

Looking for Kitchens in the Roman Landscape

Using evidence from 25 inscriptions and references in the literary record, I argue that ancient Romans appreciated kitchens as an important feature of the larger social landscape. One of the goals for the study of Roman cultural history is to recreate the Roman lived experience, including how and where elite Romans dined. Scholars have long investigated the Roman dinner party (e.g., Dunbabin, 2003). More public forms of feasting, however, were equally important to social performance, and have been the subject of relatively less study. Recent literature on civic feasting (e.g., D'Arms, 2000; Donahue, 2004) focuses on the location and act of dining; but how and where were these meals prepared?

This paper collects literary and epigraphic evidence for kitchens in the Roman world. I show that, beyond bars and hot-food establishments, kitchens formed an integral part of the Roman urban environment. Thanks to advances in electronic searching made by the online epigraphic databases, such as Clauss-Slaby, Epigraphic Database Roma, and Epigraphic Database Heidelberg, I have gathered some 25 inscriptions mentioning either a *culina* or a *coquinatoria*. These inscriptions indicate that kitchens could serve as objects of civic benefaction, temple beautification, or even line items in wills. Since kitchens appear in such a wide variety of social spheres, I argue that we ought to pay greater attention to kitchens as social spaces in which Romans conducted their daily lives.

In Roman culture, food preparation areas were considered closely linked to the place of consumption. I will briefly share four examples of this. In Cicero's speech against Caius Vatinius, the orator lambasts his opponent for never having learned proper feasting etiquette as a boy looking on from among the cooks (*In Vat.* 32). Further, a kitchen was considered so necessary for a civic feast that a certain Pescennius from Aesernia saw fit to repair the kitchen

along with the portico at which he was providing a dinner for the quadrumvirs of his town (CIL 9.2629 = ILS 5419). Third, Suetonius' anecdote recounting how Claudius abandoned a business meeting to join the feast of the Salli is particularly enlightening. Suetonius paints a vivid picture of the Forum of Augustus full not only of people conducting business, but also the smells and sounds of a working kitchen (*Claudius* 33). Finally, and perhaps most evocative of all, an inscription from a *columbarium* outside Rome (CIL 6.14614 = ILS 7931) features the deceased Q. Cauius Carpus endowing to one S. Horatius Diadoumenus rights for drawing water from the tomb's well, as well as general use of its *triclinium* and kitchen.

These are just four examples demonstrating that kitchens pervaded the Roman social landscape. While evidence for kitchens can only provide an impressionistic picture, we can see that they were as legitimate a form of elite benefaction as baths or porticoes. Moreover, this evidence indicates that kitchens were not placed into a specific context or zone, but were instead spread throughout any given town or city.

Select Bibliography

- Bossu, C. 1982. "M' Megonius Leo From Petelia (Regio III): A Private Benefactor From the Local Aristocracy." *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 45: 155-165.
- D'Arms, J.H. 1998. "Between Public and Private: The *Epulum Publicum* and Caesar's *Horti Trans Tiberim*." In *Horti Romani*, edited by M. Cima, and E.L. Rocca. Roma: "L'Erma" di Bretschneider: 33-43.
- Donahue, J.F. 2004. *The Roman Community At Table During the Principate*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Dunbabin, K.M.D. 2003. *The Roman Banquet: Images of Conviviality*. Cambridge: Cambridge

University Press.

Graham, E.-J. 2005. "The Quick and the Dead in the Extra-Urban Landscape: The Roman Cemetery At Ostia/Portus as a Lived Environment." In *TRAC 2004: Proceedings of the Fourteenth Annual Theoretical Roman Archaeological Conference*, London: Oxbow Books: 133-143.