“Family” meals? Who ate with whom and where in Roman military bases?”

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Introduction

Over the last decade or so there has been growing interest across the humanities and social sciences in foodways, in the social significance of differentiated consumption behaviours, and in gendered social space (e.g. Atkins and Bowler 2001; Miller 2001, 3; Zukin 2001, esp. 433-35; Bird and Sokolofski 2005; Avieli 2009; Graeber 2011). Cooking, eating and drinking are central socio-cultural activities, whose distinguishing characteristics provide important insights into social behaviour and cultural identity. As Marijke van der Veen has stated, the ‘daily routine of food consumption reflects and recreates social and symbolic codes of society’ (Van der Veen 2003, 415; see also Bourdieu 1990, 250-52). Status and gender hierarchies surrounding the preparation and consumption of food and drink, and their spatial relationships, are also signposts for socio-spatial organisation at both household and community levels (Delphy 2001). More specifically, cooking, eating and drinking are core activities around which social interactions and social space are often structured.

More contextualised investigations of specific social interactions surrounding these practices and the relationships associated with these activities, their hierarchies and spatial organisation, can assist in developing better understandings of social connectedness and disconnectedness in Roman military communities. Most studies of foodways in the Roman military sphere have been more concerned with food supply and storage, and less so with its preparation and consumption (e.g. Southern 2007: 111-115, 217-225). As Lyndsay Allason-Jones pointed out, though, ‘[a] soldier’s life does not consist solely of his uniform but involves his whole way of life: what he eats, [but also] how he eats it...’ (Allason-Jones 2001:24).

Maureen Carroll has indeed discussed the food preparation and consumption practices of soldiers and emphasised the importance of the social relationships associated with these foodways (2005). She highlighted epigraphical evidence for the close bonds that existed between fellow soldiers, as well as archaeological evidence for hearths, within barrack buildings, to support the long-held perspective (see von Petrikovits 1975: 97-98) that soldiers ‘prepared, cooked and consumed’ food together with their contubernia while on duty. She
argued that the absence of evidence for more structured or formal provision for food preparation and consumption – e.g. lack of evidence for cooking and kitchen-related tasks among the documented duties of immunes, or lack of evidence for centralised kitchens in the archaeological remains of military bases, supported the perception that soldiers normally cooked for each other and ate in their quarters (Carroll 2005: 364). She also argued that new recruits would have needed to become familiar with Roman-style foodways and that, as food preparation and cooking ‘were likely to have been the domain of women in the family’, these recruits would have had to learn to cook for themselves in the army (Carroll 2005: 365).

Carroll also argued that, when off duty, soldiers could take meals with their families in vici and canabae outside the fort or fortress. At the same time, she noted the evidence for taverns inside the legionary fortress at Vindonissa, the special camp dinners that took place on festive occasions, and that officers, cavalry troops and soldiers also had personal servants to assist with kitchen duties (Carroll 2005: 366-368).

Material evidence for foodways in Roman military sites

At many levels Carroll’s arguments are logical, reasonable and supported by related written and structural evidence, presenting a picture of the camaraderie of soldiers eating and drinking together within their sub-units, and alluding to family, or household, meals in officers’ residences or outside the fort. However, this picture does not accommodate the growing evidence that families of ordinary soldiers, as well as officers, could live with them within the fort walls. It also pays inadequate attention to the distribution of artefacts associated with these foodways inside military bases.

For example, what is the actual evidence, particularly during the early empire, that it was the daily practice for soldiers to cook and eat together with their comrades? Can the epigraphical evidence for close bonds between fellow soldiers indeed be used to downplay other potential cooking and eating arrangements? Could women and families living inside the walls have provided essential food and drink facilities for the combatant members of their families, or indeed for other combatants? Also, what do we actually know about how food was prepared, cooked and eaten by officers and officers’ households, or by other non-combatant personnel inside these bases? And where did the camp dinners take place? How can we test the assumption that, while on duty, ordinary soldiers cooked and ate together rather than with other family members or in other situations – such as in public taverns or mess areas (see
Specidel 1989)? Can more detailed analyses of the material culture and its distribution around these military bases potentially provide better understandings of these social interactions around food, and their impact on the organisation of these communities?

To begin to address these questions, this paper discusses how approaches to the distribution patterns of artefacts associated with cooking, eating and drinking might be used to develop better understandings of how, where and under what conditions food was prepared and consumed within these military contexts. It focuses particularly on artefacts associated with the storage, preparation, serving and the consumption of food and drink, excavated from two early imperial sites in Germany – the fortress of Vetera I, and the fort at Ellingen.

While these two military bases are not necessarily ideal, given the nature of their excavation, they are useful for testing this approach. Thus, this paper attempts to take further approaches to artefact distribution to better understand the place and roles of non-service personnel and especially soldiers’ families, inside Roman military bases (see Allison 2008, 2011, n.d.). It focuses on the more prolific, but at the same time less securely provencanced, artefacts related to the preparation and consumption of food and drink, particularly ceramics, whose distribution patterns at Vetera I were touched on at the XIXth Limes Congress (Allison 2005: 836-837. As a preliminary investigation, this paper examines how the types of material culture associated with food preparation and consumption, their associations, and their distributions within military bases can be analysed towards answering such questions.

Analytical approaches
The ceramic assemblages from these two military bases, Vetera I and Ellingen, are typically complex, with numerous different fabrics, forms, sizes, and capacities. An extremely useful technique for analysing these types to assess associations between different provenances and types of multivariate assemblages is correspondence analysis (e.g. Cool and Baxter 1999; Pitts 2010). This type of analysis creates two scatter graphs: one of samples or rows (i.e. provenances, locations, trenches, assemblages, etc); and one of species or columns (i.e. types of pottery, animal bones, small finds, or anything else related to food preparation and food consumption that can be counted in a standardized and consistent manner). For example, each of the 520 trenches excavated at Vetera I can be treated as a separate assemblage or sample, so correspondence analysis can be used to assess whether there are any associations between
the twenty-eight different ceramic classes (types of amphora, utilitarian wares, Arretine terra sigillata, South Gaulish terra sigillata, etc.), and relevant glass and metal vessels.

Vetera I

Fig. 1a shows the complete plot with the 520 trenches excavated at Vetera I and the different fabric types recorded. To interpret this graph, it should be noted that the axis values are unimportant. Instead the plot should be read relative to the origin, or centre, of the graph which represents ‘the average profile, so locations away from this represent departures from the average [assemblage]’ (Shennan 1997: 321). Here South Gaulish terra sigillata, both relief-decorated and undecorated, are closely associated and have a looser association non-ceramic vessels (glass and bronze). Utilitarian wares, including mortaria and amphorae, appear on the opposite side of the origin and are closely associated together. Italian imports of Arretine terra sigillata and other Italic wares (i.e. thin-walled wares and Pompeian Redware) all appear in the bottom right of the graph. This highlights that these vessels are not randomly distributed across the fortress, but that they do have some spatial structure that is recoverable statistically. However, as with all multivariate techniques, these spatial patterns are difficult to interpret. They indicate that patterns exist among these data, but not where they are located within the fortress.

To analyse the results of this correspondence analysis spatially, their values have been encoded into a GIS-type environment and a colour scheme has been generated, based on a colour spectrum so that each sample (i.e. trench) is assigned a colour, based on its direction and distance from the centre of the correspondence graph (i.e. polar coordinates) (Fig. 1b). In essence if two trenches have similar colours they have similar assemblages and associations. A point close to the origin (i.e. with a bit of everything) will be black, those more closely associated with Arretine ware will be light blue; non-ceramic vessels and South Gaulish terra sigillata are yellows and greens, and utilitarian wares are reds and pinks. To make the image more comprehensible these colours can be interpolated from the locations of the trenches to give a colour to each area of the fortress (Fig. 2). Thus we can suggest what parts of the fortress tended towards different types of food-related activities and identify a clear spatial structure within the data. For example, the central principia, and southeast area of the one of the legates’ palaces, to the west of the principia, tend towards more utilitarian wares, as does one of the building in the central market area (i.e. pinks and purples). The so-called tribunes’ residences, the three courtyard buildings in the northwest area, have assemblages with
concentrations of Italian and Belgic wares (blues and browns), and Building Z, the supposed valetudinarium, in the bottom left, has high quantities of South Gaulish wares, glass and bronze (i.e. greens). The buildings along the eastern part of the via principalis tend towards more Italian wares (blues).

This form of analysis can be repeated to consider the distribution of the different forms of food-related vessels at Vetera I. The exact forms are not as important as the general pattern which shows a predominant distinction between storage forms – amphorae and pots – in the top left of the graph (Fig. 3), and tablewares – bowls, cups, platters, etc. – in the bottom right, with food-preparation forms closely clustered in between. The few outliers at the right of the graph seem to be predominantly associated with glass vessels. Again, when the spatial distribution of these forms is considered clear patterns arise. In the distribution map, the strong yellows to pinks in the buildings to the west of the via principalis suggest their association with food storage and preparation, while the blues of the buildings along the eastern via principalis are more closely linked to tablewares. The predominantly greens of the tribunes’ residences in the northwest, and legate’s palace to the east of the principia demonstrate a different assemblage that suggests a different utilisation of these forms from the rest of the fortress. This implies a spatial, and perhaps social, division between these basic food-related activities that requires further investigation. Unfortunately, less of the barracks buildings at Vetera I have been excavated compared with other central administrative buildings, officers’ residences and the street areas, although it is notable, that what has been excavated of the barracks to the west have a relative lack of evidence for tablewares. Some of these distribution patterns, though, particularly in the principia is may well be affected by remains from earlier forts underlying this area. These artefact distribution analyses are therefore only partial and demonstrate a process rather than particular results.

Ellingen

The fort at Ellingen provides an interesting comparison. Here artefacts can be provenanced by building rather than by trench. Considering the vessel fabrics, as with Vetera I, there are clear associations between different types – South and East Gaulish terra sigillata is all towards the bottom right of the graph (Fig. 4) while the utilitarian and handmade wares are both towards the upper left. Relief-decorated and undecorated Rheinzabern terra sigillata are both in the bottom left area along with other[s?] imitation terra sigillata. Presenting these analyses spatially demonstrates an interesting patterning. The northern buildings (Buildings C
and D) and Area G have broadly similar assemblages that tend towards utilitarian and locally produced finewares, the main barracks (Building B) also tends to follow this trend, but its very dark colour shows that it is closer to the origin and hence has a more average assemblage for the fort. The buildings in the south-east – possibly officers’ quarters with their blues seem quite distinct from the rest of the fort and are more closely associated with the South and East Gaulish terra sigillatas. This analysis implies a distinction in the use of different types of ceramic in different parts of the fort, whether the result of restricted access or consumer choice. An analysis of the vessel forms in the fort at Ellingen was also undertaken but the lack of a clear pattern in the correspondence analysis makes the distribution difficult to interpret, although similar assemblages appear in adjacent buildings (Fig. 5).

This paper presents analyses that are still very much a work in progress. Further interrogation of these datasets and more precise analyses of the fabrics and different forms used for specific cooking, eating, and drinking activities can potentially allow patterns to emerge that relate to the socio-spatial arrangements for these activities. From these examples it is demonstrable that there are distinctions among the assemblages associated with foodways that can be related to different uses of local and imported wares and perhaps different areas for food preparation. At Vetera I it would appear that storage, food production and consumption were indeed spatially distinct activities. Also at both Vetera I and Ellingen we can observe that officers and their households seem to have made use of different types of ceramics and to have undertaken food-related activities separately. Another important point to note is that no amphorae were recorded at Ellingen, suggesting different and possibly very local food sources, and food-preparation practices.

Family meals and gendered foodways
Carroll suggested that new recruits would have missed their family meals when they went into the Roman army. But what is this suggestion based on? Keith Bradley (1998: esp. 46) and Hanner Sigismund Nielsen (1998: esp. 58) both argued that, in the Roman civilian world, and essentially in urban Roman Italy, there was little or no concept of a ‘family meal’, in the modern sense of a daily gathering of the household where the events of the day would be discussed and children would be educated in table manners. If women, families and other non-combatant personnel were indeed members of the communities, living inside the walls of
Roman military bases, how can we begin to understand the roles they played in the daily cooking and eating practices of Roman soldiers?

In the centre of the Roman Empire, in the civilian world, food preparation and cooking were carried out by both male and female servants. While there is evidence for professional male chefs in élite urban households, women seem to have more usually been responsible for cooking in rural domestic contexts, at least in Italy. While, it might seem ‘common sense’ to assume that cooking, in the male-dominated military sphere, was in male hands (see von Petrikovits 1975: 97), the complex gendering of food-preparation activities in civilian contexts, across the Roman world, may have spilled over into the military sphere. For example, it may be correct to assume that legionary soldiers ate within their contubernia (see Carroll 2005: esp. 366-368), and that officers’ household staff, male and female, prepared their meals in their residences. However, the distribution patterns at Vetera I may indicate more communal forms of cooking and eating. In auxiliary forts, as at Ellingen, the women living there may have carried out a similar wide range of domestic tasks as in rural contexts, including cooking and preparing food. Indeed life within Roman military bases, where soldiers often lived for up to twenty-five years, might have been much more like ‘life at home’ than is generally assumed.

At this point, though, these are merely assumptions. The combination of the above analyses, and my previous analyses of gendered space in military bases, might throw further light on these practices. Thus, this paper presents many questions and not so many answers, and analyses that are very much in their initial stages. Nevertheless, these types of analyses, which can be used to examine broad patterns across large artefact assemblages, have the potential to compensate for the vagaries of the depositional processes at such sites and to change our perspectives on how soldiers, and officers, prepared and ate their meals, and how women and families were involved in these practices.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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Figure captions

Fig. 1. Correspondence analysis of: a) trenches and ceramic fabric type; and b) trenches plotted against a colour spectrum, from Vetera I.

Fig. 2. Correspondence analysis of trenches and ceramic fabric types at Vetera I as: a) a graph; and b) an interpolated plot encoded with the colour spectrum.

Fig. 3. Correspondence analysis of trenches and food-related vessel forms at Vetera I as: a) a graph; and b) an interpolated plot encoded with the colour spectrum.

Fig. 4. Correspondence analysis of buildings and ceramic fabric types from the fort at Ellingen as: a) a graph; and b) a chloropleth map encoded with the colour spectrum.

Fig. 5. Correspondence analysis of buildings and food-related vessel forms in the fort at Ellingen as: a) a graph; and b) a chloropleth map encoded with the colour spectrum.