Changing Places: 
The Archaeology of the Roman Convivium 

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Abstract

Studies of the Roman convivium have traditionally focused on the literary, artistic, and architectural evidence of the event. As such, our understanding of Roman dining is biased toward an elite population that provides the bulk of such information. Missing from the discussion is a materials-based approach whereby the utensils of dining provide information on the mechanics of social meals. Here I present an analysis of 12 Roman table assemblages that identifies patterns of vessel groups to which I apply functional possibilities informed by literary and artistic evidence. The results of the analysis are contextualized using primary literary, artistic, and architectural evidence from which interpretations of dining behavior are offered. Two divergent traditions of dining are identified. One, which I call status dining, confirms the established model of Roman dining, which is centered on individual service so that status boundaries are maintained at the table. The other emphasizes group service through the use of shared vessels, introducing a new style of dining in the Roman world that I call convivial dining. The dining models are placed in their historical and social contexts, and an argument is made for the emergence of convivial dining as a response to a decreasing social identity among the Late Roman sub-elite after the third century and the growth of Christianity in the fourth century.*

INTRODUCTION

Passages from Plutarch’s Table Talk (Quaestiones convivales) and Pliny the Younger’s Letters present what might be considered idealized visions (or perhaps prescribed attitudes) of the purpose and practice of dining during the principate.1 Each provides insight into at least one way the social meal helped form, describe, and maintain Roman society. Plutarch contends that the formal meal presents an opportunity to make and reaffirm important social, and presumably political and economic, connections, with the consumption of food secondary to that purpose. The argument is made in the introduction to book 4 of Table Talk, in which he extols the pleasures and practical aspects of friendship:

People rush to the market place on business or for some other practical purpose; they attend a party—at least if they are intelligent—as much to gain new friends as to give a good time to the old. For though it would be low and vulgar to wish to carry off anything else, it is both a pleasure and a distinction to come away with a profitable addition to the number of one’s friends. On the other hand, anyone who neglects to do so makes the social occasion incomplete and unrewarding to himself; he departs after having partaken only with his stomach, not his mind. A guest comes to share not only meat, wine, and dessert, but conversation, fun, and the amiability that leads to friendship.2

Pliny the Younger, in a letter to a young acquaintance on whose behalf he appears to be acting as social tutor, expresses a similar if more idealized sentiment. He recounts a conversation at a dinner party in which he explained to his dining companion that he makes no class distinction during meals at his house, serving the same fare and drink to all guests regardless of rank:

I serve the same to everyone, for when I invite guests it is for a meal, not to make class distinctions; I have brought them as equals to the same table, so I give them the same treatment in everything. “Even the freedmen?” “Of course, for then they are my fellow-diners, not freedmen.”3

That his fellow diner is surprised by this suggests that Pliny’s habit is unusual and that most hosts did, in fact, make a distinction of class and rank through

* I wish to thank Andrea M. Berlin for her encouragement and her many suggestions on earlier drafts of this article. I would also like to thank Alix Barbet of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique for her kind permission to reproduce her photograph of the stibadium scene from the Tomb of the Banquet. I thank Editor-in-Chief Naomi J. Norman and the anonymous reviewers for the AJA for their helpful and insightful comments and suggestions, especially regarding full disclosure of the quantified materials. All errors are my own.

A detailed appendix discussing the assemblages is available on the AJA Web site (http://www.aajonline.org), under “Supplementary Data.”

1 Plin. Ep. 2.6 (to Junius Avitus); Plut. Mor. Quaest. conv. 2.10.2, 4.660.
2 Plut. Mor. Quaest. conv. 4.660 (Clement and Hoffleit 1969, 293).
3 Plin. Ep. 2.6 (Radice 1969, 97).
the strategic use of food and wine distribution. Aspects of food distribution during meals is highlighted again by Plutarch, when a dinner guest suggests that the atmosphere of companionship at the table can be manipulated by serving individual or shared portions of food to the guests: “But where each guest has his own private portion, companionship perishes.”

Plutarch’s discussion explores the benefits of both practices and demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of how choices of food distribution affected not only the tone of gatherings but also emphasized and differentiated specific social relationships of individual guests.

Artistic representations of dining in wall paintings, mosaics, silver plate, and textiles offer another type of primary source of the formal Roman meal. Portrayals of banquets, intimate meals, and drinking parties are a recognizable topos in the Roman artistic tradition from the Etruscan to the Early Christian periods. The most common surviving contexts with convivial scenes during the Etruscan and Republican periods are tombs with colorful wall paintings such as those found in the fifth-century B.C.E. Tomb of the Leopards at Tarquinia. In the earliest contexts, such scenes are more correctly symposion scenes that strongly resemble the Greek black-figure tradition from which they undoubtedly derive. Festive scenes from the wall paintings at Pompeii reveal a matured adaptation of portraying symposion scenes in which the trappings (i.e., furniture and drinking vessels) are of a distinctly Roman style, but the atmosphere and compositions are still taken directly from the Hellenistic traditions, with the single male reveler reclining on a couch accompanied by a seated female figure (figs. 1, 2). In these scenes, the subjects participate in drinking activities, whereas banqueting, dining, or simply eating are activities left unaddressed. This feature further emphasizes the reliance on the Greek topos in imagery during the Early Roman period, and it serves as a reminder that most Early Roman banquet imagery is not a mirror to actual activities connected with Roman dining.  

In the Late Roman period, the iconography of banqueting moved away from the symposion composition and introduced settings that more accurately reflected a reality of space and activities that took place during social meals (i.e., identifiable architectural settings and the consumption of food). Indeed, it is largely with the transformed dining imagery of the Late Roman period that we see representations of banquets that perhaps better reflect Plutarch’s descriptions of dinner parties during the Early Roman period. Part of this

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4 Plut. Mor. Quaest. conv. 2.10.2 (Clement and Hoffleit 1969, 193).

5 E.g., see the House of the Chaste Lovers, Pompeii, triclinium, west, east, and north walls (Clarke 2007, figs. 96, 105, 106); see also the House of the Triclinium, Pompeii, Room r.

6 For a detailed discussion on Early Roman banquet scenes and their reliance on Greek iconographies, see Dunbabin 2003, 52-63.
transformation is the incorporation of food as a central element. Not only can we identify platters of specific foods being brought to an assembled dinner party by servants, but in the place of drinking accoutrements on a central table is a central platter often containing a large fish or fowl. The development of a new, Roman vocabulary in banquet imagery with an emphasis on food might well represent a more accurate reflection of the overall purpose of Roman dining, which was to encourage communion and friendship through the sharing of a meal, and not just of wine (fig. 3).

Though Late Roman banqueting scenes are likely a more accurate reflection of the actual practice, it is unlikely that the literary and artistic representations of Roman dining provide strictly faithful reflections of current dining practices or behaviors at early and later Roman conivia. Rather, the surviving literary accounts might be best characterized as prescriptive, presenting idealized visions of what ought to unfold at dinner parties. This is certainly true of Plutarch, who presents various possibilities of behavior against the backdrop of what is philosophically pure and right by couching his discussions within the framework of Plato and the Greek symposion. Alternatively, Pliny presents a vision of his personal tastes in contrast to a convivial setting (perhaps exaggerated) that he found offensive in the context of social dining. Similarly, images likely do not depict a snapshot of actual dining settings and their organization and are designed instead to deliver festive messages of conviviality to evoke memories of good times past and the promise of dining pleasures present and future. It is arguable that dining scenes after the third century present a slightly more realistic setting of convivial events, though the message seems generally unchanged.

How, then, can we determine what really happened at Roman conivia? As expressed in the literature and illuminated by the artistic tradition, the identifiable behavioral traditions consist of two general types of table service: individual and shared settings. The two traditions are explicitly identified by Plutarch:

When I was holding the eponymous archonship at home, most of the dinners were portion-banquets (τῶν δείπνων δαίτες), and each man at the sacrifice was allotted his share of the meal. This was wonderfully pleasing to some, but others blamed the practice as unsociable and vulgar and thought the dinners ought to be restored again to their customary style when my term as archon was over.9

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1 Dunbabin 2003, 156–64.
2 Dunbabin 2003, 52.
3 Plut. Mor. Quaest. conv. 2.10.1 (Clement and Hoffleit 1969, 183–85).

Plutarch here describes the public dinners that accompany public sacrifice. He tells us that the normal practice at such affairs, contrary to the current choice of individual allotments, was to serve shared portions of the sacrificial animal. The reference here may indicate an intended distinction between public and private banquets and that Plutarch's guests were complaining that he had transformed sacrificial feasts into private dinner parties. Plutarch maintains that while the common practice at private affairs during the second century was to service each guest individually, so that each controlled his own portions, there also existed at least as a cultural memory a tradition of serving shared portions among assembled guests:

[Let us] emulate the kindliness of the men of long ago, who, because they respected all companionship with one's fellows, held in honour not only those who shared their hearth and roof but also those who shared their ration-measure, and their meal-tub. . . . Clearly the banquets of Pindar are better where "about the noble table heroes often met" all sharing everything with each other. That was really like fellowship and communion.10

The distinction that civic sacrifices resulted in public banquets with shared portions and the petition to bring back from the past the tradition of shared rations at public functions suggests that two dining traditions existed in Roman society. Can we test this model of individual vs. shared portions against the scrutiny of hard archaeological evidence? I argue that we can, and that the essential components of individual and shared services are the bowls, plates, and platters used for each.
Dining Practices Described

Individual Service

Individual service is the dominant style of dining in the Early Roman period. Early Roman authors describe the formal meal as an occasion where guests personally controlled most of their food through individually portioned dishes. Accompanying these were certain parts of the meal that were served as shared portions, most likely to the dining unit defined by shared couches. Even so, shared components are secondary to an overall service in which the primary unit is the individual.

Pliny the Younger instructed that economy could be found by providing the same food and drink for one’s guests as for oneself, arguing that it is easier and cheaper to curb one’s own extravagant tastes when acting as host so that the same moderate fare is served to all guests, thus limiting the cost of the dinner. The implication is that one could serve different classes of meals to individual guests should one be so inclined, suggesting a highly individualized service. From Plutarch we learn the importance of personal portions and service in a humorous slight at the expense of the guest Hagias, who argues that it is better to serve shared portions at banquets:

[1] It was not strange for Hagias to experience some irritation at receiving portions equal to those of the rest, for the belly he carried around was so big; and indeed he numbered himself (he added) among those who like to eat their fill, “for there are no bones in a fish shared with another,” as Democritus says. “But this liking is the very thing,” he continued, “which has brought us to the custom of serving people more than their share. Euripides’s old woman says that equal treatment ‘city with city entwines and ally with ally,’ and nothing is so in need of that quality as company at table; their need is natural and not factious, fundamental and not a novelty introduced by fashion.”

The argument continues that the harmony initiated by personal portions is maintained at a party when “the goddesses Portion and Lot preside with equity over the dinners,” so that each guest receives equal distributions of food. As lighthearted as the slight is, the underlying sentiment is serious: individual portions of food at dinner parties are not served on the whim of fashion but are deeply rooted in the needs and purposes of why we gather at all—to reaffirm old relations and make new ones.

Abuses of individual distributions of food were also possible, as highlighted by Pliny, who likely created imbalances in the intended conviviality of the Roman banquet based on social status and rank in relation to the host. This is well illustrated by several epigrams of Martial in which he complains that since he was served a different class of meal, he did not, after all, dine with his host:

Since I am asked to dinner, no longer, as before, a purchased guest, why is not the same dinner served to me as to you? You take oysters fattened in the Lucrine lake, I suck a mussel through a hole in the shell; you get mushrooms, I take hog funguses; you take turbot, but I brill. Golden with fat, a turtle-dove gorges you with its bloated rump; there is set before me a mappie that has died in its cage. Why do I dine without you although, Ponticus, I am dining with you? The hole is gone: let us have the benefit of that; let us eat the same fare.

The use of different ranks of food served to select individuals was undoubtedly an intentional tool used to affirm relations between host and guests, offering an opportunity to make obvious epicureal slight or favors in a social setting.

Another potential disruption to the equity brought about by individual service arises from the distribution of foods that do not portion out easily, the “fancy cakes and Lydian puddings and rich sauces and all sorts of other dishes made of ground and grated delicacies.” Cakes (pemmata), Lydian puddings (hundulons), and sauces (opsa), however, can be considered secondary, supplementary items to the primary foods equally distributed to individuals. They are side dishes served in such a way as to be accessible to groups of diners to flavor their own dishes or as shared finger foods of mixed variety. A third component of the meal consists of food completely beyond the control of any individual diner, those controlled instead by servants who were responsible for distributing small portions from a larger whole to guests. In a succinct definition of the

11 Certainly the sources are chronologically and geographically disparate, and it would be difficult to argue that a first-century source is informative of a fourth-century context. It should be stressed that the literary sources are used here to illustrate possibilities of behavior and not to inform on any particular or specific context. I thank an anonymous reviewer for the AJA for drawing my attention to this issue.
13 Plut. Mor. Quaest. conv. 2.10.2 (Clement and Hoffleit 1969, 189).
14 Plut. Mor. Quaest. conv. 2.10.2 (Clement and Hoffleit 1969, 191).
15 Plut. Mor. Quaest. conv. 4.660.
16 Mart. 3.60 (Ker 1968, 201); see also Mart. 1.20, 3.49, 4.48, 6.11, 10.49.
17 Plut. Mor. Quaest. conv. 2.10.2 (Clement and Hoffleit 1969, 191).
social meal provided during a philosophical discussion in Plutarch's *Table Talk*, the guest Lamprias tells us that "dinners were called 'distributions' (διαίτας), the guests 'those to whom distribution is made' (διαίτωμάς), and waiters 'distributors' (διαίτροις) because they tend to the division and distribution of the food."18 Meals with individual service thus consist of three categories of food: personally controlled food, shared side dishes, and food to be served. Here I present evidence that these three categories are verified in three classes of table vessels: personal vessels, side dishes, and service vessels.

**Personal Vessels.** Ancient sources do not hint at the qualities of personal vessels, nor do images (primarily in the first-second centuries C.E.) offer assistance, focusing as they do on drinking. What we can glean from the sources is that the purpose of individual service was to limit competition at the table through equal distributions and equal attention. Equity was likely heightened by issuing identical sets of dishes both in terms of size and shape to diners. Matching table settings would ensure that each guest received equal portions that could be verified by his neighbors.19 The use of matching table settings in our modern formal dinners provides an analogy, in which the use of sets serves to unify participants in the meal while at the same time allowing individual control over personal portions of food.20

A mosaic from Carthage depicting a banquet provides one of the few illustrations that includes vessels associated with individual distributions (fig. 4). The mosaic, dated to the second half of the fourth century C.E., depicts small bowls of a single shape set on the table in front of a diner and on a large tray held aloft by a servant who is handing another small bowl to a different diner.21 The identical size and shape of the bowls served to individual diners would have suited the needs of a host who wished to serve equal, individual portions to guests in the manner described by Plutarch. Dunbabin has argued that the scene from the Carthage mosaic represents a public banquet, thus explaining why participants are seated on benches at table rather than reclining on couches.22 If this is the case, the interpretation of the small bowls as personal vessels still holds, acting as a means to limit interpersonal competition during the meal through equal distributions of food.

Based on the literary and artistic evidence, I suggest that personal vessels can be identified in archaeological table assemblages. Personal vessels are defined as identical or similar small bowls, plates, and dishes that are present in large numbers compared with other shapes in the assemblage. The high proportion of these vessels may reflect matching sets that could be distributed to individual diners. The qualification of the vessels as small is taken to fall roughly within the parameters of the analysis of ethnographic data presented by Henrickson and McDonald, who determined that vessels intended for individual use tend to measure between 10 and 23 cm, with a mean diameter of about 14 cm.23

**Side Dishes.** The popularity of small, supplementary dishes such as sauces and pastries is well attested in the ancient literature of both the Early and Late Roman periods. In addition to the reference of such dishes mentioned in Plutarch above, one can also look to Gregory of Nyssa, who wrote in the fourth century of many sauces (*kanukheia*), relishes (*opsa*), and little cakes (*pemmata*), and to Sidonius Apollinaris in the fifth century who tells of sauces (*oxygara*) that were the responsibility of the "master of the feast" (*rex convivii*) to prepare and distribute.24

A mosaic from the *stibadium* of the so-called House of the Buffet Supper in Antioch provides an illustration of such a variety of minor dishes served up in small vessels of various shapes (fig. 5). The mosaic portrays a range of shapes belonging to a silver table service that includes small vessels specific to different types of supplementary dishes, such as a bowl containing a sauce, egg cups, and dishes containing what look like shoots of asparagus, perhaps meant to be dipped in the sauce, all of which are reminiscent of small silver vessels found in the Boscoreale treasure of the first century C.E.25 A defining feature of the vessels used to serve these side dishes is that they are made up of a variety of shapes intended for specific use, dependant on food type and consistency.

Given that side dishes were supplementary to the main dish and intended to be shared by two or more dining companions, a table assemblage dedicated to

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19 This does not preclude the possibility of individuals requesting and being served second portions, as would seem reasonable, but the purpose of the personally controlled vessels remains the same: equal distribution for each service. My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for the *AJA* for drawing my attention to this issue.
21 Blanck 1981.
22 Dunbabin 2003, 91.
23 Henrickson and McDonald 1983, 632.
25 Héron de Villefosse 1899; Baratte 1986.
personal service would not need as many of each shape as there were number of guests. Thus, side dishes, as a vessel category, consist of a variety of smaller dishes that make up a relatively small proportion of the total table assemblage, compared with other possible functional types. Side dishes consist of examples of individual vessel forms that are present in small numbers within the table assemblage.

Service Vessels. References to service vessels—those used to bring food from kitchen to table from which smaller portions were served—are most often limited to descriptions of feasts that feature silver settings. These are references to large platters or dishes brought out by servants bent over by their weight.26 The weight here likely indicates not only that the large platters and dishes were of silver, and thus heavy, but also hints at the quantity of food, which is a reference to the convivial nature of the gatherings. Again we can turn to the mosaic from Antioch as an illustration of large silver service vessels (fig. 6). Here, a variety of shapes is found: some rectangular, some oval, others round with varying decoration and each containing a different course of the meal (fish, fowl, cake).

Dumbabin argues that the Antioch mosaic illustrates a range of courses a guest might encounter during a meal.27 This would mean that the large vessels would

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26 Sid. Apoll. Epist. 1.2.6, 9.13.5.
not have occupied the table all at once but were cycled through the course of a banquet, each containing food that was then portioned out to smaller vessels. The variety of shapes of service vessels illustrated in the mosaic perhaps reflects a need of suitable shapes for different kinds of food or a desire to distinguish one course from another.

As a functional class, described in text and art, service vessels can be described as large platters, bowls, and dishes. Further, service vessels may consist of a variety of shapes. Relative to the rest of the table assemblage, service vessels make up a small proportion of all table vessels. Specific shapes or types appear singly or in small numbers.

Shared Service

The practice of providing shared service at the Roman meal is poorly attested in the literature. References are present in Plutarch both as a counterpart to individualism within a broader philosophical discussion and as a reference to times past or a cultural memory. The unflattering description given of shared service found in Plutarch, that it leads to "suspicion, grabbing, snatching, and elbowing among the guests," helps characterize the principle of the shared table setting: food is portioned into dishes that are accessible to two or more diners. Authors who praise shared service suggest that unlike individual service, shared portions provide a true sense of communion and table fellowship. Their sentiment reflects an awareness of how food distribution and consumption in social settings can strengthen, delineate, and otherwise reinforce status boundaries and social units.

Illustrations of shared dining are more common during the Late Roman period than are depictions of individual service from any Roman period. Such scenes consist of a group of diners, frequently between six and seven, in sigma formation reclining around a stibadium cushion, seemingly set upon the ground, as there is no evidence of other furniture. In the space before the diners are typically set two or three large platters, each with a single item. These scenes constitute a common type in the Late Roman catacombs of Rome, found in both Christian and pagan contexts. Those from Christian contexts are distinguished by two factors: (1) fish make up the sole food item on all the dishes, whereas similar scenes from pagan contexts will include fish, poultry, and other items (fig. 7, right); and (2) baskets containing loaves of bread are included (see fig. 7, left). The repeated motif of fish and loaves found in the Christian catacombs likely refers to the miracle of their multiplication (Mark 8:1–6). Alternatively, the pagan scenes are thought to represent funerary feasts, often portraying the deceased but with specific reference to earthly elements grounded in current dining practices, rather than an idealized meal in a paradisiac setting. The common element between pagan and Christian representations of the sigma setting is the limitation of a few vessels for many diners.

The composition of the catacomb banqueting scenes provides insight into how shared service could help unite assembled guests. The Christian and pagan scenes reproduced in figure 7 reveal certain spatial limitations that restrict access to individual dishes to small groups of diners of two or three (groups A, B, and C in fig. 7). Despite the divisions of the banqueting groups into distinct units, the possibility remains that the central group of diners (B) could serve as a bridge between the two outer groups (A and C). The central figures appear to have access to the vessels that otherwise belong to different dining units. In this way, all participants in the meal are linked by the consumption of shared dishes through a kind of cross-pollination.

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28 Plut. Mor. Quaest. conv. 2.10.2 (Clement and Hoffleit 1969, 191).
29 Plut. Mor. Quaest. conv. 2.10. Much of the discussion on individual vs. shared portions found in Plutarch reflects many aspects of modern theory on the meaning of dining (see esp.

Fig. 6. Stibadium mosaic from the House of the Buffet Supper, Antioch, early third century C.E. © Department of Art and Archaeology, Princeton University, neg. 4493.)

Shared dining can thus be defined as consisting of large dishes to be shared by multiple diners, as evinced by the catacomb representations. Smaller dishes used for supplementary items such as sauces and relishes, while absent from these scenes, were likely a component of shared service, as suggested by the popularity of such side dishes expressed in the written record. Large service vessels were also a likely component to the shared service kit, used to transport food from kitchen to table as well as refill shared dishes as needed.

**Shared Vessels.** Shared vessels in ancient representations consist of large, open vessels that can hold sizable quantities of food (e.g., whole fish, fowl, cakes). These same representations also indicate that the vessels consist of a single shape or type. The repetition of shape among shared dishes would have a similar unifying effect for the assembled dinner guests as the use of matching sets of personal vessels.\(^{32}\) Matching shared vessels, however, serve only to highlight the unity and personal connections between dining companions, as the act of sharing and taking food from a common vessel itself is an act of unified conviviality, as is explicitly touted in Plutarch.\(^{33}\)

Within these observed parameters of shared dining in Roman art and literature, we can expect shared vessels within the archaeological record to consist of matching sets of large, open vessels—that is to say, large vessels of a single type present in numerous examples within a single assemblage. The qualification of vessels as “large” consists not only of rim diameter but also volume, or capacity. Following the parameters outlined by Henrickson and McDonald, shared vessels (which they call “family-capacity” vessels) have a mean rim diameter of 24 cm and volumes that are three times that of individual vessels.\(^{34}\)

**Side Dishes and Service Vessels in Shared Service.** The physical characteristics of side dishes and service vessels are likely the same in assemblages meant for shared services as in those for individual service. As in individual service, side dishes must have consisted of small vessels in a variety of shapes and types, while service vessels are large and come in a variety of shapes and in small numbers within any given assemblages.

The literary and artistic evidence of dining can be summarized simply in a table (table 1). Each dining category is described according to behavior, and generic functional groups are assigned to the behavioral possibilities. In turn, functional descriptions are offered to real archaeological patterns that may be used to infer back to dining categories and behaviors.

**THE STUDY OF ROMAN DINING**

Texts and images have traditionally been the building blocks for the study of Roman dining and banqueting. Nineteenth-century scholarship effectively mined literary works to reconstruct the prescribed layout of the Roman meal.\(^{35}\) The scholarship of the latter part

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\(^{32}\)Wallendorf and Arnould 1991.

\(^{33}\)Plut. *Mor. Quaest. conv. 2.10.*

\(^{34}\)Henrickson and McDonald 1983.

\(^{35}\)E.g., Marquardt 1879.
of the 20th century produced a new approach to the study of the Roman *convivium* in which there was an attempt to harmonize the written and physical remains of the Early Imperial period. Of particular note is the work by D’Arms, who introduced the tenets of anthropological theory, which he felt were an untapped resource to understand better the meaning of the formalized *cena*, the principal social meal of the Roman day.36 He proposed that the *cena* functioned to reinforce existing social hierarchies and helped maintain order in Roman society.37 He introduced new questions that have shaped the study of Roman dining for the past 20 years, such as whether status boundaries were maintained or blurred by the private meal and whether the distribution of food reinforced those same boundaries.38 D’Arms suggested that to answer such nuanced questions, we must “draw on more disparate materials than have sometimes been exploited in the past,” believing that the more common sources of evidence alone (principally literary and art historic) were not enough.39

As if challenged by D’Arms, subsequent studies are marked by their careful analysis of different sources of evidence, generally architectural, art historic, and literary.40 Dunbabin’s book, *The Roman Banquet*, provides the broadest, most synthetic discussion of Roman dining to date, addressing materials from the Early Roman to Late Antique periods and thus presenting an important contribution to the study of the cultural transformation from the Classical period to late antiquity.41 Dunbabin’s detailed analysis, discussion, and conclusions are largely limited to the subject of banqueting as “the festive consumption of food and drinking in Roman society.”42 She generally sidelines the more quotidian aspects of dining. This distinction between banqueting and everyday dining represents a gap in the study of Roman *convivia*. That is to say, most studies have focused on the evidence taken from literature and art, which are generally the products of the elite and most often record special or memorable events that we might call banquets. The weight of evidence given to these socially charged artifacts from the Roman upper classes have resulted in the production of a homogenized reconstruction of what the Roman meal must have looked like. Modern scholarship has, perforce, created a dining and banqueting tradition for the Roman period that does not change across time or space, with the perception that activities and behaviors were the same in first-century Rome as in sixth-century Sardis.

This homogenized outcome seems to have been predicted by D’Arms, who warned that only by exploring

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38D’Arms 1984, 345–46.
39D’Arms 1984, 346.
42Dunbabin 2003, 4.
new categories of evidence would we begin to understand the subtleties and changes in Roman dining that were sure to have occurred over time.\(^4\) Though the methodological models of modern scholarship have changed to allow for more nuanced readings of the traditional evidence, the reliance on the same can be said to be their one shortcoming. Missing from the evidence and analyses is a means to understand personal interaction at meals vis-à-vis the central focus of the event: food.

The subtle interactions that take place when food is distributed and consumed among assembled diners is something rarely addressed in the literary sources. The few examples that can be found, such as the letter of Pliny the Younger to Junius Avitus, tend to gloss over the subtleties of the social significance of how meals were eaten.\(^4\) Such lacunae are unfortunate, as these aspects could provide additional and nuanced evidence of the kinds of status hierarchies and social standards maintained during a meal gathering.\(^4\)

**THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF ROMAN DINING**

The Roman meal, divided into various courses of food and drink, was facilitated by a series of vessels in silver, glass, or ceramic, each intended to be used in a particular fashion. In other words, the table vessels used during the Roman meal helped define how food was distributed and consumed by individual diners. To date, Roman table vessels have yet to be used as a means to decipher the sociocultural food interactions that occurred during the Roman meal. The minimization of such a large class of evidence related to eating within the field of Roman dining is likely because of limitations within ceramic studies (i.e., limited publication of domestic context assemblages) rather than any oversight or lack of interest.

Unlike the literary evidence of Roman dining, of which there are lacunae after the third century, and the ambivalent nature of the artistic evidence regarding the transmission and transformation of dining traditions over time, the ceramic evidence provides an uninterrupted data set from the first through seventh centuries with which we can track changes in table assemblages. The allure of the rich and ever-increasing corpus of Roman ceramics is that if it is possible to identify significant changes within table assemblages, it may be possible to infer changes that occurred in dining habits and the social significance of the formalized meal. The potential of identifying social changes through the ceramic record is exemplified by the differences between the late second-century table assemblage from Knossos (fig. 8) and that from early seventh-century Alexandria (fig. 9). Unlike the Knossos assemblage, which is characterized by a high proportion of small bowls and plates in matching sets, the later Alexandrian assemblage is made up of a variety of large dishes and accompanying small vessels of mixed shapes. What, if any, is the significance of the change in preference from small, matching vessels to typological disparity dominated by large vessels?

Examined side-by-side, the Knossos and Alexandria table assemblages differ markedly, a view that is at odds with the common perception that Roman dining practices were largely unchanged from the Early Roman through Late Antique periods. The table service evidence suggests a dramatic change in the dining kit from the second to the seventh centuries C.E. Can these apparent differences be related to their intended functions within the dining experience?

Here I present a method of analyzing individual Roman table assemblages in both ceramic and silver with the intention of identifying three functional categories of individual and shared service inferred from the literary and artistic evidence. Silver assemblages are included alongside ceramic for two reasons: (1) we have rare instances of cached silver sets that represent living dining assemblages, and (2) they provide an opportunity to study the dining assemblages of a level of society that could afford entire table settings in silver. Additionally, the analysis presented here is not dependent on material; it allows for comparison of assemblages independent of medium.\(^4\)

The principle of the analysis is that shape, form, or established type cannot be used as a priori determiners of function. Rather, each example of a shape, form, or type must be considered within its own context to determine what functional role it played within the assemblage to which it belonged. To work with material that is as representative of original living contexts as possible, the analyses were limited to deposits that were comparable to the larger hoards in the West. See, e.g., the silver bowls from Sucidava in Moesia Inferior (Claite and Radulescu 1988) and the small late fourth-century silver hoard from Latakia in Syria (Miliiken 1958). For Early Roman silver in the East, see the first-century Berlin papyrus of silver inventories that can be read alongside the Boscoreale treasure with surprising ease (Oliver and Shelton 1979).

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\(^2\) D'Arms 1984, 346; see also D'Arms 2004, 429.
\(^3\) Plin. Ep. 6; see also Plut. Mor. Quaest. conv. 2.10.
\(^5\) The exclusivity of western silver assemblages in the analysis reflects the nature of the silver hoarding events in the West vs. the East. Despite a lack of eastern equivalents, the character of the smaller and less uniform silver finds in the East is
stratigraphically isolated in their formation and, whenever possible, sealed. In other words, each analyzed deposit represents a collection of pottery or silver that has a high probability of having once been a use assemblage in its original context. Some deposits are from primary contexts, whereas others are from secondary contexts that seem to have been dumps or ancient cleanups of primary deposits such as single-event well deposits or hurried attempts to hide household silver in times of stress. The significance of these features is that each deposit may be largely taken to represent a functional whole. While individual vessels from the original living assemblage may be missing, each corpus can be seen as a distinct unit that belonged to an original functioning body of dining vessels, quite different from the general site assemblages, which are less representative of specific use contexts.

I selected 12 deposits for analysis, ranging from the first to early seventh centuries C.E. (table 2). The geographic distribution is broad, but with a clear clustering of sites in the eastern Mediterranean (fig. 10). Nine of the deposits yield life assemblages, meaning the table vessels belong to a single living use context. These consist of floor deposits associated with destruction events (Corinth, Knossos, Ephesos, Aphrodisias, and possibly the silver Esquiline treasure in Rome), hoarding/secretion of silver (Boscoreale and Kaiseraugst), or single-event dumping of household assemblages in a secondary context (Hacimusalar and Alexandria). In contrast, three of the deposits are “death assemblages,” or table settings pieced together from discarded materials removed piecemeal from living assemblages because of breakage or some other reason. These are made up of either large destruction levels associated with domestic architecture—but without the specificity of floor deposits so that the material should be seen as a history of ceramic usage in its context (Sagalassos)—or deposits from wells and cisterns that represent cumulative discarded materials from one or more households (Paphos and Sardis).

The difference between life and death assemblages is important because the analysis produces an interpretation based on functional categories. The question is whether death assemblages distort the relative frequencies of some vessel types over others because of their breakage rates, and thus undermine the prin-

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47 On pottery deposit formation and discussions on types and typologies in general, see Peña 2007.
48 On assemblage types and their formation processes, see Peña (2007, 319–52). I thank an anonymous reviewer for the A/IA for drawing attention to the distinction to be made among the assemblage types in the analysis.
49 For an interesting study on breakage rates in the African Red Slip Ware assemblages, see Hawthorne 2000.
Fig. 9. Table assemblage from Alexandria, early seventh century C.E.
Table 2. Assemblages and Deposits Presented Chronologically.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Assemblage Type</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Reference(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Corinth, Greece</td>
<td>life</td>
<td>large deposit dating to early first century C.E.</td>
<td>Slane Wright 1980</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boscoreale, Italy</td>
<td>life</td>
<td>large silver assemblage including table vessels dating to first century C.E.</td>
<td>Héron de Villefosse 1899; Baratte 1986</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paphos, Cyprus</td>
<td>death</td>
<td>large cistern deposit dating to early second century C.E.</td>
<td>Hayes 1991</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knossos, Crete</td>
<td>life</td>
<td>large deposit associated with probable domestic architecture, dating to end of second century C.E.</td>
<td>Hayes 1983</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ephesos, Turkey</td>
<td>life</td>
<td>small deposit dating to third century C.E.</td>
<td>Ladstätter 2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaiseraugst, Switzerland</td>
<td>life</td>
<td>large silver assemblage dating to mid fourth century C.E.</td>
<td>Cahn and Kaufmann-Heinimann 1984; Kaufmann-Heinimann 1999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esquiline treasure, Rome</td>
<td>life</td>
<td>large silver assemblage dating to second half of fourth century C.E.</td>
<td>Shelton 1981, 1985</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aphrodisias, Turkey</td>
<td>life</td>
<td>table vessels from three contexts dating from late fourth to mid sixth century C.E.</td>
<td>Hudson 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sagalassos, Turkey</td>
<td>death</td>
<td>large deposit associated with domestic architecture, dating to late fourth/early fifth century C.E.</td>
<td>Poblome 1999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hacmusalar in Lycia, Turkey</td>
<td>life</td>
<td>large domestic deposit dating to late fifth/early sixth century C.E.</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sardis, Turkey</td>
<td>death</td>
<td>large well deposit in a domestic quarter, dating to mid sixth century C.E.</td>
<td>Rautman 1995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alexandria, Egypt</td>
<td>life</td>
<td>large deposit from a household latrine, result of cleanup after destruction, dating to early seventh century C.E.</td>
<td>Rodziewicz 1984</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

picals of the analysis. This is a real concern and one that cannot be fully assuaged by the current data. An important feature of the death assemblages included in the study, however, is that they are not from deposits that accrued over long periods within a restricted physical context and so are perhaps more closely related to life assemblages than to site-wide ceramic assemblages. I analyze each dining assemblage according to the functional groups of personal, side, shared, and service vessels described above (see table 1). With the ceramic assemblages, I make use of existing ceramic typologies to classify vessels but do not rely on these typologies to determine vessel function. This is because typologies are constructed to illustrate chronological evolutions of forms and types within a production tradition. Af-

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50 It should be stressed that this study does not attempt to define assemblages in absolute terms but rather to identify patterns that can be interpreted within individual contexts.
Fig. 10. Map of sites that yielded deposits used in the analysis.

American Red Slip Ware, for example, had a production history of more than six centuries and a complex history of vessel types produced at its loose network of workshops. Typologies of Roman pottery provide the necessary classification of general forms (e.g., bowl, dish, plate) and specific identifying types.

Types are subgroups of forms that share specific and consistent features, such as ledge rims or collared rims. Types are, in effect, the result of repeated manufacturing decisions made by potters and are markers of habits, histories, and trends. Types do not, however, inherently relate to function. While certain forms can be categorized by function (e.g., amphoras as storage and transport vessels), specific types of fineware table vessels cannot be neatly assigned to specific functions. Rather, specific types of table vessels reflect market availability in different site and regional contexts at different times. Typological designations are thus best regarded as modern analytical artifacts relating to ancient production and consumption. This means that to determine the way in which dining assemblages actually functioned, some consistent mode of analysis is needed.

It is common in many Roman-period ceramic table assemblages to find fineware types in a variety of wares (production traditions), some of which are not part of the recognized production history of formalized typologies. These are often called imitations of the standard types. Imitations are essentially parallel productions with less broad distributions. These parallel types commonly appear alongside the “real deal” in ceramic assemblages. For example, at Sardis, the most common type of vessel in the Late Roman table assemblage is Phocaean Red Slip Hayes Form 3. Examples present in the assemblage include the actual Phocaean Red Slip Ware and many other examples in two different wares that are not Phocaean Red Slip. In my analysis, I put less importance on differences in ware and more on form and type for the sake of determining functional groups. This means that parallel types in alternate wares are given the same level of significance as examples of the actual forms in their

51 Hayes 1972, 13.

52 Rautman 1995.
genuine wares. This aspect is particularly important when determining groups of associated vessels in individual deposits, as it allows vessels of like form to be grouped despite their differences in ware, a common dividing factor in the publication of table vessels in ceramic analyses.

**Glass**

This analysis does not deal with glass vessels because they survive poorly in the archaeological record, representing an absence of evidence among the assemblages included in this study. The absence of glass has the potential to distort the results of the analysis, but it is questionable whether glass made up a significant proportion of table assemblages, especially in the Late Roman period, when glass was used primarily for drinking. An example of this is the large early seventh-century domestic deposit from the latrine in Maison D at Alexandria in Egypt. The deposit included a large number of glass vessels, 27% of which were glass goblets, with small bottles and flasks making up the remaining 73%.\(^54\) Stern suggests that by the late fifth century C.E., shallow and deep bowls for food service appear to have become obsolete in eastern glass assemblages.\(^54\) Certainly, earlier assemblages included glass vessels that would fall within some of the functional roles described in this analysis. The question is whether, if known, they would significantly skew the percentages of available functional classes that make up individual assemblages. With this caveat in mind, the absence of available data should not preclude efforts to contextualize the data at hand.\(^55\)

**Determining Functional Categories**

The purpose of the current analysis is to identify sets of vessels within individual deposits that may then be correlated with the functional groups described above. The first defining factor is size, based on the clear delineation between small and large dishes in the artistic representations and the corresponding distinction made in ethnographic studies.\(^56\) Simple common sense also suggests that vessel size is important. Size distinctions are made by first dividing the deposit into general groups of small and large vessels. Next, within size groups I look for vessel forms to determine if there are patterns. These patterns are necessary for determining personal or shared vessels (sets of small or large dishes, respectively), side dishes (mixed groups of small vessels), and service vessels (individual or infrequent examples of large vessels).

**Size: Measuring Capacity.** Vessel capacity is an important component of vessel function because capacity, or volume, relates to the kinds of activities suitable for a particular vessel. While there tends to be a direct correlation between rim diameter and capacity, where vessels with large rim diameters tend to have greater volumes, this is not always true; certain open forms with large rim diameters are shallow and have relatively small volumes and so are not particularly representative of their capacity (e.g., plates and platters). Despite this caveat, volume provides a general guideline for understanding the possibilities or limits of the function. For example, a vessel with a volume of 0.5 liters could be used for many things, but it is less likely to be used to serve large quantities of food than a vessel with a volume of 1.5 liters. Volume, therefore, is a measurement that helps restrict the kinds of functional possibilities attributable to a vessel.

To measure volume, I use a method called "summed cylinders," which permits the calculation of volume from profile drawings by superimposing a series of stacked cylinders that fit the contours of the vessel.\(^57\) The volume of each cylinder is then calculated using the standard formula of \(V = \pi r^2 h\). The vessel volume, or rough capacity, is thus the sum of all cylinder volumes (fig. 11).

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53 Rodziewicz 1984, 239–43, pls. 73, 74. For similar percentages of glass drinking vessels in Late Roman contexts at Carthage, see Tatton-Brown 1984, 210–11.

54 Stern 1999, 483–84, table 3; 2001, 263.

55 Other materials, such as wood and stone, were also used for table vessels (Possidius Vita S. Augustini 22), but it is questionable whether their relative proportions within individual assemblages would greatly alter the general characteristics of table settings. Further study would certainly add much to the discussion of dining assemblages. My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for the AJA for the Possidius reference.

56 Henrickson and McDonald 1983.

A drawback to the summed cylinder method is that it requires vessels that are preserved from rim to foot. Pottery from field excavations is generally fragmentary. Among the deposits in this study, the volumes of only a few table vessels could be measured with all confidence (e.g., Sardis, 16%; Hacmusalar, 25%; Alexandria, 65%; Aphrodisias, 90%). When complete profiles were unavailable, I found it possible to estimate volumes by combining rim diameters and the standard characteristics of established types (i.e., Phocaea Red Slip Hayes Forms 3 and 5, or African Red Slip Hayes Forms 91C and 99C) to reconstruct an assumed vessel shape and profile.58 When a fragmentary vessel did not fit the profile of a standard type, the volume was estimated by determining probable vessel height and shape based on wall fragment inclination.

Size: Rim Diameter and Capacity as Markers of Size. Whether a vessel is categorized as small or large is determined by the averages of rim diameters and vessel capacities measured in all the deposits from the first century to the early seventh century C.E. The averages are used as the dividing point for small and large vessels, where those vessels with rim diameters and capacities less than the average are considered small in relation to those vessels with rim diameters and capacities greater than the average. The average rim diameter of all open table vessels is about 20 cm (specifically 20.5 cm), and the average capacity is about 1 liter (specifically 0.95 liters). Thus, small vessels are determined to have rim diameters less than 20 cm and capacities less than 1 liter, and large vessels have rim diameters greater than 20 cm and capacities greater than 1 liter. The absolute measurements of all the vessels included in the analysis do not readily reveal native groups based on size. The use of the averages to divide the vessels into the gross categories of small or large serves the purpose of providing a framework, albeit artificial, within which to conceive the realm of possibilities for all vessel sizes in which otherwise an unbroken and gently sloping continuum from 5 to 35 cm in rim diameter (where anything larger constitutes an outlier) and 0.035 to 3.5 liters capacity (where capacity greater than 3.5 liters is an outlier).

The averages within each size category are significantly smaller among small vessels and significantly larger among large vessels (fig. 12). The same internal averages of small and large vessels correspond closely to the measurements of small and large dining vessels indentified in Henrickson and McDonald's ethno-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Small Vessels</th>
<th>Large Vessels</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rim diam.</td>
<td>&lt; 20 cm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capacity</td>
<td>&lt; 1 liter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal averages</td>
<td>15 cm, 0.45 liters</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 12. Measurements of small and large Roman table vessels.

The difference between small and large vessels can be expressed graphically by plotting rim diameter against volume in a scatter graph in which the axes cross at the averages, visually dividing small vessels from large (see fig. 12).

Examples of real dining assemblages help illustrate the effect (fig. 13). Here the late second-century deposit of Knossos and the early seventh-century deposit of Alexandria provide useful examples of how vessel sizes can be determined and illustrated. The two deposits appear much the same, consisting of vessels of similar size ranges in terms of both rim diameter and vessel volume. The significant difference between the two deposits lies rather in the proportions of small and large vessels present in each (fig. 14). The Knossos deposit is dominated by small vessels, composing 85% of the total (with an average of 0.4 liters), whereas large vessels make up only 15% (2.3 liter average). In the Alexandria deposit, the proportion of small and large vessels is nearly at parity, where 49% are small (0.47 liter average) and 51% are large (1.8 liter average).59

58 For the characteristics of Phocaea Red Slip Ware (also called Late Roman C) Hayes Forms 3 and 5, see Hayes 1972, 329–38, 339–40. For African Red Slip Hayes Forms 91C and 99C, see Hayes 1972, 140–44, 152–55.

59 Henrickson and McDonald 1983.

60 In the Alexandria deposit, two vessels with rim diameters greater than 20 cm but volumes less than 1 liter qualify as small vessels, illustrating some of the ambiguity in the division.
Form and Frequency. Groups of small and large vessels can each be subdivided into clusters of forms (shapes with specific identifying characteristics such as ledge rims). I hypothesize that the number of forms and the frequency of forms is a reflection of use as individual, shared, or service vessels. Following the precepts of the functional categories identified in the literary and artistic evidence (see table 1), I propose that clusters of small vessels made up of a single form represent personally controlled vessels. Similarly, clusters made up of a single form of numerous large vessels represent shared vessels. Conversely, clusters of small vessels that consist of many different forms represented by only a few examples of each represent side dishes, and clusters of large vessels made up of many different forms represented by few or individual examples represent service vessels. How, then, are clusters determined?

Just as the significance of the differences in wares among like forms is diminished for the sake of identifying groups of vessels within assemblages (as described above) so, too, are fine typological divisions between forms found within specific wares. In other words, forms with similar morphological characteristics are considered the same, even if they are distinguished within their constructed typologies and divided into different types based on typological considerations such as chronological ranges of production or specific morphological features. In the case of the Alexandria assemblage, this is illustrated by the presence of several large ledge-rim dishes that are typologically different—that is to say, categorized separately by ware and other morphological differences—but share certain physical characteristics that "unite" them within the dining assemblage. These consist of examples of African Red Slip Hayes Form 107, Egyptian Red Slip Hayes R, and Egyptian Red Slip Rodziewicz W15 (fig. 15).61 The principal physical characteristics in com-

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61 Hayes 1972; Rodziewicz 1976.
mon among these different types are prominent ledge rims, large rim diameters (ca. 30 cm), and large capacities (1.5–2.0 liters). While differences among the types are obvious, the general morphological similarities are strong. Combined with their similar sizes and their presence in the same context and dining assemblage, it is reasonable to consider the three different types as being essentially the same form within the specific Alexandria context. Grouping these different types into a single form within the Alexandria assemblage helps account for local market availability, gradual accretion of table vessels within a living context, and the possibility of replacement vessels being purchased over time as individual pieces break. The same can be true of similar types within a single typology. The Sagalassos table assemblage provides a good illustration. Based on morphological and chronological subtleties, the fine-tuned Sagalassos typology distinguishes four different large-knobbed or thickened-rim bowls that are found in the late fourth-/early fifth-century table assemblage (Forms 1B171, 1B200, 1B210, 1B220) (see fig. 15).\(^6\) Whereas each type is meaningfully distinct within the typology, as a whole the types share strong common characteristics within this particular context and can thus be considered one broad form within the assemblage.

To determine the presence or absence of matching sets of table vessels as they relate to behavioral possibilities outlined above (i.e., individual dishes or side dishes), it is necessary to consider the typological makeup of entire dining assemblages. The table assemblages from Knossos and Alexandria again offer useful examples.

The Knossos deposit includes 56 table vessels represented by six distinct forms (see fig. 8); 85% of all the table vessels can be classified as small vessels with rim diameters less than 20 cm and capacities less than 1 liter. The remaining 15% are large vessels characterized by rim diameters greater than 20 cm and capacities larger than 1 liter (see figs. 13, 14). Within the small vessel category, two forms make up the majority of examples: Çandarlı Forms 2 and 3 (see fig. 8), constituting 34% and 32%, respectively, of all dining vessels and 77% combined of all small vessels. The remaining 13% of small vessels in the Knossos assemblage consist of three different forms of bowls and shallow dishes of which not one form makes up more than 10% of the entire assemblage (see fig. 8). In other words, small vessels in the Knossos dining assemblage can be categorized in terms of forms that are either common in the assemblage (here, ca. 30% of the total or higher) or forms that are uncommon in the assemblage (10% or less of all dining vessels). Large vessels in the Knossos assemblage, represented by Çandarlı Forms 1 and 2 (large version), can be qualified as uncommon, since no one form makes up more than 12% of all table vessels.

The relationship between common forms and uncommon forms can be highlighted by identifying each group (common/uncommon) by size in a scatter graph (fig. 16). Doing so reveals that both common forms of small vessels cluster discretely and clearly within their size category, illustrating matching sets of two different shapes: small dishes (Çandarlı Form 2) and small bowls (Çandarlı Form 3). This characteristic corresponds to the working definition of personal vessels (see table 1). Forms that are uncommon in the assemblage do not cluster as tightly as those that are common, illustrating the morphological diversity of uncommon forms in the assemblage. The group made up of small forms that are uncommon in the assemblage (Çandarlı Forms 4 and 5 and African Red Slip Form 8A) likely represent side dishes, fitting within the definition determined by literary and artistic evidence. The large vessels, few in number and of two different forms, likely represent service vessels.

Comparing the sizes and the relative commonality of individual forms present in the typologically and

\(^{62}\) Kramer 1985, 90–2.

\(^{63}\) Poblome 1999.
Fig. 16. Scatter graphs of the Knossos (left) and Alexandria (right) table assemblages with consideration of high and low frequency forms.

morally diverse Knossos dining assemblage makes it possible to group vessels into three distinct categories: (1) small vessels in forms that are common within the assemblage, (2) small vessels in forms that are uncommon, and (3) large vessels in forms that are uncommon. Each category can be correlated with a functional class identified in the literary and artistic evidence (see table 1). These correlations provide a functional description of the Knossos dining assemblage, which is made up of personal vessels (66%), side dishes (20%), and service vessels (14%) (fig. 17). In other words, the Knossos table assemblage reflects a service tradition based on the individual (fig. 18).

Shifting to the seventh-century table assemblage from Alexandria, the same typological considerations help identify groups based on forms that are either common or uncommon within the assemblage. The division of vessels based on size is markedly different from the Knossos assemblage, split roughly evenly, with small vessels making up 49% of the Alexandrian assemblage and large vessels making up 51% (see fig. 14). The arrangement of rim diameters and capacities in a scatter graph illustrates the ambiguity of the relationship between small and large vessels (see fig. 13).

Fig. 17. Proportions of different vessel classes based on size and form along with their associated functional possibilities.
Knossos, late second century C.E.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal Vessels</th>
<th>Side Dishes</th>
<th>Service Vessels</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image1.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image2.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image3.png" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Alexandria, early seventh century C.E.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Shared Vessels</th>
<th>Side Dishes</th>
<th>Service Vessels</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image1.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image2.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image3.png" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 18. The Knossos and Alexandria table assemblages arranged by functional categories. Vessel numbers refer to original publication numbers. Knossos = Hayes 1983; Alexandria = Rodziewicz 1984.
Taken all together, the Alexandrian table assemblage consists of 12 identifiable forms. Many of these forms consist of multiple types (e.g., Form 1 = African Red Slip Form 107, Egyptian Red Slip Hayes R, and Egyptian Red Slip Rodziewicz W15) (see fig. 15) present in both small and large variants (see fig. 9). Only three forms are represented by a large number of examples and can be qualified as common relative to the rest of the assemblage. These are Forms 1, 2, and 3, all in their large variants. All other forms in the assemblage are represented by only a few examples of each within their size categories, making each form uncommon in the table assemblage. By mapping all common and uncommon forms in a scatter graph, it is apparent that all small vessels consist of forms with few representatives in the assemblage. Despite composing 43% of the table assemblage as a group, no single form of small vessel makes up more than 5.5% of the entire table assemblage. Small forms are not only morphologically diverse but also have a wide range of relative sizes, the opposite of late second-century Knossos, where clear size clusters are identifiable (see fig. 16). In the absence of any other discernable pattern among small vessels in the Alexandrian assemblage, all are massed together as a single group defined by their variety and the fact that only a few examples of each form appear in the assemblage. This pattern corresponds to the functional category of side dishes (see table 1).

In the Alexandrian assemblage, large vessels include forms that are common and forms that are uncommon. Forms that are common make up two clusters in the scatter graph, which helps illustrate the characteristic of the apparent separate sets of large vessels. As a group, sets of forms that appear in large numbers represent 40% of the Alexandrian table assemblage. Significantly, the average capacity of this group is four- and-a-half times greater than that of small vessels in the assemblage and four times the capacity of personal vessels in the Knossos assemblage. The character of the group—consisting of common forms with capacities at least three times as large as personal vessels—corresponds with the definition of shared vessels as determined by literary, artistic, and ethnographic evidence (see table 1).

The remaining 17% of the Alexandrian table assemblage is made up of large vessels in forms that appear in small numbers or as singular examples. As a group of large disparate forms, these vessels likely represent service vessels.

Based on the combination of vessel sizes and the varieties of forms present, the Alexandrian assemblage can be divided into three groups: small vessels of a variety of forms that appear in small numbers, large vessels in different forms that are uncommon, and large vessels in forms that appear in large numbers in the assemblage. This pattern fits with the division of functional categories needed for shared service, where large common forms represent sets of dishes intended to be shared by more than one person. The small vessels that appear in a variety of poorly represented forms correspond to side dishes for the entire table. The few large vessels of several different forms are service vessels.

Summary of Assemblage Comparison

Comparison of the table assemblages from late second-century Knossos and early seventh-century Alexandria reveals two very different modes of dining (see fig. 17). The Knossos assemblage, dominated by sets of small dishes (Chandarh Forms 2 and 3) is best suited for a table setting and service that focuses on individual diners, so that each participant receives and controls his or her own portion of the meal. The Alexandrian assemblage, on the other hand, includes a series of matching large vessels with capacities roughly four times greater than the personally controlled dishes in the Knossos assemblage, fitting within the criteria for shared dishes identified and defined by Henrickson and McDonald. Rather than individual service, the Alexandrian assemblage reflects a dining tradition that emphasized shared service in which a large dish was shared by two or more diners.

The examples of the assemblages from Knossos and Alexandria present two functional types of assemblages
that reflect different dining traditions in the Roman world: personal and shared service. Analysis of all 12 table assemblages (see table 2; see also online appx.) confirms that the Knossos and Alexandrian assemblages bear witness to trends in ceramic and silver dining sets and should be considered representative of Roman and Late Roman table assemblages, all of which can be defined as either personal or shared dining services (fig. 19).

SETTING THE TABLE: STATUS DINING VS. CONVIVIAL DINING IN THE ROMAN WORLD

The material remains of the dishes and bowls that were used for dining throughout the duration of the Roman empire reveal that there were two markedly different patterns of eating in social settings. One pattern emphasized individual service, defined in table assemblages by an abundance of small matching dishes and bowls for personal use. The other emphasized shared service, identifiable in table assemblages with higher proportions of common large vessels shared by more than one diner.

The individual service tradition is by far the most identifiable in the literary evidence. In the first and second centuries, Pliny, Martial, Plutarch, and Lucian all appear to report that personal or individual service was the norm in their milieus. Pliny offers the point of view that individual portions and service allowed for the enforcement of equal treatment of all guests, since they could receive the same quality and quantity of food as their neighbors and vice versa.66 On the other side of the coin, Martial complains of the inequities that are possible with individual service, lamenting to his host that “a turtle-dove gorges you with its bloated rump” while he is served “a magpie that has died in its cage.”67 Plutarch offers a thoughtful consideration of the amicable and polite benefits of individual service,68 whereas Lucian caustically satirizes the personal extravagances found in wealthy houses, writing that the uninitiated would “not know which of the dishes that have been put before you in variety, made to be eaten in a definite order, you should put out your hand to get first, or which second; so you will be obliged to cast stealthy glances at your neighbor, copy him, and find out the proper sequence of the dinner.”69 Regardless of the perspective of these authors, they all emphasize individual service and portions that require table sets suitable for the task, reflected by the ceramic and silver table assemblages with a large number of small personal vessels.

A defining characteristic of dining with personal vessels is that it helps preserve individuality at the table. Plutarch justifies individual portions by comparing personal portions of food to personal possessions and rights. He suggests that each guest should expect to preserve his own plate without fear of another poaching from it, or in other words, without imposing on his personal rights:

“But where each guest has his own private portion, companionship perishes.” This is true where there is not an equitable distribution; for not the possession of one’s own, but the taking of another’s and greed for what is common to all began injustice and strife; this the laws hold in check by limiting and moderating private rights. . . . Private possessions in such matters do not disturb the general fellowship, and this is due to the fact that the most important characteristics of a gathering and those most serious attention are in fact common, namely, conversation, toasts, and good fellowship.70

The sentiment seems clear: individual allotments of food help limit conflict between guests by isolating each person in a protective “legal” bubble that acknowledges the personal dignity and status he brings to the table. This responds directly to D’Arms’ question of whether status boundaries were maintained or blurred at private meals.71 For this reason, I propose to call services with individual portions “status dining,” whereby personal status within the broader social context (e.g., rich/poor, patron/client) is recognized and maintained through individual distributions of food.

The second dining tradition emphasized group service over the individual. It is identifiable in dining assemblages by sets of large vessels intended to be shared by two or more people. Literary evidence of shared dining is uncommon, and Plutarch, who mentions it briefly as perhaps a historical oddity rather than a contemporary practice, does not present it in a very positive light.72 Shared dining is perhaps best represented not by written sources but by the images found in the third- and fourth-century catacombs in Rome where wall paintings of stipadium-like settings on the ground depict between six and seven diners eating from two or three large dishes (see fig. 7). Whether such scenes truly depict dining with shared vessels is unclear, though it is suggestive and corresponds well with ceramic table

67 Mart. 3.60 (Ker 1968, 201).
68 Plut. Mor. Quaest. conv. 2.10.
69 Lucian De Mercede conductis 15 (Harmon 1968, 439).
70 Plut. Mor. Quaest. conv. 2.10.2 (Clement and Hoffleit 1969, 193).
71 Supra n. 38.
72 Plut. Mor. Quaest. conv. 2.10.2.
Fig. 19. The functional compositions of all analyzed table assemblages, first–early seventh centuries C.E.
assemblages that include sets of large dishes suitable to be shared by more than one person.

The essential element of shared vessels is that their use emphasizes group service and helps blur the lines between individuals during a meal. The exultations inscribed on many banqueting scenes found in the Roman catacombs to drink and be happy are as much celebrations of shared company as affirmations of life, adding to the communal nature of sharing food from the same dish.\textsuperscript{73} The shared service of these meals effectively removes the individual and encourages a sense of the collective. For these reasons, I call shared services “convivial dining.”

The primary difference between status and convivial dining assemblages is found in the vessels whose functions are linked most directly to the consumption of food. Personal and shared vessels provide the clear dividing factor between the two assemblage types. However, status and convivial dining assemblages share certain common traits in that they both include service vessels for transporting food from kitchen to table and side dishes for distributing sauces, relishes, and the like. Just as important as the identification of the different functional groups that make up status and convivial dining assemblages is revealing the different relative proportions of each within their assemblages. Consideration of these proportions allows for a more nuanced reconstruction of the table setting for each assemblage.

\begin{center}
**Chronology of Status Dining and Convivial Dining**
\end{center}

All Early Roman table assemblages (first–third centuries) can be defined as belonging to status dining, regardless of their material (see fig. 19). Convivial dining does not appear in the archaeological record until the Late Roman period. Among the assemblages analyzed here, the earliest convivial example appears in the Sagalassos assemblage from the late fourth or early fifth century. Indeed, all the ceramic table assemblages from the Late Roman period (fourth–early seventh centuries), with the exception of the Aphrodisian assemblage, can be identified as convivial settings. Given the data set, it is possible to say that shared dining was absent from the Early Roman period and developed as a common practice during the Late Roman period.\textsuperscript{74}

\begin{center}
**Status Dining Assemblages**
\end{center}

Among status dining assemblages, personally controlled vessels stand out above all others and make up 70% of all table vessels (fig. 20). Side dishes and service vessels each make up 15% of status dining assemblages. The high proportion of small personal vessels among status dining assemblages accentuates the nature of individual service. This is because status dining assemblages are made primarily of sets of personal vessels (fig. 21) that were distributed equally to individual diners, necessitating the need for a larger proportion of personal vessels.

The small proportions of side dishes and service vessels represent the other side of the picture. Whereas the high proportion of personal vessels limits the relative proportion of the other two functional groups, it does not dictate that both service and side dishes should each make up approximately 15% of the table assemblage (see fig. 20). The similar relative proportions of side dishes and service vessels likely reflect the ways in which they were used during meals. Service vessels, proportionally few in number, contained main courses and were used to distribute food to individual settings. While containing different kinds of food (e.g., relishes, sauces), side dishes are present in similar relative proportions to service vessels and were likely used in a similar manner as service vessels. That is, whatever supplementary items there were for the meal would have been distributed to individual diners via small side dishes that could be passed from guest to guest, effectively acting as service vessels.

\textsuperscript{73} On toasts of wine in the catacombs, see Dunbabin 2003, 178–81.

\textsuperscript{74} As noted earlier, Plutarch seems to suggest that shared dining occurred at public feasts associated with sacrifice in the second century C.E. It would be an interesting study to see if Early Roman remains of public feasting reflect convivial table assemblages.
Fig. 21. Personal and shared vessel types by site: 1, ledge-rim bowls; 2, hammer-head rim bowls; 3, knobbed-rim bowls.
Convivial Dining Assemblages

Unlike status dining, convivial table assemblages do not include any one functional group that dominates the rest. Among convivial dining settings, shared vessels and side dishes each make up about 40% of the table assemblage (see fig. 20). The absence of a single dominant functional group is consistent with the use of shared vessels. Because two or more diners eat from the same vessel, proportionately fewer large shared dishes are required for the intended service than is necessary for small personal vessels in status dining assemblages.

Unlike status dining assemblages, the relative proportion of side dishes and service vessels is not the same. Service vessels make up only 20% of the convivial dining setting, compared with 40% of side dishes (see fig. 20). Sauces, relishes, garnishes, and supplementary menu items in general were popular in all periods of the Roman empire, and there is no evidence for a sudden increase in their popularity that would explain the high proportion of side dishes found in Late Roman convivial dining assemblages. In the early second century, Plutarch is explicit about the variety of different side dishes found at banquets, citing “fancy sauces, like *aburttakē, kandaulos* and *karukē*.”

In the later fourth and fifth centuries, Gregory of Nyssa in the East and Sidonius Apollinaris in the West are equally explicit about the popularity and expectation of sauces as an important component of a meal. Rather than an increase in the variety or popularity of sauces in convivial dining settings, it is more likely that the difference in proportions is the result of differing dining organizations between status and convivial dining, the form of which is hinted at by the relative proportions of the functional groups.

Just as the similar relative proportions of side dishes and service vessels in status dining assemblages were used to reconstruct a distribution pattern of food, the relative proportions of shared and side dishes in convivial settings hint at an alternate food distribution and service. The identical proportions of side and shared vessels in convivial settings suggest a connection in terms of how they were used and how they related to each other. The nature of shared vessels is that each is used by two or more diners, creating a dining unit. The similarity of the proportions between side dishes and shared vessels means there was the potential of having the same number of each functional group on the table at any given moment. In other words, each dining unit could potentially have access to a side dish of their own, or that side dishes could be rotated around the dining space from one diner to another, effectively serving as another kind of shared vessel.

Status Dining vs. Convivial Dining: Identifying the Settings and Contexts

Based on the relative proportions of functional categories within table assemblages combined with other archaeological evidence, such as the architecture and furniture associated with dining, it is possible to reconstruct the physical distributions and organizations of status and convivial dining in Late Roman contexts using real assemblages as examples. The Kaiseraugst silver assemblage is a good example of a Late Roman status dining table assemblage. It includes six sets of personal vessels, composing 80% of the assemblage. Each set consists of a small ledge-rim bowl, a shallow hemispherical dish, and a small plate (see fig. 21). Each form may have been used for different courses of the meal. Side dishes, making up 10% of the assemblage, are represented by a small oval dish and a small rectangular dish, both with inscribed designs of fish on their floors. The remaining 10% of the assemblage is made up of large ledge-rim bowls used for service.

Using the dimensions of a sigma table found in a Late Roman townhouse at Sardis, the dining surface associated with the *stibadium* setting (see fig. 3), it is possible to map the potential setting for the six diners of the Kaiseraugst table assemblage. The table measures 128 cm wide and 135 cm long. Plutarch mentions that the preferred position for eating is reclining flat on the stomach, as opposed to lying on one’s side during the drinking portion of meals. This means more space is needed for eating than for drinking. Assuming a generous amount of space per diner of about 55 cm along the edge of the sigma table, six guests using the Kaiseraugst treasure can fit comfortably around the Sardis table (fig. 22). The large service vessels fit easily in the center of the table, as do the side dishes. In figure 22, I have set the table with only one form of the personal vessels, assuming only one would appear at a time as part of the rotation of different courses of the meal.

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77 The many large silver platters that make up the most visually striking objects of the assemblage are not included in the dining assemblage because they were not likely used for food service but rather to transport other vessels to the table.
78 Gates 1997, fig. 33; Greenewalt and Rautman 1998, 485.
This schematic view of a table setting for status dining helps illustrate that each participant is isolated from the others, that the placement of food in personal dishes limits the possibility of physical exchange between guests, and that service can be metered out individually. Because of the large size of the sigma table, personal service was given from the back of the couch, so that servants approached each guest individually to offer wine and food or to wash hands between meals. This is clearly described by Sidonius Apollinaris in the fifth century, who wrote to a friend how he “turned round as if asking for water for my hands, and after waiting just the time that the hurrying servants take to make the round of the couch, I again reposed my arm on the cushion.”

It is also noteworthy that side dishes, few in number, could be placed so that they did not appear to belong to any particular guest. Instead, it is likely that side dishes in status dining were passed around the table as needed, truly serving as supplementary dishes.

Determining the setting for convivial dining is more difficult, given the absence of hard evidence that can be directly linked to the practice, except for the evidence of the table vessels themselves. The table assemblage from Alexandria provides clues of possible organizations because it is associated with a specific house, Maison D, whose architectural spaces are informative. Unlike many of the large Late Roman villas that had halls with apsidal spaces that were large enough to fit stibadia measuring at least 4 x 3 m, Maison D does not have a single large space obviously dedicated to dining. Only two rooms of the preserved ground floor have evidence of decoration, making them the most likely dining spaces. These are Rooms D3 and D4. Room D3 measures 2.7 x 3.3 m, and Room D4 measures 2.7 x 2.8 m, both too small for large stibadium furniture.

Rather than dine on built-up furniture, it may have been simpler for the occupants of Maison D to dine on the ground, as seen in the banquet scenes from the Roman catacombs (see fig. 7), using cushions and perhaps a mat as a table space. Abandoning fixed-shaped furniture would also have freed the overall seating/reclining arrangement. Whereas the catacomb banquetting scenes depict a semicircular arrangement similar to stibadium dining, the rooms in Maison D are still too small to accommodate six or more diners comfortably in an apsidal formation, whether reclining or seated. However, closing the dining area allows for a more efficient use of dining space and takes up less of the space.

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The stibadium measurement is based on a sampling of apsidal spaces from Late Roman villas in the East that measure between 6 and 9 m across as well as the masonry stibadium at Faragola, Italy, which measures ca. 4 x 2.7 m. For Faragola, see Volpe 2006.
room. In turn, this would allow for a greater number of people. Figure 22 depicts a hypothetical convivial dining space that would fit neatly into either Room D3 or Room D4, where the dining area consists of a circular area with a diameter of 120 cm (comparable to the sigma tables), and diners are given about 70 cm diameter of space in which to sit (not recline). Not only does this arrangement fit the architectural spaces of Maison D, it effectively increases the intimate nature of convivial dining by creating a centralized focus for the group as a whole.

The hypothetical seating arrangement for convivial dining can also explain the relative proportions of functional categories within the table assemblage, which are roughly 2:2:1 (40% shared vessels, 40% side dishes, and 20% service vessels). These proportions are constant among convivial dining assemblages (see fig. 19). The ratio is such that there could be an equal number of shared and side dishes in use at one time. In the schematic arrangement of convivial dining in figure 22, I have placed two large service vessels in the center of the dining space and arranged the side dishes and shared vessels in an alternating pattern between each of the eight diners. Each shared vessel is used by two diners, creating a dining unit. The side dishes could act as bridges between units so that the unit is expanded around the circular dining space, ultimately linking every participant in a chain of shared vessels and food (see fig. 22). While the arrangement lacks solid evidence, it is reminiscent of the catacomb banquet scenes, whose semicircular compositions may have been influenced by representations of stibadium and earlier motifs (see fig. 7). If the convivial arrangement reflects reality on some level, it effectively conveys the overall message of group service and unity of shared dining.

Silver and Ceramic Services

I examined both ceramic and silver table assemblages in part to test whether differing patterns are based on class distinctions. During the Early Roman period, there is no distinction discernable between the functional composition of dining sets in ceramic and silver assemblages (see fig. 19). This is not true of the Late Roman assemblages. The functional compositions of the two Late Roman silver settings—the Kaiseraugst and Esquiline treasures (mid fourth century and second half of the fourth century, respectively)—are identical to all Early Roman status dining settings. This suggests that among people wealthy enough to own silver dining settings, individual service remained the norm. This is contrasted by the Late Roman ceramic assemblages, which, with the exception of the Aphrodisian material, emphasize group service through the use of shared dishes.

Four of the five analyzed Late Roman ceramic table assemblages have nearly identical proportions of functional categories designated for convivial dining. The trend represented by these assemblages strongly suggests that a new dining tradition had developed among the non-silver-using classes that was distinctly different from the silver-using classes. The material distinction is similar to that made between what Rotroff called the metal class and the clay class during the Hellenistic period. In the Late Roman dining model, the metal class is associated with status dining and a sense of tradition, since it continues the established Early Roman mode of dining. The clay class is associated with convivial dining and social innovation, as it redefines dining patterns and units (from individual to group).

The division of status and convivial dining based on materials (silver vs. ceramic; metal vs. clay) in the Late Roman period can also be defined in terms of service and social expectations of the Roman meal. The Early Roman dining experience and the Late Roman diners of the metal class, with their dependence on small, personally controlled dishes and meal portions, emphasize individual service. These status dining meals helped ensure that status boundaries were maintained during the course of an evening during which alcohol could threaten the social boundaries between guests that existed beyond the dining room. This was a benefit of status dining that was espoused by Plutarch. The Late Roman convivial dining tradition associated with the clay class, with its dependence on large shared dishes, emphasized the participants as a unified group through shared service. The convivial dining of the clay class effectively removed individual egos at meal gatherings by eliminating personal possession of food and encouraged a sense of the collective.

Social Contexts and Interpretation of Status Dining.

During the Early Roman period, status dining was practiced by both elite and sub-elite populations

[82] In this, it would be similar to the appearance in the Early Roman period of Hellenistic banquetting imagery that did not accurately reflect the Roman tradition.

[83] The Esquiline treasure appears to miss side dishes, though it is probable that such dishes were once part of the original assemblage. On the long and complex history of the Esquiline treasure, see Shelton 1981.


[85] Plut. Mor. Quaest. conv. 2.10.2.
throughout the empire, as indicated by the similarities between silver and ceramic table assemblages. The common tradition of status dining among the elite and sub-elite likely reflects the practice of socially mixed dinner parties, where even low-level clients could be invited to dine with their patrons. In this model, the sub-elite imitate the elite at home so that they could successfully participate as guests without appearing foolish, though this was not always avoidable, as Lucian tells us. Status dining is ideal for socially mixed gatherings because it offers the possibility of maintaining existing social boundaries. The equal distribution and personal control of food serves to reinforce personal identity as well as the rights and privileges associated with individual and class. This feature is explicitly praised by Plutarch, who argues that individual service at dinner parties mitigates competition between guests. Plutarch suggests that the host who properly provides individual service justly and rightly creates an atmosphere of equality while maintaining social identities, for "he makes proud the poor and humble man, exciting him with a taste of independence, while the rich and great he accustoms to bearing equal treatment without ill-temper and so teaches them self-control without giving offence."

During the Late Roman period, status dining was still the fashion among the silver-using elite. Small plates, dishes, and bowls continue to be present in Late Roman silver "treasures" such as those of Kaiseraugst in Switzerland, the Esquiline in Rome, and rare finds from the eastern provinces such as the late fourth-/early fifth-century silver hoard from Sucidava in Romania. Recent scholarship on Late Antique dining that includes discussions of silver often seems so distracted by the brightest and largest members of silver treasures (e.g., the large, often richly decorated silver platters) that the smaller plates and bowls are overlooked. Vroom suggests that the popularity of large silver platters during the Late Roman period proves that banquet imagery from elite contexts, in which diners seem to be eating from a large central platter (e.g., the mosaic from the Room of the Small Hunt at Piazza Armerina), should be taken as accurate representations of dining behavior (i.e., shared service).

However, when the small plates and bowls that constitute a large portion of these same silver assemblages are taken into account, it is clear that Late Roman silver sets were designed to accommodate individual service with personal settings (see fig. 19).

The continuation of status dining among the Late Roman elite accords with the social hierarchies present in the empire after the third century. This included a shrinking body of elites whose social status and power far exceeded their elite predecessors of the Early Roman period. At the highest level in the imperial court, this eventually manifested in new ceremonies to display the power of the emperor and empress, such as were criticized by Procopius in Justinian's court. The provincial Late Roman elite may have imitated the imperial court to some degree and adopted increasingly hierarchical ceremonies in their own homes, a possibility made manifest in the large, elaborately decorated audience halls found in Late Roman villas, where patrons would receive their clients.

From the end of the third century on, there was an ever-shrinking pool of effective patrons at the civic level. In place of a large body of low-level patrons to choose from, the Late Roman sub-elite found that their circumstances could be improved by registering as one of hundreds of clients belonging to a few powerful individuals. In essence, local patronage was limited to and controlled by a few wealthy and powerful families in any given city, the honorati. The result was an even greater social gulf between patron and client. Whereas it is possible to find Early Roman references to socially mixed meals in the literature, there is a noticeable absence of similar records in the Late Roman sources, suggesting that clients were no longer invited to dine with their patrons. In a social world where local aristocracy wielded enormous power and enjoyed a level of status higher than was typical in the Early Roman period, status dining would have suited the needs of the elite to maintain personal control, identity, and recognized power at social dining events populated exclusively by powerful peers.

Social Contexts and Interpretation of Convivial Dining: The chronological boundary of convivial dining, which is not apparent in the archaeological record until the

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86See Martial (supra n. 17) and Pliny (supra n. 3).
87Lucian, De Mercede conductis i–19.
88Plut. Mor. Quaest. conv. 2.10.2 (Clement and Hoffleit 1969, 193–95).
89For the Kaiseraugst treasure, see Cahn and Kaufmann-Heinimann 1984; Kaufmann-Heinimann 1999. For the Esquiline treasure, see Shelton 1981. For the Sucidava hoard, see Clante and Radulescu 1988.
90Vroom 2007.
91The possibility remains that outdoor banqueting scenes from elite contexts like those from Piazza Armerina represent an alternate style of dining for the rich—one that is less formal, allowing for shared vessels among intimate peers.
93Ellis (1991) argues that the size and lavish architecture of these halls served to glorify the owner and to intimidate his guests, much as was the intent of the imperial palace.
fourth century, is critical to understanding the social contexts associated with the practice. The limitation of convivial dining assemblages to the ceramic record suggests that the tradition was limited to the sub-elite who either could not afford expensive silver or chose not to allocate household funds to maintaining a silver set. These two features provide the framework for understanding not only how convivial dining functioned but also why it appeared at all.

The sharing of food from common vessels during social meals can break down external social barriers and create binding egalitarian relationships at the table through commensalism. Guests who assemble with the purpose of sharing food in this manner do so with the understanding that individual egos and personal identities are to be left behind so that the act of eating is not merely a binding agent of performance but also an acknowledgement of sharing sustenance within a microcommunity defined by the participants. If this is the case among the Late Roman sub-elite, what aspect of community are they reenacting and solidifying through convivial dining?

Just as the Late Roman elite saw their social status drastically elevated after the third century, the sub-elite suffered a corresponding decline in the effectiveness and visibility of their individual roles and personal power within the community. The disenfranchisement of the Late Roman sub-elite may well have inspired attempts among the population to create cohesive communities whereby the mass is able to wield some influence when the individual cannot. The popularity of social institutions among the urban masses such as the Circus Factions and even imperially regulated professional guilds, while not exclusively the result of proletariat community building, can be viewed as part of the phenomenon. Similarly, the ever-growing ranks of Christian communities, which depend on ideals of unity and sharing as equals to create community, can also be seen in this light. If community-building efforts are a hallmark of the Late Roman sub-elite, convivial dining may be one of the tools of the process whereby meals were used as a means to break down individual barriers and solidify social commitments among the masses.

The Exception of Aphrodisias

The Aphrodisias assemblage represents the only example of status dining among the Late Roman ceramic table settings studied for this analysis (see fig. 19). Rather than diminishing the interpretation of convivial dining as an affirmation of a populist movement against the rising power of a small body of local elites, the Late Roman social and political history of Aphrodisias may lend weight to such a conclusion.

Roueché has suggested that unlike many Late Roman cities in the East, the sociopolitical circumstances at Aphrodisias witnessed a resurgence of local patronage during the fourth and fifth centuries. Roueché points to the unusually high number of inscriptions recording benefactions to the community by local citizens, which far outnumber those that record donations from imperially appointed governors. This suggests that local patrons, made up of local citizens in the council, were still interested in participating in the civic administration and betterment of the community. The continued presence of a large and affluent local patron pool at Aphrodisias, apparently exceptional during the Late Roman period, could explain the continued practice of status dining as the dominant fashion, since the sub-elite would still need to be able to participate in formal meals with their patrons.

The dominance of small bowls suitable for status dining in the Aphrodisias table assemblage continued until the mid sixth century. It is not until at least the late sixth or early seventh century that common Late Roman ceramic imports characterized by large dishes such as African Red Slip Form 105 appear at Aphrodisias. Before that, the Aphrodisias ceramic market consists almost exclusively of locally produced table vessels, perhaps in response to the need for forms suitable to continue their favored status dining.

Rather than a ceramic anomaly among the Late Roman ceramic assemblages, the continuation of status dining at Aphrodisias until at least the early sixth century can perhaps be associated with the dynamic civic activities that are well-attested in the archaeology and epigraphy of the city during the Late Roman period. In this light, the continuation of local civic development, artistic patronage, and status dining at Aphrodisias strengthens the hypothesis that status dining in the Roman world ought to be associated with sociopolitical contexts where patronage is vibrant and interactive.

CONCLUSIONS

The comparative analysis of Early Roman and Late Roman ceramic and silver table assemblages reveals two divergent dining traditions. The literary and artis-

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99 Hudson 2008.

95 Richards 1932, 190; Tapper and Tapper 1986, 68.
96 For Circus Factions, see Cameron 1976. For guilds, see Ruggini 1999.
tic evidence also suggests two modes: individual and shared service. The available archaeological evidence seems to support this and lends helpful details that reveal the practices that I call status dining and convivial dining. The modest size of the sample data set (12 assemblages) and the lack of hard evidence for the quantification of glass in earlier dining assemblages highlights the need for caution regarding the results of the current study. However, patterns identified in the available data require an interpretive response.

During the Early Roman period, status dining suited the needs of the general population, so that both elite (silver) and sub-elite (ceramic) groups practiced similar traditions that facilitated participation in socially mixed dining events where separation and personal control of food served to maintain status boundaries. During the Late Roman period, status dining was practiced predominantly by the elite, which allowed the Late Roman aristocracy to emphasize and retain their personal identities and statuses at banquets of peers, since their sub-elite clientela were no longer invited to participate. In contrast, the Late Roman sub-elite participated in convivial dining, which emphasized shared portions with the purpose of fostering emergent egalitarian communities.

One such community that may have particular relevance to the formation of convivial dining was the growing Christian population. The Christian communities of the fourth century represent not only a newly official and expanding religious group but also an empire-wide community connected, as Brown suggests, not by money but by religion.\(^{101}\) The numerous references to banquets and meals in the Gospel of Luke offer insight into the perceived role of dining in the Early Christian communities. In Luke, meals illustrate “bad” and “good” behavior, where good behavior is exemplified by meals as community-building activities.\(^{102}\) The discernable meal activities described by Luke are essentially status dining, though it is arguable that the overall tone and message of the meals as prescribed in the texts predict the development of convivial dining among Christian groups. Such a transformation is perhaps illustrated by a comparison between Luke’s parable of the great dinner (14:16–24) and a homily by John Chrysostom in the later fourth century.

In Luke’s parable, a wealthy man brings the poor off the street to populate his banquet after his wealthy peers excused themselves ungraciously. The decision to bring in the poor and to spurn his peers satisfied Jesus’ call to feed the poor because they cannot return the favor; by contrast, the wealthy peers who refused to come were perhaps reluctant to return the favor of the feast (Luke 14:12–14). In the later fourth century, John Chrysostom sought to create strength within the Christian community through meals not by bringing in the poor but by acting like the poor, who dined together not with the expectation of a returned invitation but as a symbol of group effort:

let us enter into fraternities and partnerships in this matter; and as the poor do in their feasts, when each one alone would not be able to furnish a complete banquet; when they all meet together, they bring their contribution to the feast; so also let us act.\(^{103}\)

The image is one of egalitarian participation and contribution where food was communal and shared among banqueters. While it is unlikely that convivial dining developed entirely out of Christian contexts, it is tempting to link the two, with the possibility that shared portions represent a domestic adoption of a stylized Eucharist that was transformed as Early Christian worship moved from house to church in the fourth century.\(^{104}\)

Whether convivial dining can be linked to Christian developments in the fourth century is less important than the probability that the new tradition was widespread among Christians and non-Christians alike. The adoption of a new dining system among the sub-elite distinctly different from and in some ways contrary to elite practices adds another color to the spectrum of Late Roman society. The identification of convivial dining as a phenomenon among the sub-elite validates the standing interpretation of the social gulf that existed between elite and sub-elite after the fourth century. The analysis of common table settings also provides a voice to the often silent ceramic-using classes of the later Roman empire. As much as the elite used banqueting events to affirm their individual social statuses, so, too, did the sub-elite use convivial dining to construct and maintain an anonymous yet united community identity.


\(^{102}\) Moxnes 1986, 163–66; see also Elliott 1991.

\(^{103}\) St. Chrysostom Homilies 11.15 (Schaff 1994, 417–18).

Works Cited


