Macellum / μάκελλον: ‘Roman’ food markets in Asia Minor and the Levant

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Macella were a popular amenity in many well-to-do urban centers of the Roman world. These specialized markets devoted to the retail of costly foodstuffs first appeared in Italy during the Republic, even if their layout and function was inspired by the commercial architecture of the Hellenistic East. Throughout their evolution macella remained faithful to a basic architectural scheme while at the same time displaying regional variations. Their recurring formal and functional characteristics are highlighted in the most comprehensive study to date: Macellum: marché alimentaire des Romains (1983) by C. De Ruyt.1

P. Gros rightly observed that in our modern languages the term ‘market’ tends to designate a specific economic activity, rather than the built structure where the activity takes place.2 A macellum, on the contrary, corresponded both to a fixed architectural reality and to the particular use made of such a building. Its basic layout consisted of self-contained, inward-facing premises with an open courtyard lined with porticoes that concealed rows of shops; in the middle of the courtyard frequently stood a circular columnar monument (tholos). Gathering the retailing of costly foodstuffs into a specific, enclosed space allowed for better control of freshness, prices, weights and measures.3 More than its shape, it was its function that defined the macellum, a market where mainly fish and meat were sold. Literary sources refer, in order of importance, to: fish,4 meat, game, poultry and (rarely) other products necessary for a good banquet (e.g., fruits, vegetables, bread of high quality).5 Under the Republic, the sources seem to insist on fish, whereas in the Imperial and Early Christian sources the slaughter and sale of meat prevails.6

The debate on the origins and early development of the Roman macellum is complicated. Despite probable Hellenistic influences,7 most macella are found in Italy and the western

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1 Prior to C. De Ruyt’s Macellum: marché alimentaire des Romains (Louvain-la-Neuve 1983), macella were the subject of some brief accounts. See especially L. Crema, L’architettura romana (Encyclopedia Classica, sez. 3.12.1; 1959) 171-73, 286-87 and 515-21; A. Boéthius and J. B. Ward-Perkins, Etruscan and early Roman architecture (Harmondsworth 1970) 211, 294-95, 298, 372, 468-69 and 482-83; N. Nabers, “The architectural variations of the macellum,” OpuscRom 9 (1973) 173-76, which, as an abstract of an unpublished 1967 Princeton Ph.D. dissertation (Macella: a study in Roman archaeology), was the first attempt at an architectural classification.


3 The aediles or agoranomoi were responsible for the annona macelli: De Ruyt (supra n.1) 356-58; C. Holleran, Shopping in ancient Rome: the retail trade in the Late Republic and the Principate (Oxford 2012) 175.

4 Rare seafish, especially, was praised and sold in public auction: Holleran ibid. 176-77.

5 For this list, cf. De Ruyt (supra n.1) 341-50. Holleran (supra n.3) 172 underscores the dearth of sources concerning the sale in macella of non- or less-perishable food items such as bread, oil, wine, garum or cheese.


7 It has long been assumed that the functional specialization and visual uniformity characterizing the Late Classical/Early Hellenistic Ionian agora inspired the architecture and function of early Roman macella, but Ionia’s pioneering rôle in the evolution of the Greek agora is increasingly