TO IMITATE OR TO SPECIALIZE?
AFRICAN IMPORTS AND THE PRODUCTION OF DOMESTIC COOKWARES IN ROME AD 50-550

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Abstract: *In order to assess the importance of cookingware production in the environs of Rome over the period from AD 50 to AD 550, the effect of African cookingware imports on domestic production is examined through the study of a large assemblage recovered in the excavations of a late Roman domus on the north-eastern slope of the Palatine Hill. The results depict a versatile and adaptive craft that persisted under external pressure through a variety of production strategies. On a more general level, the production of the imitations shows how components of material culture, even everyday kitchen utensils, became increasingly uniform in the Roman world.*

INTRODUCTION

The Imperial period in Rome witnessed a steady increase in the number of cookware vessels produced in regional fabrics, but in forms apparently seeking to reproduce imported wares, particularly those from North Africa. This phenomenon is by no means unique; imitations of African cookware – as they should probably be defined[1] – are present in small to moderate quantities on many archaeological sites around the western Mediterranean. Their production seems to have begun during the mid-Imperial period, at the latest in the late 2nd century AD[2] and in certain areas it may have continued to the early 7th century AD.[3] While Sicily and Britain constitute the geographic extremes of this phenomenon,[4] much of the evidence comes from the coasts of southern France and eastern Spain,[5] where numerous kiln sites once involved in the production of these imitations were located.[6]

As several explanations have been offered for the appearance of local imitations, the present paper attempts to assess quantitatively the effect of African cookware imports on domestic production in the environs of Rome over the period AD 50 to AD 550 through the study of a large cookware assemblage recovered through the Palatine East excavations.[7] These excavations were carried out in 1989-1993 as a joint-project between the Soprintendenza Archeologica di Roma and the American Academy in Rome and focused on a late Roman aristocratic *domus* located on the north-eastern slope of the Palatine Hill.[8]

The dominating feature of the *domus* was an apsidal hall supported by a series of north-facing barrel-vaults. Soon after the completion of the principal structure in the late 3rd century AD, a set of smaller apses and chambers was built to the south of it. Most of these spaces, including the barrel-vaults, were filled with building- and household debris of unknown origin between the early 4th and the mid-6th century AD. These deposits are the main source of the material analyzed in this paper. Somewhat earlier deposits were found adjacent to a small fountain of Neronian or immediately post-Neronian date and the vestiges of Late Republican and Augustan domestic architecture to the north of the well-preserved structures of the upper story of the *domus*. As some of these deposits pertain to the early 1st century AD, the author is able to examine the effect caused by African cookware imports in Rome over five centuries.

FROM SHERDS TO TRENDS

A total of 10,166 diagnostic cookware sherd families has been recovered from the Palatine East excavations. For the purpose of the present study, this assemblage was first refined by excluding the examples of Roman cookware found in Medieval and modern contexts as well as other diagnostic sherds than rims (i.e. handles, bases and decorated sherds) from further analysis. Consequently, the resulting 8349 extended cookware rim sherd families can be assumed to correspond with an equal amount of cookware vessels. As the assemblage contains only scarce evidence of pottery that corresponds chronologically with the construction of the aristocratic *domus*, the study material falls clearly into two groups (*Table 1*). About one-fifth of the vessels were recovered from chronological horizons preceding the building,

[1] It should be borne in mind that besides the tradition established by Carthaginian cookwares between the mid-2nd century BC and the age of Augustus (see Fulford 1994, 53), pottery production in Africa Proconsularis shows strong Greek and west-central Italian influences: Frova 1977, 183; Castañer Masoliver *et al.* 1990, 170; Freed 1998, 31.

[2] Pellecuer & Pomaredes 1991, 375-377; Tortorella 1995, 95-96; Dodinet & Leblanc 1988, 138-141; Freed 1998, 62 no. 137 (see also p. 60, fig. 8, no. 137).

[3] Pasquinucci *et al.* 1998, 1409-1410.

[4] Swan 1993; Alaimo *et al.* 1997, 55, 67. African tableware forms were also reproduced locally both in Central Italy and elsewhere in the Roman world, e.g. Tortorella 1995, 96; Pasquinucci & Menchelli 1996, 507-510; Ciotola 2000, passim. For an extensive summary on the Italian imitations of African tableware, see Fontana 1998.

[5] Aquilué Abadías 1987, 52, fig. 15, no. 13; Aguarod Otal 1991, 47, 413-414; Alonso de la Sierra Fernández 1995, 158-159; Sánchez Sánchez 1995, 267, 274, fig. 13, nos. 28-31; Serrano Ramos 1997, 220-221; Bernal Casasola 1998; Seguí *et al.* 2000, 1416-1417, tab. 1.

[6] France: Dodinet & Leblanc 1988, 136-139, 142 fig. 10; Pellecuer & Pomaredes 1991, 371-373; Passelac 1996, 371, 374; Spain: Sánchez Sánchez 1995, 267 esp. footnote 92; Serrano Ramos 1997, 220, 229, figs. 9, 12-13; Bernal Casasola 1998, 1341, 1349-1350.

[7] The author acknowledges the possibility that the assemblage may also include imitations of other imported cookwares than those of African origin, see e.g. Ciotola 2000, 1401; Santoro 2002, 994-996. They will be dealt with, at the latest, in the final publication on the Roman period cookwares of the Palatine East excavations.

[8] For a more detailed introduction to the Palatine East excavations, see e.g. Hostetter *et al.* 1994.

Phase	Date (AD)	*N*=	ReCW	AfCW	IRSC	CAMP	AeCW	PALS	PANT	HAND
1.	40/50 - 80/90	214	95.33	1.40	2.34	0.93	-	-	-	-
2.	80/90 - 100/110	864	89.88	4.88	2.07	2.56	0.37	-	0.24	-
3.	100/110 - 150/170	236	81.78	12.71	4.24	0.85	0.42	-	-	-
4.	150/170 - 190/200	450	63.33	32.89	2.00	1.33	0.22	-	-	0.22
5.	220/230 - 270/290	26	53.85	42.31	-	-	3.85	-	-	-
6.	270/290 - 300/310	956	48.85	46.44	1.99	2.51	0.21	-	-	-
7.	300/310 - 310/320	849	53.47	45.11	0.82	0.24	0.24	-	0.12	-
8.	310/320 - 320/325	1256	54.14	45.70	0.16	-	-	-	-	-
9.	320/325 - 350/360	708	67.09	32.49	-	0.42	-	-	-	-
10.	350/360 - 400/425	409	78.24	21.27	0.24	-	-	-	0.24	-
11.	400/425 - 525/550	2425	86.56	12.37	0.04	-	-	0.08	0.16	0.78

Key: ReCW = Regional cookware, AfCW = African cookware; IRSC = Internal Red-Slip cookware; CAMP = Campanian cookware; AeCW = Aegean cookware; PALS = Palestinian cookware; PANT = Pantellerian ware; HAND = hand-built cookwares.

Table 1. The proportions of cookwares at the Palatine East excavations (%).

Pottery class	Phase	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
West-central Italian cookware		1.0	0.5	1.6	3.2	-	6.4	11.7	10.6	16.2	11.6	7.3
African cookware		40.0	9.1	9.1	5.7	-	6.3	12.2	11.1	25.1	29.8	33.9

Table 2. The share of west-central Italian imitations in the study assemblage (%).

while the majority of the material derives from deposits that follow its completion.

Of the eight productions distinguished from the assemblage, only two are of particular importance. The most significant is the group that can be attributed to local production and consequently termed regional or west-central Italian cookware. This group is evidently composed of several fabrics or fabric groups, which in all likelihood represent the output of different workshops and production areas. As the identification and characterization of these fabrics is evidently beyond the scope of this paper, the classification published by Peña[9] has been adapted to this study. Of the imported cookwares, the only group that can be said to have considerable significance during the period in question is African cookware,[10] which was produced in the province of Africa Proconsularis from the early 1st to the late 5th century AD. The remaining six productions – Internal Red-Slip cookware, Campanian (i.e. Black-sand) cookware, Aegean cookware, Palestinian cookware, Pantellerian ware and the class of hand-built cookwares – are clearly of minor importance.

A development not showing up in table 1 is that the steadily increasing presence of African cookware is accompanied, from the late 2nd century AD onwards, by a growing number of locally produced vessels in forms apparently seeking to reproduce the African cookware. When the quantity of these imitations is contrasted to African cookware and west-central Italian production as a whole (*Table 2*), two diverse patterns emerge. Firstly, in respect of African cookware, the share of imitations grows steadily towards the end of the chronological sequence. While they play only a minor role even in the late 3rd century AD, the situation has changed completely in the 5th century AD. By then, a third of the forms considered typical for African cookware belongs actually to west-central Italian production. But, secondly, regarding the total volume of west-central Italian cookware, these imitations clearly pass out of sight, although one can observe a momentary increase in their quantity towards the 5th century AD.[11]

[9] Peña 1999, 187-188.

[10] African cookware finds from the late Roman deposits of the Palatine East excavations are extensively discussed in Ikäheimo 2003.

[11] In certain areas the production of imitations seems to have constituted a significant part of the output. An illustrative example of such pottery is the southern Gaulish fabric *Céramique Commune Brune Orangé Biterroise* (B.O.B.), one-third of which has been identified as imitations of African cookware, see Pellecuer & Pomaredes 1991, 377, fig. 14.

Group	Phase 1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Fine volcanic cookware	-	(25.0)	(33.3)	(22.2)	-	83.3	43.4	43.0	32.5	45.9	42.2
Coarse volcanic cookware	(100.0)	-	(66.7)	(11.1)	-	-	1.9	1.4	3.9	5.4	6.5
Quartz sand cookware	-	(75.0)	-	(66.7)	-	16.7	54.7	55.6	63.6	48.7	51.3

Key: Fine volcanic cookware, Peña 1999, 188, fabrics 6b-c; Coarse volcanic cookware, Peña 1999, 188, fabrics 6d-e; Quartz sand cookware, Peña 1999, 187, fabrics 5d-e.

Table 3. The diachronic distribution of the three fabric groups in west-central Italian imitations (%).

Form	Phase 1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	TOTAL
Hayes 196 lid	-	3	1	1	-	-	6	8	2	1	14	36
Hayes 181 pan	-	-	-	3	-	2	1	2	5	7	5	25
Hayes 26/181 pan-casserole	1	-	1	-	-	-	2	1	1	-	15	21
Hayes 23A shallow casserole	1	-	-	-	-	1	7	8	3	-	11	31
Hayes 23B shallow casserole	-	-	-	-	-	3	10	22	39	15	96	185
Hayes 193 deep casserole	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	3	2	-	2	9
Hayes 197 minor	-	-	-	1	-	9	8	9	5	2	1	35
Hayes 197 deep casserole	-	1	1	4	-	14	16	17	19	12	10	94
Late Roman deep casserole	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1	1	-	-	3
Central Tunisian deep casserole	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1	-	-	-	2
TOTAL	2	4	3	9	-	30	53	72	77	37	154	441

Key: On the nomenclature and identification of these forms, see Ikäheimo 2003, 32-68.

Table 4. West-central Italian imitations of African cookware by form.

When it comes to fabrics, it is of considerable interest that – at least in this preliminary analysis –approximately a half of these imitations show a rich quartz sand temper (*Table 3*). As quartz sand is also the main inclusion in pottery produced in Roman Africa, the production of imitations may have sometimes been more extensive than just the faithful reproduction of the vessel form. Of the imitations manufactured without the presence of quartz sand, the majority of examples show a fine fabric with slightly gritty matrix and minute inclusions of volcanic origin. The rarity of west-central Italian imitations with coarse volcanic temper, on the other hand, can be understood through the form repertoire of African cookware. For a potter employing heavily tempered clay including various large angular minerals of volcanic origin, the production of forms like Hayes 23B and Hayes 197, which preconceive the use of substantial compressional forces at certain stages of the forming process was out of the question.[12]

By using their frequency as an index, the most common subjects of imitation (*Table 4*) both in Rome and elsewhere seem to have been the vessel forms that were popular outside Roman Africa. These include, for example, the Hayes 181 pan, the Hayes 23B shallow casserole and the Hayes 197 deep casserole.[13] The number of African cookware lid imitations, on the other hand, is substantially lower and may result, at least to a certain extent, from the difficulties of identifying west-central Italian lid forms as African copies. Alternatively, the reproduction of African cookware lids was perhaps useless, because – in contrast to other forms – the performance characteristics of lids did not require much attention. Perhaps, it was also more profitable to concentrate on producing copies of African cookware forms of recognized performance characteristics. As the ease of manufacture and transportation had forced the producers to exclude the addition of a proper knob, the absence of imitations also suggests that the design of African cookware lids was not very user-friendly.[14]

[12] Ikäheimo 2003, 93.

[13] E.g. Pellecuer & Pomaredes 1991, 365, 376 fig. 13; Sánchez Sánchez 1995, 267; Pasquinucci & Menchelli 1996, 509, fig. 5 no. 32; 511, fig. 7, nos. 49-52; Pasquinucci *et al.* 1998, 1409-1410.

[14] Had this controversial form been a lid-plate (it. *piatto/coperchio*, sp. *plato/tapadera*) or a bowl of distinguished performance characteristics, one should expect to find copies in local fabrics in the same abundance as imitations of other African cookware forms. On the identification of this form as a lid, see Ikäheimo 2003, 75-79.

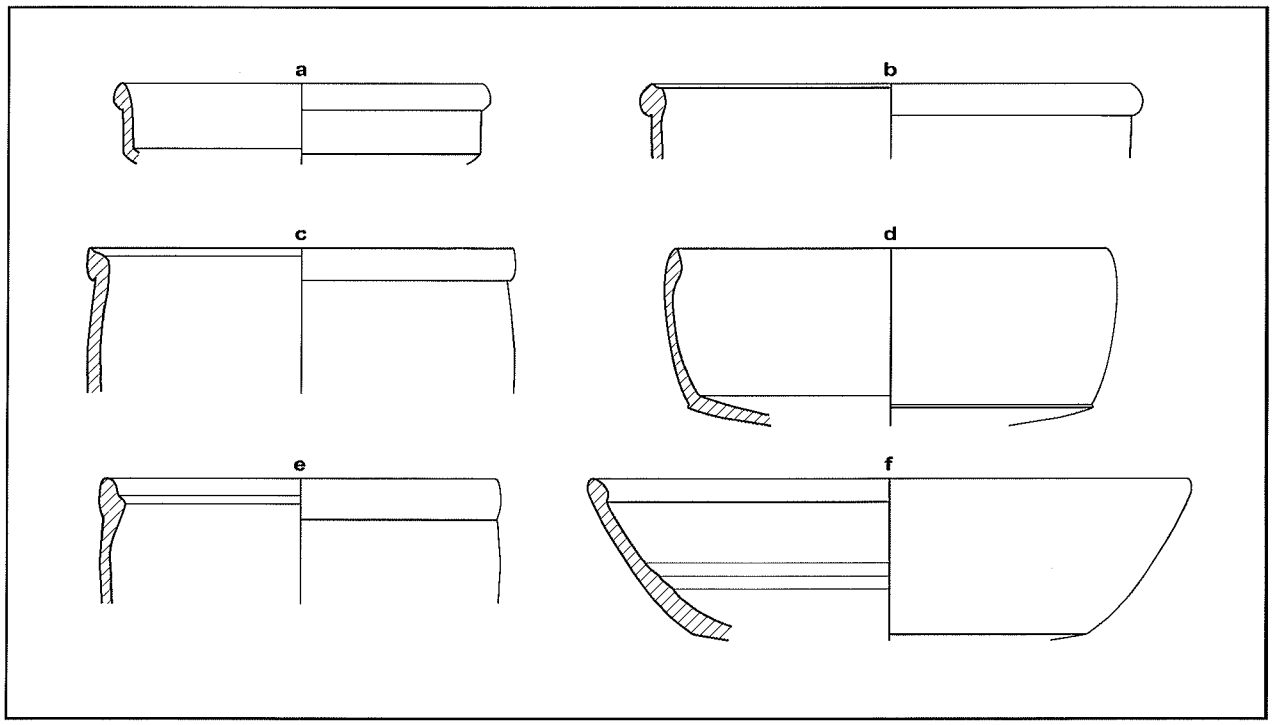

Fig. 1. A selection of African cookware imitations from the Palatine East excavations: a) Hayes 197 minor; b-c) Hayes 197 deep casserole; d) Hayes 193 deep casserole; e) Late Roman deep casserole; and e) Hayes 23B shallow casserole. Scale 1:3.

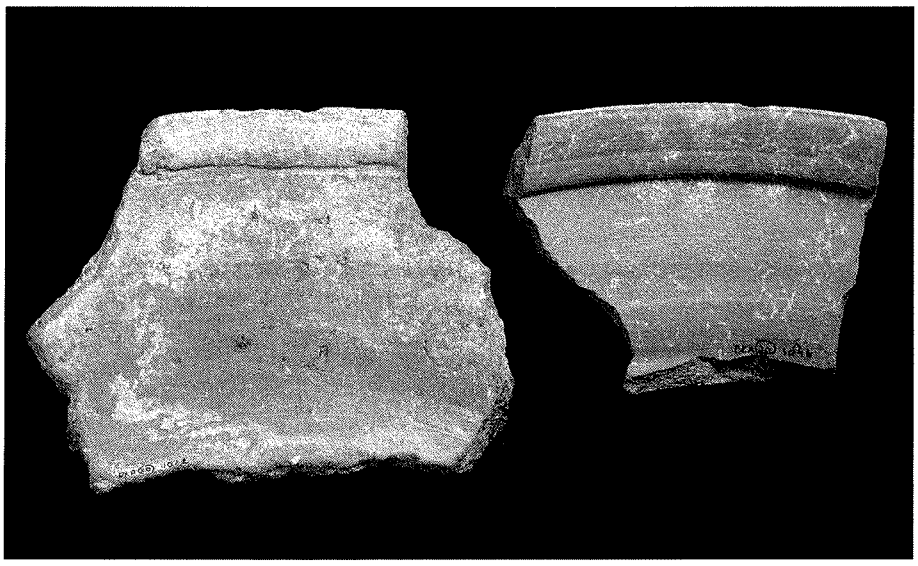

Fig. 2. The west-central Italian imitation of the Hayes 23B shallow casserole (left) does not show the same richness in detail as its Central Tunisian counterpart (right). Scale 1:2. Photo: Samantha Scaringe/The Palatine East Pottery Project.

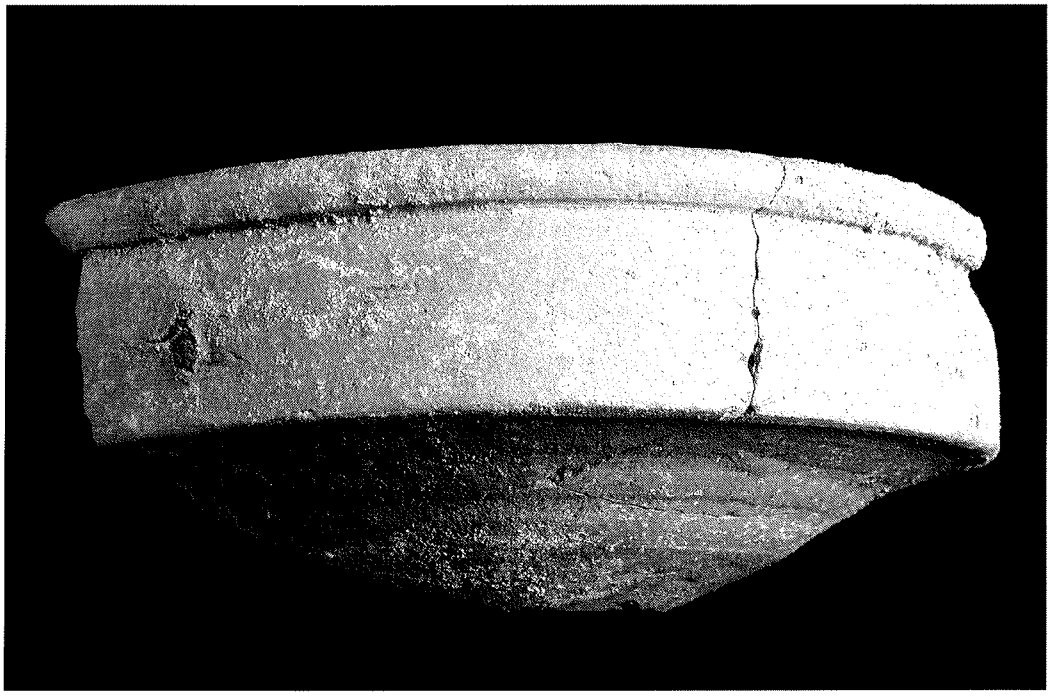

Fig. 3. The presence of minute volcanic inclusions – the small pebble visible on the left is clearly accidental – characterizes this example of the Hayes 197 minor. Scale 1:1. Photo: Samantha Scaringe/The Palatine East Pottery Project.

In all, the quantitative evidence suggests that the strategy behind the success of these products was based on gradual replacement rather than a rapid conquest of the markets. After an initial period of introduction onto the Roman market, regional potters evidently began to exploit the success of African cookware with their own products of supposedly inferior technical and aesthetic qualities.[15] As the introduction of these imitations inevitably affected the market share of African cookware imports, their presence in the region of Rome and elsewhere bear witness to vigorous cookware production. It was a both versatile and adaptive craft that managed to persist under external pressures for several centuries through a variety of production strategies.

CULTURAL ASSIMILATION THROUGH COOKWARES?

Although the existence of imitations is usually said to indicate the popularity of African cookware, the significance of the phenomenon itself has been interpreted differently. In any case, especially from the late 2nd to the early 4th century AD, African products were probably a point of reference among Roman cookwares (see *Table 1*). They were evidently worth copying,[16] although we have no firm evidence regarding their actual market value. It is likely and, perhaps, even probable that imitations were generally cheaper than the imports.[17] However, the idea about the large-scale importation of African pottery solely to the use of the upper class, which, in turn, would have developed a taste and markets for low-cost copies,[18] is difficult to accept at face value. Thus, it is necessary to consider the issues of availability and competitiveness of various cookwares as well as the influence of Roman culinary habits to their distribution.

As pointed out by Santoro,[19] imitations can be defined as such only if the original product was also available to the consumers. On the other hand, fraud is the essence of an imitation, as the consumer is not supposed to be expert or informed enough to distinguish between a copy and the

[15] Aquilué Abadías 1987, 80; Aguarod Otal 1991, 413; Picon & Olcese 1995, 112; Tortorella 1995, 95-96; Bernal Casasola 1998, 1351; Peña 1999, 164. Due to differences both in the available raw materials and production methods, imitations of African cookware have been said to lack certain features that are characteristic of the originals, see e.g. Fontana 1998, 83. Still, intentional attempts to catch even the details of surface finishes were made, as examples reproducing blackish *patina cenerognola* cover on the vessel exterior clearly show, see e.g. Pellecuer & Pomaredes 1991, 365; Moreno Almenara & Alarcón Castellano 1994, 1289-1293; Revilla Calvo *et al.* 1997, 105, 116; Serrano Ramos 1997, 220; *cf.* Aguarod Otal 1991, 245. Finally, while it is generally acknowledged that the popularity of Roman cookwares enjoying a wide distribution was primarily based on their good performance characteristics, enhanced appearance may have also contributed to their success, see Ikäheimo 2003, 98-99; *cf.* Picon & Olcese 1995, 112.

[16] Panella 1986, 440; Bernal Casasola 1998, 1350.

[17] Tortorella 1995, 95; Santoro 2002, 994-995.

[18] Bernal Casasola 1998, 1351; see also Tortorella 1995, 95-96; Fontana 1998, 83, 96.

[19] Santoro 2002, 994-995.

original product. This raises the question about the availability of African cookware, an argument that has been occasionally used to explain the appearance of imitations.[20] Availability was certainly an important factor promoting the predominance of African cookware in Ostia – one of the main hubs of trade and redistribution in the Roman world – where locally produced imitations are scarcely present. Similarly, in larger towns and cities, of which the imperial *urbs aeterna* is a prime example, cookware imports must have been widely available, but the vastness of the market left also room for local entrepreneurs. In more remote places, where African products were not necessarily available without interruption, the production of imitations may have assumed rather a complementary than competitive character.[21]

On the other hand, the importation of African cookware may have forced local potters to limit themselves to the production of a variety of indigenous forms.[22] In the region of Rome, the west-central Italian flanged casserole is an illustrative example of such a form. In general, pans characterize the form repertory of both Internal Red-Slip cookware and Campanian cookware, while pans and small casseroles are abundant in African cookware. By contrast, the percentage of large flanged casseroles, *ollae* and other cumbersome vessels is significantly higher among the west-central Italian production. In addition to differences in the output of production centers, the ease of transportation as well as local customs of acquisition may have contributed to this remarkable diversity.[23]

Finally, the introduction of cookware imports together with respective imitations may also be interpreted as a sign of cultural integration and the advance of Roman culture.[24] Culinary habits were vigorously altered especially along the coasts of Italy, France and Spain, while local nutritional traditions and indigenous vessel forms persisted further inland. According to this scheme, local imitations may have acted as mediators for cookware imports by introducing the consumers to new cuisine and kitchen utensils.[25] While it is perhaps somewhat exaggerated to see their production as a sign of cultural osmosis in the western Mediterranean,[26] cookware imitations show how even everyday kitchen utensils became standardized in the Roman world.[27]

[20] Aguarod Otal 1991, 413; Pellecuer & Pomaredes 1991, 377; Tortorella 1995, 96.
[21] Pellecuer & Pomaredes 1991, 377, 382; Tortorella 1995, 97; Panella 1999, 190.
[22] Anselmino *et al.* 1986, 62, see also Villedieu 1984, 135-136; Panella 1999, 189-190.
[23] Ricci 1986, 85; see also Panella 1986: 445-446.
[24] Pellecuer & Pomaredes 1991, 374-375, 377; Passelac 1996, 317.
[25] Pellecuer & Pomaredes 1991, 377; Fontana 1998, 96.
[26] *Cf.* Dodinet & Leblanc 1988, 143.
[27] Pellecuer & Pomaredes 1991, 378.

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