

R. Bruce HITCHNER

More Italy than province: Land, food and culture change in Roman Provence.

“Agrorum cultu, virorum morumque dignatione, amplitudine opum, nulli provinciarum postferanda breviterque Italia verius quam provincia” (Pliny HN III.31)

The Elder Pliny’s famous assessment has long been read as testament to the profound impact of Roman-Italian culture on Provence. But what does Pliny mean precisely when he states that Provence was “more Italy than province”? Recent archaeology relating to land use, production and culinary tastes in Roman Provence, in tandem with literary and documentary evidence, provides some answers to this question.

Material and epigraphic evidence from the lower Rhone valley, for example, points to significant wetland reclamation efforts to increase food production modeled on comparable entrepreneurial drainage schemes undertaken in Italy in the late republic and early empire. The resulting changes to parts of the Provencal landscape reflect the adoption and implementation of specifically Roman-Italian attitudes toward the environment that remained a hallmark of the province’s agricultural economy through the end of antiquity, but not significantly into the Medieval period

No less interesting in this regard are newly integrated archaeozoological data from a broad range of sites in Roman Provence relating to shellfish production and consumption. Specifically, the evidence indicates a major shift from mussel consumption centered on coastal communities to a broad regional and social preference for oysters in imitation of contemporary Italian culinary tastes, but also reflecting new economic opportunities related to the introduction of Roman rule. While certainly lending clarification to the Plinian vision of an Italianized Provence, this change in culinary tastes ultimately gave rise to a set of social and economic realities in Provence that proved quite distinct from the Italian experience, but which, again, did not extend beyond the late antique period.

These and other examples to be considered in my paper demonstrate not only the particular nature and evolution of cultural change and invention in Roman Provence, but also the nourishing effect on our knowledge and understanding of the ancient world of blending archaeological and textual evidence.