

More Italy than Provence? Archaeology, Texts, and Culture Change in Roman Provence

R. Bruce Hitchner
University of Dayton

Agrorum cultu, virorum morumque dignatione, amplitudine opum,
nulli provinciarum postferenda breviterque Italia verius quam
provincia. (*Nat.* 3.31)

Pliny the Elder's vision of a Provence already deeply Romanized by the late first century C.E. has long informed historical and archaeological discourse on the region. Monographs on the province of Gallia Narbonensis and the Gallic provinces generally, while acknowledging the important cultural developments of the pre-Roman period, tend to interpret, *à la* Pliny, Romanization as something of a one way process involving mainly the adoption of Roman culture by the local population.¹ A more balanced assessment of the nature of culture change in southern Gaul in the Roman period is overdue. This can only be achieved through a more thorough analysis of the archaeological record than has been attempted to date, and by a greater willingness on the part of archaeologists and historians of Roman Provence to move beyond a vision of archaeology as something more than a material affirmation of the vision presented in the ancient literature. To illustrate the potential of this approach I would like to present two archaeological case studies that tell a slightly different story of cultural change and invention in Provence than that told by ancient texts. But "different" in this instance should not be taken to mean "discordant," for, when integrated, these disparate bodies of knowledge inform one another and contribute to a new understanding of Provence's Roman past.

Oysters: The Creation of a Provincial Staple

My first case study focuses on recent archaeological evidence relating to shellfish production and consumption in late Iron Age and Roman Provence.² Between the fifth and second centuries B.C.E., shellfish consumption, chiefly of

¹General studies on Gaul: Drinkwater; Jullian; King. For a more nuanced approach to the issues of Romanization in Gaul see Wolff. On Roman Provence, see Fevrier *et al.* and River.

²See Brien-Poitevin.

mussels, constituted a significant food source for settlements around the group of *etangs* or brackish coastal lakes between Marseilles and the mouth of the Rhone river. During the second century B.C.E., oysters (*ostrea edulis*) replaced mussels, first at Martigues and Saint Blaise, the two most important centers in the region, as well as at some smaller inland settlements. From the first century C.E., the consumption of oysters, and to a lesser degree, scallops (*proteopecten glaber*) became a province-wide phenomenon, extending as far north as Orange and Digne, involving all population classes, to judge from the finds of shell remnants in considerable quantities in all settlement categories. Oysters and scallops remained an important part of the Provençal diet until late antiquity and were only replaced again by mussels in the early medieval period as a consequence of the growing preference for younger, reproductively immature oysters that probably diminished stocks of the latter.

The archaeological evidence on shellfish has a number of important implications for our understanding of the cultural changes that occurred in Provence as a result of its incorporation into the Roman empire. The first concerns dietary change. For the Romans, mussels and oysters constituted prestige foods, that is, foods that were considered relatively scarce and expensive and thus reserved for the elites or used only on special occasions.³ For the *etang* communities, on the other hand, shellfish were dietary staples. The decision by the indigenous population of the *etangs* to shift from mussel to oyster consumption cannot, therefore, be adequately explained in terms of emulation of a Roman cultural trait,⁴ but rather as a form of accommodation involving a minor modification in the nature of the food consumed and no change at all in cultivation and harvesting technology. In essence, a new food tradition was created from an attempt to maintain an existing food tradition in a new situation.

The remarkable expansion of oyster consumption in particular from a relatively circumscribed population group along the Provençal coast to virtually the entire population of the province is of even greater significance, for it speaks directly to the issue of Romanization. Again, what we are observing here has nothing to do with the transfer of a particular elite Roman food custom to Provence, but instead the creation of a new cultural phenomenon arising from the congruence of Roman and indigenous and Provençal culture and locally

³On prestige foods, see Garnsey 122–27.

⁴On the difficulties of “emulation” as an explanatory model of Romanization, see Jones 34–35.

favorable economic circumstances. Specifically, the establishment of veteran colonies by Caesar and Augustus at Arles, Nîmes, Orange, and a number of other towns in Provence probably stimulated a demand for oysters as a culturally desirable food. But this demand could only have been met if the conditions for large-scale oyster production and distribution were present. Moreover, the *etangs* constituted an excellent marine environment for shellfish production, and the simple technology for cultivating shellfish will have made investment in the intensification of production relatively inexpensive and easily achievable, and from the standpoint of the market cheap and readily available.⁵ The distribution of shellfish throughout the province will have in turn been easily facilitated by the well-developed system of roads and canals, including the canal of Marius leading from Fos to Arles.⁶

In effect, the development of a state-based economic infrastructure under the empire, in contrast to the earlier tribal system, acted as a catalyst in the emergence of another staple food and, by extension, a new regional culinary tradition that was neither specifically Gallic nor Roman, but something entirely new. The contrast with Italy, where both archaeology and texts indicate that oysters remained an exotic and expensive food, could not be more marked.⁷ Indeed, the importance of this contrast is difficult to underestimate in historical terms. In particular, it challenges the cogency of Pliny's famous assessment of Provence. At the risk of exaggeration, it might be said that rather than becoming more like Italy, the province was becoming Provence. On matters of food, the archaeological record suggests that the Roman literature on oysters may be something of a literary topos. But even if we assume that the texts do reflect the reality of Italy and perhaps other Mediterranean cities (I am thinking here of the high notional prices of oysters and other shellfish found in the Price Edict), this is not necessarily the case for the empire as a whole. Taken together, the

⁵A number of villas that grew up around the shores of the *etangs* in the Roman period were evidently involved in the production of fish sauce. Installations for the cultivation of shellfish could have easily been established for the harvesting of shellfish, see Brien-Poitevin 319.

⁶To prevent spoilage, oysters may have been transported in a manner not dissimilar to that practiced in Sardinia until quite recently (probably into the 50s), in which merchants transported shellfish from the coasts into the interior in salt water in wicker baskets "to trick them into thinking they were still in the sea." I wish to thank Professor Robert Rowland for providing this information. Brien-Poitevin 318–19 suggests a possible link between the development of the salt pans near the Rhone mouth and shellfish production. The weight of transporting shellfish does not seem to have been a factor, to argue from the large volume of shells found at many sites.

⁷See Sen. *Ep.* 78.23; Mart. 3.60, 7.11; Petr. 119; Hor. *S.* 2.42.

texts and archaeology on shellfish in Provence and Italy imply that the strict categorization of particular foods as either staples or prestige foods may not be a useful guide to the reality of food consumption in the Roman empire.

Pastoralism in the Crau Plain

In their accounts of Provence, both Strabo (4.1.7.) and Pliny (*Nat.* 21.57) drew attention to the Crau plain, a vast stony plain to the southeast of Arles, famous for its pasturage and the large number of flocks and herds that it attracted. Recent fieldwork conducted by both French and American teams in the Crau has now yielded a wealth of new information on the nature and scale of its pastoral economy in the Roman period.⁸ Of the more than 150 sites recorded to date by the two projects, some fifty belong to the period between the first century B.C.E. and the fourth century C.E. The vast majority of these formed the remnants of sheepfolds visible in the landscape as very low stony mounds containing remnants of walls in foundation and small amounts of pottery, amphorae, tile, coins, and other small artifacts. In plan the sheepfolds were narrow boat-shaped structures oriented either northeast-southwest or northwest-southeast with internal subdivisions. The absence of sheepfolds prior to the first century B.C.E. suggests that the appearance of fixed-dwelling stockraising coincides with the establishment of the Roman colony of Arles.⁹ The French team has estimated that some 100,000 sheep were maintained chiefly for their wool in the Crau under the empire.¹⁰ By any measure, we are dealing with a substantial stockraising operation.

As with the shellfish data, a number of important inferences can be drawn from this evidence. First, we are again dealing with a significant change to a highly localized industry in Provence dating to the Roman period, a change directly linked to the establishment of a Roman colony. The combination of the suitability of the Crau to large-scale stockraising and the market created by the colony for woolen products also no doubt accounts for the evolution from the loosely managed non-fixed pastoral regime described by Pliny to the highly organized fixed stockraising regime under the empire.¹¹ Finally, although there are parallels between the pastoral economies of the Crau and south Italy in the period, the industry established in the Crau is, again, an

⁸See Badan *et al.* and Hitchner.

⁹Badan *et al.* 298.

¹⁰Badan *et al.* 305.

¹¹The sheep industry was almost certainly managed by large landowners who rented parcels in the Crau; see Badan *et al.* 304–5.

example of something new being created on the middle ground between Roman and Gallic culture in Provence.¹²

Conclusion

These two case studies from Provence demonstrate the importance of integrating archaeology and texts in studies of culture change and creation in the Roman empire. For most readers this message may seem patently obvious. But even in 1999 it is still possible to find a leading scholar of Roman economy and culture asserting, for example, that archaeology is at best a useful supplement to literature on matters of food.¹³ Ultimately, it is not enough to acknowledge the importance of reading texts and things together. We need also recognize that the universe of things is daily becoming much more vast than the universe of texts, and that we must be careful to not restrict our choice of things to integrate with texts to those things that texts and our own culturally determined behavior privilege. This means becoming methodologically and ideologically less risk averse in our willingness to come to grips in imaginative ways with the problems of comprehending cultural and economic change in the ancient world. To paraphrase James Deetz, we must not only read what has been written but look at what has been done.

Works Cited

- Badan, O., J.-P. Brun and G. Conges. 1996. "Les bergeries romaines de la Crau d'Arles." *Gallia* 52: 263–310.
- Barker, G. 1995. *A Mediterranean Valley. Landscape Archaeology and Annales History in the Biferno Valley*. Leicester.
- Brien-Poitevin, F. 1996. "Consommation des coquillages marins en Provence a l'époque romaine." *Revue archéologique de Narbonnaise* 29: 313–20.
- Drinkwater, J. 1983. *Roman Gaul. The Three Provinces, 58 B.C – A.D. 260*. London.
- Fevrier, P. A., M. Bats, G. Camps, M. Fixot, J. Guyon, and J. Riser. 1989. *La Provence des origines a l'an mil*. Aix-en-Provence.
- Garnsey, P. 1999. *Food and Society in Classical Antiquity*. Cambridge.
- Hitchner, R. B. 1994. "Prospection archéologique a Entressen." *Les Amis du Vieil Istres* 17: 15–26.
- Jones, S. 1997. *The Archaeology of Ethnicity*. London.
- Jullian, C. 1908–26. *Historie de la Gaule*. Paris.
- King, A. C. 1990. *Roman Gaul and Germany*. London.
- River, A. L. F. 1988. *Gallia Narbonensis, Southern France in Roman Times*. London.
- Wolff, G. 1998. *Becoming Roman. The Origins of Provincial Civilization in Gaul*. Cambridge.

¹²On the pastoral economy of south Italy see Barker.

¹³Garnsey 113–14.