

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

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* (Enciclopedia Classica, sez. 3.12.1; 1959) 171-73, 286-87 and 515-21; A. Boëthius 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.

2 “Il peut sembler étrange de consacrer un chapitre à une notion qui évoque plutôt, dans notre langue, une fonction économique plutôt qu’une structure bâtie”: P. Gros, *L’architecture romaine du début du 3ème s. av. J.-C. au Haut-Empire*. I. *Les monuments publics* (Paris 1996) 450.

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 seafood, 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.

6 C. De Ruyt, “Les produits vendus au macellum,” *Food & History* 5.1 (2007) 135-50.

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