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Moderation, refined luxury, or extravagance? Fattened animals and ancient Roman norms and values

Kim Beerden

History Institute, Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

Discussions concerning ancient Roman conspicuous consumption are normally related to extravagant preparation of dishes or consumption of exotic foodstuffs. This paper argues that serving and eating fattened animals was a more suitable mode of conspicuous consumption for the Roman elite of the early Principate than has been previously argued. The sources suggest that consumption of fattened animals could be a way to achieve a sought-after balance between norms and values relating to moderation, refined luxury, and extravagance. Why? Fattening expressed notions of control of nature and was connected with consumption of local foods. As such, consumption of fattened animals articulated aspects of the sense of cultural identity that is referred to as *Romanitas*. Appreciation of these features contributes to our understanding of popularity of consuming fattened animals among the Roman elite.

KEYWORDS

Antiquity; ancient; Rome; Romanness; fattening; foodways; conspicuous consumption; *Romanitas*

I. Introduction

The study of food and foodways in the ancient Graeco-Roman world has greatly evolved over the last decade or two. "Conspicuous consumption" is one of several important concepts from the social sciences and anthropology that have been introduced to the study of ancient food. More can be said about conspicuous consumption in antiquity than has been done so far: the aim of this paper is to pursue a further analysis of conspicuous consumption in the context of Roman fattening of animals during the period of the early Principate. In previous literature on conspicuous consumption the discussion often revolves around the extravagant preparation of food and exotic foodstuffs. Here, however, I take a different approach: this paper argues that serving and eating fattened, and thus artificially enlarged, animals was a relatively more attractive way of conspicuous consumption for the Roman elite on the Italian peninsula than has been previously understood. The reason for this is that such consumption could express elite norms and values. Although sources from a range of periods are addressed, the focus will remain on the period of the early Principate (late first century BC–early first century AD); the earlier sources will be taken to represent traditional norms that the hosts and guests of the Principate would also have internalized. Later sources are used as a reflection on practices of the early Principate. The nature of

CONTACT Kim Beerden k.beerden@hum.leidenuniv.nl

the sources is that of literary texts, which—in their own different ways—express norms and values and are therefore very useful to this research.

My argument is that fattening allowed the elite to consume conspicuously in a relatively acceptable way, keeping the balance between too much extravagance on the one hand and excessive frugality on the other. This was possible because of ideas about *Romanitas*, or "Romanness": "Roman men and ancient Roman custom, the *mos maiorum* ('morals' or 'customs' [of the ancestors]), are presented as together forming the foundations of the *res Romana* ('the Roman state, or perhaps 'Romanness')" (Edwards 1993, 20). This had always been important, but was emphasized even more when Augustus introduced his program of moral renewal, which was—among others—concerned with following the ancient *mores*.

Although the Romans themselves did not use the term *Romanitas* in the time period under investigation here, the term is used by modern historians as an umbrella under which is gathered a constellation of ideas about Roman identity, and ideals related to identity, which we do find in the sources. For example, Athenaeus, Greek author of the third century AD *Deipnosophistae* and vivid observer of Roman life and history, presents the early Roman ancestors as frugal living, hardworking, wise men who did not keep too many slaves. Most importantly, they adhered to ancestral laws and customs (6.273a–d). Then Athenaeus refers to the author Poseidonius and his ideas about the ideal Roman, which revolve around endurance, frugality, piety, plain and simple material possessions, honesty, and agricultural pursuits (6.274a). These are familiar themes in Roman thinking about the past and highly visible in the sources—we only need to think about the famous statesman Cincinnatus who was referred to as the ideal Roman man. This farmer in the Early Republic became Dictator, saved Rome and then went back to his farm (Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 3.26–29). We will see that fattening and *Romanitas*—especially aspects of control over nature and consumption of local foods—can be seen as interrelated.

II. Conspicuous consumption in the ancient world

The concept "conspicuous consumption" is a modern one, introduced into academic discourse by Veblen in his *The Theory of the Leisure Class* ([1899] 1994). According to Veblen, work does not provide prestige to members of the socioeconomic elite (as it does to those of a lower social status). Instead, the rich and powerful show their status by exhibiting their wealth to others. The first way to show wealth is to do nothing, to enjoy leisure: therefore, Veblen calls this elite-group "the leisure class." The second way is to demonstrate wealth by maintaining an extravagant lifestyle—by consuming conspicuously (23–24, 47).[1] A variety of kinds of performative consumption can be used to create or consolidate status.

This leads us to the use of "conspicuous consumption" in the context of antiquity. In the period under discussion in this paper we see the existence of a small political and socioeconomic Roman elite that was very rich indeed.[2] It is clear that status concerns were rife: status needed to be gained and shown to others (and by showing status, more status was gained). Families belonging to the *nobilitas*—a category including the old aristocratic families as well as the richest plebeians—were continuously in competition with one another. They vied for the best political appointments, the best marriages for their daughters and—as this was a military society—for military glory. In order to maintain rank in such a highly competitive society, the elite families needed to show their wealth to

peers and *clientes*[3] in ways that followed Roman customs (Laurence [2009] 2010, 88). This became even more important when Augustus emphasized that the mores of the ancestors should be followed and Roman customs re-invigorated. When Roman customs were adhered to, this ensured that Roman identity was expressed.

While some modern literature about ancient Rome also uses terms like "status" and "luxury" (*luxuria, luxus, luxuries*)[4] and leisure (*otium*) to understand the lifestyle of the rich, the use of the term conspicuous consumption works very well. As in nineteenth-century American society, which prompted Veblen to introduce the term, Roman society is one where the rich elite would have the luxury of leisure (*otium*) which they would—at least theoretically—use to fulfill positions in the political system (this was not seen as "work") and to pursue other worthwhile activities. A lifestyle befitting one's station, which involved spending money on oneself and one's clients, was part of this, too. The elite felt that having *otium*, using it to the benefit of the state, and maintaining a particular lifestyle showed your high status in the hierarchy and defined you as a part of the elite (Toner 1995, 22–33).

Conspicuous consumption can, then, conveniently be used in its widest sense to describe the lifestyle of the richest Romans and encompasses many ways of consuming conspicuously, which were appropriate at various times and for various purposes:

> … conspicuous consumption was an accepted, and even required, form of behavior in Roman society…. To highlight just a few Roman ways of conspicuous consumption: … acquiring a nice villa on the bay of Naples; owning many slaves; owning pieces of art; wearing expensive clothes and perfumes; giving food away as part of the *alimenta* [food program]. (Beerden 2010, 1)

It is also important to note that there was more than one purpose to conspicuous consumption in the Roman world: first to show wealth, second to provide favors to others (Dauster 2003) and third, in my opinion, to express Roman identity (*Romanitas*). All ensure that more status as an elite Roman citizen was gained.

The house (and everything that happened in it) took a central position in conspicuous consumption: it was an expression of one's taste and wealth and thus the focal point of the elite families and their reputations (Eck 1997, 162–190; d'Arms 1970). This is where both private and public lives were lived—the *pater familias*, as leader of the family, received his clients in his "power house" (Wallace-Hadrill 1988, 43–97). Although this function became less pronounced with the arrival of the Principate (Isager 1993, 270–271), the house is still the focus of many ways of conspicuous consumption, including the one that is of most interest here: through food and foodways. Conspicuous consumption, argues Veblen, is at the basis of the development of an important aspect of food and foodways: the feast, which was (and is) a particularly fine way to show wealth to friends, acquaintances, and *clientes*, as well as an opportunity to favor particular persons (Veblen [1899] 1994, 47; cf. Dietler 1996).

III. *Romanitas* in food and foodways

My assumption is that following Roman customs (and thus expressing *Romanitas*) was deemed very important—also when consuming conspicuously. This context led to the fact that conspicuous consumption was restricted on two levels: morally and legally.

This is valid for all aspects of conspicuous consumption, but this paper will focus on food and foodways from here on. First the moral aspect: the fictional dinner of the freedman and social climber Trimalchio, as ironically written down by Petronius (first century AD), is probably the most famous example of lavish extravagance at dinnertime:

> A donkey in Corinthian bronze stood on the side-board, with panniers holding olives, white in one side, black in the other. Two dishes hid the donkey; Trimalchio's name and their weight in silver was engraved on their edges. There were also dormice rolled in honey and poppy-seed, and supported on little bridges soldered to the plate. Then there were hot sausages laid on a silver grill, and under the grill damsons and seeds of pomegranate.[5] (*Sat.* 31.9–11; translation M. Heseltine and W.H.D. Rouse, Loeb Classical Library)

This is just one example of an episode in this fictional dinner that actually ridicules Trimalchio's taste and upbringing: he is uneducated. He is depicted as one of the *nouveaux riches* with too much money and too little taste, resulting in such decadence and extravagance as shown above.[6] Extravagant presentation of food was not in good taste. Decadence and extravagance do not go well with ideas of the ideal Roman of the past, who farmed his own land, was self-sufficient and was moderate in his consumption.

On the other hand, someone like the senator Cato the Elder (third/second century BC) was admired—by the Greek Plutarch, at the start of the second century AD—for his moderation, but also considered a sour conservative for being too austere:[7]

> He tells us that he never wore clothing worth more than a hundred drachmas; that he drank, even when he was praetor or consul, the same wine as his slaves; that as for fish and meats, he would buy thirty asses' worth for his dinner from the public stalls, and even this for the city's sake, that he might not live on bread alone, but strengthen his body for military service. . ..[8] (Plut. *Vit. Cat. Mai.* 4.3-4; translation B. Perrin, Loeb Classical Library)

> . . . the excessive rigidity and austerity of his own mode of life.[9] (Plut. *Vit. Cat. Mai.* 20.6; translation B. Perrin, Loeb Classical Library)

Both Cato and Trimalchio, although living in different eras, are depicted as lacking the knowledge of *comme il faut* in terms of this aspect of *Romanitas*. The ideal is to express the traditional Roman *mores* of simplicity in a refined way. Both Trimalchio and Cato exaggerate: Trimalchio does too much and Cato too little. This *faux pas* matters: food was crucial in establishing one's social standing. A balance should be found between extravagance on the one hand and being a "traditional moderate Roman," although, admittedly, this balance aiming for refined luxury was not easily achieved (Edwards 1993, 202–204; Zanda 2011, 8–12).

There seem to have been clear social mores as far as this balance was concerned: for example, at public displays, more luxury was allowed than where private living was concerned (although it is hard to separate the two) (Zanda 2011, 10–11). In any case, ridicule was never far away for those who were thought to have tipped the balance to either of the two extremes. As the satirical author Horace (first century BC) comments in *Sat*. 2.2.65–66: "He [a wise man] will be neat, so far as not to shock us by meanness, and in his mode of living will be unhappy in neither direction" (translation H.R. Fairclough, Loeb Classical Library).[10] As Horace should always be seen as a critical commentator on Roman habits (such as *luxuria*, ambition, and greed) we may take these remarks very seriously in the context of this argument (cf. Rudd [1966] 1994, 167).

Apart from these moral restrictions, in the Late Republic the state aimed to interfere in the "rat-race" of extravagant conspicuous consumption by means of sumptuary laws. One aim was, it has been argued, to stop the rich from having to keep out-doing one another at public dinners (among others) to keep their place in the hierarchy, wasting their fortunes and suffering from moral decline.[11] It has been convincingly argued that this was, however, not the only reason. Perhaps more importantly, Roman territories grew and much wealth was brought into Rome during the Late Republic. This allowed for extreme extravagance on the part of some families, ensuring that their share of *clientes* grew—as these families were known to provide their *clientes* with more, or better, favors.[12] Both upward mobility of social outsiders and competition among those already belonging to the elite were threatening to the established political and social order (Dauster 2003, 69; de Ligt 2002, 9–22; Zanda 2011, 54–57; cf. Kolb 1977, 239–259). In order to maintain this order, then, sumptuary laws aiming to restrict excessive extravagance were introduced. The sumptuary laws related to food and foodways restricted the number of guests that could be invited (*lex Orchia*, 182 BC), the kinds of food that were to be served (*lex Fannia*, 161 BC), and the import of foodstuffs (*lex Licinia*, around 140 BC) and delicacies (*lex Aemilia*, c. 115 BC) that could be served at a dinner party (Slob 1986, 90–94; de Ligt 2002, 9–22; Sancisi-Weerdenburg 2000, 142–163; Dauster 2003, 65–93):

> . . . dormice, which sumptuary legislation and Marcus Scaurus the Head of the State during his consulship ruled out from banquets just as they did shell-fish or birds imported from other parts of the world.[13] (Plin. *HN* 8.82.223-4; translation H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library)

There are more sumptuary laws related to food and foodways (Zanda 2011, 113–128), but these are the most important for our purposes here. Although it appears that these laws were not enforced (or perhaps they only applied to non-festival days as suggested by Gowers [1993, 69, 73]) they are very important sources for what was considered extravagant and threatening in the eye of the lawmaker of the Late Republic—and these ideas resonated during the Early Principate. The sumptuary laws reveal underlying norms and values related to moderation and refined simplicity.

IV. Categories of conspicuous consumption

The above leads to the following questions: how could a Roman living in the period of the Principate be seen to consume conspicuously in terms of food and foodways, while keeping the fine balance between frugality and extravagance? How could he be deemed to achieve refined simplicity by others, showing his wealth in an acceptable way that corresponds with ongoing ideals about *Romanitas*?

For the purpose of this paper it is useful to distinguish six categories by means of which one could practice conspicuous consumption through food. These categories do not exclude one another and can be combined. First, through the number of guests invited. The more one could provide for one's many guests, the more an individual would show off his personal wealth. Second, through the whole entourage of the dinner party: the way the room was decorated, the clothes the slaves wore, and the entertainment provided fall into this category. Tableware could be magnificent, as, among many

examples, the silver vessels found at Boscoreale—near Pompeii—show (Baratte 1997). Third, food could be prepared and served in particularly ingenious ways (e.g., Macrob. 3.13.13). This had to do with the skills of the cook and the methods he used for preparation. The fourth-century "cookbook" by Apicius provides many examples of ways to prepare particular dishes.[14] Fourth, a great quantity of food could be served. Fifth, through import and preparation of exotic foodstuffs: by serving a dish such as flamingo tongues (Suet. *Vit*. 13.2). Spices are a prime example of an important imported product; and fish coming from further away seems to have been valued higher (Hor. *Sat*. 2.2.31–33). Sixth, through the ways the animals that were to be served were raised—and this last category will be the main topic of discussion in the remainder of this paper.

Taking into account that norms and values regarding the balance between modesty and extravagance should be respected, all six ways of consuming conspicuously through food and foodways have been problematized in the literary sources. Each of the six ways was commented upon, either through sumptuary laws or by means of unwritten social laws (about which we know because they were expressed by ancient authors). Morals concerned with ideas of *Romanitas* as well as legislation show different issues for each of the six categories—how to consume conspicuously in these ways, without overdoing it? The first five ways of consuming conspicuously have obvious limits, either by law or by custom, because they are so visible. These limits will briefly be discussed in what follows, after which the exceptionality of the sixth way of conspicuous consumption—serving fattened animals—will be analyzed.

The numbers of guests were theoretically restricted by the *lex Orchia*, as briefly mentioned earlier. Decadence was easily succumbed to in matters of entourage. With regards to the nature of the foodstuffs that were served, again, balance was key. Serving fig-peckers enclosed in a hen-egg, as Trimalchio did, is an example of extravagance—and one of the choices for which he is mocked by the author (Petron. *Sat*. 33; 35). Horace makes fun of "foodies" who want to serve all kinds of delicacies coming from a particular area and prepared in particular ways (Hor. *Sat*. 2.4.11–87; 2.8.6–74. Cf. Rudd [1966] 1994, 212). While Romans found the provenance of their food extremely important (Dalby 2000), at the same time—and probably because of it—food was clearly deemed eligible for satirical purposes. However, not only the quality but also the quantities of food on which people would gorge can also be seen to be commented upon and satirized (Hor. *Sat*. 2.8.6–74; Gowers 1993, 18–19). Where quality and quantity of foodstuffs were concerned, these should not be too extravagant in order to keep a proper balance.

Although staples such as grain were regularly imported to deal with shortages, or simply to feed the large population of the city of Rome, import was not always well-thought-of. Import of exotic animals was not only seen in a positive light (although necessary because they were used during the games in the amphitheater or to be kept as pets): "the Roman moralists had no hesitation in blaming upon the corruptive influence of their conquests of the East, which had destroyed traditional austerity and simplicity of custom" (Dunbabin 2003, 24; Isager 1993, 258–261). Luxury was depicted as being imported from the East—and in this sense conflicting with *Romanitas* (e.g., Ath. 12.540b; Livy 9.6.9). Even when these notions of eastern luxuries had a rhetorical function—to serve programs of moral restoration (and

possibly diminished through the ages [Isager 1993, 273])—to eat imported foodstuffs was in conflict with the Roman ideal of the gentleman-farmer. Already in 161 BC the import of exotic wines was regulated and the *lex Aemilia* was supposed to regulate serving exotic birds.[15]

The sixth way of consuming conspicuously is by means of serving fattened animals: this way is much more subtle, although it should be noted that it was not undisputed. For example, the *lex Fannia* was introduced in the Republic to forbid the serving of poultry, with the exception of non-fattened chicken; and the *lex Aemilia* forbade serving (fattened) dormice. Fattened animals were restricted by legal means in the Late Republic (but only in theory), showing the background to attitudes toward this kind of behavior. I will argue in the remainder of this paper that the consumption of fattened animals during the Principate, and the fattening itself, expressed *Romanitas*, moderation and wealth at the same time. The last category had, then, some advantages over other modes of food-related conspicuous consumption where moral aspects were concerned. This contributes to an explanation of the popularity of serving fattened animals among the Roman elite.

V. Fattening[16]

I here use "fattening" in a broad sense of the term: to encage (or otherwise restrict movement of) animals and to provide them with plenty of food. In raising the animals, they should become as big and fat as possible. Three categories of animals that were fattened in the Roman world are investigated here:[17] poultry, fish and "other animals." In the first category, we find such animals as quail, peacocks, and thrushes; geese were force-fed in order to enlarge their livers.[18] The second category is fish. Fish were, especially in the Late Republic but also afterwards, raised in fishponds, most prominently mullet, eel, and *scarus* (perhaps to be identified as parrot fish) (Higginbotham 1997, 41–53). The third category, "other animals," contains animals such as dormice and hares.[19] It can be noted that all three categories consist of smaller animals that could, before they were raised and fattened, normally be found in the wild in Roman Italy. To illustrate how fattening worked in practice, in the next few paragraphs I will provide an example from each of the three categories.

"Although the flesh of the thrush was, according to Galen, rather hard (Gal. *Alim. Fac*. 6.669 K), the thrush was generally considered a true delicacy: they were fattened for sale and good profits were made on raising them, because they were much sought after" (Beerden 2010; cf. Varro *RR* 3.2.15–16). Thrushes were kept in a birdhouse and fed with millet, which could be supplemented with dried figs mixed with flour (Flach 2004, 137–168). The birds also ate myrtle and mastic seeds, wild olive, ivy berries, and fruits. Their food needed to be appetizing and there should be plenty of it in their cages: if they ate more, they became fatter, an obvious truth as asserted by the first-century agricultural author Columella (*Rust*. 10.4). Thrushes could be prepared by roasting them, sometimes accompanied by milk-cakes, with peas and white sauce, boiled with other meats, or even in the way Apicius recommends in a fourth-century recipe:

> Crush pepper, laser [a condiment], laurel berry, mix in cumin, *garum* and stuff the thrush [with this preparation] through the throat, tying them with a string. Thereupon make this preparation in which they are cooked: consisting of oil, salt, water, dill and heads of leeks.[20] ((Excerpta) XXIX [Vehling 497]; Translation Vehling [1936] 1977)

This recipe has the fattened animal not only stuffed *with* feed in its production stage, but also stuffed *as* feed in the preparation stage. It could be argued that while this last aspect was easily seen as too extravagant (as commented on in, for example, Macrobius, *Sat*. 3.13.13 and Petr., *Sat*. 40), the first stuffing with feed was not: it was considered reasonably refined, as will be discussed further below.

Roman artificial fishponds were used to raise and fatten fish. Pliny claims Roman commercial fishponds were invented in the first century BC, but they probably existed earlier than this—perhaps on a private basis. The Greeks and Etruscans certainly raised fish in ponds a few centuries before and will have influenced the development of Roman pisciculture (Andrews 1948, 186–188; Corcoran 1959, 37; Higginbotham 1997, 3–5). Those involved in the commercial business in the Late Republic must have done very well: the demand for fish was high (Higginbotham 1997). At the same time, elite owners of smaller private fishponds were ridiculed: this may have had to do with disdain for those involved in the fishing business or with the idea that the wealthy owners kept their fish as pets (Corcoran 1959, 37, 43).

To give an example of a particular fish: red mullet (or surmullet) were raised and fattened in commercial, and perhaps also in private ponds (Plin. *HN* 9.30.64–66). This makes sense because heavy red mullet would fetch extraordinary prices. However, the mullet could apparently not adapt to the circumstances very well: "For we cannot, if we should wish to do so, feed in a fish-pond a multitude of red mullet, such as we have very often seen in the sea, since it is a very delicate kind of fish and most intolerant of captivity, and so only one or two out of many thousands can on rare occasions endure confinement…" (Columella *Rust*. 8.17.7; Translation E.S. Forster and E.H. Heffner, Loeb Classical Library).[21] Nevertheless, attempts to fatten mullet and the Roman preference for large mullet—if indeed possible—are what matters here. Mullet were very popular and they were sold for large amounts of money—and were thus considered luxury items (Higginbotham 1997, 49–50).

Dormice were a common animal and were regularly eaten in their unfattened form. They were, however, also kept and fattened for the well-to-do. Varro notes that dormice were held in outdoor pens, where plenty of acorns, chestnuts, and hazelnuts were available (Rodolfi 1994, 215–220). When it was time for them to be fattened even more, they would be transferred into special large terracotta containers (*dolia*).

Only nine dormouse jars have been positively identified as such. Uncertainty about their provenance:

> leads to at least two hypotheses about their use in the fattening process. First, it could be argued, in accordance with Varro, that a farmer who kept large quantities of dormice in pens transferred them into jars for the final fattening process. A second way of interpreting the archaeological evidence is that in those cases where just a few dormice were needed (for small-scale consumption) a jar in one's own backyard would do. (Beerden 2012, 232-233)

The special *dolium* was closed with a lid. Inside the *dolium*, food was deposited in a small "food tray," while small holes ensured the dormice could breathe. The dormice were left in the dark jar with plenty of food available to them. The animals would be left to fatten for a while. Then they would be taken out of the *dolium* and be taken to the house (or to the house of a buyer) where they would be prepared for consumption. When serving the animals, Petronius (as cited above) describes how the dormouse is

sprinkled with honey and poppy seeds, while Apicius suggests roasted, boiled, and stuffed dormice. Here, too, an animal already stuffed *with* feed is stuffed again *as* feed, and then transferred into the cooking pot:

> [A dormouse] is stuffed with a forcemeat of pork and small pieces of dormouse meat trimmings, all pounded with pepper, nuts, laser, broth. Put the dormouse thus stuffed in an earthen casserole, roast it in the oven, or boil it in the stock pot.[22] (8.9 [Vehling 396]; translation Vehling [1936] 1977)

VI. Why fattening?

Emily Gowers has discussed the meanings of eating fattened animals in her book *The Loaded Table: Representations of Food in Roman Literature*. Gowers argues that analogies were drawn between stuffed eaters and fattened animals. Macrobius, for example, asserts that cramming is not healthy for animals in the context of a discussion on human health (7.4.4–5). Plautus, too, is seen to make jokes on this topic: "is this stuffing the contents of a human stomach, or is it culinary stuffing that is then consumed?". "Gluttony and the crammed food most suitable for a glutton" are continuously associated: "Foodstuff and body are often confused in satire" (Gowers 1993, 73–76, citations at 74; 75; 121). Gowers makes the case that fattening animals, and then eating them, is depicted in the literature as the epitome of human gluttony.

This paper adds, and provides contrast, to Gowers' findings by showing that fattening is also a method of conspicuous consumption that also relates to a number of positive Roman ideals. I argue that fattening and eating fattened animals may—in addition to negative ideas about excessive luxury, gluttony, and a lack of moderation—have been a relatively acceptable way of conspicuous consumption. *Romanitas* is of importance here: eating fattened animals tied in with Roman ideals about control over nature and the simple life of the farmer. These are aspects of *Romanitas*. Attitudes toward fattening would, then, be more of a mixed bag than it may seem.

Controlling nature

Artificial and natural ways of producing food are juxtaposed to one another—this is as true for ancient societies as it is for ours. Consumption of artificially produced food (and I included fattened animals here) touches upon a great number of prevalent societal norms. The idea of controlling nature was firmly ingrained in Roman ideology—building bridges over rivers and "conquering" them is a familiar theme.[23] Pliny praises the Roman building of aqueducts with their arches, and the wonders of tunneling of mountains, and crossing valleys for the purpose of getting the water to Rome (*HN* 36.24.121–126).

Production phase

Serving a remarkable dish because it was "exotic" functions on the level of distribution of the animal; serving a dish in an extravagant way works on the level of manner of consumption of the animal. In contrast, fattening works on a different level: it revolves around an animal that was manipulated in its production stage (Goody 1982, 35–36).

In the case of fattened animals, a Roman could show his guests that he had conquered nature by taking "ordinary" foods, such as a thrush or a fish, and "shaping" them to his liking by having them fattened. While control of nature can also be seen in the preparation phase (think of the fat goose, fish, and birds made from pork at Trimalchio's dinner) (Petron. *Sat.* 69–70), true manipulation of nature could only take place at the production stage.

Taming wild animals

Additionally, animals such as dormice, fish, and thrushes are all field animals or perhaps even wild animals by nature.[24] Instead of hunting them, they were raised on farms—turning them into farm animals. This is another way of controlling nature.

Size: bigger is better

"Bigger is better" seems to have been apt: when an animal was bigger than expected, this would add to the enjoyment of eating it. "Why should I not tickle the palates of certain epicures by mentioning its weight?" (Ep. 95.42; translation R. Gummere, Loeb Classical Library) Seneca asks when discussing the size of a mullet.[25] Juvenal depicts someone who has just spent an extravagant amount for a big mullet (although this may well be exaggeration). Throughout the same satire IV, Juvenal ridicules the treatment of a big fish that was caught and given away to the emperor (4.16–17). Horace mentions, with his usual flourish, that to serve a huge mullet is exciting because it is naturally small and light (cf. Wilkins 1993, 202). A pike that is big by nature is not exciting (Hor. Sat. 2.2.34–39). Ammianus Marcellinus judges those who use scales at dinners to show how fat and large the (fattened?) animals were that were served there (28.4.13). The idea that bigger is better where food is concerned can be seen elsewhere: Macrobius speaks of eggs, small livers, and onion coils that looked much bigger than they actually were while on display: the shopkeeper kept them in water (7.14.1). Pliny speaks of large asparagus and kale that were in demand among the elite (*HN* 19.19.53–55). To give such importance to size (and not to quality or taste of a fish) seems to be particular to Roman thinking—in contrast to Greek (194–195, 200).

The animals used for fattening in the sources, are (at least in their pre-fattened state) relatively small. We know that small animals are notoriously more difficult to fatten: Kleiber's law shows that smaller animals, with higher heartbeats and so on, need to eat relatively more food in order to fatten up (Kleiber 1961). A dormouse would need to eat a lot before it became fat (Rodolfi 1994, 215–220)—but the amount of meat to be gained from that dormouse would still remain small. A pig eats more in an absolute sense, but the amount of meat is larger in both an absolute and a relative sense. Although the Romans did not know Kleiber's law, they were certainly advanced in their thinking about agriculture and they will have known that a smaller animal needed more food to be fattened than animals bigger by nature: when serving naturally small, but fattened animals, it was shown that much money had been spend on production of the animal. Again, it can be safely assumed that Roman ideas concerned with control over nature are a factor that should be taken into account.

Exoticism vs. the ideal of the Roman farmer

As already referred to above, the Roman ancestors were seen as farmers. The simple farming life is one of the key ideals of *Romanitas* (Thibodeau 2011, 50–54). What is more, wealth and

status came from owning land and not from trade. This ideal is most succinctly expressed by Cato, who discusses how the ancestors saw different professions in his "handbook" on farming:

> And when they would praise a worthy man their praise took this form: "good husbandman", "good farmer"; one so praised was thought to have received the greatest commendation … it is from the farming class that the bravest men and the sturdiest soldiers come, their calling is most highly respected…. (*Agr*. 1.1.2-4; translation W.D. Hooper and H.P. Ash, Loeb Classical Library)[26]

Cato imagines farming as producing better citizens: "agriculture … is deemed superior to both [trade and money-lending] in piety, probity, and stability" (Bodel 2012, 51). Varro, likewise, explains how the Roman ancestors thought highly of those who lived in the country and farmed (Varro *Rust*. 2.introd.1; 3.1.1–4). Cicero has taken some of his dialogs to villa-settings and "fix[ed] both the character and the location of honorable *otium*" (Bodel 2012, 53).[27]

One way to express the ideal of the Roman farmer is to eat produce from one's own lands or at least not from too far away: "no fields are harvested for me beyond the Getae or Parthians" (Sen. *Thyestes* 461–462; translation F.J. Miller, Loeb Classical Library)[28]; "Eloquent Juvenal, I send you, see, Saturnalian nuts from my little bit of land" (Martial *Epigr*. 7.91.1–2; translation D.R. Shackleton Bailey, Loeb Classical Library).[29]

This ideal resulted in an ambivalent practice. On the one hand, rich Romans never left off their search for new, exotic ingredients. It is a well-known *topos* that eating exotic animals from all over the empire showed Rome's domination over the known world (Wilkins 1993, 201). On the other, there were plenty of moralists to criticize these habits: "Luxury is not a product of Roman society but imported or brought into Rome from the outside"—from the East (Zanda 2011, 9). Importing animals from far away could, then, also be seen as the antithesis of ideals of *Romanitas*. Import of exotic animals made eating local animals more desirable to some, who were in favor of Roman ideals concerting tradition, religion, and the home-grown (Wilkins 1993, 200. Plin. *HN* 19.19.52–53).

E. Zanda, in this context, asks the following question:

> I wonder if local products from one's own estate would have been perceived as exotic and luxurious enough and therefore worth offering by a member of the social elite to his guests. If we accept the centrality of the banquets and their social and political significance within Roman society, we cannot believe that the very top families would not have been active players in the competitive game by offering the most exotic products and expensive meals. (2011, 57)

This is where fattening of essentially local animals comes in. Animals such as dormice, snails, and some species of fish and poultry were (or were seen as) native to Roman Italy—which made them "Roman." They could be fattened locally, preferably on one's own farm (Wilkins 2005, 32, 41).[30] Athenaeus gives three examples of Romans who managed to eat well but to do this in a modest way: Tubero and Rutilus bought game-birds and fish from their own peasants and slaves, and Mucius from his clients (6.274de). In one of his poems, Martial speaks of a villa where all the luxuries of the town can be found, among others dormice, which are brought there by a farmer (*Epigr*. 3.58.36). It should be noted that these examples are animals which were also fattened on

a regular basis. Eating these fattened animals could tie in with ideas of local food. Still, the fattened animals served to consume conspicuously: the fattening still expressed status and wealth due to its cost.

VII. To conclude

The combination of reasons above supports the idea that serving fattened animals allowed Romans to aim for refined luxury though conspicuous consumption. The animals used for fattening were domesticated, manipulated, and controlled at the production stage, showing control of nature in a number of ways. The animals were local and this tied in with ideals about the self-sufficient Roman farmer. Although I cannot prove it, future research may also attempt to connect the consumption of fattened animals to *virtus* ("manliness"), another aspect of *Romanitas*. The consumption of these animals, which lacked self-restraint where the intake of food was concerned, could perhaps provide a positive contrast to one's own self-restraint.[31]

Fattening was, as such, a way of conspicuous consumption through food that could express wealth, status, good taste, and *Romanitas* all at the same time. While the pitfalls of excess and extravagance inherent in conspicuous consumption remained ever present, and legal measures were certainly taken, serving and eating fattened animals may well have been seen as a morally defendable choice.

Notes

1. Cf. the introduction by C. Wright Mills to Veblen (1974, 16–17). Criticism concerning the concept by Hayden (2001, 31–32).
2. For a more detailed investigation of the life of the elite see, among much literature, Wallace-Hadrill (1990, 145–192).
3. Important families would have a group of clients (*clientes*). The family, or an individual belonging to the family, had done them a favor. They had, for example, received a house or a position. It return, clients would have an obligation of loyalty to the family. They would be counted on to support the family when one of its members stood for election, for example.
4. Consider Wallace-Hadrill (1990, 145–192) but also Gowers (1993, 17).
5. Ceterum in promulsidari asellus erat Corinthius cum bisaccio positus, qui habebat olivas in altera parte albas, in altera nigras. Tegebant asellum duae lances, in quarum marginibus nomen Trimalchionis inscriptum erat et argenti pondus. Ponticuli etiam ferruminati sustinebat glires melle ac papavere sparsos. Fuerunt et tomacula super craticulam argenteam ferventia posita, et infra craticulam Syriaca pruna cum granis Punici mali.
6. For a summary of various stances on interpretations of the *Cena Trimalchionis* as satirical and Trimalchio as a "social upstart" see Bodel (1999, 32–37).
7. For Cato's views on extravagance see Livy 34.1–4; and the idea that he was too austere in Plut. *Vit. Cat. Mai.* 19.1; Sen. *Ep.* 87.9.
8. Ἐσθῆτα μὲν γὰρ οὐδέποτέ φησι φορέσαι πολυτελεστέραν ἑκατὸν δραχμῶν, πιεῖν δὲ καὶ στρατηγῶν καὶ ὑπατεύων τὸν αὐτὸν οἶνον τοῖς ἐργάταις, ὄψον δὲ παρασκευάζεσθαι πρὸς τὸ δεῖπνον ἐξ ἀγορᾶς ἀσσαρίων τριάκοντα, καὶ τοῦτο διὰ τὴν πόλιν, ὅπως ἰσχύοι τὸ σῶμα πρὸς τὰς στρατείας.
9. ἄγαν καὶ κεκολασμένον τῆς διαίτης.
10. mundus erit, qua non offendat sordibus, atque in neutram partem cultus miser. See also the extremes as depicted in *Sat.* 2.3.167–181; 224–246; 2.4.11–87; and 2.9 where the guests cannot take the speeches about origins and quality of the food anymore and leave their dinner. Cf. Juv. 11; 14.127–137; or for an example for a "good emperor" depicted as keeping the balance:

Suet. *Aug.* 74–77 (but compare 70; and "bad emperors," e.g., *Vit.* 13.); and arguing—for various reasons—in favor of simplicity: Hor. *Sat.* 2.2.70–136; Tac. *Ann.* 3.55.

11. As satirized in Juv. 11.1–55—here poor men also serve extravagant dinners. For more primary sources cf. Zanda (2011, 19). For this argument, among others, Gabba (1988, 38–41) as summarized in De Ligt (2002, 17–18).
12. See, however, Juv. 5.24–173 for a man whose patron provides him with inferior food and drink—perhaps to emphasize his clients' inferior status.
13. … glires, quos censoriae leges princepsque M. Scaurus in consulatu non alio modo cenis ademere ac conchylia aut ex alio orbe convectas aves.
14. Note that there is much unclear about who Apicius might have been (if he ever existed as one person); when the "cookbook" was actually compiled—it is normally dated to Late Antiquity; whether we should really see the text as meant for practical use, and if so, who would have used it.
15. And Juvenal seems to have considered home-grown food as part of a modest lifestyle: 11.64–71. He satirizes those who claim to be able to taste where a dish comes from: 4.139–143. Varro comments on this as well, *apud* Gell. *NA* 6.16.
16. The more practical issues of fattening are discussed in Beerden (2010); and Beerden (2012). I will briefly repeat them here, but the passages in V are based on these earlier publications.
17. Large-scale pig fattening is excluded because pigs were normally already fattened.
18. Cf. Varro *Rust.* 3.9.2; Columella *Rust.* 1–15; 8.2.4 (from Christmann and Becker (n.d.) *Brill's New Pauly Online*, s.v. "Breeding, of small domestic animals IIf").
19. On hares being fattened: Macrob. 3.13.14–15; Varro on boars, roes and hares: 3.12.5; 3.13. See Beerden (2010) on literary sources on how dormice were fattened; Beerden (2012) on the archeological materials used to fatten dormice.
20. Turdos aponcomenos: Teres piper, lasar, bacam lauri, admisces cuminum, garum et sic turdum per guttur imples et filo ligabis. et facies ei impensam, in quo decoquantur, quae habeat oleum, sales, aquam, anethum et capita porrorum.
21. Neque enim si velimus, ut in mari non nunquam conspeximus, in vivario multitudinem mullorum pascere queamus, cum sit mollissimum genus, et servitutis indignantissimum. Raro itaque unus aut alter de multis milibus claustra patitur […]. See also Plin. *HN* 9.30.64–66. Cf. Higginbotham (1997, 50.
22. Glires: isicio porcino, item pulpis ex omni membro glirium trito, eum pipere, nucleis, lasere, liquamine farcies glires, et sutos in tegula positos mittes in furnum aut farsos in clibano coques.
23. Two articles of many that could be cited here are: Purcell (1996, 180–212); Purcell (2012, 373–387). References from Penders and Naerebout (2013, 243–258).
24. Leach distinguishes (1) pets, which are strongly inedible, (2) farm animals, mostly edible, (3) field animals, which are game and edible, but only on special occasions, (4) remote wild animals, inedible, not subject to human control. Leach (1964, 44).
25. quare autem non pondus adicio et aliquorum gulam inrito?
26. Et virum bonum quom laudabant, ita laudabant, bonum agricolam bonumque colonum. Amplissime laudari existimabatur qui ita laudabatur.… At ex agricolis et viri fortissimi et milites strenuissimi gignuntur, maximeque pius quaestus.
27. Cf. Dalby (2000, 21–24, 269–272). What farming means to the elite we are speaking about is unclear: did they work the land themselves or are we speaking about more luxury farmhouses where slaves did the work? For our purpose, this does not matter: we clearly see an ideal where owning land and getting produce from the land is important.
28. nullus mihiultra Getas metatur et Parthos ager.
29. de nostro facunde tibi Iuvenalis agello Saturnalicias mittimus, ecce, nuces.
30. As satirized in Petron. *Sat.* 37–38; 48; 53 and mentioned in Juv. 11.64–71.
31. Hill (2011) and Bradley (2011) offer the most comprehensive studies of ancient relations between obesity, gluttony, and immorality. Also see Edwards (1993, 199); Gowers (1993, 24).

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Notes on contributor

Kim Beerden is Assistant Professor in Ancient History at Leiden University, The Netherlands. She is working on the history of mentality in antiquity, and is specifically interested in ancient uncertainty management, food, and foodways.

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