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# The New-Old Interest in Roman Foodways

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**Abstract**

*What and how the Romans ate has long been of popular and academic interest, benefiting from a rich body of evidence from textual, iconographic, artefactual and environmental sources. Scholarly publications on Roman dietary practices have increased over the past hundred years, particularly in the last two decades. To what extent does the contemporary discourse on food influence this scholarship? This paper attempts to explain the growth in interest in this topic by examining the trends in scholarship on Roman food production and consumption over the past century.*

## Introduction

David Soren's intellectual scope is impressively vast, so it should be no surprise that the themes of Roman food production and consumption have been woven through many of his projects. His engagement with these themes is evident most recently in his excavation of a Roman garum factory at Tróia in Portugal. Furthermore, throughout Professor Soren's career he has never lost sight of how the Roman world is received by the general public: his innovative course on the depiction of ancient Rome in the cinema exemplifies this. Preliminary results of the research below were first presented at "Rome and its Receptions," a recent symposium organized by Cynthia White at the University of Arizona, in which both Professor Soren and I participated. In submitting this article for his festschrift, therefore, I select these aspects of Professor Soren's many research interests to honor his achievements in Classics and Archaeology.

Between the lurid descriptions of the dining practices of the Emperors,[1] actual Roman recipes,[2] and the manner in which the Romans themselves situated diet in their own history,[3] it is no surprise that how and what Romans ate have been topics of perennial interest to scholars of Roman history. Moreover, Roman foodways (the practices and traditions surrounding all aspects of food production and consumption) are more than just of academic concern: there is an intense, even personal interest in this topic among many members of the public, as evidenced by the scenes of Roman dining in movies[4] and the numerous popular books on the subject.[5] We look to the Romans as guides, not just for what to do but also of course for what not to do: the over-indulgence and debauchery of elite Roman diners is an image so firmly entrenched as to be a cliché, so much so that the apocryphal understanding of *vomitoria* as designated rooms for purging derives from it. By comparison, the textual evidence for Greek diet is narrower and the emphasis on sacrifice has made discussion of Greek meals in secular contexts far less common.[6] But besides the nature of the sources, the greater interest in Roman dietary habits may be tied to that longstanding tendency to turn a mirror on Roman society to understand our own.

Food is a hot topic in popular culture for the past decade or two, from the "elite foodie culture" to the battles over GMOs, labeling, dietary fads, locavorism, food justice, and more. As a society we have some major concerns with food in the current moment: agribusiness and environmental sustainability; obesity and malnutrition; disparities in health and diet between rich and poor. These are not the same concerns of earlier generations. Does the scholarship on Roman foodways over time reflect those shifts?

This paper investigates the relationship between scholarship on Roman foodways and the contemporary discourse on food. How scholars approach and understand Roman food practices will necessarily be informed by the issues surrounding food in the present day, but to what extent? Or are other factors driving scholarship? This study falls within the field of Classical Reception, focused on how the classical world has been understood and how it has influenced us in post-classical and modern times.[7] If a tenet of reception studies is that we view the past through our own subjective, inescapably culturally grounded gaze, then the reception of Roman foodways is a prime candidate for study.

## Methodology

I applied quantitative methods drawn from the social sciences to approach this question of how contemporary concerns might infuse the scholarship on Roman food. I mined the Anglo-American scholarship for publications on all aspects of food in the Roman period: everything from dining implements and habits to food production, irrigation and trade in comestibles.

In one way or another, all activities in the ancient world may be tied to food. Therefore, to get robust but manageable patterns on this potentially vast topic, I placed some limits on my dataset. First, I restricted my study to English language publications. There is extensive scholarship on Roman foodways in other languages, such as French, but the food culture in other countries is different enough that generalizations are best avoided. These require their own studies. Second, I limited my dataset to academic journal articles. Journal articles generally represent a quicker turnaround of scholarly endeavors than do books, so their publication date reflects current research. Further, they are more easily trackable across time than book chapters or books. Using the online academic journal database JSTOR I tallied the articles in the disciplines of art and art history, archaeology, classical studies, history, and social sciences relating to Roman food and diet written in English in the past 100 years. For each ten-year period I filtered the search to entries with the word "Roman" in the title and "food" somewhere in the main text. This filtering system led to numerous unrelated publications to wade through, but the number generated was manageable enough to study. Putting any further filters on the title was too restricting: few articles about "Roman food" actually contain both those words in the title!

I then scanned the list of titles generated by those filters for all articles relating to food. Many topics touch on food tangentially. For example, Roman pottery usually contained foodstuffs, and "trade" in the ancient world was often of food. However, if there was no specific mention of some aspect of food in the title, I did not include it. My method results in some undercounting, almost certainly: going by the titles alone may overlook articles that contain a significant discussion of Roman food. Still, I would argue that the title is a significant enough indicator of the content of the piece, and of the author's overall focus, to be informative. Further, JSTOR is not a repository for all journals, and in particular it does not include *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, *Journal of Archaeological Science*, or *Vegetation History and Archaeobotany*, three critical venues for publications of Roman and food related research. I therefore searched those journal archives and added the relevant Roman food related articles and straight Roman articles into the totals. The results, shown in Figure 1, reveal some interesting patterns.

## Discussion

First of all, if you have the impression that Roman food is something of a hot topic in academia of late, you are partially correct: in actual numbers of publications over the past hundred years, the topic has skyrocketed. However, as Figure 2 shows, so have articles on ancient Rome more generally. This graph presents the articles with "Roman" in the title over the past one hundred years, demonstrating a steep growth curve in scholarly output, in part due to the proliferation of academic journals. Therefore, Figure 1 is misleading. But what Figure 2 does show is that the rate of increase in articles on Roman foodways in the last decade was higher than the increase for Roman articles more generally, so this trend is not simply attributable to the growth in scholarly output.

A more informative number for each decade, then, is the percentage of publications on the Roman world that concern food (Figure 3). This graph presents a very different picture. While there has been growth in publications on Roman food over time, the increase has been quite gradual. In particular, the rise in the past two decades is significant, to be sure, but not stratospheric. Thus, in spite of the fact that it seems that everywhere one looks there are new studies of Roman food, the topic remains a modest portion of overall scholarly output on the Roman world.

Nonetheless, an explanation for the growth of this subfield is worth exploring. To approach this, we may ask, what is it about Roman food that receives scholarly attention? To answer this question I sorted the publications on Roman food into general categories based on topic, as derived from their titles. Topics included "Agriculture and Food Production," consisting of articles on such subjects as farming practices, pastoralism, agricultural yields, and irrigation systems. I categorized publications with titles like "Roman dinner garments" or "Falernian wine" as "Elite Foodways." Another category, "non-elite foodstuffs," included articles on specific non-luxury foods such as pulses or garum. "Diet and Consumption" included articles on the adoption of Roman olive oil in Switzerland and the diet of the Roman army. I grouped articles on the movements of foodstuffs, the imperial grain dole and *horrea* in the category of "Distribution and Trade." Any articles concerning food in religious contexts were assigned to the category "Religion." As some articles could fit into more than one category I sorted them according to best fit. Figure 4 shows the relative popularity of each topic for each decade.

There are some observable changes in topics over time. One is the expansion of the range of topics concerning food in the Roman world, particularly in the last four decades.[8] Articles linking food and religion emerge in the past forty years, and although distribution and trade in Roman foodstuffs are explored as early as the late 1930s, it is from the late 1960s on that the topic becomes firmly rooted in Roman food studies. This rise in interest may relate to the growth of studies of the Roman economy more generally. But apart from these broad trends, what is remarkable is how the same topics within scholarship

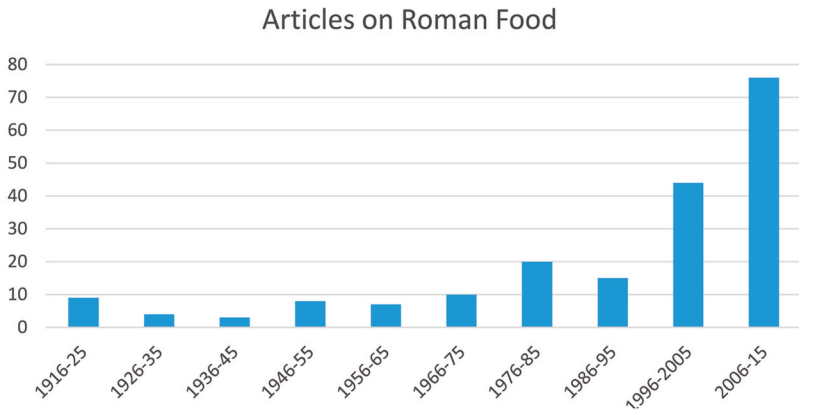



**Figure 1:** Articles on Roman food written in the past 100 years.

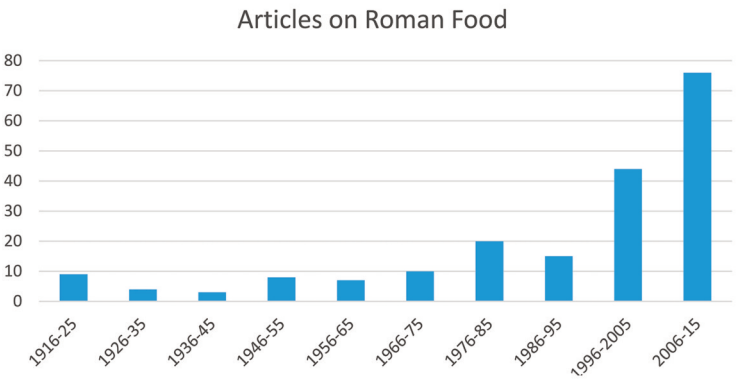



**Figure 2:** Articles on Roman food written in the past 100 years, in comparison to all articles on the Roman world in the same period.

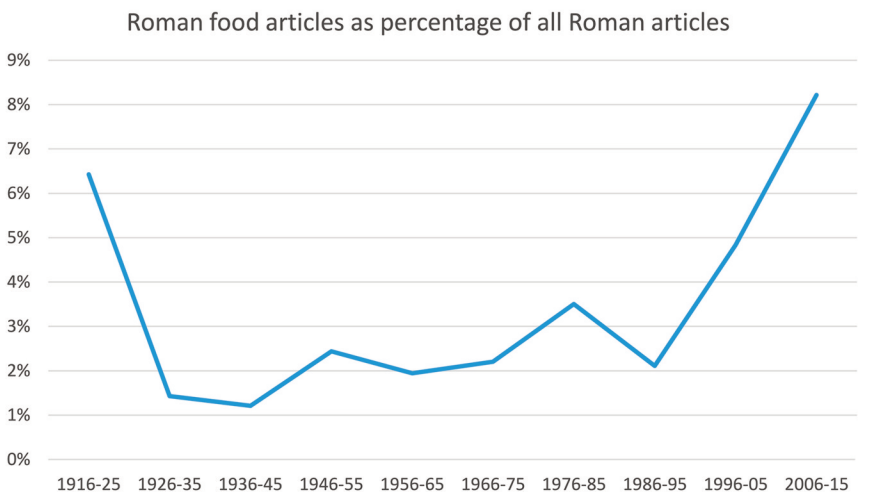



**Figure 3:** Articles on Roman food as a percentage of all articles on the Roman world in the past 100 years.

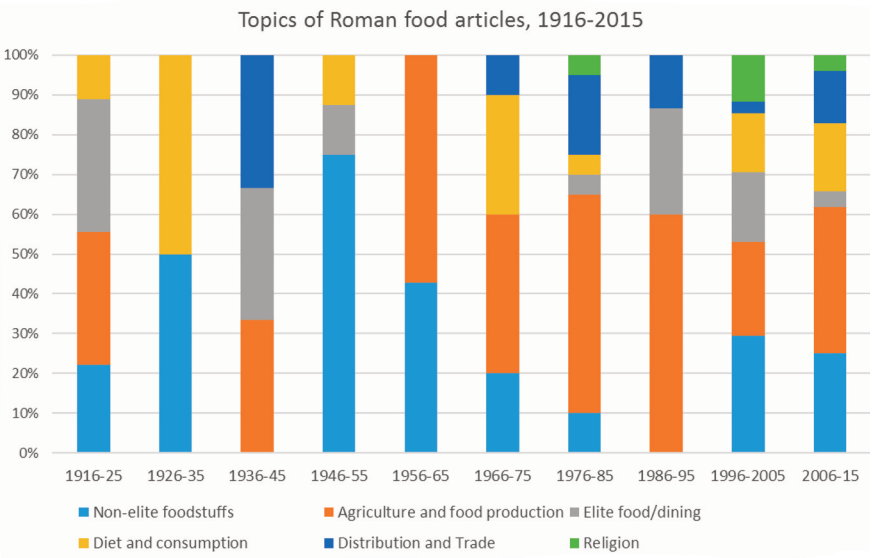



**Figure 4:** The popularity of topics of Roman food studies in the past 100 years, by percentage.

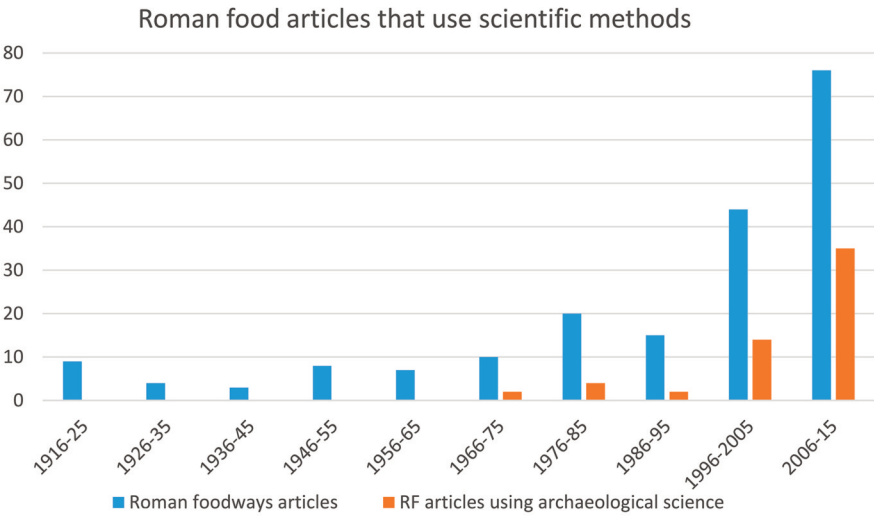



**Figure 5:** Roman food articles that use scientific methods in the past 100 years.

on Roman food recur over the decades. One might have expected to see a progressive decline in interest in the topic "Elite Foodways," but that has not occurred. "Agriculture and Food Production" represents the most popular topic, but remains a minority. Non-elite foodstuffs are consistently a subject of study.

So the main topics concerning Roman foodways have not, for the most part, changed in the past century. This suggests that the contemporary discourse on food, which has evolved over the past one hundred years from the glorification of industrialized agriculture to strong criticism against it, from malnutrition fears to new concerns with obesity, from place-based culinary traditions to innovation and fusion in cuisine—in short, all these and other transformative features of popular attitudes toward food—are not evident in the topics selected by scholars for study. It is true that occasionally, individual articles reflect the concerns of the day projected on the past. So in 1918, during WWI, we have an article entitled "Roman War Bread."[9] That same year, an article entitled "A Study of Dietetics among the Romans" came out, which proves to be mostly about food substitutes of the Romans and makes direct reference to similar practices during the rationing of wartime US.[10] Similarly, an article entitled "Government Relief during the Roman Empire" was published in 1936, during the Great Depression.[11] Through the Second World War there are few scholarly publications at all, and food was not a subject of much

interest with the exception of articles on the Roman military diet, which continue in the early 1950s. But these occasional cases where the article reflects the immediate context remain the exceptions. Observing what may be called the "consistent variability" in topics over time, I would argue that the selection of research foci has not been strongly influenced by contemporary concerns about, and attitudes toward, food. Instead, the steady increase in scholarship on Roman foodways, and in particular the spike of the past two decades, must be due to other factors.

Besides the changes in contemporary public perceptions of food, another change has occurred: the development of new methods for analyzing ancient foodstuffs, health, and diet. Indeed, a revolution has occurred in the archaeological methods at our disposal for reconstructing ancient diet and nutrition. Pollen analysis reveals what crops were being grown and locates food processing areas; stable isotope analysis of human bones tells us about nutrition and diet of ancient peoples, and animal bones and seeds tell us about diet and food production practices. Organic residue analysis of the interiors of pots can even reveal the types of dishes being prepared. So it is no wonder that a glut of new studies has emerged employing these methods: there is a lot of new data being generated. We can demonstrate the extent of this by Figure 5, a graph showing the increase in articles on Roman foodways that incorporate methods of the archaeological sciences. Although traditional studies continue, scientific studies now constitute a significant portion of scholarly output on Roman foodways, for all topics. So, for example, an article about Roman oil production, a topic of perennial interest, is informed by residue analysis of an oil processing area.[12] Likewise, a study of the changes to the livestock in England between pre-Roman and Roman times is conducted using strontium isotope analysis of cattle teeth.[13]

Many of the articles appear in publications such a *Journal of Archaeological Science*, but not all: the more traditional journals also feature such pieces.[14] We must conclude then that the growth in scholarship on Roman foodways has been method-driven rather than theory-driven: the new techniques have triggered new studies. This is not to say that the resulting publications lack a theoretical grounding. In fact, the analyses address central themes in Roman studies, such as cultural change,[15] social inequality, and standard of living in Roman times.[16] A common inspiration among the Roman food publications is Peter Garnsey's profoundly influential 1989 book, *Famine and Food Supply in the Graeco-Roman World: Responses to Risk and Crisis*. This incisive, empirically grounded book, with 668 citations by Google Scholar's count, established the framework for scholarship on Roman foodways in subsequent decades. I would argue that the combination of the new methods described above and the ideas in Garnsey's book explain the spate of recent studies.

## Concluding Remarks

James Porter has observed that disciplinary self-awareness allows us "to own up to the circumstances under which knowledge of something becomes possible at all, in the broadest sense: institutionally, socially, and culturally possible."[17] This is the justification for the examination of scholarship on Roman foodways presented here: to understand the context in which knowledge on the Roman world is being produced. While the topics concerning Roman foodways have changed little in the past century, the burgeoning utilization of new methods is shaping the direction this field is going, and predetermining to some extent the theoretical approaches taken. But these new methods are in their infancy, and we may look forward to their use in even more varied approaches to Roman foodways in the century ahead.

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1 E.g., Suetonius on Nero.

2 Notably, *De re coquinaria*, a collection of late Roman recipes attributed to Apicius.

3 E.g., the story of Republican consul Manius Curius Dentatus, whose incorruptibility was evident in his rejection of the Samnite ambassadors' bribes while roasting his turnips (see Plutarch, *Life of Cato* 2.1, among others).

4 E.g., the banquet in Fellini's 1969 film *Satyricon*.

5 E.g. Ilaria Gozzini Giacosa, *A Taste of Ancient Rome*, Anna Herklotz, transl. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Patrick Faas, and Shaun Whiteside, *Around the Roman Table: Food and Feasting in Ancient Rome* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

6 Often scholarship on ancient Greek diet is conflated into studies of ancient diet and food more generally, e.g., John Wilkins and Shaun Hill, *Food in the Ancient World* (Oxford and Malden: Blackwell, 2006); Peter Garnsey, *Food and Society in Classical Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

7 Seminal texts on classical reception studies include Lorna Hardwick, *Reception Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Charles Martindale and Richard Thomas (eds.), *Classics and the Uses of Reception* (Oxford and Malden: Blackwell, 2006).

8 1986–95 is anomalous in this respect.

9 Monroe Deutsch, "Roman War Bread," *The Classical Journal* 13.7 (1918): 527–528.

10 Cornelia Harcum, "A Study of Dietetics Among the Romans," *The Classical Weekly* 12.8 (1918): 58–61.

11 Hazel Ramsay, "Government Relief During the Roman Empire," *The Classical Journal* 31.8 (1936): 479–488.

12 Alessandra Pecci and Francesco d'Andria, "Oil

Production in Roman Times: Residue Analysis of the Floors of an Installation in Lecce (Southern Italy)," *Journal of Archaeological Science* 46 (2014): 363–371.

13 C. Minniti, S. Valenzuela-Lamas, J. Evans, U. Albarella, "Widening the Market. Strontium Isotope Analysis on Cattle Teeth from Owslebury (Hampshire, UK) Highlights Changes in Livestock Supply between the Iron Age and the Roman Period," *Journal of Archaeological Science* 42 (2014): 305–314.

14 E.g., Michael MacKinnon, "High on the Hog: Linking Zooarchaeological, Literary, and Artistic Data for Pig Greeds in Roman Italy," *American Journal of Archaeology* (2001): 649–673.

15 Julian Wiethold, "Late Celtic and Early Roman Plant Remains from the Oppidum of Bibracte, Mont Beuvray (Burgundy, France)," *Vegetation History and Archaeobotany* 5.1 (1996), 105–116.

16 E.g. Rebecca Redfern, Christine Hamlin, and Nancy Beavan Athfield, "Temporal Changes in Diet: A Stable Isotope Analysis of Late Iron Age and Roman Dorset, Britain," *Journal of Archaeological Science* 37.6 (2010): 1149–1160; Rebecca Griffin, Martin Pitts, Richard Smith, Alan Brook, "Inequality at Late Roman Baldock, UK: The Impact of Social Factors on Health and Diet," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 67.4 (2011): 533–556.

17 James Porter, "Reception Studies: Future Prospects," in Lorna Hardwick and Christopher Stray (eds.), *A Companion to Classical Receptions* (Oxford: John Wiley and Sons, 2008), 471.