Wolves' Nipples and Otters' Noses?
Rural Foodways in Roman Britain

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People who eat strikingly different foods or similar foods in different ways are thought to be strikingly different... What we like, what we eat, how we eat it and how we feel about it ... speak eloquently of how we perceive ourselves in relation to each other.'

(Mintz 1985: 26).

The study of food is not merely based on the nutritional or calorific content of a foodstuff, rather it encompasses the fuller context of its production, storage, distribution, preparation and presentation in a social and cultural setting (Johannessen 1993: 117). The study of food has long been recognised as important to the understanding of the social fabric of groups. This has been particularly the case within anthropology but also within historical archaeology. As has been suggested by Johannessen, in everyday cooking and serving of food, people not only feed themselves but express themselves socially, economically, politically and ideologically; what 'we' eat is not what 'they' eat and these distinctions help us to differentiate us (1993: 117). From this we can see that food is much more than nutrition, possibly because the action of eating is fundamental to life, it has been filled with much symbolic meaning. It is an everyday necessity but it expresses concepts that are fundamental to the functioning of a society; wealth, status, identity can all be expressed by what food is being eaten and how it is consumed. One's identity as expressed through what is eaten is often constructed in opposition to another group of people. For example, the Trobriand Islanders do not eat human flesh, nor do they eat dog or snake. They abhor their neighbours, whom they consider to be cannibals and dog- and snake-eaters. These neighbours in turn despise the Trobriand Islanders for their lack of culinary discrimination in neglecting such excellent foods as humans, dogs and snakes (Malinowski 1948).

Traditionally, the different components that make up a meal have been studied separately and often without much thought to the role they played within cooking and eating. In this paper I will suggest a more integrated approach, i.e. that the different artefactual classes (pottery, animal bones and plant remains) are studied together and in the order that they may have been used to cook and eat a meal (see Hawkes 1999). The food that will be considered through this approach is the food which may have been consumed by the rural poor.

The second issue which will be addressed in this paper is the concept of 'Roman' Britain. By this I do not mean the debate about what we mean when we describe an object as being 'Roman' but rather how relevant is the actual concept of 'Roman' Britain when studying the daily lives of, in this instance the rural (but also the urban) poor. As will be seen, it can be suggested that Rome and the new administration would have had little if any influence upon key aspects of their lives.

Both these issues will be elucidated with some examples from sites concentrated in the East Midlands, in particular in the Corieltauvian territory. The sites under consideration are rural but can be divided quite crudely into high and low status. This division is based on the label attached to the site by its excavator. This is often done on very superficial indicators, for example, a site has a high proportion of fine wares, and therefore it must be high status. There is very little consideration of the context of use or of the bigger picture. We will consider whether or not this designation of poor/ wealthy is reflected in what was actually consumed upon these sites, or how it was consumed (i.e. the cooking methods employed).

The model which has been devised for an integrated study of food is based on the steps needed to procure ingredients, prepare them, cook them, serve them and finally consume them (Hawkes 2001). It has been divided into three main stages: food procurement and food preparation and storage, which can occur either after food procurement or after food preparation. These have each been subdivided into different phases which take account of the meal process. The main components which have been considered in this model are animal bones, i.e. the 'meat' portion of the meal, the ceramics which are involved in the cooking, serving and consumption, and plant remains, representing the vegetable component. However there are other categories of finds and archaeological evidence which should be considered as well, such as: types of small finds, structural data such as hearths and buildings, vessels of other materials such as metals and glass and artefacts made out of organic materials such wood and leather. The model also identifies the different types of archaeological evidence which indicate the different stages in the consumption process. I do not intend to dwell upon this methodology, as I have talked about it in detail elsewhere (Hawkes 2001).

A key issue to the study of food is the social and cultural context within which food operates. Food plays a highly significant social role, and this is something which has long been recognised within anthropology and historical archaeology (Yentsch 1994; Deetz 1996), but is a rather newer concept within Roman archaeology. Here, foodstuffs are seen more in the light of the general economy, i.e. the production of staples, or the import of luxuries. However, we can gain useful insights into the social role of food from anthropological approaches particularly concerning changes in foodways and cooking techniques in a context of contact and culture change.

A related issue to this is the idea of cultural conservatism. Often in recent years this has been interpreted as 'resistance'(Webster 1997; Scott 1985). Although in some cases passive resistance may have played a role, a more complex interpretation can be put forward. The 'famous' acts of resistance, for example the Boudican Revolt, or the areas of life resistance has often been linked to, like for example religion, are associated with the native elites. Resistance then would not be found on poor rural sites but rather on wealthier sites, as it can be suggested that resistance is deeply associated with the loss

of elite power. If we consider the impact of conquest upon native society, it may be that those most affected by the Roman Conquest were the native elites. The people who were 'in charge' in late Iron Age Britain, as Millett (1990) has made clear, found themselves in a situation post-conquest where their scope for action was more limited, and where their continuance in positions of authority was dependant upon the approval of the Roman authorities. The native rural poor on the other hand were poor and unimportant before the Conquest just as they were after, as has been suggested in the case of Imperial rule in Egypt (Said 1994). The people who were most affected were the powerful, whereas the life of the lower orders remained unchanged. This, it can be suggested, may have been the case in Roman Britain.

When we consider examples of resistance that have been claimed for Britain, principally settlement patterns (Hingley 1997; Fincham forthcoming), status display, and religion (Webster and Cooper 1996), it is notable that the latter two are, in any case, directly related to elite concerns (and may be as much to do with re-affirming their own power in changed circumstances to their followers as 'resistance'). Settlement patterns are, as the antiquity of our modern countryside illustrates, highly durable, and innately conservative, and perhaps here we should not expect change, and consequently seek special reasons (i.e. resistance) when change does not occur. Perhaps rather it is the change which needs special explanation.

Thus, acts of resistance against the Roman authorities *may* have been carried out by discontented native elites, hence the suggestion put forward in the introduction that the Roman Conquest might have had little relevance to ordinary people's lives. Lower status rural sites have often been interpreted as being unromanized, i.e. there is a lack of the trappings archaeologists normally associate with a 'Roman' site. However, what we may be dealing with is simple conservatism. Is conservatism 'resistance'? Perhaps, but the term resistance seems to me to carry with it connotations of conscious action to resist 'romanisation', rather than the innate inertia which slows the process of cultural change. People liked eating mutton stew out of grey pots and so continued doing so, not through a sense of political action, but because there was no real reason change. How many old (and even not so old) people do you hear saying that they do not like 'foreign foods'? Because the food you eat is often thought to define who you are at the deepest levels, people may be very loath to change such habits. If we take this approach – assuming a lack of all but superficial change unless otherwise apparent, the pottery present on sites should not be seen as Roman pottery but rather as the closest possible approximation to what they were used to, selected from what was now available.

This leads us to a consideration of the whole issue of the transmittance of ideas. In traditional interpretations of Romano-British sites and their material culture, knowledge of this 'Romanized life style package' is always assumed. It has never actually been considered how anyone would ever have known about such a thing, if such a thing actually existed (see Fincham 2000). Often the practicalities of how people would have found out about how to wear Roman fashions, hairstyles, how to cook and eat Roman-style are taken for granted. Coins and sculpture are often cited as the vehicle for transmittance of such concepts (Cool pers. comm.). The idea that women (and men) might have used coins as an example of how to do their hair suggests a certain element of desperation, of desperately wanting to be Roman and have Roman hair. But also the

practical difficulties of accurately reconstructing a complex hairstyle from a coin portrait should not be underestimated, and if attempted at all would almost certainly be a distorted version of the original. If however, people were, as outlined above, not particularly interested in Roman goods, then why should we assume such a great interest in other areas of life. Is it because we still automatically assume that people wanted to become Roman? Therefore, in this paper, I suggest that we not only need to break free from Romanization (for a detailed deconstruction see Freeman 1993) but away from the concept of Rome. We are merely studying a prehistoric society, especially in the early period, whose inhabitants had no knowledge or interest in the Roman Empire. Although we cannot doubt that as a political entity the Roman Empire existed, we can doubt if its existence had any relevance to the rural poor who inhabited it. When we find a 'Roman' artefact on a site we automatically assume it to have been used in the same way as objects are used in the same way all across the empire. Because we approach not only the objects but also the people with the hindsight of history, we pay little attention to what they were perceiving or interacting with their world. We need to look at material culture in terms of how people used it and forget about the Roman Empire, because after all how many people in a rural farmstead would have known or had any interest in who the Emperor of Rome was?

A further point to consider is who was actually doing the food preparation. In most traditional societies it is very much a woman's job: although men may be involved in food procurement and agriculture, the actual cooking is often carried out in the home. Women, in particular poor women, have little social and political influence, and despite occasional high profile exceptions (e.g. Boudicca) this was almost certainly the case in pre-Roman native society. Thus, a poor woman's contact with the outside world may have been even more limited than that of a poor man. Cooking is not a skill that has traditionally been learnt in a formal way, it is a skill acquired through watching and helping mother (Flandrin et al. 1996). Therefore, particularly in pre-literate societies, it can be suggested that information about food and how to cook was passed on from mother to daughter, and existing as it did in the 'closed' domestic world, would have been a prime area of 'conservatism'. Food cooked by a woman would have been basically a continuation of food cooked by her mother, which in turn she learnt of grandmother. Food, in particular daily food, may have remained unchanged, except for minor modifications, for many generations, and because of the possibility (rather than in spite of it) that a great sense of identity may have been vested in what food was consumed, a simple 'passive' situation of cultural inertia and conservatism, rather than the active decision to 'resist' is sufficient to explain this. Again, we perhaps should take the approach that it is change in this core area of identity which requires explination – rather than the lack of change.

The archaeology that we often study is not that of the home and of women, but that of the world beyond the home, or how homes relate to the outside world and to men. In cases where women are seen to have roles in society, these are usually not 'ordinary' women but members of the elites and their roles are seen as important because they are in essence 'male' roles. Although gender is too large a topic to discuss here however, it can be suggested that the realm of poor women was often confined to the home or its immediate surroundings, and it is here that we find a gendered archaeology. An

archaeology therefore which is not concerned with the political, a male preserve in the past, no matter how unpalatable this may be to modern women, and this is why I prefer 'conservatism' in food to 'resistance'. On rural farmsteads perhaps with little contact with the wider world, food prepared by women who learnt from their mothers would naturally be 'native' rather than Roman.

Even where 'Roman' foodstuffs are present (albeit in *very* small quantities), we must question who were they for and how were they used, if we are to model their possible relationship to everyday food. As foodstuffs they did not come with instruction manuals, and there is, in fact, no convincing model to suggest to us how native women would have learnt to 'cook Roman'. Such food is better approached by envisaging its functioning within the well-established social sphere of the rural farmstead. Much material culture theory stresses that the social meaning of an object is not intrinsic, but imparted by context (Appadurai 1986): evidence of 'exotic' foodstuffs in small quantities is not, therefore, convincing evidence of the transplantation of continental cooking *methods* to Britain. They may have been novelties, the acquisition of which built male status, they may have been small-scale imports, tried and rejected, they may have been acquired, but converted to use with 'native foodways'. Many alternatives exist to try to explain what small amounts of exotic material mean upon rural sites. What is increasingly clear, however, is that in the long run, they did not challenge the well-established patterns of mundane, daily food – and neither should we expect them to.

In conclusion, I would like to underline the key focus of this paper. It is simply this: that in studying the daily, the mundane, we should, I believe, take an approach that takes account of cultural inertia and innate conservatism. It is by studying the banalities of everyday life that we give voice to the underrepresented in archaeology. By taking a more sensitive approach to material culture, particularly in recognising that the presence of a 'Roman bowl' or 'Roman food stuffs' do not necessarily indicate a 'Roman' use, we can move beyond the quite probably superficial changes which were the result of the Roman conquest, and recognise the cultural continuity beneath the 'things'. More importantly, I feel, is the mindset with which we approach such an issue. Romanization has been thoroughly deconstructed (see Hingley 1997; Freeman 1993), we no longer wish to be 'Romano-centric', but in looking at the conquest period we still expect to see change, and seek to explain instances of continuity. Given the fact that material culture is not, in itself, a guide to the social context within which such 'things' were used, perhaps we should expect continuity, and seek to explain change.

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