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# Ex oriente lux

## A panorama of craft studies in the Roman East

by JEROEN POBLOME

### *The seduction of the Roman East*

When visualising the Roman East, famous cities, such as Corinth, Constantinople, Ephesos, Antioch, Beirut and Alexandria, immediately spring to mind. Each of these places had an undeniably inimitable character. It should therefore come as no surprise that all seven of the illustrious wonders of the ancient world are located in the eastern Mediterranean.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the monumentality of the Roman East must have been splendid. In the East, there was money and power, which generated an opulent environment of display. Urbanism, monuments and ancient art are not surprisingly key words in the vocabulary of Classical Archaeology.<sup>2</sup>

At face value, it must be fantastic to be an archaeologist working with such rich cultural heritage demonstrating direct links to our European cultural consciousness.<sup>3</sup> As with anything in life, however, there are also downsides to this archaeological nirvana. For instance, at Sagalassos (SW Turkey) the team of Marc Waelkens is engaged in the excavation of a magnificent urban mansion with, as of yet, 51 rooms uncovered, spanning at least four floors.<sup>4</sup> However, the excavation has so far failed to locate the kitchen of this elite housing complex. In general, excavated kitchen facilities are all but undocumented in the Roman East. Additionally, where in the archaeological literature on the Roman East are the necropoleis of the ordinary townsfolk, the villages, the farms and even the ordinary urban domestic architecture? Where, in other words, are the normal people in this splendid archaeological setting?<sup>5</sup>

It is no wonder, therefore, that the isolated richness of the East formed an easy background for very disparate conceptual views on how that opulence came about. In this particular setting, there is no need to expound upon the polarized debate between primitivist and modernist views regarding the status of the ancient economy – especially since the effects of recent, ground-breaking historical work on the topic<sup>6</sup> cannot yet be measured. It is of importance, however, to understand that, although Classical Archaeology did not necessarily actively participate in this debate, most archaeological projects developed rather implicit intellectual stances when considering the socio-economic implications of their fieldwork. More often than not, artefacts, such as imported amphorae or glass vessels, support conclusions concerning the socio-economic network of the studied community with the inherent danger that simple

artisanal evidence may be extrapolated beyond its potential. The main importance of this message, therefore, is to recognize a distinct need for a different intellectual approach toward humble and broken archaeological *realia*. In a recent contribution, Kevin Greene argued for “an overtly reflexive approach to interpretation” in future Roman pottery studies<sup>7</sup> by making an appeal to avoid traditional (positivist) conclusions that the presence of a given assemblage of pottery is informative on the economy of a site and/or the social position of the community. Only when a lot of methodological hurdles are taken (specifically, those related to the quality of deposit and the processing of the find assemblage), may pottery, or other types of artefact for that matter, provide hints at socio-economic conditions. However, the interpretation of such hints should always be based on an embedded approach, linking all other types of evidence of non-pottery or even non-artefactual nature.

Clearly, our rich archaeological evidence could be entering the world of Classical Studies in much more engaging ways. This may actually depend less on the theoretical concepts at hand, and more on the action of modelling and on the means of presenting our particular evidence. We need to be more explicit on how we create meaning for our artefacts and also which elements these represent in the intellectual piece of machinery of archaeological interpretation. An excellent (de-)constructive approach introduced by John Davies designed flow diagrams of resource movements (goods, services, money, people), which considered stages of household autarky, external third parties and institutions, and the impact of central authorities.<sup>8</sup> Without wanting to evoke Rostovtzeff-like stances, Roman socio-economical patterns represented a huge network linking different goods, people and information in an intricate way, by means of a variety of essentially dependent exchange mechanisms. Connectivity, or the variable coherence of regions, both internally and with one another, was a traditional feature of pre-industrial Mediterranean society and economy.<sup>9</sup> The very nature of the Roman Empire also sustained exchange mechanisms other than trade. These include redistribution, gift exchange, as well as socially tied and commissioned trade, and these mechanisms involve a great deal more people than simply the producer and his customer.

Roman material culture studies can make a very important contribution to this debate and craft studies should become increasingly central in advancing reconstructions

of daily life in antiquity. The richness of the archaeology of the Roman East holds an enormous potential for growth in this area. I see two problems, however, which need to be considered in order to allow artisanal archaeology to take its deserved place in Classical Studies. The first problem is that anything in Classical Archaeology comes with an enormous weight of tradition of research. In this tradition, craft studies are mostly restricted to creating typological catalogues, developing chronologies, and studying certain aspects of production, mainly with the provenancing of the objects in mind and reconstructing distribution patterns. Taking into account that all of these activities focus on a level of basic data identification and information gathering, and that we at times tend to use obscure technical terminology, it should come as no surprise that as of yet artisanal archaeology has not really managed to play the role I should like to see it play in the archaeology of the Roman East. The second problem with studies on Roman material culture is that these have so far mostly been published in a fragmentary fashion according to specific artefactual categories (e.g. glass, metal, ceramics and sculpture). This is an unfortunate state of affairs, which impedes comparative and interdisciplinary studies, and there is a clear need to provide an open forum to advance the development of scientific rationale shared by the many types of Roman material culture studies. International efforts such as *CRAFTS*, *INSTRUMENTUM* and the new journal, *FACTA. A Journal of Roman Material Culture Studies*, will gradually, but surely, start to give appropriate weight to the tradition of Classical Archaeology.

#### *Artisanal archaeology in the Roman East*

In the new world of craft studies in the Roman East, I see two avenues of research which could be tackled with success by applying more reflexive patterns of thinking. First of all, I see a great need for improved knowledge of artisanal production organisation. Second, this knowledge could be better incorporated into models of regional development.

To start with, the study of artisanal production should consider more ways to make typologies work. As already indicated, the traditional classificatory framework can never be an end in itself. Otherwise, we run the risk of forgetting why the analysis started in the first place: to reveal patterns of daily life in antiquity. Objects – at times in combination with other objects – were designed in the ancient world with certain purposes in mind. Obviously, the aspects of function and design are linked. For instance, a cooking vessel was made of a specific type of clay and its shape was a function of contemporaneous culinary practices. The degree of sophistication in conceiving forms was dependent on the mode of production. The more advanced the mode of production, the more factors were at play when

introducing a specific new line of products on the market. For example, the common types of Roman sigillata tableware with wide distribution patterns can be considered to result from a typological model of negotiation. It all starts with the entrepreneur, who conceived of making tableware in large quantities. There may have been a progressive link between the impact of particular types of tableware on their markets and a higher social/financial position of the entrepreneur, possibly related to the fact that this individual can be regarded as being a member of local elite. When conceiving of household artefact types, the entrepreneur had to consider the mastery of the craftsmen he/she contracted, and both parties also had to take into account the potential customers, who were in a position to accept or reject new products. Customers mostly seem to have judged the quality, functionality and affordability of the products, before considering their fashionability. At the same time, customers also – possibly subconsciously – took part in emulating a ‘better’ social context. The concept of tableware typologies can therefore be regarded as the result of a model of negotiation between fashion and mainstream, involving the mentioned parties; the resulting balance is by nature socially charged allowing different groups to express different messages.

In the Roman East, we must be particularly aware that there are still many hidden landscapes of production. When working at Tanagra, Boeotia, not only do we come across the usual variety of sigillata and red slip wares, but this survey pottery also includes a Boeotian line of tableware and a range of fabrics which we consider to be ‘Greek’ in nature and do not seem to correspond to the other attested production centres of table wares at Athens, Corinth and Patras.<sup>10</sup> Another example of how new discoveries are bound to make our picture more complex is the fact that nobody had ever heard about Sagalassos red slip ware before 1987, yet the ware clearly represents a high quality type of tableware comparable to any of the main types circulating in the Roman East.<sup>11</sup>

Obviously, interdisciplinary work has to continue to play a strategic role in material studies. Such research should not only be aimed at pinning down the uncertain provenance of the many lines of artisanal production, and documenting aspects of production technology, thereby, in reality, reducing the role of archaeometry in providing technical solutions to archaeological questions. In addition, there is an increasing role for interdisciplinary research to help model the conceptual agenda of artisanal archaeology. This research should be genuinely multi-strategic in nature and compatible with the general reconstruction of socio-economic patterns in antiquity.<sup>12</sup> The world of glass studies, for instance, has recently benefited from improved archaeometry, documenting a clear organisational distinction between primary glass-making and secondary glass-working facilities in the Roman world.<sup>13</sup> As far as primary production is concerned, we still have to allow for large gaps in our knowledge. For certain periods between the middle of the first millennium BC and the ninth century AD, which re-

present the time span when this model of production is presumed operational, there is next to no evidence. Even in the core area of Syro-Palestine and Egypt, where most of the fresh glass is supposed to have been produced, the total amount of published primary production facilities is limited. Additionally, the raw materials of soda-lime-silica glass are not exceptional in nature, and certainly not restricted to the mentioned core area. Admittedly, the quality and the combination of the available raw materials may not always be as pure or ideal as the Belus river sand and natron from Egypt, but they may have met the production needs – as illustrated by the case of Roman York<sup>14</sup> and the late Roman Rhineland<sup>15</sup> where local primary glass production was suggested. The main idea behind the primary/secondary organisation is logically sound, but the fact that a restricted set of primary production centres within any region would approach a near-monopoly in providing the rest of the empire with primary glass contradicts current views on the ancient economy. Certainly, regional monopolies existed, a fact illustrated by the distribution of Sagalassos red slip ware. However, supra-regional monopolies cannot be reconstructed – not even in the heydays of the most widely distributed tablewares, such as Italian sigillata<sup>16</sup> and African red slip ware.<sup>17</sup> Glass and pottery products, including their raw materials, are of a modest and fairly common nature. The distribution of regional products can experience phases of economic growth, but in antiquity this only seems to happen when the regions of production can capitalise on their potential by linking to larger interactive networks. It should therefore perhaps be less of a surprise to note that most of the evidence for primary glass production in Palestine is datable to Late Antiquity, exactly when this region experienced a period of economical growth, as attested by the impact of its wine trade.<sup>18</sup> As a result, two factors are of importance in making and distributing fresh glass: the availability and quality of the raw materials and the existence of supra-regional exchange networks in which the production region is involved. In my opinion, this opens the potential for other regions to have been active in making and distributing primary glass.

Consequently, the study of artefactual distribution should be much more closely tied to that of production. As things normally go in Classical Archaeology, the most representative ranges of artefacts with extensive distribution patterns (e.g., the set of Late Roman amphorae,<sup>19</sup> African red slip ware,<sup>20</sup> Italian sigillata<sup>21</sup> and also eastern sigillata A<sup>22</sup>) have received the lion's share of attention. Without wishing to play down the importance of these lines of production, it seems worth considering the ways such wares have acted as a comparative standard for the success of other artisanal products and whether this comparative exercise does justice to typical ancient modes of production. Although the actual pottery production centres are very poorly known in the Roman East,<sup>23</sup> the available evidence does support the notion that sizeable production output was achieved by multiplying small-scale production

units rather than enlarging existing facilities.<sup>24</sup> Such processes of horizontal multiplication took place within attested production centres,<sup>25</sup> and I would like to suggest that the aforementioned widely distributed wares were the result of processes of horizontal multiplication involving many small-scale production units within one or other region, resulting in so-called conglomerates of production.<sup>26</sup> In other words, the archaeology of production units indicates that small-scale production units geared towards their own regional markets are to be regarded as the norm in antiquity. Obviously, this conclusion should change our focus on distribution patterns, away from putting more dots on the map, which seems to be an exercise mostly relevant to modern scholars, and more towards understanding which markets artisanal entrepreneurs had in mind and which risks they were prepared to take. Considering the fact that even the highly successful types of tableware in the Roman East were mainly dominant in their own region of production<sup>27</sup> indicates that such entrepreneurs were not prepared to take many risks and they mainly put their money on the markets they knew within their own regional radius. It is only when conglomerates of production are present that further markets are reached. However, the resulting vast distribution pattern is actually a combination of a patchwork output comprising many regional production centres, and these exceptions were not necessarily purely commercial in nature, but possibly tied to larger mechanisms instigated, implicitly or explicitly, by central authorities, such as the *annona*.<sup>28</sup> Perhaps the exercise of comparing the rate of renewal of shapes and wares might reveal that our general view of distribution patterns is too positivistic and that slow rates of renewal could actually hide deficiencies of supply in regions not involved in these specific lines of artisanal production. It seems to me that a production-linked focus on distribution patterns holds much potential for approaching the contribution that the artisanal sector made to ancient society.

Considering the regional anchoring of craft production, the concept of regional development could serve as an explanatory framework for artisanal production and distribution. Each region is to be considered as a synopsis in which the wide variety of Roman craft products was produced and/or exchanged. This regional context fared better or worse as a result of differential relations with central authorities, such as the state, army and church, and as a result of changes in time and space. Conceptual as this approach may be, artisanal archaeology in the Roman East fortunately has not only a very inspirational mosaic of regions, but also rich documentary sources, which help put flesh to these bones. I am not only a strong believer in the idea that artisanal production, in some cases, made a strong contribution to the regional economy, but also that, when provided with the right conceptual framework, the opulence of Classical Archaeology may be very much to our scholarly benefit.

# NOTES

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- <sup>3</sup> RICHARD HINGLEY, *Globalizing Roman culture. Unity, diversity and empire*, London 2005.
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- <sup>5</sup> Even the recent, innovatively structured and very widely adopted textbook for university teaching cannot answer most of these questions: SUSAN E. ALCOCK / ROBIN OSBORNE (eds), *Classical archaeology*, Oxford 2007.
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- <sup>7</sup> KEVIN GREENE, *Roman pottery: models, proxies and economic interpretation*, in: *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 18, 2005, p. 34–56.
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- <sup>20</sup> Cf. note 17.
- <sup>21</sup> Cf. note 16 and SIMONETTA MENCHELLI / MARINELLA PASQUINUCCI (cf. note 11).
- <sup>22</sup> JOHN LUND, *An economy of consumption: the eastern sigillata A industry in the late Hellenistic period*, in: ZOFIA H. ARCHIBALD / JOHN K. DAVIES / VINCENT GABRIELSEN (eds), *Making, moving and managing. The new world of ancient economies, 323–31 BC*, Oxford 2005, p. 233–254.
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## SUMMARY

This paper wishes to explore the setting of craft studies in the Roman East within the tradition of Classical Archaeology. The position of crafts in the setting of opulence and splendour of Classical Archaeology is not straightforward. Opposing conceptual views on ancient socio-economic mechanisms are further complications. Based on examples from personal fieldwork, the need for the creation of an engaging and reflexive platform is highlighted. The study of artisanal production technology and organisation is to play a fundamental role. The continued use of interdisciplinary techniques and the development of a more cohesive conceptual platform crossing over various types of craft studies are considered strategic elements in the potential contribution to the study of socio-economic patterns in antiquity.

## RÉSUMÉ

Cet article se propose d'explorer l'état des études concernant l'artisanat dans les provinces orientales de l'Empire romain, au sein de la tradition de l'archéologie classique qui, du haut de son opulence et de sa splendeur, n'a pas intégré l'artisanat sans quelques difficultés. L'opposition entre différentes conceptions des mécanismes socio-historiques ayant dominé l'Antiquité a ultérieurement compliqué la situation. Des recherches personnelles sur le terrain ont mis en évidence la nécessité de créer une plate-forme basée sur l'interaction et la réflexion. Dans cette optique, l'étude de la technologie et de l'organisation de la production artisanale est censée jouer un rôle fondamental. L'utilisation suivie de méthodes interdisciplinaires et le développement d'une plate-forme conceptuelle plus cohérente et abordant les différentes approches des études consacrées à l'artisanat s'avèrent être des éléments stratégiques en vue de la contribution potentielle de l'étude des modèles socio-économiques de l'Antiquité.

## ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Der Beitrag untersucht, welche Bedeutung der Erforschung des Handwerks im östlichen Teil des Römischen Reichs im Rahmen der Tradition der klassischen Archäologie zukommt, die weitgehend von der Darstellung der Pracht und der Reichtümer der dortigen Fundstätten bestimmt ist. Die Rolle des einfachen Handwerks wird vor diesem Hintergrund kaum fassbar. Unterschiedliche Meinungen zu den damaligen gesellschaftlich-wirtschaftlichen Mechanismen haben die Forschungssituation zusätzlich erschwert. Eigene Forschungen des Autors führen zur Erkenntnis, dass für weiterführende diesbezügliche Studien eine verbindliche Plattform mit entsprechender Ausstrahlung geschaffen werden sollte. Dabei werden Untersuchungen zu Technologie und Organisation des Handwerks eine fundamentale Rolle spielen. Die nachhaltige Anwendung interdisziplinärer Methoden und die Entwicklung eines Grundlagenkonzepts, das auf der engen Verbindung der unterschiedlichsten Ansätze zur Erforschung des Handwerks beruht, werden als wesentliche strategische Elemente für mögliche Beiträge zu weiteren Erkenntnissen der sozio-ökonomischen Verhältnisse der Frühgeschichte hervorgehoben.

## RIASSUNTO

Il saggio intende esplorare il contesto degli studi sull'artigianato nell'Impero romano orientale nel solco della tradizione dell'archeologia classica. La posizione degli artigiani nel contesto dell'opulenza e dello splendore dell'archeologica classica non è evidente. La presenza di visioni concettuali contrastanti per quanto riguarda i meccanismi socio-economici esistenti all'epoca creano ulteriori complicazioni. Sulla base dell'esempio di ricerche personali condotte sul campo, il saggio sottolinea la necessità di creare una piattaforma che richiede impegno e induce alla riflessione. Gli studi della tecnologia e dell'organizzazione indispensabili per promuovere la produzione artigianale è pertanto destinato a svolgere un ruolo fondamentale. La continua applicazione di tecniche interdisciplinari e lo sviluppo di una piattaforma concettuale più coesa che coinvolga tutti diversi tipi di studi sull'artigianato sono considerati elementi strategici nel potenziale contributo allo studio dei modelli socioeconomici dell'Antichità.