

**Roman Pottery in the
Archaeological Record:
Some Follow-Up Comments
by the Author**

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I would like to begin by stating how gratified I am that my book has proved to be of interest to so many and such distinguished students of Greek pottery and Roman pottery in Greece and the eastern Mediterranean, more generally,¹ and to express my very great appreciation to the editors of this volume and organizers of the conference on which it is based, Mark Lawall and John Lund, and also to the Gösta Enbom Foundation, the Danish Institute at Athens, and the Canadian Institute in Greece for funding and hosting the event. The presentations made in the course of the conference and the contributions to this volume, most of which I have had the opportunity to read in draft form, have brought to my attention various views that I would not have considered on my own and a vast amount of relevant evidence, research, and bibliography of which I was and in many cases would likely have remained unaware, and for this I am indeed most grateful.

In writing the book it was my hope that it would inspire students of archaeological pottery – both in the Roman world and beyond – to explore how the generalizing, normative model of the pottery life cycle that it presents might be applied in specific cultural/chronological/geographical contexts to learn interesting things about both the pottery record and the past more generally. Of the various contributions to this volume, I would like to single out two – those by Mark Lawall and Susan Rotroff – as engaging this challenge in precisely the way that I had hoped might occur. In the case of Lawall's contribution, he has used his extraordinary knowledge of Greek amphorae to revise and elaborate the model with a view to capturing the specific circumstances of the life history of these vessels. Performing this exercise allowed him to discern several differences in the ways in which amphorae were used between the Greek world and the Roman world, account for certain features of the representation of Greek amphorae

in refuse deposits, and articulate distinct models for the life history of amphorae within regions oriented toward the production of foodstuffs for local consumption and those oriented toward their production for export. In Rotroff's case, she has reviewed in as systematic a fashion as the circumstances permit the pottery assemblage recovered in the American School of Classical Studies in Athens' excavations in the Athenian Agora for evidence for vessel repair. On account of the extraordinarily large size of this body of material she has been able to document in an impressively robust fashion variability in this practice by vessel type and time period. While some aspects of this picture could have been predicted *a priori* on the strength of logical considerations, others are entirely unexpected, and raise interesting questions about the ways in which the inhabitants of Athens used and regarded their material possessions.

I would also like to make specific note of the contribution by Elizabeth Murphy and Jeroen Poblome. This presents the results of a program of path-breaking research on pottery production, and had work of this kind been available to me when I wrote the book I would very probably have elected to engage the production phase of the pottery life cycle in something more than the cursory fashion in which I did in the book.²

Research published elsewhere since I consigned the revised book manuscript to the publisher in March, 2006 has advanced significantly our understanding of certain of the topics touched on in the book, while research still in progress at the time of writing promises to do the same. In late 2008 Kevin Greene published an article that provides a synthesizing overview of consumption and consumerism in the Roman Empire, furnishing a much needed set of conceptual constructs for considerations of the consumption of pottery and the pottery life cycle.³ More recently, Nicholas Ray has completed a Ph.D. thesis that presents an extended consideration of consumer theory and the forms of evidence for consumption in the Roman world, including pottery evidence, followed by a detailed analysis of the artifact assemblages from 12 houses at Pompeii with a view to elucidating various issues of consumption.⁴ This represents an extremely welcome effort to wed general theory relevant to the study of material culture with a carefully designed empirical study, and we can look forward with great anticipation to the publication of Ray's results. Elsewhere, Ruth Siddall is carrying out a

program of research involving the compositional analysis of mortars and cements from Roman Corinth that is providing important evidence for the practices involved in the recycling pottery and other ceramics as reagents in these materials.⁵ Finally, the appearance of the journal *Facta: a journal of Roman material culture studies*, edited by one of the editors of this volume (Lund) and two of the other conference participants (Daniele Malfitana and Poblome), constitutes an extremely important development, as it means that there is now a regular forum for the publication of research of the kind here under consideration.⁶

One aspect of the model presented in my book that I believe requires more careful consideration, perhaps leading to some more or less substantial revision, is the distinction between primary and secondary use and the conceptualization of artifact function on which it is based. In brief, the model posits that the producer of an artifact will have in mind some specific application or set of applications that it will serve or, alternatively, that the consumer who acquires a newly manufactured artifact, will have some specific application or set of applications in mind for which to use it, and that we can employ this fact to identify – if only notionally – an artifact's primary use and, following from this, any secondary use or uses.⁷ As it turns out – and as was completely unknown to me at the time that I wrote the book – the tendency on the part of those who manufacture and acquire artifacts to evaluate their suitability for performing a certain application or set of applications is an issue that has drawn the attention of philosophers, including Risto Hilpinen, Randall Dipert, and Johan Modéé, and a consideration of the treatment of these questions in the philosophical literature might permit a more soundly articulated approach to the definition of primary and secondary use.⁸

Turning to the broader issues addressed in the book, one also hopes that scholars will in the near future devote considerably more attention to the study of practices of refuse discard in the Greek and Roman worlds and the ways in which these shaped both urban and rural landscapes.⁹ A particularly conspicuous example of this phenomenon has been documented at Ostia, where it appears that there was a systematic effort to raise ground level across effectively the entire city by as much as ca. one meter during the later first century AD through the importation and dumping of mixed refuse, quite probably debris resulting from the Great

Fire of AD 64 at Rome.¹⁰ This was presumably carried out with a view to raising the city somewhat higher above the water table, which normally stood at a level only slightly below that of the natural ground surface.¹¹

Roberta Tomber, in her contribution to this volume, employs information regarding the organization of refuse disposal in Cairo during the 20th century to good effect, and I would like to close by similarly introducing some comparative evidence from modern Egypt with a view to illustrating aspects of the two topics just raised. In this case, I am drawing on the well known description of Egypt composed by Dominique Vivant, Baron de Denon, one of the savants who accompanied Napoleon on his Egyptian expedition of 1798-1801 and subsequently the first director

1 For reviews of the book that consider the question of whether or not it is likely to succeed in this regard, see Kolb 2007; Bes 2008; Freed 2008; Jackson and Greene 2008; Pryor and Slane 2008; Tomber 2008; Viitanen 2008.

2 See also Gibson and Lucas 2002, which presents interesting evidence regarding the incidence of various kinds of production defects in the pottery assemblage recovered in the excavation of the Roman pottery workshop at Greenhouse Farm, in Cambridgeshire. For a useful survey of the papyrological evidence for amphora production in Egypt during the Roman period, see Gallimore forthcoming.

3 Greene 2008.

4 Ray 2009.

5 Siddall 2006; <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/%7Eucfbrxs/Homepage/rsresearch.htm>. For a short characterization of some of the results of this work, see the contribution by Slane in this volume.

6 See Peña 2009 for a review of the first number of this journal.

7 Peña 2007, 8, 9-10.

8 For a critical survey of the treatment of these issues in the philosophical literature, see Modéé 2007, 34-46.

9 See in this regard Ballet et al. 2003, which I encountered only after I had submitted the book manuscript to the press. This volume contains extremely interesting case studies of practices of refuse discard in several cities in Roman Gaul, including Autun, Lyon, Nîmes, Aix-en-Provence, and Tours.

10 For this raising of ground level at Ostia, see Meiggs 1973, 64-65 and the various studies published in Meded 58 (1999), 61-97. There may have been a similar effort to raise the ground level over much of the neighboring hamlet of Vicus Augustanus during the first and/or second centuries A.D. See http://www.rhul.ac.uk/Classics/LaurentineShore/VicusAugustanus/VC_VicusAugustanus.html.

11 For a similar effort to raise ground level above the water table in a coastal area by the systematic importation and dumping of mixed refuse in contemporary Senegal, see http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/03/world/africa/03garbage.html?_r=1

of the Musée du Louvre.¹² In writing about Balasse (Deir el-Ballas), a town located on the west bank of the Nile River in Upper Egypt that is renowned for the specialized manufacture of water jars (known as Bâlâlis), he noted: "...they [the jars] are made at very little expense, and are sold so cheap that they are sometimes used to construct the walls of houses, and the poorest inhabitant may supply himself with them in abundance....The people make rafts of these pots, which have been described by every traveler into Egypt; they are thus carried down the Nile, part of them are sold on the way, and the remainder are embarked at Rosetta and Damietta [Rashid and Domyat, harbor towns at the mouth of the Nile] to be sent abroad....I have often been at Balasse, and have been astonished at the immense cargoes of these jars, which are either piled up on boats, or made into rafts, like the large floats of wood on our rivers, which are borne by the stream, and at the same time carry their owners, who dispose of them to good advantage".¹³

Freshly manufactured Bâlâlis were thus regularly employed for two completely unrelated applications – either as water jars or as structural elements – and a significant portion of those destined for export to non-local markets for the second of these two applications also served first as floats that supported the transport of their sellers down the Nile as far as its mouth. This interesting set of circumstances suggests just some of the sorts of complications that will need to be taken into account if we are to achieve a more satisfactory definition of primary and secondary use.

In another passage, Denon writes: "Our second expedition was to Meimund, a very rich village, with ten thousand inhabitants. Like all the rest, it is surrounded with dunghills and heaps of rubbish, which, in such a flat country as this, form so many hills, that may be seen at a considerable distance. Every evening each of these eminences is seen covered with people, who lie down upon it, and breathe its noisome vapours, smoking their pipes, and observing if all is quiet in the fields. These heaps of dung and rubbish produce many inconveniences, they obscure the houses, infect the air, and fill the eyes of the people with an acrid dust mixed with minute straws, which is one of the numerous causes of the disease of the eyes to which the people of Egypt are so much exposed".¹⁴

It thus appears that the rubbish middens surrounding villages such as the one in question constituted prominent landmarks, and that while they represented both a nuisance

and a threat to the villagers' health, they also served positive purposes, since they provided a vantage point from which it was possible to keep watch on the fields surrounding the village, an activity that appears to have led to their emergence as popular spots for the inhabitants to relax and perhaps also socialize during the evening hours. It is not at all difficult, indeed, to imagine that the berm-like midden situated immediately to the south of the fort at Wadi Umm Hussein/Mons Claudianus termed by the excavators the South Sebakh might have been employed in a similar way by the inhabitants of this isolated outpost of the Roman Empire.¹⁵

12 Denon 1803.

13 Denon 1803, 231-32.

14 Denon 1803, 168.

15 For this feature, see Peña 2007, 285 fig. 10.3, 286