

# Reconstructing history through pottery: the contribution of Roman N African cookwares

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### Introduction

This article investigates the scale and significance of the production of and trade in Roman N African cookware, to show that the study of cookwares is an essential complement to studies of tablewares and amphorae for our knowledge of trade routes, but also to demonstrate the contribution that pottery can make to wider debates about political and economic developments. Although ceramic studies are commonly used to generate distribution maps and make statements about trade, they are rarely employed to develop or challenge thinking on the Roman economy and to construct arguments about the relationship between redistribution and the market economy.<sup>1</sup> Rather than presenting detailed statistics on distribution,<sup>2</sup> the article aims to investigate the factors propelling trade in cookware and what that adds to our picture of the Roman economy. Researchers have tended to concentrate on either production or consumption sites, without analysing the link between them, which, as argued here, is fundamental for an understanding of the dynamics behind the movement of these and other goods.

Roman N African cookwares, produced in what is today Tunisia, were widely exported around the Mediterranean. Although many different shapes were produced, those destined for export constitute a fairly small and uniform group of forms when compared to the multitude of local variants. Figure 1 shows the main export types, around which this article is based.

### The value of African cookware studies

As an essential and functional commodity, pottery used for cooking is found on most sites, yet cookwares have often been neglected in excavation reports and academic studies. The majority will derive from local sources, which has led to the belief that cookwares had only local or regional distribution and have little to add to wider economic questions. Studies of cookwares have been further limited by their lack of aesthetic appeal and the difficulties in dating them, but the wide distribution of certain cookwares and their importance in qualitative and quantitative studies is increasingly being appreciated as an important economic indicator. Intensive archaeological work at sites such as Ostia, Carthage and Marseilles, using scientific techniques, has demonstrated that in the Roman period many cookwares were objects of long-distance trade; indeed, N African cookwares were exported on a larger scale than any other Roman cookwares, from the early 1st to the early 5th c. A.D. Cookwares can also shed light on social and cultural practices<sup>3</sup> and

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1 Stone 2009; see also Lewit 2011, 318, on the lack of attention to economic questions; and Polfer 2001 on the failure to link information on productive activities to the nature of the economy.

2 I have provided (2010 and 2011a) more detailed, quantified information on the distribution of N African cookwares around the Mediterranean. Much valuable data can be gleaned from Reynolds 1995 and 2010; Hayes 1972; and the LRCW, RCRF and SFECAG conference volumes.

3 Swan 1992, 2; for instance, she has shown that new ranges of vessels introduced into Britain with *Legio VI* and its African soldiers indicate a functional difference from the British equivalent of Black Burnished Wares.