

Learning to consume: consumption and consumerism in the Roman Empire

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Roman archaeologists have been criticized for taking too much interest in the minutiae of specific topics and categories of material evidence, instead of exploiting them to generate broader interpretations,¹ while theoreticians have found prehistory “a safer, more comfortable and purer world for archaeologists to play in”.² This paper will attempt to address such criticisms by working some examples of Roman material culture into an investigation of consumption, making extensive use of the metaphorical terminology of Z. Bauman.³ It will complement existing studies of consumption in Roman archaeology⁴ by asking whether any Roman consumption practices can be described as *consumerism*, an economic phenomenon which many historians consider to be a feature of the modern world, and the 18th c. in particular.⁵ The studies of material culture (applied art, bead necklaces, pottery, lamps) explored here would have to be extended in number, time and space to provide a definitive answer to the question.⁶ Much of the paper draws upon Romano-British archaeology, not only because of the author’s familiarity with the subject matter but also because the impact of an empire may be particularly visible in its peripheral regions. Consideration of Roman consumption will be concluded by exploring briefly its relationship to recent work on identity and globalization.

Although consumption has been a lively topic amongst anthropologists and early modern historians since the 1970s,⁷ archaeologists can make a positive contribution from their work with material evidence.⁸ Economists, especially those working in a broadly Marxist tradition, tend to regard consumption as the consequence of production, and focus their studies on the latter.⁹ More recently, consumption has been seen as a key to understanding social relationships by bridging the gap between anthropology and economics, especially in contemporary society.¹⁰ Consumption has also been incorporated into studies of modern empires and globalization, for it combines social behaviour with economic, political, and technological spheres of interpreta-

- 1 C. Woolf, “The present state and future scope of Roman archaeology: a comment,” *AJA* 108 (2004) 417-28.
- 2 H. E. M. Cool, *Eating and drinking in Roman Britain* (Cambridge 2006) xiii.
- 3 Z. Bauman’s profound output has accelerated in recent years to include books on globalization and consumption: (*Globalization: the human consequences* [Cambridge 1998]; *Liquid modernity* [Cambridge 2000]; *Consuming life* [Cambridge 2007]). Born in 1925, his varied life in Poland during war and peace, followed by a long career in academic sociology in England, gives his work a distinctive character: cf. A. Elliott (ed.), *The contemporary Bauman* (London 2007); T. Blackshaw, *Zygmunt Bauman* (London 2005).
- 4 Perspicaciously analysed in 2006 by N. Ray, “Consumption and Roman archaeology beyond Pompeii,” in B. Croxford et al. (edd.), *TRAC 2005* (Oxford 2006) 25-41.
- 5 J. Styles, “Manufacturing, consumption and design in eighteenth-century England,” in J. Brewer and R. Porter (edd.), *Consumption and the world of goods* (London 1993) 527-54. A deeper chronological ‘genealogy’ of the Georgian Order is explored by M. Johnson, *An archaeology of capitalism* (Oxford 1996).
- 6 No attempt is made to include the enormous topics of food or clothing, common targets for sumptuary laws in the ancient and modern world (cf. P. Garnsey, *Food and society in classical antiquity* [Cambridge 1999]; C. K. Kilkerby, *Sumptuary law in Italy: 1200-1500* [Oxford 2002] 9-22).
- 7 C. B. Martins, *Becoming consumers: looking beyond wealth as an explanation for villa variability* (BAR 403, Oxford 2005) 9. Brewer and Porter’s collection of papers (supra n.5) remains an excellent introduction to a diversity of approaches.
- 8 D. Miller, “Consumption,” in C. Tilley et al. (edd.), *Handbook of material culture* (London 2006) 341; M. Berg, *Luxury and pleasure in eighteenth-century Britain* (Oxford 2005) 12-13.
- 9 D. Miller, *Material cultures: why some things matter* (London 1998) 11; Martins (supra n.7) 39; Ray (supra n.4) 27.
- 10 “... consumption goods are most definitely not mere messages; they constitute the very system itself”: M. Douglas and B. Isherwood, *The world of goods: toward an anthropology of consumption* (2nd edn., London 1996) 49.