective on the act of consumption (specific to person, object, and perhaps even individual consumptive act). In effect, the perspective on 'consuming', for example, a Samian bowl in Britain in 100 AD will be varied, given the identity of the consumer. We may think of this, broadly, as a consumption spectrum (the different social locations a 'thing' may be consumed in). The Governor may use a Samian bowl in private, where there is no one to notice him using an odd bit of Gaulish pottery only fit for the natives. A Centurion from Gaul may use one because it reminds him of home, and actually makes him feel more 'gallic' (as opposed to Roman). A member of the local elite may use one because it is 'Roman', and he wishes to identify with the conquerors in order to retain his social position in the new province. A native farmer may use one

because suddenly, there is nothing but horrid red pot at market, and all the nice hand-made stuff he used to use has vanished. These are caricatures, but they do illustrate the different roles an object may play in different circumstances (note that all circumstances leave the same archaeological evidence: a couple of sherds of a samian bowl).

We may term the package of emotions, wants, needs, motivations (social, political, ethnic), that surround the acquisition, use and disposal of a 'thing', all the various elements that structure the 'social life' of that 'thing' whilst in the hands of a particular consumer, an individuals 'realm' of *discrepant consumption*. It is thus in the act of *discrepant consumption* that the meanings of things are established. No two outlooks are identical, but as with power relations (Scott 1990: 21–22), ranges of similar perspectives may form broad groups. This occurs with power relations when groups subjected to similar forms of domination engage with their social circumstance in individually unique, but generally related ways. Such related groups are described by Scott as having a 'family' resemblance. We may extend this concept into the area of consumption, where households, or settlements which share similar social and economic expectations, may also share similar tastes, desires and aspirations in their consumption activities. It is thus at the level of groups which share a 'family' of related consumption motivations that *discrepant consumption* can be addressed archaeologically.

As with other codes of behaviour, the meaning of 'things' may be rigorously enforced through a sense of group approval/disapproval. Scott (1990: 128–134) has suggested that the modes of behaviour of groups subject to domination or threat may be policed, as non-conformity is a risk to group survival. If we include consumption within this range of behaviour (and we surely must if we accept the role of the manipulation of material culture in forming identity), a dominated native who attempts to 'eat Roman' from their new Samian bowl may be met with disapproval from neighbours. This group, socially subordinate to a local elite, may have little option but to use the bowls available (here productive studies of pottery manufacture, distribution, and availability are clearly crucial to the understanding of consumption), but the social meaning of the object may be dominated by its *bowlness,* rather than its Roman-ness, and the use of the bowl may carry with it social significance defined by circumstances internal to the group, and thus part of the internally policed identity of that group. A group meaning for objects is thus negotiated and policed. The elite may have a different meaning that they attach to the same, or similar, object, and if so, the mode of consumption of this object may actually become part of a resistant strategy, based on the maintenance of a 'subordinate' way of use. If objects of the conqueror are bent to this use by subordinates, such a strategy may have the twin value of perpetuating former modes of behaviour, and taming new material culture through appropriation.

Clearly an important issue is the process through which an individual acquires an object for consumption. This is a phase much considered by Henry (see Figure 1 for a simplified version of her consumption model), and which is termed on the model that she presents as 'The Decision'. This model is person centred, the individual becomes 'aware' in the Decision phase, acquires, uses, and then discards. To put this act of consumption into a larger context we need, in effect, to link Henry's model to Appadurai's (1996) concept of a social life of things, and thus create a 'topology' of consumption (Figure 2).

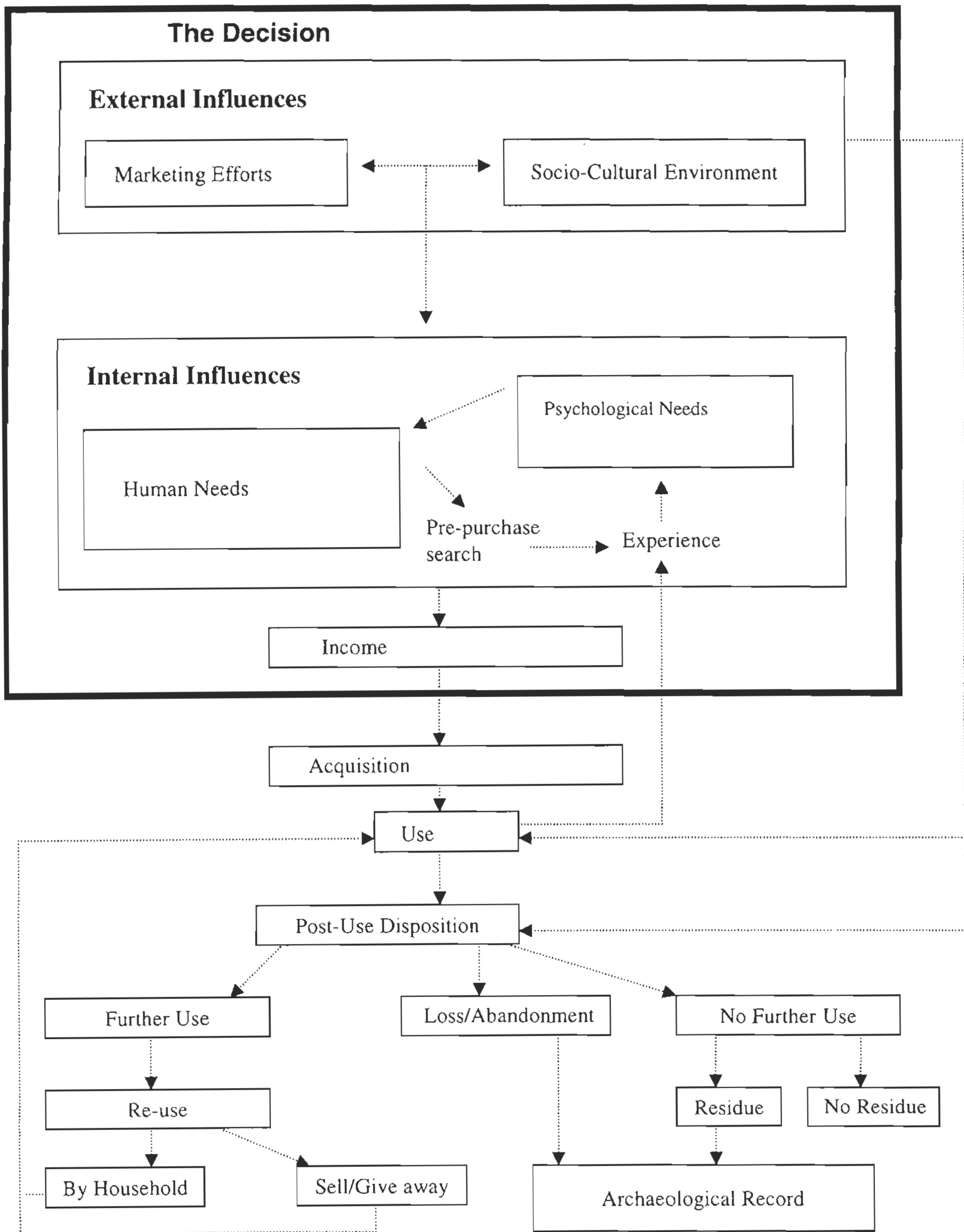


Figure 1. A simplified general model of consumer behavior (after Henry 1991, figure 1)

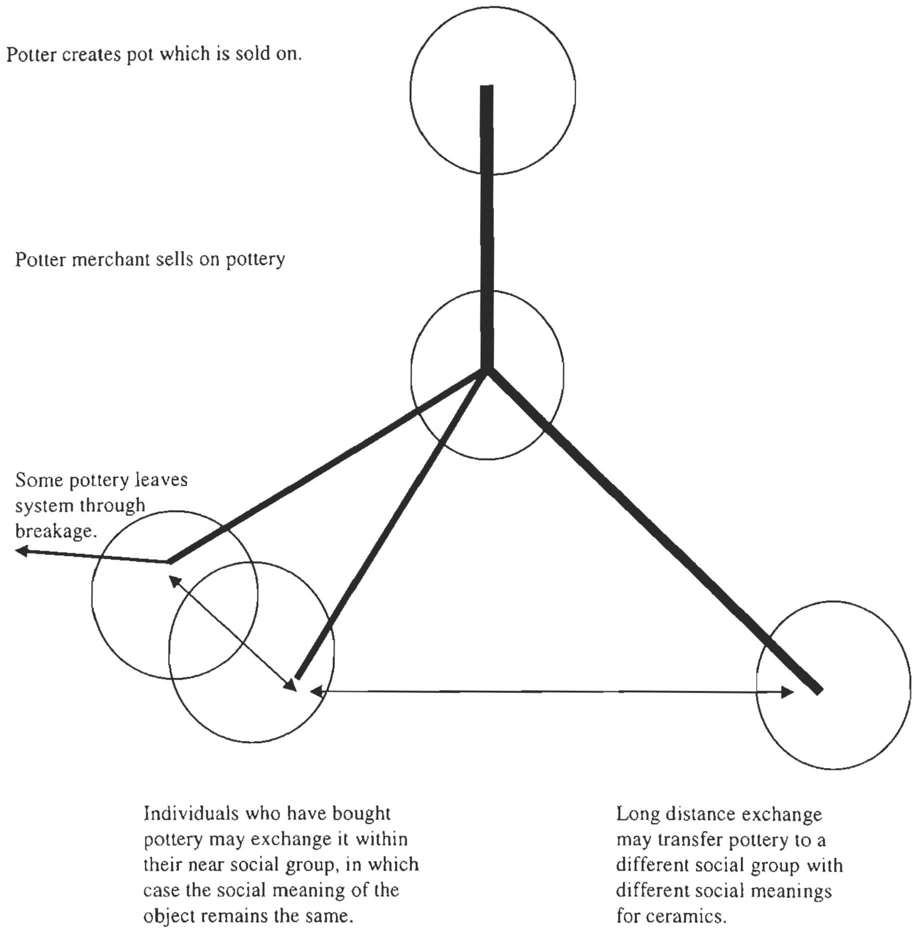


Figure 2. Topology of Consumption, ceramic acquisition as an example

How are we to relate this to the archaeology? If it is the case that material culture in general is linked to the creation and maintenance of identity (Pearce 2000), then it should be the case that the consumption of different classes of material culture by the same individual occur in linked mental and social contexts: we should see patterns across the consumption of different types of thing, and conversely, the more classes of material culture we analyse the better sense of the 'consumption' world of the individual we will achieve – a technique deployed to great effect in American historical archaeology by, for example, Deetz (1996).

Thus a scheme can be developed to profile the consumption activity on any given site, by ranking the occurrence of architecture, small finds, and architecture. In the case of the case study deployed for the purposes of this paper, that of the data collected by

the Libyan Valleys survey (Barker 1996; Mattingly 1996) in the Wadi Ghazira, only the pottery and architecture are available, but this is sufficient to demonstrate the potential of generating a consumption profile on a site by site basis, and the generating an interpretive consumption framework within which to place that sites consumption activity.

Before proceeding to the case study, we must give thought to the appropriate unit of analysis. It is, of course, pretty much impossible to study 'individuals' in archaeology, and we have already touched upon the concept of a consumption group. Henry (1991: 6–7) has overcome the problem by aggregating individuals into 'households', and such a unit could form the basis of a 'consumption group'. However, even this is probably optimistic if we are dealing with survey data from the Roman period. In the Wadi Ghazira the smallest unit of study was a 'site', which may have been one of several types: a group of huts, a farm, farmstead, or Gasr (being a fortified farm, usually architecturally substantial). However, even at this level, the fragmentation of the ceramic data was such as to preclude any meaningful analysis, and the data was thus considered at the level of the site type (e.g. all data for huts were amalgamated). The question under consideration for the purposes of this case study was thus: 'did architecturally similar sites in the Wadi Ghizra show a shared sense of *Discrepant Consumption?*

To this end we will consider two types of pottery identified by the survey, African Red Slip (or ARS), and the later Tripolitanian Red Slip (or TRS), and their distribution through the Wadi Ghirza (Figure 3). The forms were divided into 'size ranges', and although this was clearly somewhat elastic, it essentially gave a division across five size categories. These sizes were then applied to three 'use forms', a basic tri-partite division of the ceramics into bowl, dish and platter. The combination of broad size divisions and 'use form' was an attempt to give an impression of the ceramic assemblage, as it would appear to the user, rather then in an abstract typological sequence. The following case study is based upon a single Wadi, a fraction of the data available, and the number of sherds involved is small. It represents a feasibility study of what is envisaged to be a far larger (and consequently statistically more reliable) project, covering the entire Libyan Valleys Survey area.

Along the Wadi we see a basic pattern, some bowls, many dishes, a few platters. This was then subdivided by the putative 'consumption groups', based upon site types (see Figure 4 for ARS distribution on, for example, farms). In the non-Gasr site graph we see that the three use categories retain the same basic proportional relationship as the Wadi average (Figure 5). For the Gasr sites, however, the category of site which we may suggest represents the greatest investment in architectural 'consumption', the basic relationship still pertains, albeit in a slightly distorted form. There is a general increase (proportionately) in the larger type of dish, and platters, representing a significant deviation from the Wadi aggregate profile.

When we move onto TRS (Figure 6), we see that the peak in medium dishes remains, but the relationship with bowls is different, with a much wider size spread. When we examine the GASR profile (Figure 7) this mimics the Wadi average (unlike with ARS), but other site types have principally medium bowls. What does this suggest in terms of our consumer theory models? On a small sherd count this is clearly rather hypothetical, however, I shall explore this case study as a heuristic tool in establishing potential, and

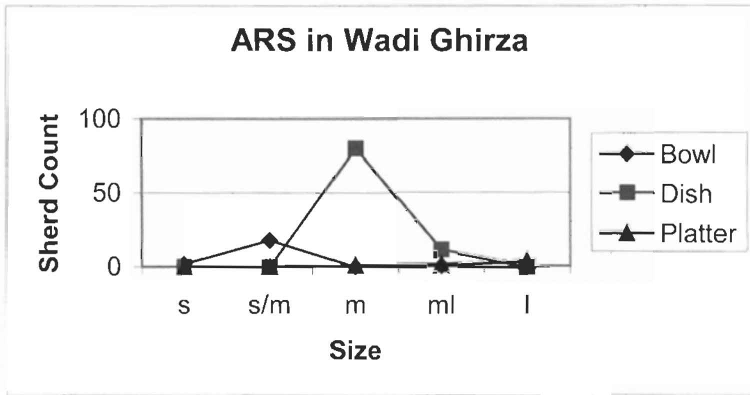


Figure 3. ARS in Wadi Ghirza

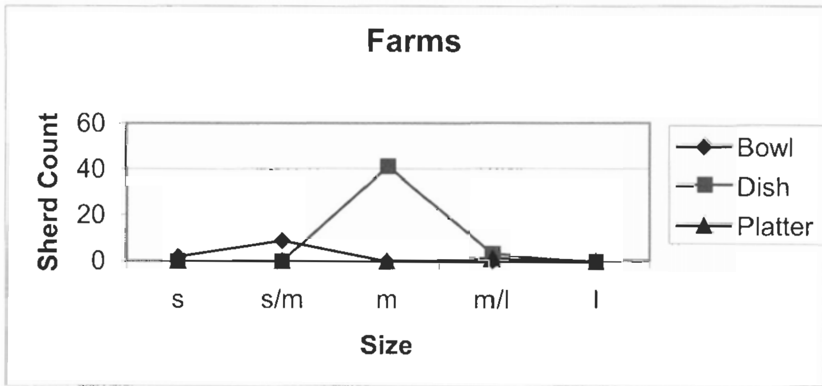


Figure 4. ARS on Farm Sites in Wadi Ghirza

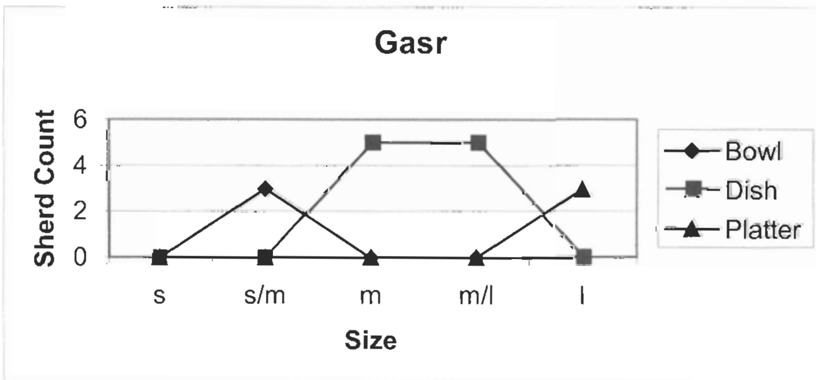


Figure 5. ARS on Gasr sites in Wadi Ghirza

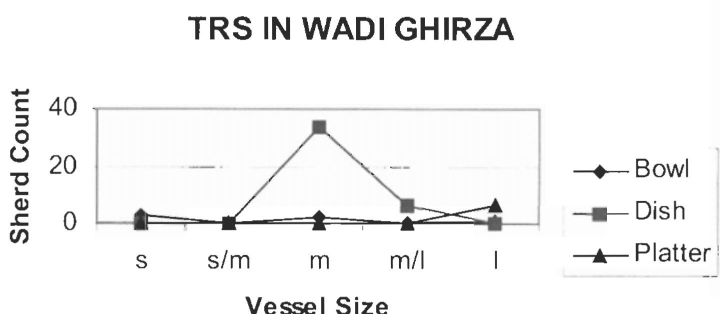


Figure 6. TRS in Wadi Ghirza

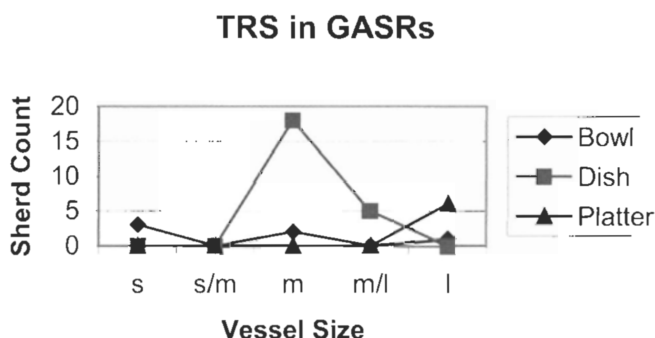


Figure 7. TRS on Gasr sites in Wadi Ghirza

to illustrate the type of questions which we may begin to ask. The repeated relationship between the 'use categories', many dishes, some bowls, few platters *may* represent the underlying 'suite' of pottery required to perform the function of these ceramics, (and being fineware we may suggest that this function is perhaps both to eat from, but also social, in that it may have had a display function). This relationship is established low down in the status hierarchy, as established through the basic architectural division of non-gasr/gasr. The forms which increase in frequency as we move up the social scale are those 'either side' of the Dish peak, suggesting that within the use scheme, the core mode of pottery consumption is through the use of medium size dishes (this is so on all types of sites). This basic core use is then elaborated upon, the more fineware is consumed. If we compare this to a modern context, we might suggest that if you are putting together a collection of crockery bit by bit, you might start with the primary element (dinner plates). Matching coffee cups will be low down on the scale, but note that when the set is complete you will have as many coffee cups as plates, thus the

more that is consumed, the more 'fringe items' increase in relation to the primary element, distorting numerical relationships. We see a similar process with TRS, in which most sites only have dishes, but the GASR sites have a much broader range. However, note that the Gasr profile for ARS consumption is significantly different to the overall Wadi profile, but the TRS profile for GASR's closely mimics the Wadi average. This clearly indicates a shift, in which by the TRS using period, the Gasr's have become the focus for consumption, at least of Red slip ceramics.

Clearly there are issues of wealth and availability which act as caveats and constraints on such a process, but in examining the Wadi assemblage in this way we can illustrate the *way* in which extra wealth was spent, rather than just making a simple statement that more wealth equals more pottery. This allows us to begin pencilling in motivations in 'Henry's' black box (albeit in a superficial way). We can suggest that pottery use in Wadi Ghazira is focused upon a core use area of medium dishes. This is probably a functional issue: the medium dish in this context being the basic ceramic item used for food serving (broadly equivalent in the spectrum of ceramic use to a modern dinner plate). The principal functional motivation on less obviously wealthy sites was thus to acquire these basic vessels. Turning to more wealthy sites, principally the Gasr's, we do not see a simple 'multiplication' of ceramics: i.e. as more ceramics are consumed, increased consumption is not merely a question of, for example, 'twice as much as everything'. The proportions change – why is this?

There is a spectrum of interpretations, but to illustrate this I will offer two polarised alternatives. Firstly is the simple 'wealth' interpretation, that all individuals in Wadi Ghazira aspire to a 'normative' and ideal assemblage of pottery, and their acquisition of ceramics was geared to systematically acquiring this assemblage within the confines of their purchasing power. In this scenario the difference in the patterns of consumption from ARS to TRS would indicate (at least in the realm of fine ware consumption), a widening in the relative gap between the wealth of Gasr's and all other types of site. The difficulties with this are, however, manifold. We must question the degree to which knowledge about this ideal assemblage could have been accurately reproduced. Minor variations in the pottery graphs, for example, might illustrate 'inaccurate' translation of elite norms down the social scale.

However, it is also possible that key elements of the ceramic assemblage were genuinely confined to certain types of sites, a situation which increases in extremity form the period of ARS use to that of TRS use. Platters, rare on all sites (even when bowls and dishes are relatively common), are concentrated on Gasrs. This might suggest that another selection process is occurring, one based upon some form of active consumer choice, rather than the passive constriction of lack of wealth. This may infer some form of social selection (perhaps the use of platters was seen as an elite preserve in the Wadi), or this may infer a deeper cultural divide between the inhabitants of Gasr's and the rest of the Wadi. If this were the case we may suggest that Gasr inhabitants had a different consumption pattern to other inhabitants of the Wadi, and that this is in fact an example of *discrepant consumption.*

This case study clearly needs to be located in a wider context, with consideration of other Wadi assemblages, and contrasting assemblages from outside the survey area, like those from the coastal towns, contrasting fine ware with coarse wares, and where

possible small finds. Also, any deep discussion of actual examples of *discrepant consumption* also needs to be located within a closely constructed interpretative framework taking account of regional circumstance – this is research that is currently underway. However, with this small example we might suggest that the shift from ARS to TRS consumption profile indicates an increasing social stratification in the landscape, and might suggest, for example, that the benefits of large scale agricultural production, presumably for the state (something which Mattingly (1997), has described as a landscape of opportunity), did not trickle down further that the inhabitants of Gasr sites. In this way we may be able underline (in a quantified fashion) the way in which state exploitation extracted the wealth produced in an area (identifiable though conventional production based studies of the Roman economy), to the detriment of the local inhabitants. Although detailed work of this kind are beyond the scope of this paper, the current study ultimately aims to combine consumer studies with post colonial theory to assess the degree to which Roman imperialism shaped provincial economies in Spain, North Africa and Britain. Thus, I hope that I have demonstrated the potential for introducing a greater degree of reasoned complexity to the study of the consumption of material culture within the Roman Empire, and the contribution such a study could make to our understanding of the wider nature of the Roman Empire.

Faculty of Continuing Education, Department of History, Birkbeck College

Bibliography

Appadurai, A. 1986. Introduction: commodities and the politics of value. In A. Appadurai (ed.) *The social life of things: commodities in cultural perspective.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 3–63

Baker, P., Forcey, C., Jundi, S. and Witcher, R. (eds.) 1999. *TRAC 98: Proceedings of the eighth Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference, Leicester 1998*. Oxford: Oxbow

Barker, G. (ed.) 1996. *Farming the desert: The UNESCO Libyan valleys archaeological survey.* Vol. 1. London: The Society for Libyan Studies

Cooper, N. 1996. Searching for the blank generation: consumer choice in Roman and post-Roman Britain. In N. Cooper and J. Webster (eds.) *Roman Imperialism: post-colonial perspectives.* Leicester: School of Archaeological Studies, Archaeology Monograph 3. 85–98

Courtney, P. 1997. Ceramics and the history of consumption: pitfalls and prospects. *Medieval Ceramics*, 2: 95–108

Deetz, J. 1996. *In small things forgotten: an archaeology of early American life.* Gardern City, NY and London: Anchor Books

Fincham, G. R., Harrison, G., Rogers-Holland, R. and Revell, L. (eds.) 2000. *TRAC 99: Proceedings of the ninth Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference, Durham 1999.* Oxford: Oxbow

Gibb, J. G. 1996. *The archaeology of wealth: consumer behaviour in English America.* New York and London: Plenum Press

Going, C. J. 1992. Economic 'long waves' in the Roman period? A reconnaissance of the Romano-British ceramic evidence. *Oxford Journal of Archaeology*, 11: 93–118

Green, K.1986. *The Archaeology of the Roman Economy.* London: B.T. Batsford Ltd

Henry, S. L. 1991. Consumers, commodities, and choices: a general model of consumer behaviour. *Historical Archaeology*, 25, No. 2: 3–14

Lewit, T. 1991. *Agricultural production in the Roman economy A.D. 200 – 400.* Oxford: B.A.R., International Series 568

Mattingly, D. J. 1985. Olive oil production in Roman Tripolitania. In D. J. Buck and D. J. Mattingly (eds.) *Town and Country in Roman Tripolitania: papers in honour of Olwen Hacket,* ed Oxford: British Archaeological Reports International Series, 274. 27–46

Mattingly, D. J. 1988. Oil for export: a comparative study of Roman olive oil production in Libya, Spain and Tunisia. *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 1: 33–56

Mattingly, D. J. 1996. *Farming the desert: The UNESCO Libyan valleys archaeological survey.* Vol. 2. London: The Society for Libyan Studies

Mattingly, D. J. 1997. Africa: a landscape of opportunity? In D. J. Mattingly (ed.) *Dialogues in Roman Imperialism: Power, discourse and discrepant experience in the Roman Empire.* Journal of Roman Archaeology Supplementary Series No. 23. 117–142

Mattingly, D. J., and Salmon, J. (eds.) 2000. *Economies Beyond Agriculture in the Classical World.* London: Routledge

Pearce, S. 2000. Researching Material Culture: Introduction. In S. Pearce (ed.) *Researching Material Culture.* Leicester: School of Archaeological Studies, Leicester Archaeology Monographs 8/ Material Culture Study Group Occasional Paper No. 1. 1–6

Rickman, G. 1980. *The corn supply of ancient Rome.* Oxford: Clarendon Press

Said, E. 1993. *Culture and imperialism.* London: Vintage

Scott, J. C. 1990. *Domination and the arts of resistance: hidden transcripts.* New Haven: Yale University Press

Woolf, G. 1998. *Becoming Roman: the origins of provincial civilization in Gaul.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Yentch, A. E. 1994. *A Chesapeake family and their slave: a study in historical archaeology.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press