

WHY INNOVATE? BETWEEN POLITICS, THE MARKET, AND MATERIAL CULTURE AT THE DAWN OF EASTERN SIGILLATA

Abstract

This paper considers the origin of Eastern Sigillata A (ESA) in its historical context. It argues that the reasons why, and the means by which, a new high-quality ware is developed and introduced deserve investigation no less than its subsequent pattern of distribution; that, in the light of the geopolitical context within which ESA was created in the mid-second century BC, its introduction may have resulted from decisions taken at the highest level; and that in a period of economic growth the increasing popularity of a ware does not necessarily indicate a fall in its status, since aspiration expressed through consumer choice may be as important as emulation and status differentiation.

1. Introduction

Research into hellenistic pottery understandably tends to concentrate on periods for which the data are most plentiful, especially the period from the first century BC onwards when the eastern Mediterranean was organized into Roman provinces. Vital questions about economic developments, the evolution of styles, the differentiation of manufacturing sites, and so on have occupied much of the attention of scholars studying the ceramic record. The present paper, however, focuses on an earlier time and on a progenitor of what became the typical Roman red-slip fine wares, namely Eastern Sigillata A (ESA), a high-quality ware that emerged in middle hellenistic times and continued to be made for some four hundred years.¹

¹ On ESA as, in its origin, a hellenistic rather than Roman ware, see Lund 2011. Reynolds 2010, 90, extends the chronology to the mid-3rd-century AD. For ‘terra sigillata’ as an artificial modern name, see Wallace-Hadrill 2008, 411.

After reviewing current views on the early chronology of ESA and setting its origin in a broader economic context, the paper considers some possible reasons for the original stylistic choices that ultimately led to the familiar, high-quality wares of the Roman period. It argues that scholars, besides investigating a new style's emerging distribution pattern, also need to focus on the reasons for its invention; that ceramic innovation may sometimes have been the result of conscious initiative by members of the ruling elite, and may thus be related in part to high-level geopolitical developments; that we may too readily equate high-volume production with low status ('sub-luxury' does not mean 'vernacular'); and that consumer aspiration is as important as emulation and status competition.

2. Chronology

We may begin with a few remarks on the origins of Eastern Sigillata A.² Its fabric points to its initial manufacture in the region from Tarsos (Cilicia) to Laodikeia (northern Syria).³ Until recently, the earliest excavated pieces were thought to be either from a context at Tel Kedesh (Israel) dated 143–132 BC, or from Corinth if the relevant context antedates the sack of the city in 146.⁴ Now, however, it appears that finds at Jebel Khalid (Syria), from a stratum whose latest datable material is coins of the Seleukid king Demetrios I (r. 162–150), may push the date back a little earlier.⁵

Berlin alerts us to the apparent time-lag between the ware's introduction before 150 and its later rise to popularity, which appears to be a phenomenon of the late second century.⁶ A similar delay has been posited between the introduction of Athenian mould-made bowls

² The standard classification of ESA (earlier known as Pergamene Ware) is that of Hayes 1985, modified by Slane 1997 on the basis of finds from Tell Anafa (Israel), and further developed in Hayes 2008. For a brief history of the classification of 'Eastern Sigillata' wares, see Poblome 1996, 500–1.

³ Malfitana *et al.* 2005, 200.

⁴ Lund 2005, 234.

⁵ Berlin 2012, reviewing Jackson and Tidmarsh 2011 and citing Herbert and Berlin 2003. Kramer 2013 concurs in locating ESA's origin in NW Syria during the mid-second-century.

⁶ Berlin 2012.

(‘Megarian bowls’) in the later third century and their wider circulation in the second; Rotroff arguing that in the conditions of the ancient economy a delay of decades may have been normal before a complex new style was adopted widely and manufactured in large quantities.⁷ It should be borne in mind, furthermore, that archaeology usually documents the moment of an object’s deposition, not its period of use;⁸ this makes it likely that there will be a time-gap between a style’s invention and its entry into archaeological deposits. On both these grounds we can be confident that the invention of ESA took place no later than, and quite possibly some considerable time before, 150.

3. Economic context

ESA did not emerge like a *deus ex machina* into an astonished eastern Mediterranean world. It was a direct development from earlier red-slipped wares, as well as from its own black-slipped predecessor;⁹ and its arrival, like those of its successors, was surely in part a reflection of general prosperity. Recent work on the hellenistic economies—including aspects such as overall economic growth, regional trajectories, and developing networks—may be relevant not only to the dissemination of ESA but also to its inception.

Students of earlier periods are well aware of the active trade links between Old Greece and the wider Mediterranean. It is no surprise to find that those communications remained important after Alexander, and indeed gained in energy and intensity; there is undoubtedly more evidence of long-distance trade. It is true that an increase in evidence is not necessarily evidence of an increase, but probably few historians would dissent from the view that Alexander’s conquests led to a new level of integration—in economic and other respects—between different parts of the Mediterranean and between the eastern Mediterranean and the interior of western Asia, the Seleukid empire.¹⁰ One element of integration more fully

⁷ Rotroff 2006, esp. 367–8, 372–6.

⁸ Cf. Lund 2009, 68–70.

⁹ Lund 2005, 234.

¹⁰ Davies 1984, 270–85.

acknowledged in recent years is networking;¹¹ it seems clear that the period saw increasingly active and complex networks operating throughout the Mediterranean and western Asia. The third-century Zenon papyri, for example, offer clear evidence of a lively demand for Greek commodities and luxuries,¹² both perishable and durable, on the part of people in Egypt, perhaps people mainly of Greek culture. It would be surprising if Greek settlement in the Seleukid empire was not accompanied by a similar demand, leading to an increase in traffic.

Examples of the sources and archaeology suggesting an overall increase in aggregate material wealth include the following: (1) the vast scale of monumental construction in the grand cities of this period, part of the general trend of urbanization that moved northwards through the Balkans over the *longue durée* of Greek history;¹³ (2) the steep increases in the numbers of shipwrecks in the third, and again in the second and first centuries BC, including many around south-western Asia Minor;¹⁴ (3) the increase in geographical knowledge about the distant parts of the *oikoumene*, the world accessible to Greeks;¹⁵ (4) the rising frequency of inscriptions on stone across the Greek world, each one implying an investment of cash and labour, as well as bronze statues accompanying many honorific decrees and dedications;¹⁶ (5) the rise in the status of maritime traders expressed through, for example, the formation of trade associations at Rhodes and elsewhere;¹⁷ (6) the increase in monetarization and the use of bronze coin,¹⁸ as well as the development of instruments of credit;¹⁹ (7) the increasing permeability of *polis* boundaries, seen for example in members of one *polis* owning real estate in another (the Achaean leader Aratos being a case in point: Plutarch, *Aratos*, 41. 4). All this,

¹¹ Horden and Purcell 2000, ch. 5; Malkin *et al.* 2007 ~ Malkin *et al.* 2009.

¹² See e.g. Austin 2006, no. 298.

¹³ Bintliff 1997.

¹⁴ Gibbins 2001, 288; Horden and Purcell 2000, 371 table 5 ('after Parker 1992'), gives approximate shipwreck totals by century, from 6th to 1st BC, of 20, 38, 43, 65, 156, and 185.

¹⁵ See e.g. Geus 2003.

¹⁶ See e.g. Walbank 1984, 10–16.

¹⁷ Gabrielsen's work is central: e.g. Gabrielsen 1997; Gabrielsen 2001.

¹⁸ See e.g. Grandjean 2003; Warren 2007; Psoma 2012.

¹⁹ On credit, see von Reden 2010, 92–124.

it is reasonable to suggest, adds up to a general picture of economic growth.

Not every feature of the rise in material resources was due to increased trade or manufacturing. Scholars have often pointed out, for example, that the simple act of Alexander opening up the Persian royal treasuries released a vast sum of precious metal into Mediterranean networks. Equally, it is well known that widespread benefaction by generals, kings, and the equivalent of today's billionaires came to be a source of support upon which many *poleis* relied heavily, probably to a greater extent than in the classical period.

An overall increase in prosperity need not be distributed equally in space and time. While some areas of the Greek world saw an increase in urbanization and trade, others fell back;²⁰ the pattern also varies with time. Certain areas which scholars, under the influence of written sources, have regarded as economic backwaters may not have been so at all. In the Peloponnese, for example, archaeology now confirms that investment in permanent built structures continued steadily through the third and second centuries BC.²¹ On a more local scale, it is possible to see how different parts of the Peloponnese enjoyed different economic trajectories during the hellenistic period, as in other periods.²²

In general, however, and in contrast to an older picture of political unfreedom, agricultural downturn, and declining rural settlement, scholars today take a more balanced approach to the conditions of life under which the bulk of the population typically existed. For free citizens of *poleis*, democracy flourished,²³ though not in the radical (and rare) form that had occurred at a few places in the classical period. Propertied elites seem to have dominated democracies,²⁴ perhaps more than before; but this does not in itself amount to a sharp break with the past. Kings, for the most part, were not territorial monarchs claiming legal ownership of an entire land-mass with all its settlements, as we might assume on the analogy of some later European monarchies. Most cities were not in any sense kings' possessions; formally they

²⁰ Alcock 1994.

²¹ Shipley 2005, esp. 321–4.

²² See e.g. Shipley 2008; Shipley forthcoming.

²³ See e.g. Rhodes 1997.

²⁴ See e.g. Shipley 2000, 129; Crowther 2002, esp. 16–18; Bayliss 2011, 51–6.

were allies and, in diplomatic terms, peers. Although the king might have the military power to impose his will, he did not often choose to do so.

Agricultural decline is hard to assert confidently, since a reduction in rural settlement may simply indicate migration (or net migration) of labour to towns and their peripheries.²⁵ The apparent rise of a class of super-rich citizens within *poleis* is consistent with the expansion of maritime commerce. These wealthy men, who might single-handedly bail out a community when its coffers were empty—men like Boulagoras of Samos and Protogenes of Olbia—were typically honoured by their democratic *poleis* only after lengthy careers of generosity towards their fellow-citizens.²⁶ Some of them had presumably made their fortune from investment in seaborne trade, taking advantage of the newly expanded and integrated networks of the post-Alexander world.

4. Geopolitical context

Let us turn to the circumstances of the new pottery style's creation. North-west Syria was home to the Seleukid tetrapolis—Antioch, Seleukeia-in-Pieria, Apameia, and Laodikeia—and was the heartland that any royal investment in Cilician security was designed to protect. Cilicia itself, separated from Syria by the Amanus mountain range, occupied a crucial geopolitical position as the north-westernmost extension of Seleukid power²⁷ and the bulwark between Syria and Asia Minor, a region whose capture would open the way to the four capitals for an invader.

After Antiochos III's defeat by the Romans in 189 and the resulting treaty of Apameia in 188, Cilicia remained Seleukid, though at the request of the Rhodians the Senate somewhat contradictorily declared the city of Soloi to be free.²⁸ Under Seleukos IV (r. 187–175) the area was still secure, for we are told that he respected a ban on sending Seleukid warships further

²⁵ For a Laconian example, see Shipley 2002, 281–2, 325. On Peloponnesian rural change, see Stewart 2013.

²⁶ Boulagoras: Austin 2006, no. 132. Protogenes: Austin 2006, no. 115.

²⁷ For a clear map showing some of the principal locations, see Millar 1993, 567, map III.

²⁸ Habicht 1989, 335.

west than here.²⁹ His successor, Antiochos IV (r. 175–164), acted to strengthen the cities in this frontier zone,³⁰ which suggests that it was seen as under threat; but already his father's assassination had foretold the beginning of instability for the kingdom.³¹ The Romans were keeping close watch; sending, for example, a diplomatic mission in 172. Destabilization of the empire was compounded in 168 when Antiochos IV was humiliatingly ordered to withdraw from Egypt by the Roman envoy Popillius (Polybios 29. 27). In 164 Antiochos IV was killed while invading Iran, and a war among rivals for the crown ensued. Two years later Demetrios I, a former long-term hostage at Rome, eliminated the infant Antiochos V and took the kingship despite Roman opposition, which continued during his reign; not long after his accession the Romans forced him to burn his warships and disable his war-elephants.³² In about 162 a further diminution of Seleukid control occurred when Kommagene, west of the upper Euphrates, broke away (Diodoros 31. 19a). It is not surprising, therefore, that before long a certain Zenophanes began to wield independent power in Cilicia.³³ The schism between the the two regions is seen again when Alexander Balas, who was essentially a puppet of the Attalids and Ptolemies and became king in Syria (r. 153/2–145) with Roman support, was forced out of Antioch but was still able to recruit troops from Cilicia.

ESA thus emerged at a time when Cilicia was a focus of interest for those with strategic ambitions and was the scene of military activity and militarization. When it was disturbed the effects were felt in Syria, and *vice versa*. At first sight, military events may seem remote from the concerns of pottery specialists, and certainly we must not jump to a *post hoc, propter hoc* view, positing a causal connection between geopolitics and changes in material culture. On the other hand, we must not rule out the possibility of any link between a new, high-quality ceramic style and the geopolitical circumstances of the time. The importance of the locality makes the question all the more important: this small corner of the Mediterranean was a

²⁹ Habicht 1989, 339.

³⁰ Cohen 1995; Tempesta 2005.

³¹ Will 1982, 365.

³² Habicht 1989, 354.

³³ Habicht 1989, 362.

crucible of the future shape of the Roman empire in the east.

Is the question, then, one about Rome's growing power? While ESA certainly emerged into a zone of instability exacerbated by Roman diplomatic pressure, however, this area was not yet heavily influenced by Roman power, as we shall see below (§5).

Would it, nevertheless, not be surprising if a major new technological innovation took place in an area suffering repeated military and political disruption? Would one not expect such an area to be in decline rather than to throw up innovation? In fact, ancient warfare did not necessarily disrupt trade or cut trade routes;³⁴ or if it did, it could stimulate innovation: the third-century AD Roman civil wars, for example, coincided with a rise of regional fabrics probably stimulated by the disruption of trade.³⁵ The later 'boom' in ESA, indeed, took place in a time of frequent warfare.³⁶ On the local level, most damage to the landscape during actual campaigns was short-term,³⁷ and human population numbers could recover quickly from losses. The underlying fertility of this coastal shelf must also be borne in mind, as well as the geographical advantage enjoyed by its coastal cities, located as they were on a major sailing route and close to the Syrian tetrapolis.

Stylistic changes can reflect more positive eras of harmony between powers. Rotroff dates the origin of the 'Megarian' bowl (§2 above) to the years after the liberation of the Piraeus and Athens from Macedonian rule in 229. She argues that it reflects a period of close diplomatic relations between Athens and Egypt, the bowls being copies of Alexandrian silverware and probably also of 'gold-glass' ware (in which gold leaf is sandwiched between two layers of glass). The invention of this imitative style may have been occasioned by the inauguration of the Ptolemaieia festival at Athens around 224/3.³⁸ This leaves unspecified the circumstances and mechanism of the invention. Was the new form commissioned by some state authority or leading public figure? Did a workshop owner or investor, seeing an opportunity to impress

³⁴ See e.g. the compelling case study of MacDonald 1982.

³⁵ Poblome 2006.

³⁶ Kramer 2013.

³⁷ Shipley 2008, 57–8; cf. Foxhall 1993 on the agricultural environment.

³⁸ Rotroff 1982a, 9–13; Rotroff 1982b, 331; Rotroff 2006.

elite clients and profit from it, ask his workers or slaves to experiment? Did a potter himself, perhaps after noticing variations in the existing product, propose the experiment, whose results were then taken up by his masters and presented to the political class of Athens and soon to a wider elite market? All these agencies and more, or none of these, may have been in play; what is important is not to assume that any particular one was not. The key factor in Rotroff's reconstruction is the link between stylistic innovation and elite consumption: if she is right, then either the invention of the 'Megarian bowl' or its initial promotion and presentation to the market were in some way intended to mark a historic moment, whatever other intentions were in play.

Unlike the 'Megarian' bowl, ESA comes in a range of forms both decorative and functional. Assuming that at least some of them were devised simultaneously or within a short time, it seems entirely possible that the introduction of a new style was a relatively public event; the style being perhaps designed to catch the eye of the richest in society, and maybe even commissioned by such a person or persons. Although it will be argued below that the consumption of new styles can reflect a bottom-up scale of aspiration at least much as a top-down scale of values, nothing in the nature of ancient society makes it unlikely that one or more powerful individuals, such as a king, a general, rich citizens, or leading metics, were responsible for authorizing and financing an innovation that could be expected to involve a process of trial and error and thus expense and delay. Paterson's model of the partly closed market economy, discussed below (§5), would tie in well with a top-down initiative that led to the creation of an excellent, durable, and extremely marketable new commodity.

Coincidentally, Wallace-Hadrill, in his monumental contribution to the study of Roman culture in the late Republic (discussed below, §6), tentatively advances a similar idea, suggesting that Augustus's lieutenant Maecenas may have personally brought about the initial development of Arretine pottery ware by awarding military supply contracts to rich friends in his home town, none other than Arretium.³⁹ One could frame a similar hypothesis for second-century Cilicia or NW Syria, according to which a king or governor invested in new tableware

³⁹ Wallace-Hadrill 2008, 415–16.

for the benefit of his troops—perhaps with mercenaries in mind above all. We even know of a garrison foundation with a palatial complex in Cilicia Pedias, founded in the second century and planned by ‘a mighty power or ruler’—perhaps Antiochos IV—‘according to his sophisticated education and notions’.⁴⁰ This is, of course, purely speculative; but it opens the door to top-down initiative in the creation of a style.

We need not, however, limit possible explanations to those of a political-military nature. Lest we be tempted to imagine that hellenistic rulers thought of nothing but international relations and imperial strategy, we should recall that Antiochos IV not only donated generously to Athenian building projects but made Epicureanism the official philosophy of his court. Kings expressed their status through patronage, for example by commissioning statues and coin portraits; why stop there? The unknown potter who first mixed the red glaze we identify with eastern sigillata A was a genius, no doubt; but he could not have made the product popular on his own.

5. Explanations of distribution patterns

Recent discussions of the developing patterns of movement of East Mediterranean pottery in the hellenistic period have considered factors such as market forces, imperial policy, acculturation, and social competition.

Lawall, discussing changes in the amphora trade in the Aegean during the third and second centuries, talks of markets, elasticity of demand, excess of supply over demand, and so on.⁴¹ Such factors may well explain changes in the distribution of a class of artefacts; but can they explain the unique prominence of ESA, which within a generation of its birth came to dominate over other high-quality wares?

Malfitana and his co-authors argue that the spread of ESA in Italy is related to the Roman imperial ‘dialectic’ with the eastern Mediterranean.⁴² It is not, they argue, simply the result of

⁴⁰ Radt 2011, 62 (*non vidi*), quoted by Wright 2011.

⁴¹ Lawall 2006.

⁴² Malfitana *et al.* 2005.

market forces or any excellence in the product, but of competition between producers in an ‘economy of substitution’. Such an economy, Paterson suggests,⁴³ is distinct from a pure market economy in which producers seek to open up new markets, increasing the total volume of sales. It is, rather, a partly closed market economy in which the incentivized behaviour, for those investing in production, is maximizing profits by trying to take market share away from other, similar products. This subtle view of ancient markets may well offer a way forward in understanding the dominance of ESA; it may also suggest possible motives for the original innovation.

If, however, we wish to connect somehow the ware’s inception with Roman–Italian trade penetration, we shall need evidence that Romans and Italians were already active and influential in Syria as early as the mid-second century. Was ESA introduced under any kind of influence from the expanding power of Rome? Was it introduced into an area that was already ‘romanized’? It seems unlikely that Rome’s geopolitical successes down to the second quarter of the second century had yet had much of an economic or cultural impact upon Syria or Cilicia. In the present state of knowledge it appears that before the late second century Roman and Italian traders were not present in large numbers even in Old Greece, including Delos, before the last third of the second century,⁴⁴ where Rome had been the arbiter of affairs in that region at least since the end of the second Macedonian war in 197. Consequently, it seems unlikely that as early as the 150s Italian entrepreneurs could have begun playing an important role in the economies of parts of the East Mediterranean that lay even further from their homeland.

This was not yet the Romans’ ‘back yard’, despite their victory over Antiochos III, after which they had delegated control of Asia Minor to Pergamon and the Rhodians. Indeed, their attitude to Cilicia has been described as being ‘hands-off’ until the mid-first century BC.⁴⁵

⁴³ Paterson 1998, 165.

⁴⁴ See e.g. Lawall 2006, 275 n. 56, citing Hasenohr and Müller 2002 (general considerations), Follet 2002 (Athens), Müller 2002 (Boiotia), and Rizakis 2002 (Macedonia).

⁴⁵ Freeman 1986. Cf. also Kroll 2002, rebutting the view of Meadows 2001 that centralized Seleukid control of local coinages in Syria and Pontos reflected Roman pressure.

Consistently with this picture, a recent survey of the distribution of ESA establishes that its earliest shapes were broadly in a hellenistic tradition, and only later evolved to resemble Italian forms more closely.⁴⁶ As late as the start of the Imperial period, the *poleis* of NW Syria were still essentially Greek entities, albeit multicultural in character.⁴⁷

ESA was not a completely novel product. Space forbids a discussion of its black-slipped predecessors; but we should bear in mind the possibility that the innovation was devised by investors and financiers in order to gain market share. There is also a possibility that at least one of the black-slipped predecessors was a non-Greek style,⁴⁸ so it possible that the creation of ESA was an initiative taken by Greek entrepreneurs seeking to outdo non-Greek competitors.

6. Meaning and material culture

At the grass roots, we must consider the choices made by those who purchased artefacts and managed households. Just as there cannot be leaders without followers, so we cannot attribute the popularity of a style entirely, or even primarily, to the designer, the financier, or the marketing man—other than, perhaps, in a monopoly situation or a command economy. It is a popular but mistaken view that huge corporations such as Coca-Cola and Microsoft determine what we buy. They do not: we have the choice whether to buy or not to buy, and there are alternative products available. It is true that manufacturers use aggressive advertising and marketing to persuade us to buy their products rather than those of their rivals, and making it harder for us to ‘see’ the competing product; they may thus gain an undeservedly large market share even when some rival goods are demonstrably superior, as Pepsi or Linux are claimed to be by their adherents. But it is difficult, if not impossible, to persuade large numbers of people that something is worth buying if it is not of a high standard to begin with. In the absence of mass media and advertising, what factors promoted the take-up of new

⁴⁶ Willet 2012, 212–50, esp. 230–1, 250.

⁴⁷ Millar 1993, 237, 241–2.

⁴⁸ Kramer 2013, 285–7.

hellenistic pottery wares? Two factors are likely to have stood out: the support of powerful persons or institutions, and the choices made by consumers who communicated with one another about what they liked and why.

I have argued elsewhere⁴⁹ that the study of small-scale material culture in hellenistic Old Greece would benefit from more subtle theoretical approaches. Artefacts need to be considered, as far as possible, as parts of their original assemblages; they should also be treated as objects to which their users attributed meaning, in the ways theorists have explored.⁵⁰ Even if we cannot detect those meanings with certainty, the failure to pose the question of meanings severely limits the illumination we can hope to garner from the study of artefacts. Some hellenistic archaeologists have now begun to ask relevant questions. Berlin, for example, explores how in late hellenistic Judaea people of different classes and in different places used a different range of household material culture: those in rich parts of Jerusalem and in rural villas, for example, adopting more Italian-style pottery.⁵¹

Gender is a consideration without which choice and meaning cannot be fully explored. Although there appears to be no direct evidence to show whether men or women decided how a Greek domestic environment was decorated and equipped, the question is worth asking, for the answer might influence how we accounted for the introduction and later popularity of ESA and similar wares.

Notions of emulation and luxury have been invoked to elucidate the introduction and diffusion of new styles. Wallace-Hadrill, in his work, cited earlier, cited on the late Republic (equivalent to the middle and late hellenistic period), examines the flow of Greek styles into Italy and the processes of emulation and ambition which, he argues, fuelled the adoption, imitation, and adaptation of existing styles.⁵² On a number of general points, however, it may be possible to fine-tune his suggestions.

Writing, for example, of Greek-style luxuries and what he calls 'sub-luxuries' in general

⁴⁹ Shipley 2013.

⁵⁰ e.g. Miller 1987; Miller 2006; Miller 2010.

⁵¹ Berlin 2005.

⁵² Wallace-Hadrill 2008.

(not only pottery), Wallace-Hadrill refers to their ubiquity, even stating that the Megarian bowl ‘dominates the archaeological record’.⁵³ That is certainly not the case for rural survey data, where undecorated or local wares predominate overwhelmingly;⁵⁴ it is probably not the case even for urban contexts. It might be more accurate to say that the Megarian or mould-made bowl is very widely distributed; that numerous fragments are found at excavated sites, chiefly major urban centres; but that even excavated pottery assemblages comprise mainly undecorated domestic fine wares (perhaps with a simple applied slip) and fine to coarse (un-slipped) cooking and storage vessels. ESA forms only a small proportion of finds at most of the excavated sites where it occurs, but enjoys a disproportionate share of space in published site reports.

With regard to the use of Arretine ware in large quantities by the Roman army, Wallace-Hadrill appears at times to overstate the degree to which the army was a low-status organization, and envisages mass production as diminishing an object’s status;⁵⁵ this may be true from the point of view of the elite, but is not necessarily so for most members of society, especially the prosperous potential consumers of such a new style. ESA, for its part, may have started being produced in larger quantities (‘mass-produced’ might be a rash term to use) within a few years or decades of its invention; and at this stage it is possible that its technical excellence was diluted, for the second generation of the ware is said to have a less robust slip.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to suppose that ESA was still a very specialized product when compared with the range of available ceramics, and retained a high, perhaps very high, status.

A commodity’s status relative to other commodities is not the only gauge of the affective attachment that its possessor may express towards it. Wallace-Hadrill places too much weight upon the scorn heaped upon Samian ware as ‘proverbially cheapskate’ (his words) by literary writers such as Martial—a satirist, after all—and Pliny the Elder. Such writers belonged to,

⁵³ Wallace-Hadrill 2008, 412.

⁵⁴ See e.g. the evidence from the Laconia Survey: Visscher 1996, esp. 109–10; Shipley 2002, esp. 269.

⁵⁵ Wallace-Hadrill 2008, 437–9; note ‘downmarket derivatives or “sub-luxuries”’, 438.

⁵⁶ Kavvadias 2012, 169.

and wrote for, the stratospheric echelons of the elite, and their purported or pretended views cannot be taken as evidence of attitudes among other groups, including those who might most often employ red-slipped wares. Referring to the Augustan period, Wallace-Hadrill writes of ‘*banal* household commodities’ beginning to ‘aspire to new levels of *quasi-luxury*’ (my italics).⁵⁷ He appears to mean that the owners of this material wished to put a social distance between themselves and those they saw as their inferiors, but were in fact only confirming their own inferiority in relation to the owners of true luxuries. One could just as well state the matter in positive terms and talk of a wider diffusion of prosperity and the availability of new utensils that were thought to be better than those previously available. To the relatively wide spectrum of people who considered buying these products, they may have seemed by no means banal but of superlative quality; not poor imitations of something more special. These consumers surely did not regard their first canteen of ESA as a *sub-luxury*, but as a luxury in their terms.⁵⁸

One certainly take too ‘top-down’ an approach to diffusion and popularization that relegates new styles to the status of pale imitations. They can even be dismissed as ‘a poor man’s metalware’; but the skeuomorphism hypothesis, according to which ceramic forms often imitate silver and gold vessels, has undoubtedly been pressed too far.⁵⁹ It relates to the issue of ancient monetary values; some scholars regarding a vase priced in obols (sixths of a drachma) as ‘cheap’.⁶⁰ Since, however, the silver drachma was (for example) a day’s reward for a skilled mason on a prestigious public building project in classical Athens, one might do better to think in terms of the earnings of a skilled technician in modern Britain, such as a

⁵⁷ Wallace-Hadrill 2008, 437.

⁵⁸ It is only fair to note that at many junctures Wallace-Hadrill gets the balance right. He concedes, for example, that the stamps with which individual Arretine manufacturers advertised themselves were ‘marks of pride’ and that ‘[t]heir pottery was innovative, whatever the models, and demanded recognition in its own right’ (Wallace-Hadrill 2008, 414); and writes of ‘the restoration of dignity not only to the elite but to the citizen’ under Augustus, and of ‘[t]he aspiration to new “quality” wares by the citizen’ (Wallace-Hadrill 2008, 416).

⁵⁹ For some reservations, see Lapatin 2003.

⁶⁰ e.g. Gill 1987, Gill 1988; *contra*, e.g. Boardman 1988b, Boardman 1988a.

decorator or plumber, who may charge a private customer one to two hundred pounds for a day's work—a sum that at 2013 prices approximates to a family's weekly shopping bill.⁶¹

Examples could be multiplied, and precision is unattainable; the point is that a vase priced in obols is not likely to have been a frequent purchase for the great majority of consumers.⁶²

We should not withhold from the aspirational owners of new material culture the credit for having achieved a real rise in status. Possession of a new, superior style such as ESA may indeed have been a sign of one's success, of having 'arrived' at a status that made one 'respectable' both subjectively and (in the right community) objectively. It was not necessarily (and was certainly not only) an competitive expression of superiority over another specific social group or groups; let alone evidence of a *misguided* sense of superiority, a self-deluding, Pooterish failure to realize that one was still falling short of the best.

Similar arguments have been made by others about 'superior' and 'inferior' styles of art in other imperial contexts, such as Roman Britain. 'Provincial' art, which used to be seen as a second-rate imitation of 'good' Roman work, was surely not regarded as second-rate by those villa-owners who commissioned and lived with it.⁶³ To them it was the proof of their prosperity and success. A style must not be relegated to the second class merely because it is derivative; it must be treated on its own merits according to its social and cultural context.

7. Conclusion

A distinction has been drawn in this paper between the factors that explain the eventual rise to popularity of a pottery style and those that lay behind its original creation and entry into the market. Market forces or Roman cultural pressure may well have played a vital part in shifting

⁶¹ Lapatin 2003, reviewing Vickers 1998, suggests similar reasons why V.'s conversions of the drachma, *mina*, etc., are far too low.

⁶² For a general critique of the Vickers hypothesis, see Willet 2012, 323–6, citing Zimmermann 1998, 2–7, for classical and hellenistic Greece.

⁶³ Scott 2000; Scott 2003; see also Scott 2006 on the undue prioritization of aesthetic values in the study of 'art'.

people's preferences away from previously well-established fabrics. The paper, however, has introduced the notion that a new pottery ware need not necessarily be the outcome of impersonal social and economic forces, but may in some circumstances originate in a conscious initiative taken by one or more members of an elite or ruling group; its introduction may thus relate to questions of profit maximization, propaganda, and even state policy. Eastern Sigillata A's rise would not convincingly be explained by looking for metal prototypes; even if such items could be identified, the new ware could not have become widely disseminated and imitated if it had not been the fine ware of choice for a relatively large number of moderately prosperous households. In a climate of general economic upturn, it may be appropriate to regard social aspiration expressed through material culture in a positive sense, not as a social manoeuvre that was doomed to failure from the outset.

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