Life in the Roman Empire: Episode 196

The Macellum and Restaurants

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A big part of Roman life was simply "keeping in" sufficient supplies.

***Macellum*:**

***Tholos*:**

As with all things Roman, **the purchase of meat was regulated** (to monitor butchery and attempt to stem off illness). Butchery then, was publicly tied to a **religious** act.

Macellum Meats and Jesus Followers

Though **bakeries** were spread throughout the city, **meat** appeared only to be sold close to a central forum market and its adjoining buildings where an altar can be easily found. That **relation between the meat and its religious connotations** became the single most important examples of Christian deference and maturity in Paul's writings:

> ***"Now concerning things sacrificed to idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies. … 4 Therefore concerning the eating of things sacrificed to idols, we know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one... 7 However not all men have this knowledge; but some, being accustomed to the idol until now, eat food as if it were sacrificed to an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled."*** [1 Corinthians 8:1-7]

Obviously, Jesus followers, partly in response to the call of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, debated eating meats offered to idols. That meat was a higher quality at a more reasoned price – but it may have been an offense to newer Jesus followers who once put significant energies into cultic practices. In any case, Paul referenced the debate in 1 Corinthians 8-10, offering instruction in three settings: eating meat offered to idols at home where one could not be observed, eating at a public temple outlet attached to the *macellum* facility, and eating when invited to a "not yet" believer's home.

Looking at the macellum, we see the correspondence between sacrifice and meat market, common cultic practice and culinary offering of daily meats. We can also observe the venues that troubled the Apostle Paul, those public dining establishments associated with the cultic offerings.

The Daily Meal

In general, it should be noted that Romans normally ate one large meal daily. They ate other smaller "snack-sized" meals as well, but the Latin designations for these changed over time and by location, and each was adjusted in "time of day" eaten over the period of the empire. Here is a safe generalization for New Testament students:

- Breakfast (*ientaculum*), if taken, was a **light meal at best**, often little more than salted bread, milk or wine, and perhaps dried fruit, eggs or cheese. It was often overlooked.

- The Roman lunch (*cibus meridianus* or *prandium*) was popular among **field or service workers** and was a quick meal eaten in late morning with salted bread, fruit, eggs, cheese, or even meat or fish.
- The dinner (***cena***), the **main meal of the midday**, would be accompanied by *well-watered* wine mix. An ordinary upper class dinner would include meat, vegetable, egg, and fruit. The *comissatio* was a final wine course (often more stout) at dinner's end that could be followed by a rest time.
- An evening snack (*vesperna*) was observed in early Rome, but as the weight and time of the *cena* meal was pushed later and later, its formality was phased out.

Bread was the staple

Most Romans thought of daily bread as the singular staple of the empire, and represented "daily provision" or "daily basic need" in common speech. Jesus prayed: "Give us this day our daily bread" as a summary of *daily needs*. It appears most ancients considered a "quart of grain" to be understood as equal to a person's *daily nutritional requirement*, with olive oil and wine as supporting elements of the common diet.

What is essential to understand is the price of bread was the essential economic indicator watched by the Senate.

With a bit of sleuthing, it is possible for an archaeologist to attempt an estimate of the ancient "market price" of daily commodities through the mentions of bread in ancient documents, such as the reference found in Mark 6:35-6:44. The setting of that text recalled a "mass feeding" miracle by Jesus. Mark recorded "five thousand men" hungered when:

> ***"But He [Jesus] answered them [the disciples], "You give them** something **to eat!" And they *said to Him, "Shall we go and spend two hundred denarii on bread and give them** something **to eat?"*** [Mark 6:37]

Dividing five thousand people divided by "two hundred *denarri"* (the remuneration standard of a laborer's daily wage) we can generally surmise **one laborer's daily wage bought as many as twenty-five loaves of bread in Christ's time**.

That's important, because the formulation may help us understand later prophecies of the New Testament.

You see, in excavated cities of the Imperial period, we find significant numbers of bakeries and granaries, with the **central standardization of measures controlled through a forum granary**. The New Testament projects such *controlled pricing* it in Revelation 6:5-7 where we see such price controls.

> ***"When He broke the third seal, I heard the third living creature saying, "Come." I looked, and behold, a black horse; and he who sat on it had a pair of scales in his hand. And I heard something like a voice in the center of the four living creatures saying, "A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius; and do not damage the oil and the wine."***

What is shocking about the prophetic portion is the inflation revealed. In that "vision of the four horsemen of the apocalypse" some seven "seal judgments" are prophesied as meted out on the earth, with a note about a **famine** is found in the decree. The text indicated both *disparity* and *irregularity* in this famine, with some foods more scarce and other foods in greater abundance. Some seem sorely affected, while others seem to hardly suffer. **This inequity suggests human involvement, not simply a naturally caused famine.**

The Greek word translated "quart" (*choenix)* is actually a standard "measure" roughly equivalent to a dry quart, and could yield 1.5 to 1.875 loaves of one-pound bread (a Roman standard loaf).

It seems clear that John predicted a **dramatic increase in the price of wheat**, with a day's wage offering the purchase power to buy merely enough wheat to make a single Roman-pound loaf of bread - instead of as many as twenty-five loaves of bread in the time of the Gospel accounts. **This would represent about a 1500% increase in price, an absurdity in John's time.**

Other interesting related studies explore the **millstone** based passages of the Gospels such as Mt. 18:6; Mk. 9:42; Lk. 17:3 (around neck); Mt. 24:41 (with two women grinding).

Roman Meals outside the Home

In our other sessions we briefly mentioned public accommodations like a *thermopolium (wine bar)*, a *poppina (a pub)*, a *taverna (work room sometimes offering victuals to workers)* or other eating establishments.

The point is that the **majority of the population did not possess the means to do their own cooking**.

Living in a wooden tenement house apartment many floors above the street with few if any furnishings the Romans had no stoves or chimneys. The house was warmed by portable **brazier** furnaces (called ***foculi***), or fire pans in which coal or charcoal was burned, with smoke billowing inside searching for an escape through doors or the roof.

For the poor the thermopolae offered some basic hot food selections, and the Popinae (snack bars) offered fillers. The one or perhaps two accessible meals daily consisted of porridge or bread with scant meat and a pulse of vegetables, when affordable.

The Latin poet Horace ate a meal of onions, porridge, and a pancake.

For the poor, tableware probably consisted of simple and coarse pottery and many daily meals were eaten sitting upright, and they were often even cheaper if eaten standing, because a *Poppina* offered limited seating (something *still* a part of Italian life!)

Roman Wine

To cover Romans food, we should cover also Roman drink. Another staple of the diet for any Roman was wine.

The term *Enoteca* is an **Italian** word, from the Greek (*oinos* for "wine", and *teca* or "receptacle"). It became the designation of a wine shop in Italy. The Greek terms remind us of the fact that **Greek wine was the most highly prized as "old world" wine**, while domestic Roman wine commanded lower prices among Romans.

Yet, there were some exceptions. Scholars refer to the C2 BCE as the dawn the "golden age" of Roman winemaking. One particular famous vintage of 121 BCE was named the ***Opimian*** vintage, (after consul Lucius Opimius) and may have become an expression of good wine.

Pliny the Elder wrote extensively about viticulture wine in his **thirty-seven volume Roman encyclopedia** *Naturalis Historia* (dedicated to the Emperor Titus) that was published after Pliny's death near Pompeii following the eruption of Mount Vesuvius.

- **Book Fourteen** dealt exclusively with wine, ranking the "first growths" of Rome.
- **Book Seventeen** included discussion of various viticultural techniques and an early formalization of the concept of terroir. Pliny concluded the vineyard has more influence on the resulting quality of wine than a particular vine type.
- **Book Twenty-three** deals with purported medicinal properties of wine.

Pliny helps us with several important insights:

- At its height, the empire was estimated to consume what would now equate to about **a bottle of wine each day for every citizen**.
- The Pompeians appeared to have a widespread reputation for their wine-drinking capacity. The worship of Bacchus (the god of wine) left depictions of the god on frescoes and archaeological fragments throughout the region. Amphoras stamped with the emblems of Pompeian merchants have been found across the modern-day remnants of the Roman empire, from Bordeaux to Spain.
- The term "wine" spanned a *broad spectrum* of grape-based beverages, the quality of which depended on the *amount of pure grape juice* used and *how diluted* the wine was when served. An estate typically pressed skins one to three times. Each pressing offered a wine that was considered of lesser quality than the one before.

Unfiltered pressed grape must (juice with pulp and skins) was stored in large earthenware jars known as ***dolia***, often partially buried into the floors of a barn or warehouse from two weeks to a month before the wine was removed and put in ***amphoras*** for storage.

Small holes drilled into the top allowed the carbon dioxide gas to escape.

- White wine might age on its sediment, while chalk or marble dust was sometimes added to reduce acidity.
- Some wines were "baked," a process similar to that used to make modern Madeira.
- To enhance sweetness, a portion of the wine must was boiled to concentrate the sugars in the process known as defrutum and then added to the rest of the fermenting batch.
- Lead was also sometimes used as a sweetening agent, but honey could also be added, as much as six pounds to sweeten three gallons of wine to Roman tastes.

Now, the Koine New Testament used the Greek term “oinos” (as a provincial writing, lumping all types together) while the Vulgate followed suit using the “catch all” term “vinum.”

The Gospels do make note of the varied qualities:

> ***“…and said to him, "Every man serves the good wine first, and when [the people] have drunk freely, [then he serves] the poorer [wine]; [but] you have kept the good wine until now."*** [John 2:10]

> "***And the people stood by, looking on. And even the rulers were sneering at Him, saying, 'He saved others; let Him save Himself if this is the Christ of God, His Chosen One.' The soldiers also mocked Him, coming up to Him,*** **offering Him sour wine*…” [óksos – low-grade, sour wine, given as a cheap painkiller to people condemned to crucifixion.]*** [Luke 23:35-36]

Technically, first press wines produced two products: “new wine” which was highly flavorful but low in alcohol (like Hebrew “tirosh”) and the best of the ***oinos***.

Second pressings offered ***posca***, a mixture of water and a more sour wine that had not yet turned into vinegar. Less acidic than vinegar, it retained some of the aromas and texture of wine and was the preferred wine for the rations of Roman soldiers due to its low alcohol levels. *Posca's use as soldiers' rations was codified in the Corpus Juris Civilis and amounted to around a liter per day.*

A third pressing offered yet a lower quality called ***lora***, made by soaking the pomace of grape skins already pressed twice in water for a day, and pressing a third time. Cato and Varro recommended lora for **slaves**.

Both posca and lora were the commonly available wine for the general Roman populace and probably would have been (for the most part) red wines, since **white wine grapes were normally reserved for the upper class**.

Wine clearly was a common beverage, though not singular in quality or properties. The Gospels reveal Jesus clearly didn't refuse the drink throughout His life (cp. Matthew 11:19), though He did on the Cross (see Luke 23:36). The Apostles instructed care in its use (Romans 14:21; Titus 2:3; Ephesians 5:18) but acknowledged medicinal value as well (1 Timothy 5:23).

Wine as Medicine

There are substantial references to indicate that Romans believed wine was a *symptomatic cure* for mental disorders like depression, memory loss, intense grief, bloating, constipation, diarrhea, gout, halitosis, snakebites, tapeworms, urinary problems and vertigo.

In the end, there are two important concepts we must recall in understanding the Roman world for New Testament studies:

- First, meat markets and cultic observance were intimately linked in the Roman marketplace.
- Second, bread and wine were Roman staples and economic measures carefully watched by both the Aventine guilds and Roman Senate.

Additional Implications: