

The ecology of empire: food, community and network in the Classical Roman landscape

Yale Colloquium on Agrarian Studies: January 15th 2010

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Brief Introduction

Over the long timescales of archaeology, the natural landscape and its ecological drivers often figure prominently in accounts of agrarian change. I have chosen a particular chapter of *Feast* to shift the focus within discussions of long term change from natural landscapes to the more ephemeral social landscapes. In *Eating in order to be* three such social landscapes are explored, from the Europe of 2,500 and 1,500 years ago. They relate respectively to: Iron Age Britain and Gaul; the expanding Roman Empire; and the late Empire and emerging Christian World. Each of these social landscapes is defined by a distinct theater of consumption of food and drink. There are discernible connections between these changing theatres of consumption and enduring consequences upon food production and the agrarian sphere. At the start of the period in question, European farmers cultivated a range of crops and varieties that are now obscure, with technologies that have long become rare. At the end of that period, a new principal crop, bread wheat, rose to prominence and remains the world's most foremost food species today. The animal-drawn turning plough appears at the same time, and has remained central to agricultural production until the modern industrial agrochemical age. The sequence of changes provides a focus for discussion of how cultural dynamics can shape patterns of food production on timescales (and geographical scales) much greater than the cultural episode in question.

Main text (*Chapter Nine from Feast: why humans share food. OUP*)

Colchester, Southern England, *circa* AD45

He made his way unsteadily along the side passage, still clasping a dish of some identified concoction. The outside air was a relief – it might clear his head a little, and in any case he needed the break. It was so important that he made the right impression – how often was he ever going to get that chance to dine in the Tribune’s house again? – Nonetheless, it was hard-going, both physically and emotionally. The physical side was troubling him most now – all that exotically flavoured meat, whenever was it going to stop? and fish that looked like snakes, and others of the strangest shapes imaginable.

This last thought hurried his pace to the door to the latrine. Turning speedily into the darkened room, he hardly made eye contact with his companions before occupying the one free seat. He glanced momentarily at the glamorous brooches that marked them out as of rather higher status than he. He certainly made no attempt to join their conversation, which any case he couldn’t quite follow. He hadn’t imagined his Latin was that bad – indeed, he had to use it every day since his promotion, but sorting a few soldiers out was one thing, following drunken Italians in full flow was quite another.

The ache returned. He was not yet aware that his problem didn’t so much derive from the stuffed intestines he’d bravely consumed, or even those wizened sticky fruits that the little boats brought up the River Colne in great jarloads. He was unknowingly sharing

these treats with a fast growing population of whipworms, currently taking vigorous exercise in his alimentary tract. Slumping a little, his thoughts returned to the warm sunshine of his distant birthplace, and to the more comforting meals of his childhood. For a brief moment the strong stench of cess gave way in his mind to that distant smell of moist thatch and chickpea stew, and to recaptured thoughts of a space between earthen walls, family, and a slow burning fire. He pulled himself back to the moment and rose up. Since those soothing chickpea stews, a great deal had happened that he preferred not to recall, and in any case, he needed to rejoin the companion who had secured his invitation to this strange and elaborate feast. He might have trouble following the conversation, but that didn't mean he couldn't still make an impression.

In a gloomy underground car park beneath a shopping centre in eastern England, we can look up to an empty space where the unfortunate incident imagined above lay entombed for the best part of two millennia. The car park is in the town of Colchester in southern England, hewn out of the subsoil in the 1970's after a 'rescue excavation' had been carried out. The local archaeological unit was used to Roman remains turning up all the time; Modern Colchester was built over the site of a legionary fortress on the northern periphery of the Roman Empire in the middle of the 1st century AD. Enough of Roman Colchester's outline survives in the modern town for the team to work out that the car park was being excavated through the foundations of one of a row of larger houses within the fortress, almost certainly the house of a "tribune", a high ranking officer, probably a young man being groomed for high office in the civilian world.¹

The excavation of the tribune's house was carried out in advance of the development of the shopping centre. In one corner of the house they exposed the ground plan of a small room, dominated by a deep, timber-lined pit. We can only speculate on the seating arrangements over that pit. Beneath those uncertain seats, the evidence gains in solidity. Two to three metres down into the latrine pit, past the traces of the wooden lining that became increasingly clear, one of bio-archaeology's great prizes came to light. The diggers had recovered "coprolite", the formal term for fossil faeces.

The word coprolite derives from the Greek *copros* and *lithos*, or faecal "stone". The stone refers to the mineralization of the ancient faeces; they are found encrusted and rendered solid by an infusion of calcium phosphate, which gives them a light brown colour. The calcium derives from lime in the surrounding sediment, and the phosphate from the high phosphate content of the faeces itself. The actual form coprolites can take varies, as a consequence of the considerable variation of dietary input featured throughout this book. Sometimes they may retain a recognisable shape, but quite commonly they collapse into layers of a more anonymous kind. Here at the Legionary fortress, the coprolite from the tribune's latrine was described as "*pale buff in colour with an open porous structure including fragments of plant material...formed as flat irregular sheets within the pit fill*". After careful lifting, those ancient faecal fragments were softened and broke up in hydrochloric acid, yielding a solution of dark brown hue, within which lingered the insoluble residue of some ancient repast. There were the microscopic fragments of silica, known as "phytoliths" the least digestible part of plant food. Other small fragments of tissue were still intact. They could be identified under the microscope

as pieces of cereal bran. Alongside these fragments, the minute eggs of the *Trichuris* nematode were spotted, an intestinal parasite more commonly known as the whipworm.²

The bulk samples taken from the fill of the latrine also included seeds of figs, raspberries, grapes, and elderberries, fragments of bones of some of the animals consumed: cattle, sheep or goat, pig, hare, and the birds, mostly domestic fowl, with some duck and goose. Careful sieving would add fish to this list, eel, herring, mackerel, and rather surprisingly, stickleback. Anyone who has seen the vicious spines on the particular fish will wonder how it found its way into a latrine. It may have come in with some of the broken tableware that was also dumped in the loo, some very delicate fragments of eggshell ware imported from Italy. Perhaps we are catching a glimpse of culinary theatre, discretely rejected and disposed of?³

In refuse deposits of this period in other parts of the fortress at Colchester, flotation and sieving has further enriched this list, with increasingly exotic elements. Figs and grapes are not the only fruits to have travelled as far as the Italian tableware. Other deposits within the fortress produced mulberry pips, walnut shells, olive stones, and even the charred remains of dates, the most exotic item of all, with some of the flesh still visibly attached. This residue of a diverse and novel table is further enhanced by shells of chicken egg, and of mussels, oysters, scallops and cockles. The contrast with the staple fare of that time was immense. What were these meals about, in the otherwise bare and functional setting of a military fortress?⁴

The ends of empire

The British Isles may have seemed chilly and rainy to its military occupiers, but they were very far from the most extreme landscapes touched by the expansion of the Rome. The meals enjoyed on the best tables within the Roman fort could be read as a map of its political influence. From the cool British north come raspberries and hare, and fish from the adjacent oceans; from the estuarine lowlands around the North Sea come eels, and from the lush grasslands of temperate Europe came beef. Figs, grapes and wine arrive from the Mediterranean, and most exotic of all, dates from the south-eastern limits of Empire, bordering the desert. In this respect, their meals are similar to the meals enjoyed at the heart of later imperial powers of Europe, which similarly mapped out their global conquests through their food, giving particular prominence to exotic spices and beverages, which not infrequently travelled from colonies on the far side of the planet. If we trace the Colchester date stones back across the Empire of Rome to their source, we reach the south and east margins of the Mediterranean Sea, and the arid, sun-drenched regions of South West Asia. Beyond those even, there are Roman forts in regions too arid for anything to grow, and to which all food must have been imported from some distance.

One such string of forts runs for around 170 kilometres from the Nile Valley, some way north of the ancient site of Luxor, to the shores of the Red Sea. They are arranged along two Roman roads, perhaps a day's march from each other, crossing Egypt's Eastern

Desert, a parched mountainous expanse traversed by a thin population of Bedouin shepherds. Each road leads to an ancient stoneworking settlement. One road leads to Mons Claudianus, the other road to Mons Porphyrites. The very fine stone quarried from these sites was dressed on site and exported vast distances. They can still be seen in Rome today, for example in the form of the columns that grace the Pantheon. Imperfect columns that fractured before completion remain in the desert close to their source, ominous memorials to the memory of the workers whose prodigious efforts did not always bear the required fruit. We can reflect with awe on the formidable task of shaping such columns under the blistering heat and then transporting them to the heart of the Empire. Archaeobotanist, Marijke Van der Veen was keen to learn how they undertook the basic, but equally challenging task of feeding themselves.

Ancient writers had spoken of the harsh living conditions that slaves, prisoners and conscripts endured at these sites, leading her to speculate on some fairly grim meals. The terrain, the heat, and the isolation of these sites made it fairly difficult for to reach, let alone dig these sites, but once excavation began, those same environmental features served well. The sites were encountered in a marvellous state of preservation, clearly visible from some distance, with nothing in this barren landscape to disturb them. Within their planned military outlines, the footings of huts, storehouses, and middens could be seen. The arid conditions also greatly favour the preservation of food debris. In middens, and in abandoned huts within the quarry settlement, Van der Veen recovered a mass of food plant debris. Working her way meticulously through this material, she was increasingly surprised by its makeup.

As might be expected, there were fair numbers of cereals and pulses, heavy to move, but the most compact and transportable foodstuffs of all. There were also oilseeds, such as sesame and safflower, and nuts such as walnut and almond, adding flavour and variety, and still easily moved around. Yet more flavour is added by 14 species of spices and herbs, including coriander, dill, anise, basil and fenugreek. The list becomes increasingly interesting when we move to fruits. Date, olive, grape and fig are among 18 fruits identified, which also include pomegranate, mulberry and watermelon. Least expected of all were the green vegetables, including cabbage, chicory, cress and lettuce.⁵

Like the northern meal with which this Chapter opens, their meals were also arranged around a fusion of Roman and local meat. In both places, the Roman favourites of pork, oysters and chicken were enjoyed. In the north of the Empire they were consumed alongside the traditional beef, and here in the south with donkey and camel. This ample desert fare was further complemented by a wide variety of fish imported from the Red Sea.⁶

Who was eating in such splendour? A clue comes from numerous fragments of pottery, found amongst the refuse, that have been used as writing tablets. These “ostraca”, as they are known, add some important details to the plant list, for example recording the importation of bread and wine, and alluding to gardens and the importation of manure, accounting for the presence of fresh vegetables. But they also allude to the types of people at these sites. They were clearly employing paid labour, including skilled

stoneworkers, masons, smiths and quarrymen. We also learn about their wages and, significantly, how substantially their wages varied from one class of worker to another. We can imagine such pronounced differences were conspicuously displayed in the manner of sharing food.⁷

On both the northern and southern extremes of empire, archaeology is revealing some surprisingly luxurious lists of ingredients in what seem rather stark military contexts, and in regions where the meals were traditionally rather simpler. A deeper sense of what this luxurious eating was about is gained by moving from the periphery of the Empire to its heart.

Power dining on a different kind of frontier.

In Rome, two decades after this chapter's opening meal, we encounter a rather Byronic figure who briefly drifted through the court of Nero. His name was Titus Petronius Niger, and he carried the title of the emperor's *arbiter elegantiae*, in other words, his personal style guru. When it came to that vast population of aspirants of simple origin who yearned to climb the ranks of *Romanitas*, of which our opening fictional character having trouble at the meal and on the toilet is a rather modest example, Petronius' snobbery and acerbic wit found its natural target. He wrote a parody entitled the *Satyricon*, and fragments of the text have survived. In those fragments of fiction we can

read about a freed slave who has fast become fabulously wealthy, the owner of vast lands who has planned the most elaborate of funerary monuments. Wealthy he may be, but in Petronius' eyes the freed slave Trimalchio remains a *parvenu*, an object of ridicule who no amount of newly acquired wealth can free from his native coarseness, coarseness that will forever distinguish Trimalchio, at least in Petronius' mind, from the latter's refined circle. The poor man's aspirations are most easily ridiculed by observing the excesses and pretensions on display at the dinner party he throws.⁸

The passage within the Satyricon entitled *Dinner with Trimalchio* is a lively description of perfumed fools, old wine, abused slaves and theatrical cuisine. A collection of lavishly attired social aspirants recline upon couches, their cups filled, hands washed and nails manicured by an assortment of attendant boys. It is a hard task to condense the absurd drama to a menu, but for the sake of comparison, here it is:

Dinner with Trimalchio: Menu

hors d'oeuvres

An ass of Corinthian bronze with two panniers, white olives on one side and black on the other

dormice sprinkled with honey and poppy seed

steaming hot sausages, on a silver gridiron with damsons and pomegranate seeds underneath.

mock peahens' eggs (pastry shell containing small fowl seasoned with yolk and pepper)

A goose, two mullets and a honeycomb, with bread

Celestial arrangement of plump fowls, sows' udders, and hare

peppered fish

Zodiacal arrangement of chickpeas, beef steak, testicles and kidneys, figs, cheesecake, sea-scorpion, sea bream, lobster

Wild boar dressed with baskets of Syrian and Theban dates.

Drinks:

Mead

Wine Vintage : FALERNIAN CONSUL OPIMIUS circa 30BC

Even in bleak military settings ranging from the wet chilly north to the scorched arid south, we could start assembling the food remains from either remote location into a reasonably exotic and elaborate menu. Within the fairly unadorned spaces of these army compounds, meal tables were being set with the same colourful array of elegant plates.

Bowls and cups, some rich red, others charcoal black, or an elegant grey. Upon these plates would be servings of meat, eggs, fowl and fish, adorned with exotic fruits and flavourings, elaborately presented along with white bread loaves and abundant wine.

Not necessarily a feast of *Satyricon* proportions, but when compared either with what was eaten a few years previously in any part of the Empire's periphery, or indeed in the homelands of many of the troops now stationed along its length, a striking departure, and a new kind of meal. It was novel in terms of its diversity and sheer geographical scale, but it was also novel in relation to transforming the diners, their relationship to their environment, and to each other.

If we venture a little way outside the British fort, or back in time in the lives of those diners, meals would instead comprise a reasonably healthy, if somewhat monotonous, mix of a wide variety of cereals and grain legumes, together with mutton or lamb. Such had been the familiar daily diet for some centuries across a large expanse of Europe. On

special occasions in the temperate regions north of the Alps, this simple fair was complemented by consumption of beef in quantity, washed down with beer and mead. Steak and alcohol had been the mark of a good party since at least the days of Hambledon Hill. Within the fortress excavations at Colchester, some malted barley, ready for brewing, was recovered near to the barracks of the ordinary soldiers.⁹ Against the background of this culinary pattern, these imported fruits and strange seafoods would have seemed most exotic to many who observed them and even those who partook of them. Mutton, pork and beef would have all been familiar, but it is clear from the proportions of animal bones that much more pork is being consumed, a clear reflection of Roman taste.

Like all parodies, the *Satyricon* can only raise a laugh among Petronius' effete circle if the absurdist images have some resonance with real lives. Out on the fringes of empire, archaeology captures a few fragments of those real lives, and individuals reaching for a new or improved identity through the manner in which they share food. Earlier cuisines explored in this book consolidated communities around the hearth at the heart of the cultural landscape. The sharing of food re-affirmed those communities, giving ever greater substance to the difference between them and others. Even the feasts at Hambledon Hill and Pylos, while taking farmers away from their homes and hearths, brought them to the focus of their own community's landscape. In contrast to this, elaborate Roman dining typically had its impact *at* boundaries, actively shifting those boundaries and in this way redefining who was, and who wasn't, one of the gang. These could be boundaries of status; Roman hosts often brought a client or protégé to their meal

table, to further develop their relationship. They could be boundaries between rich and poor, freeman and slave, as parodied in the *Satyricon*. They could alternatively be geographical and cultural boundaries as at the military frontier of empire. In a society of unprecedented scale and ethnic mix, sharing food played a key role in the process of *becoming* Roman. *Romanitas* is rather like a growing network of cultural connections, first spreading by trade and exchange, then by military conquest and political consolidation. At the many stages within the expansion of that network, strangers from contrasting backgrounds and cultures would meet, and gather together to share food or drink. In doing so, they both transformed themselves, and transformed the network of which they are part.¹⁰

Because sites like Colchester have a rich archaeological record we can come very close indeed to such food sharing occasions, even to the private movements of one particular diner. We can also step back from the day of his discomfort to see how such food sharing can unfold, on greater scales of space and time, to impact, not just upon military/urban culture and consumption, but also in a fundamental way to the nature of the wider community and landscape and the manner of their food production.

An aspiring diner

To capture a sense of cultural ambiguity and social arrival that characterised this style of dining, I have imagined the visitor to the Tribune's latrine to be a Thracian whose Latin

was not entirely fluent. Totally speculative but not that implausible; we know from military records that Thracians made up one of the largest ethnic groups within the Camulodum camp. Most were of fairly low rank, but at least one gravestone indicates that they too could start climbing the ranks of military office. Indeed, the unprecedented scale of Roman expansion owed a great deal to the relative ease with which the conquered, whatever cultures they were born into, and whatever languages they spoke, could join with their conquerors, and in a relatively short space of time become Roman, in a similar manner that a polyglot community of 19th century European émigrés could become American. In the heart of the Roman Empire, meals very commonly mixed social rank, and the meal played a critical part in advancement towards their goals. On the Empire's periphery, a corollary of mixed rank and status must have been a fair range of language abilities. The remarkable wax writing tablets from the waterlogged fort at Vindolanda upon Hadrian's Wall bear witness to the fluency and literacy of at least some ordinary soldiers, but others would presumably have struggled.¹¹

By taking one such Thracian legionary to the dinner party, and from thence for a brief interlude to the latrine which leaves the most enduring record of the meal, a drama unfolds that is the inverse of Trimalchio's own feast, as portrayed by Titus Petronius in his satire. At the latter, Petronius has two rather effete poets arrive at the dinner party of a ludicrously wealthy social aspirant, to whom they will always feel greatly superior. In my invented drama however, it is a rather low ranking individual who secures an invitation to the house of someone who is comfortably superior. The tribune may well have been quite aristocratic, or if not that, then certainly scaling a far classier and more

elevated greasy pole than the one upon which our diner is struggling to maintain his grip. Two inverse dramas, but different views of a common theme in the sharing of food upon the frontier, a frontier that may be geographical, social, or cultural, or some combination of all three. In this context, the sharing of food and drink operates on the periphery of a social cohort, shifting the boundary between an “in-group” and an “out-group”, such that some of the latter may transform themselves into the former.¹²

Such feasts serve as marketplaces of social capital. Some of the participants know and care for each other, but others may be strangers. All, however, will come away with some sense of whether or not they have had a profitable time, but in social, rather than pecuniary terms. Rather like the ordinary market, the various participants may in principle all come away satisfied, and with an enhanced personal sense of their own status. Again, like an ordinary market, their investment may not pay off. Nonetheless, the shared enthusiasm for the general principle can elevate this particular form of meal to a lead position in the cultural dynamic. In this context, it may be worth bringing our two poets from Trimalchio’s residence all the way north to chilly Camulodunum (the contemporary name for the town of Roman Colchester) to see what they make of our own diner. They would no doubt make fun of his rudimentary Latin, and might wonder whether he would be better advised to stick to his Thracian “black bread” back home, rather than the more refined white bread that was clearly testing his unrefined bowels. They would mock the assortment of physical attributes they regarded as gross in a typically Thracian sort of way. Their cultural background would endow them with an ample language of ethnic hostility from which to carefully fashion delightful witticisms.

This was an empire, and a time, in which social movement could be very fluid. A century later, the emperor was an African with a Syrian wife, whose sister spoke no Latin and whose citizens followed numerous different religions.¹³ Nonetheless, the archetype of “foreignness” is prominent in perceptions of the time and must have greatly shaped the sharing of food and drinks with strangers and those of different rank. To get some sense of contemporary ideas about “foreignness”, we can follow the son-in-law of one of Britannia’s conquerors on his literary journey northwards, in his *Germania*. This account is in part drawn from the personal travels of Cornelius Tacitus, in part drawn from accounts by others, merchants, soldiers and the like, and in part from a traditional understanding of what foreigners are like. In his account, written in the 1st century AD, we can see a contrast with our own modern racial stereotypes, that emphasise skin colour and religious affiliation, for example. The recurrent features of foreignness in Tacitus’ writing are notably fluid and, in principle, mutable. One such mutable mark of foreignness is hairstyle; the Chatti were hairy and bearded, and only cut their hair after they had killed. The Suebi dressed their hair on the side and bound it up into a tight knot. We very occasionally recover a preserved coiffure from archaeological deposits. Much more frequently, we recover the hairpins with which it was held in place. Many of them slipped out to be later recovered by archaeologists at sites like Camulodunum. Tacitus makes occasional reference to such things as squalor, bravery, and earth worship, but nothing that might be regarded as biologically fixed. There are also allusions to a confusion between male and female roles. The Gauls, though once powerful, were now effeminate. The Cherusi, once brave, were now cowardly. Among the Sitones, the

women ruled the men. Ethnic identity seems to have been generally more fluid; people could adopt a new identity, allowing the empire to expand. In this novel transformation, a prime rite of passage was the sharing of food and drink the Roman way.¹⁴

An emphasis on mutable ethnic signals reminds us of the much greater ethnic mobility in Europe in the 1st millennium AD than that in the 2nd. Individuals were not as bound by birth, belief or language as they might be in more recent times. Very many people changed sides quite dramatically and died with a different ethnic identity from that into which they were born. In this dynamic, the meal adopts a very primary place in cultural transition. That is borne out clearly by the archaeological evidence of Roman expansion. Hot on the heels of the military presence came new kinds of food and new styles of eating. In that sense, the Camulodunum evidence is typical of a much wider picture. However, it is not the earliest form of consumption to spread north.

Before the main course, a drink

Between two modern gardens a couple of kilometres to the west of the legionary fortress lies a mound of earth, partly obscured by trees. In 1924 this mound, the Lexden Tumulus, yielded another exceptional find. A wide range of luxury items was unearthed that clearly marked the burial of an individual of high rank. There were fragments of silver and gold that had quite likely been woven into clothing. Alongside them lay the metal parts of fine vessels, pedestals, stools and a chest. There were small pieces chain

mail, and the studs, buckles and hinges with which they would be held together. The deceased presumably had the status of an elite warrior. Other artifacts in the burial give an indication of cultural association, but an indication that is ambiguous. Several of the finds indicate of a prominent member of late Iron Age elite, but one piece has a quite different date of manufacture. It is the head of a copper alloy axe, whose style places it much earlier, not simply a few generations earlier, but back in the preceding millennium. This local elite warrior was buried in traditional local style, together with in heirloom that had been in their tribe for at least 1000 years, a clear signal of power and status within a long-standing indigenous cultural tradition.¹⁵

Yet at the same time as making this strong allusion to the ancestral past, this assembly of grave goods simultaneously points in another direction. Alongside these functional items and the curated heirloom are a series of ornaments with the style of the fast expanding empire in the south. The most striking of these was a medallion of silver, prepared from a cast of a coin of the Roman emperor Augustus. While in essence a member of the traditional elite, this warrior had some rather nice trinkets with which to display a certain worldliness. But these trinkets are dwarfed, in volume at least, by another allusion to cultural contact with the south. This local elite warrior was buried with at least seventeen large clay flagons (amphorae) of Mediterranean wine.

Vast quantities of exotic alcohol, or at least allusions to its consumption, are a widespread feature of the tribal elite that was ultimately consumed by the northerly expansion of the Roman World. Some of the most spectacular are the elaborately decorated and massive

bronze punchbowls found in elite burials around Burgundy. In some cases, these massive containers filled with wine could lighten the heads of a thousand or more people. Wine and wine-drinking equipment had been traveling from central Italy up the Rhine for seven centuries before it reached the Colchester grave.¹⁶

Even further than the wine itself traveled the glamorous *idea* of wine. Within a few years of our tribune's feast, a noblewoman was laid to rest on the Danish island of Lolland. Although Lolland was several hundred kilometers beyond the Empire's limit, the noblewoman's lavish jewellery and several imported roman glasses and bronze vessels bore witness to her worldliness and wealth. One of those bronze vessels conserved a residue of its contents. Within that residue, fragments of cranberry of cowberry, barley, and bog myrtle could be discerned. This could well have been the drink to which Tacitus refers. With marked distaste, he described a drink made of cereal grain, forged to a certain resemblance with wine.

Such evidence seem to put wine at the vanguard of the northerly spread of Mediterranean culture, and there are other cases, possibly before, and most certainly since, when the consumption of some psycho-active substance, such as alcohol, tobacco or opium, has been a notable feature of the contact zone between cultures. It is also at the vanguard of contact zones on a more intimate scale. In many societies, the very first gesture of the host when welcoming their guest is to offer them a small preparation of alcohol, or whatever psycho-active substance their society permits. Sharing a drink, or a pipe, also forms a basis of making contact with those for whom insufficient intimacy has been

established to share a meal. It could have played quite a critical role in this respect at both Hambleton and Pylos. Even before we feel comfortable about sharing food for the body, we feel able to share food for the mind.

As aspiring north Europeans gathered along the very modern waterside entrepôts and in emerging markets, over a flagon of wine, real or fake, they were not just changing their drinking habits; they were also adjusting their styles of presentation, not just in their hairstyles, but in the presentation of their entire body. They were by no means the first generation to carry manicuring equipment with them, but we do see an increase in the loss of personal tweezers for archaeologists to rediscover. Their grandparents' sheepskins and linen shawls had been fastened with a discrete and much valued bronze brooch. They did the same, but their brooches had become larger and flashier, their varied design more easily discerned by their fellow drinkers. Just as, over 30,000 years earlier diners came to the very first conversational circles around the hearth adorned with necklaces of shell and bone, so these Iron Age drinkers came to the wine cauldron bedecked in brooches, bracelets, necklaces, and rings in their ears, and upon their manicured fingers and toes.¹⁷

A more traditional hearth

For several generations, elite nobles and their clients, traders and artisans had gathered together along these frontiers of consumption, to conduct their business and share food

and drink. First they gathered in riverside entrepôts that had grown up from the Mediterranean, across Gaul and on to Britannia. As these trading routes were followed and captured in military conquest, they gathered in and around Roman forts, and subsequently in the towns that grew up around them. All the while, the great majority of the population lived a different sort of life.

Not far from the centres of cross-cultural contact were a great number of rural settlements that seem to continue with any clear seismic change. These sites correspond to the countless farming families who produced a large part of what was consumed. Their farms can be found in the near vicinity of Camulodunum, and indeed all over Britannia, marked out by less enduring traces, but traces nevertheless that come unequivocally into view from the air, as cropmarks. They are the compounds and hamlets in which 95% or more of the population lived. In this particular region of Europe, they are made up of round or oval house plans, together with paddocks, ditches, fences and palisades. Fragments of neither amphora nor wine cup grace the rubbish tips of these humble settlements. Figs and dates are nowhere to be seen in their storage pits or among the ashes of their hearths. Instead those ashes are characterized by the chaff of the staple cereal crops they had farmed for centuries.¹⁸

Over other parts Europe, the remains of farms away from the Main axes of cross-continental networking can be recovered, and the ashes of their hearths habitually bear witness to the grain harvest, and the immense amount of work involved in threshing, dehusking, winnowing, sieving and storing. We get the clear impression that, at the time

a wave of exotic cuisine was transporting Roman culture across the map, the expanses over which it traveled were in large part given over to a more prosaic arable production. A very wide range of grains crops were grown, including species and varieties of wheat, barley, millets, rye and oats, beans, peas, and other pulses that are hard to find among today's harvest. Among the ashes we also find the charred seeds of their field weeds, the silent monitors of past environments. Among them are weeds characteristic of damp and nutrient starved soils. These landscapes had borne centuries of exploitation. From these ancient fields, the vast majority of the population gathered their harvest of grains and pulses that made up the bulk of their diet. Around the arable fields grazed the sheep, cattle and pig that would occasionally be slaughtered to supplement the meal. From here they would bring their harvests and meats to clusters of roundhouses at the heart of these intensely worked landscapes.

Even though a rectangular architecture of partitions, whose beginnings were seen at Jerf-El-Ahmar, had come to characterize farming communities all over the mainland for thousands of years, the people of Europe's northwestern Isles had continued to share drink or food in the round. Their circular buildings, of wattle, daub and thatch, came in many sizes, and were often clustered into a hamlet, or bounded compound. From legal codes that survive in Ireland and Wales from just a few centuries later, we learn of five generation extended families, bonding together a great grandfather and all his descendants.¹⁹ The scale of these hamlets and compounds would fit well with such groups, and is believed to have been the norm in across what came to be the Roman province of Britannia. In the heart of these compounds, parents, children, grandchildren,

first and second cousins, uncles and aunts gathered, according to gender and age, to collectively carry out their farming chores. Stories of the feasting habits of the northern Celts were described by a Greek author named Poseidonius. He records tales of bloodshed and gallantry, of prominent men engaged in conspicuous display. Here is how he sets the scene:

When several dine together, they sit in a circle; but the mightiest among them, distinguished above the others for skill in war, or family connections, or wealth, sits in the middle, like a chorus-leader. Beside him is the host, and next on either side the others according to their respective ranks. Men-at-arms, carrying oblong shields, stand close behind them, while their bodyguards, seated in a circle directly opposite, share in the feast like their masters. The attendants serve the drink in vessels resembling our spouted cups, either of clay or silver. Similar also are the platters which they have for serving food; but others use bronze platters, others still, baskets of wood or plaited wicker. The liquor drunk in the houses of the rich is wine brought from Italy and the country round Marseilles, and is unmixed; though sometimes a little water is added. But among the needier inhabitants a beer is drunk made from wheat, with honey added; the masses drink it plain. It is called corma. They sip a little, not more than a small cupful, from the same cup, but they do it rather frequently. The slave carries the drink round from left to right and from right to left; this is the way in which they are served. They make obeisance to the gods, also, turning towards the right.

(Athenaeus: Deipnosophistae IV.151-152)

The elite had access to Mediterranean wine dispensed from silver flagons. But even the beer-drinking lower ranks of these traditional communities on the periphery of empire had been nodding to new trends. Even on the more modest farmsteads, more brooches were being worn, and the occasional piece of imported tableware brought out to impress visitors. Who knows, perhaps they were also squeezing a few red berries to add a fashionable hue to their home-brewed beer.

One thing we do notice from the broken pottery retrieved from this period, is that consumption becomes increasingly individual, with a growing prominence of cups and plates of a size suited to the individual diner. The formal constraints of the extended family arranged around the hearth to receive and welcome the stranger were being relaxed. Individuals from different families and societies were meeting to share food and drink in smaller groups. New trading settlements were growing up along river valleys across Europe, where such individuals could gather, negotiate and exchange goods. The agents of this change, the travelers, traders and purveyors of jewelry and exotic goods moved across a rich cultural mosaic on the periphery of empire, whose variety is captured in the writings of Cornelius Tacitus. Like a much earlier generation of travelers moving across Europe with the first elements of a farming economy, they would often find themselves in an architecture of partitions, new rectangular buildings closer to the trade routes, farther from the long established settlements, and in angular contrast to these intimate home circles of the north west. Rectangular buildings and

rectilinear spaces come to be seen on the sites where these new forms of exchange take place, and these spaces accommodate new styles and patterns of sharing food and drink.²⁰

One particular rectilinear style would come to accommodate the classic Roman dining arrangement. Within urbane dining rooms, three couches would be placed at right angles, corner to corner, with up to three reclining diners on each. The fourth side was open, a stage to the other three for the display of foods and entertainments. Many depictions of this arrangement survive, and in some villas, the plans of such dining rooms was preserved in the design of the floor mosaic, or even in fixed stone couches. For all the heights to which the splendour of the cuisine rose, a lot of Roman meals were small scale affairs. In contrast to the extended families of the north, The traditional Roman family was nuclear, composed of the *paterfamilias*, his one wife, their children and slaves, and dining was often in quite small groups.²¹

Community and network

Two complementary but contrasting ways in which people make contact with one another are thus expressed in the manner of sharing food and drink. The first is “community”, bringing together extended connections of kinship and land, the land of the “ancestors”. The food a community shares has a clear ecological relationship with that land; the balance between grains, vegetables and fruit, meat, fish and fowl, reflects the balance and soil and water resources in the local region, the ancestral lands. The food is simple, and

shared relatively equitably between the dining kin, reaffirming a sense of timeless community and security within its established bounds. The second principle is the “network” along which relative strangers can move and meet to exchange goods and ideas. Such a network is an open rather than a closed system, an ever expanding tree whose outer branches grow to take that same network further and further. The food shared along the branches of this network is ostentatiously laced with the exotic, allusions to distant regions and the network’s sheer scale. The food is complex, and dining is competitive, frequently bringing strangers together in unequal negotiation. Through sharing food and drink they reposition themselves in social and cultural terms. In a later historical period, the meals with the “community” and the “network” broadly correspond to the *basse cuisine* of the peasantry, and the *haute cuisine* of Europe’s elite network of royal households.²² On the eve of Rome’s expansion, those networks were initially more modest in scale, propelled by modest boats carrying merchants and travelers, and in a subsequent episode, the military. From Britannia, they would bring corn, cattle, silver, hunting dogs and slaves.²³ A single slave may have been worth a whole amphora of Mediterranean wine. The network of Roman influence and expansion would decorate its elite tables with exotica spanning the known world. A wide array of southern treats would follow military expansion north of the Alps; pomegranates, almonds, melons and peaches have all been found. Perhaps their farthest reach of all is traced by a very small, wrinkled, dried fruit with a hot spicy taste. Black peppercorns have been found on three sites in Britannia and several more in Central Europe. Their remains can be traced to the Roman port of Berenike in Egypt, to where they entered the imperial network, a network that had taken them all the way to the northern frontiers of empire from their distant place

of origin. They had been gathered from the wild forests of the Malabar coast in Southern India.²⁴

Anatomy of a network

All around the empire, and perhaps especially on its social and geographical frontiers, people were eating and drinking in manners that both celebrated the vast network of which they were part, and ensuring that its outer branches continued to grow. At the very tips of these growing branches, we see narcotic substances and exotic flavourings. At a certain distance they are followed by an elaborate cuisine and a new manner of dining. Stepping back, and viewing those frontiers from a greater distance still, these exotica fall into place within a range of either features of consumption and display, such that the Roman style of living and being leaves substantial traces all over Europe, traces in clothing and personal adornment, decoration, house construction and the layout of settlements, towns and landscapes. “Romanisation” leaves a powerful imprint all over the empire that Rome controlled, and that imprint is at its most emphatic in culinary, artistic, and architectural styles of consumption.

Beneath the surface of consumption

What about production? How did this massively influential, continent-wide network transform the food quest itself, and the source of supply to these new elaborate tables? The picture here is more complex, and to get some sense of that complexity, we can bring Petronius' fictional poets to another part of Britannia, to the house of another extravagant consumer in the Roman style.

For this northern province, the palace of Fishbourne, close to the coast of Southern England, is magnificent indeed. Its excavator, Barry Cunliffe, speculated that it was the seat of one of the sharpest locals to do deals with imperial Rome, a tribal leader of whom Tacitus records: *Certain states were handed over to king Cogidumnus - he has remained continuously loyal to our own times - according to the old and long-received principle of Roman policy, which employs kings as tools of enslavement.*" (Tacitus *Agricola* 14.1)

Such a principle paid off handsomely for this particular local leader, who celebrated his achievements in a display of fabulous consumption in the Roman style. By AD80, the palace had suites of rooms, colonnades, tiled rooves, mosaic floors and painted walls, all arranged around a most impressive formal garden. Our visiting poets would no doubt peruse the 150 metre frontage with their customary caustic disdain. On passing through the entrance, they might also get a little lost.²⁵

Back in Rome, the houses of the elite followed a particular structure, a predictable arrangement of rooms and spaces. The view from this large garden was superficially similar, but actually quite different. All the trappings of urbane architecture were there, but the large interior garden was essentially a vast compound, with a series of doors

opening off it leading to separate structural units of the palace. In central position, the most impressive rooms of all were entered from the far part of the garden opposite the entrance. Another structure that had been given a rather surprising prominence in this far part of the garden was a large bakery. The whole layout may have confused these poets from foreign parts, but would conversely be a rather familiar grammar of space for the region's local inhabitants. They would be perfectly familiar with entering a large enclosed compound with separate doorways opening onto it, including those of working buildings, and going across to the main house opposite the entrance. The compounds they knew from old would have been built from wood and clay, and be round rather than rectilinear, but the use of space was broadly the same.²⁶

The landlord at Fishbourne provides an extreme and conspicuous case of consumption on the frontier. His parents before him would have been familiar with drinking wine in the Mediterranean style and trading for fine pots and ornaments from the Roman world. In the early days of his own political success, he went further and shared elaborate meals in rectangular spaces accordingly to the Roman way. His first timber palace on the site has as one of its prominent features a bath-house, indicating that as he shared food and drink in Roman style, he and his guests also attended to their bodies in the Roman style. As he consolidated his political success in later years, his houses and compounds were all completely clothed in Roman style, and he was keen that visitors cast their eyes on his Roman bakery and other mod cons. However, not far beneath the surface, he remained a collaborating local tribal leader, in Tacitus' words, a useful tool for enslavement.

Perhaps for that reason, the consumption of food and drink at the frontier did not immediately connect with a changed food quest around the frontier. As far as we can tell, many methods of farming and land management stayed the same. Not that they were at all bad; the empire didn't succeed in reaching anywhere in which a harvest surplus could not be extracted. Indeed, the limits of an available surplus are probably what determined the final limits of the Empire itself. For centuries, new woodlands had been cleared for cultivation, and they continued to be cleared. A wide range of cereals and legumes had been grown, and continued to be grown using the same methods that had been used for centuries. Fishbourne may have had a kitchen garden, but there isn't any evidence from the archaeobotany that early Roman Britain saw an intensification of horticulture. The whole idea of creating a formal artificial garden was new to the north, but with an emphasis on design and decoration rather than function.²⁷

There is however, one area in which this new generation of peripheral consumers did transform the production, as well as the consumption of food. They were by nature importers of exotica, exploiting the vast networks of exchange that they also sustained and spread, moving an enormous range of items, building materials, metal and glass, and exotic foods on an unprecedented scale. They were also expert at the technologies of importing and exporting, and moving things over long distances in large quantities. One consequence was that there was a lot more metal around, and they very quickly used iron to make large cutting knife to harvest and manage hay.²⁸

For an ordinary farmer of the time iron was precious, and would be restricted to tools little bigger than a pen-knife, enough to harvest leafy branches for feed, but inadequate for harvesting the far more luscious grasslands. The new, wealthy consumer could afford to fashion long hay sickles, and in the process create a new form of vegetation, hay meadows, for repeated summer cutting. We even find waterlogged clumps of hay in some early Roman wells. Quite a significant contribution to the food quest had probably not been directly related to styles of consumption drawn from the Mediterranean south. The Roman favourites of pork, chicken, and oysters, are little augmented by the maintenance of hay meadows. This novel ecological product of metal technology, the hay meadow, was of more relevance in the sustenance of those essentially northern symbols of prestige and wealth, horses and cattle.²⁹

After Cogidubnus death, the palace continues as a theatre of consumption in the Roman style for many generations, continuing to reflect the changing fashions of the Roman world without impinging too much on the production of food by the enslaved wider populace. After many episodes of rebuilding and extension, the palace was finally destroyed by a fire in the later part of the third century AD, and for some reason abandoned as a charred ruin. Around the ashes of Fishbourne, the imperial networks of contact are also in fragments. The nodes of that network, the regional administrative capitals, were in decline, and even the divinity of the emperor at the epicentre of the network has long since been challenged. Britannia was effectively controlled by breakaway leaders. As the province's foremost palace of consumption collapsed, the rationale and ideology behind that consumption was also in a state of collapse. A

culinary celebration of the far tips of the most expansive branches in the network would no longer have had the same resonance and meaning it had in the network's youth. And yet, when we shift our attention to the consumption of food to its production, the roofs of Fishbourne Palace of consumption finally fell at the dawn of a new era of innovation in the food quest. It was a dawn that broke, not in the crumbling core of Empire, but on its periphery.³⁰

As the network collapsed, and people looked to their more local regional contacts, a great deal of wealth moved from the towns out into the countryside, and it was an urbane wealth, used to a wide range of transactions and contacts, but now more directly concerned with the productivity of the land. A certain sector of society built and lived in the Roman style, which was by now hardly "Roman" any more; it had been around in Britannia for almost 300 years. Their villas were often more modest, but it was their farms that were particularly interesting. They certainly did have market gardens, and grew a range of vegetables spices and herbs, and fruit crops, and some had vineyards. Out in their fields, they grew a range of crops, including the species that has become the major food source of the human species in calorific terms, bread wheat. This species had been around for thousands of years, though only as a minor crop in the north. However as Rome's control over the north waned, it ascended to premier position in the food quest, an ascent to which we shall return in a future chapter.

Their rich harvests they gathered in with enormous scythes, with blades of two metres length. They used far more metal in their farming equipment than any of their

predecessors, most notably in one particular tool that, like bread wheat, has gone on to conquer much of the planet. Their predecessors prepared their soils with digging sticks, hoes and ards, highly effective tools, the best adapted for many a terrain. For the deep soiled lowlands however, soil cultivation had been revolutionised by a piece of equipment that could dig deep, lift whole landscapes of soils and turn them upside down. To operate, it required substantial trained animal power, and the north Europeans were experts in the raising of cattle and horses. It required an appropriately shaped board to lift and mould heavy weights of soil. In front of that “mould-board”, the incision had to be made in the soil with a blade so heavy that it was difficult to lift. A single one of these cutters or “coulters” required the same weight of metal that might have been in the ownership of several villages a generation earlier.³¹

The lavish frontier consumption had run its course, the imperial divinity at its core consigned to history with the conversion of a fourth century emperor to Christianity, a religion that specifically precluded his own divine status. By the time of the Emperor Constantine, citizens of the his empire lived, farmed and shared meals in a quite different way from the forefathers who had extended Roman culture further, and more emphatically, than any previous cultural formation. At the vanguard of that expansion was, first of all a way of sharing drink, followed shortly after by an elaborate and theatrical manner of sharing food.

- ¹ Crummy 1992 : chapter 3 p.21
- ² Crummy 1992 : chapter 8
- ³ Crummy 1992 : chapter 7 for bones, chapter 8 for other food remains
- ⁴ Crummy 1984, 1992
- ⁵ Van der Veen M. 1998, 1999, 2001
- ⁶ King 1999
- ⁷ As papyrus was expensive, short notes, brief accounts and other such things were instead written on stone flakes and fragments of broken pottery. These are collectively referred to as 'ostraca'. The word comes from the Greek 'ostrakon' meaning 'shell.'
- ⁸ Walsh 1999
- ⁹ Crummy 1992
- ¹⁰ Garnsey 1999
- ¹¹ Bowman 2003
- ¹² Dietler 1990, and in Dietler and Haydon 2001 uses the term "diacritical" (from the Greek for "distinguishing") for such feasts,
- ¹³ The emperor in question is Septimus Severus, born in Lepcis Magna in modern day Libya. His Syrian wife was Julia Domna. As for contemporary religious plurality, see Beard *et al.* 1998, and Beard 1998
- ¹⁴ Gaius Cornelius Tacitus *De Origine et Situ Germanorum (Germania)* composed around AD98
- ¹⁵ Foster 1986
- ¹⁶ Dietler 1990
- ¹⁷ Hill 1997, Jundi and Hill 1998, Carr 2000
- ¹⁸ Cunliffe 1991, Jones 1989, 1996, Hawkes 2000
- ¹⁹ Hingley 1989 for a discussion in the context of the archaeological evidence
- ²⁰ Hill 1995
- ²¹ Slater 1991, Garnsey 1999, Dunbanin 1996
- ²² Goody 1982
- ²³ Strabo lived from 64BC to 23AD traveled widely in Europe and the Nile, and is a major source on contemporary geography and economics. He writes of Britain: 'Most of the island is low-lying and wooded, but many parts are hilly. Britain produces corn, cattle, gold, silver and iron. These are exported together with hides, slaves, and hunting dogs.' (Strabo, Geography 4.5.2)
- ²⁴ Jacomet *et al.* 2002 and Bakels and Jacomet 2003 for Central European luxury foods; Roman pomegranates, almonds, melons, peaches, peppercorns. Further up the coast from Berenike at Quseir al-Qadim, Van der Veen 1984 has recovered, not just peppercorns, but also coconut and rice, also imported from India
- ²⁵ Cunliffe 1971, 1998
- ²⁶ Hingley 1989
- ²⁷ Jones 1989, 1991b
- ²⁸ Rees 1979
- ²⁹ Jones 1991a
- ³⁰ Cunliffe 1998
- ³¹ Jones 1989, 1991a