REGIONALISM AND GLOBALISM IN ANTIQUITY
Exploring Their Limits

Edited by
FRANCO DE ANGELIS
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CONSUMPTION AND CHOICE IN ANCIENT SICILY*

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Abstract

Research has been carried out since 2002 on domestic material of the 5th century BC from the site of Morgantina, located in the hills of east-central Sicily. Two settlements have been uncovered at Morgantina: one on the Cittadella hill, reportedly destroyed in 459 BC (according to Diodorus), and the other on the adjoining Serra Orlando ridge, founded by at least 430 BC. Since the site features two well-dated and discrete sets of artefacts, it presents an excellent opportunity to track the behaviour of ancient populations over time. Among the results of this research is the discovery that choices made by consumers at Morgantina from the array of available imported pottery, particularly the black gloss ware made at Athens, varied widely between the first and second halves of the century. While consumers have often been ignored by archaeologists and historians in favour of concentrating on groups that are easier to identify, such as manufacturers and merchants, consumption of imported products has been explored in anthropological terms by Michael Dietler, among others, and in economic terms – albeit to a lesser extent – by Lin Foxhall. Their approaches have focused on the meanings of objects in foreign cultures, leaving aside the decision-making process that leads to the purchase or rejection of a consumer good. This paper seeks to develop an interpretative model of consumption in the ancient world derived not only from the work of the above-mentioned scholars, but also from buying habits and the notion of consumer choice. By examining the ability of consumers to choose, and the choices they made, a better understanding of the role of imports within Mediterranean societies can be formed.

Since the 18th century, when Greek vases were first discovered in large numbers in Italy, scholars who have sought to understand ancient Mediterranean trade have given pottery great attention. There are three reasons for this interest in ceramic evidence, even over other categories: first, the ubiquity of pottery fragments in the archaeological record; second, the wide distribution of distinguishable exported types around the Mediterranean; and third, trade in pottery was often associated with trade in other goods (such as the use of amphorae to transport oil or wine). Morel (1983, 69-70) identified five ‘modes of diffusion’ covering the entire range of the ceramics trade, from vessels exported

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only to areas near the production centre, ‘on the order of a few kilometres, rarely more’, to industrialised pottery production and distribution in large quantities over huge distances. Johnston (1991, 204-05) gave a similar description of the ways in which pots moved:

At its simplest, [a vessel] may merely accompany its owner (or owners) in any migration. At the other end of the scale we can posit potteries producing material at a high rate for immediate export to known overseas customers, with coined silver used as a means of arranging the transactions involved.

Until recently, however, little of the entire sequence of pottery’s history, from production to use, and finally breakage, discard or deposition – what van der Leeuw (1999) called the chaîne opératoire – was studied in detail, or from an economic perspective. Indeed, only two elements of the pottery trade have attracted significant attention: producers and production centres, easily identifiable by the presence of industrial installations such as kilns and associated debris, including wasters; and merchants and transporters of pottery, for whom a fair amount of literary and epigraphic evidence is preserved.¹ In contrast, relatively little attention has been focused on buyers of pottery, apart from Johnston’s mention of them, quoted above. Yet consumers played an undeniably significant role – perhaps the most important one – in creating the archaeological record as we discover it today, including the presence of those ubiquitous pot sherds, which are not typically found where they were made or sold, but rather where they were used, deposited or discarded by the very people who had made the choice to purchase them. This paper will discuss the actions and choices of consumers, in the hope of further elucidating trade in antiquity. In particular, a set of artefacts discovered at Morgantina, in east-central Sicily, will serve to show how archaeological ceramics can illustrate consumer agency in economic transactions.

The modern term ‘consumption’ has been used in a variety of ways by anthropologists and historians. Some have desired a culturally derived definition, as in its earliest version, used by Dietler to describe the place of foreign products in the south of France in the Iron Age. For him, ‘consumption’ described the ways in which the meanings attached to imported objects by foreign consumers are different from the meanings they have in their home context.² Dietler’s modern analogy for this phenomenon is the significance


² Dietler (1990; 1997; 1998; 1999; 2005) introduced the term to archaeology, deriving it from the work of Appadurai (1986). For the use of ‘consumption’ in historical archaeology, see
Coca-Cola has in some parts of sub-Saharan Africa, where it is a high-status beverage reserved for welcoming guests, in contrast to its lower-status role in North American societies (Dietler 1999, 483-88). The cultural meaning of objects in importing societies is a significant component of the choices made by consumers in those communities, but other factors also contributed to buyers’ decisions concerning which goods to purchase and which to reject. Cost, for example, both absolute and relative to other comparable goods, must also be taken into account, along with issues of scarcity, transport and fashion.

In contrast to studies focused on culture such as those conducted by Dietler, work concerned with issues of ancient trade often seems to include some economic connotation in the word ‘consumption’, although the precise relationship between economic exchange and consumption is rarely made explicit. Foxhall, for example, attempted to integrate an economic analysis of ancient trade with a culture-oriented concept of consumption. She observed identifiable similarities between ancient and modern economic behaviour, such as the desire for, and purchase of, luxury goods among those who can afford them (Foxhall 1998). She also argued for recognition of the agency of ancient consumers – their ability to make choices regarding the kinds of goods they expended their resources upon – and an understanding of the specific social and cultural situations ancient consumers inhabited. The points made by Foxhall, like those of Dietler, are important ones to build upon, but her results were limited by her strictly descriptive approach. Observation is useful as a first step, but it does not bring us much closer to understanding why the archaeological record of ancient material culture looks the way it does, and what mechanisms led to its creation. What is needed instead is a process of rigorous theory-building that poses testable questions about the archaeological record – for example, what choices did ancient consumers make, from what set of possibilities and, most importantly, why did they make those choices and not others?

In what follows, ‘consumption’ is used broadly, referring not only to purely economic transactions involving the purchase of goods, but also to the decisions made in arriving at those purchases, as well as the use-life of the goods following their purchase. This paper therefore seeks to show how consumption

Cook et al. (1996). Other authors who work on the classical world have been less rigorously theoretical about their use of the term, preferring to see only a purely ‘transactional’ side to consumption (see below, as well as, for example, many of the papers in Crielaard et al. 1999).

I agree generally with Sahlins (1985; 1995; 2005), who has argued repeatedly that a crucial element in understanding historical change is knowledge of how aspects of culture define the ways in which people can or will react in a given situation. I believe, however, that economic decisions are not solely cultural.

See, for example, Foxhall 1998; Hodos 2006.

See n. 2 above.
was at least partly a function of consumer choice. It also seeks to fill in part of the history of ceramic vessels, the *chaîne opératoire* mentioned earlier. The argument will be advanced that it is possible (though difficult) to identify consumer choice in the archaeological record. Discussion will end by making some tentative and preliminary steps towards a theoretical understanding of economic exchange that embraces consumer agency and the role of taste in shaping the choices consumers made.

There are a variety of questions that need to be considered in order to understand fully the consumption of pottery. First, it is necessary to understand each vessel or set of vessels as the subject of a unique transaction. Within any given transaction, both buyer and seller had to evaluate where the goods stood relative to other possible purchases or sales with respect to their intended function, decoration, socio-cultural meaning and value in signalling the purchaser’s sense of fashion or taste to other individuals. These more-or-less intangible factors joined more concrete ones in determining an agreed-upon price. Some other factors that determined price included the costs, noted earlier, of production and transport (both by land and sea, including the costs incurred from breakage of some of the vessels during transit), the rarity of the type or fabric of the particular vessel in the importing context, and the ability of a seller to gain a profit against the desire of the purchaser to keep the price as low as possible. Clearly, it will be difficult to account for all of these variables in an ancient milieu. In fact, as will be shown, it is probably impossible to describe ancient consumer choice in modern economic terms without knowing the prices involved in pottery transactions.

Modern microeconomic discussions equate the agency of consumers with the ways in which ‘a chosen combination of goods changes given a change in prices or income’ (Arnold 2004, 167-73). Briefly, this variability is analysed in a three-step process. The set of points at which equal utility is derived from various combinations of goods is described graphically by a line called an ‘indifference curve’ (Fig. 1a). When combined with a graph plotting a consumer’s budget constraint (the amount of each of two different goods that it is possible to purchase on a set income) (Fig. 1b), it is possible to produce a demand curve (Fig. 2a-b). Demand curves show the intersection of the price of goods and the quantity purchased, thereby demonstrating the ways in which consumer choices change as price varies. Since these kinds of analyses are predicated on a clear knowledge of prices in the marketplace, it is difficult to

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6 A criticism of the mechanistic quality of such an analysis of consumption may easily be made here. Consumers, as already noted, do not react solely to price and availability, but also to less tangible factors such as quality or cachet of available goods relative to one another.
CONSUMPTION AND CHOICE IN ANCIENT SICILY

Fig. 1: (a) A chart showing indifference curves for groups ('bundles') of two types of goods – in this case milk and orange juice – from which an individual will derive the same total utility (after Arnold 2004, 169). For example, a bundle of 8 cartons of milk and 3 cartons of orange juice has the same total utility in this chart as a bundle containing 5 cartons of milk and 4 cartons of orange juice. It is possible to have multiple indifference curves for the same pairs of goods – larger bundles, which equal greater total utility, appear on curves farther from the origin (see Fig. 2a). (b) A chart showing an individual’s budget constraint (the different combinations of two goods that can be purchased based on the individual’s income and the prices of the two goods) (after Arnold 2004, 167).
Fig. 2: (a) A chart showing consumer equilibria (A, B) based on two different prices for the same good X. The lines $I_1$ and $I_2$ are indifference curves for goods X and Y; $I_2$ represents larger total utility. Consumer equilibrium is the point at which the slope of an indifference curve is the same as or is tangent to the budget constraint. In this example, at a price of $10 for good X, A is the consumer equilibrium point, allowing the individual to consume 30 units of good X. At a lower price of $5 for good X, the budget constraint shifts towards more units of that good, and consumer equilibrium is reached at 35 units (after Arnold 2004, 174). (b) Using the data derived from Fig. 2 (a) for price and quantity, it is possible to plot demand curve D for good X, and thereby to understand how consumers make their purchasing decisions (after Arnold 2004, 174).
apply them to examples from the ancient economy. Examination of ancient consumer choice will therefore have to take a different approach, one that considers changes in consumption practices over time as evidence for the agency of consumers. Several different factors could also cause changes in consumption, particularly possible variations in the supply of the product whose consumption is being tracked, and these factors must be accounted for as well.

In order to understand changes in consumption practices over time, it will be useful to turn our attention to a specific set of evidence. The pottery from two groups of deposits excavated at Morgantina, located in the hills of east-central Sicily some 60 km from the Ionian Sea, will serve to show how consumer choice can be recognised and analysed. Morgantina has the advantage, for the purposes of this investigation, of being composed of two distinct, yet chronologically and geographically contiguous settlements. The first town was founded by an indigenous population around 1000-900 BC on the hill now known as Cittadella, and it continued to be inhabited until the 5th century (Leighton 1993) (Fig. 3). Around 550 BC, Greek influences in the form of architecture and imported goods, especially pottery, began to appear with increasing frequency (Sjöqvist 1973; Antonaccio 1997). Diodorus Siculus (11. 78. 5) provides the only extant literary reference to the Cittadella settlement, explaining that the town was captured in 459 BC by the Sikel leader Ducetius and his army. A destruction layer dating to the middle of the 5th century seems to confirm Diodorus’ account (Sjöqvist 1958, 156; Antonaccio 1997, 186). At some point soon thereafter – apparently by about 430 – a settlement was founded on the adjoining ridge, Serra Orlando (Walsh 2006). This new Morgantina was characterised by a Greek-style grid plan that made allowances for the largest agora known in Sicily (Bell 1984-85, 504). There is also epigraphic evidence for the presence of Greeks from the very earliest period of occupation (Bell 1998, 319-20; Cordano 1992). At the same time, domestic assemblages at both settlements demonstrate an affinity at Morgantina in the 5th century for locally produced indigenous fine wares, especially the matte-painted ware known as Siculo-Geometric (or by its type-site, Licodia Euboia) (Walsh 2006). In other words, it appears that Cittadella, in its latest phases, and Serra Orlando, in its earliest phases, were both mixed settlements.

The overall composition of the assemblages will receive greater attention later, but for the moment it is worth concentrating on a single type. A strong preference for shiny black imports was in evidence in both of the settlements at Morgantina, with large proportions of black gloss, including imitation wares probably manufactured in colonies on the Sicilian coast, found in both towns, and large amounts of Lakonian black gloss also present on Cittadella in the
Fig. 3: Map of Morgantina, showing the Archaic and Early Classical settlement on the hill of Citadella, and the Classical through Roman period settlement on Serra Orlando. Courtesy of Prof. Malcolm Bell, III.
The most common fabric of any kind found in 5th-century contexts at both settlements is Athenian black gloss (ABG). Fully one-quarter of all fragments from domestic assemblages on Serra Orlando were in ABG. The results for the settlement on Cittadella are preliminary, but seem to show a similar distribution. The archaeological record found at Morgantina therefore offers an opportunity for tracking changes in the consumption of at least one type of imported good over time, and the physical relationship between the two settlements allows a measure of control over geographical variation.

The assemblages of pottery were remarkably homogeneous within each of the two settlements. 279 diagnostic fragments of ABG have been catalogued from early 5th-century Cittadella. The distribution of shapes shows that local interest in ABG was concerned almost exclusively with smaller vessels used for drinking: in order of frequency, stemmed cups, skyphoi, stemless cups, cup-skyphoi, mugs, kantharoi and bolsals (Fig. 4). Eating vessels – consisting of small bowls, salt cellars and one-handlers – comprised only 15% of ABG on Cittadella, and there were a couple of lamp and lekythos fragments as well. Large vessels associated with drinking, such as amphorae, pelikai or psykters were absent, apart from a single krater fragment. On Serra Orlando, by contrast, a different range of shapes was found, represented by 122 diagnostic fragments (far fewer 5th-century contexts were excavated on Serra Orlando compared to Cittadella). Of drinking vessels, skyphoi and stemless cups were almost equally popular, with mugs, stemmed cups and kantharoi trailing far behind (Fig. 5). Salt cellars and small bowls were almost the only eating vessels. Lamps were much more common on Serra Orlando in ABG. Interestingly, the distribution of shapes was restricted in the same ways across all the assemblages examined within each site, demonstrating the existence in both periods at Morgantina of two different but relatively widespread ideas of the kinds of imported pottery one should buy.

Consideration of these data, particularly the functions for which ABG vessels were intended, within the context of their larger assemblages including vases in other fabrics, can help to explain consumption practices at Morgantina over the course of the 5th century. Clearly, in both settlements, people wanted ABG for drinking, but not for pouring, mixing or storing liquids. They were also not typically interested in it for eating or serving large amounts of food, or for any other purpose besides drinking. On the occasions when ABG vessels

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7 See also Walsh and Antonaccio, forthcoming.
8 The ABG from both Serra Orlando is the subject of a study currently underway by the author.
were bought for eating, the types chosen were meant for holding single servings of food or, more commonly, condiments.

In all of the ways just mentioned, Cittadella and Serra Orlando seem to show similarities. But when we take a closer look at the distributions of specific shapes, important differences emerge. To take one example, on Serra Orlando, skyphoi and stemless cups (especially the heavy versions known as Castulo cups) are quite common, but stemmed cups are practically non-existent. Castulo cups are noticeably heavier than other stemless cups as a consequence of their thick walls, leading to the theory that they were designed expressly for the export market, where durability during transport would be essential.\(^9\) Morgantina’s inland location might make it possible that stemmed

\(^9\) Castulo cups were identified as a type by Shefton (1995). A relatively intact example from Cittadella (inv. 80-576) has been published in Antonaccio (2004, 75-76). Shefton (1997, 88) later
cups simply never arrived in the town, owing to their inherent fragility. Comparison with Cittadella, however, demonstrates that this cannot be the case; far from merely being present there, stemmed cups were the most prevalent shape. The absence of stemmed cups from Serra Orlando cannot therefore be explained by the impossibility of transporting them so far overland. An examination of stemmed shapes produced in Athens shows, too, that they were still being produced in quantity in the second half of the 5th century, and evidence from coastal colonies, such as Kamarina, Himera and Lipari, shows that these argued that the thickness of the cups would also help them survive rowdy barbarian feasts, thus making them more attractive to foreign purchasers: ‘I reflected whether the heavy, sturdy build of the cup was not due merely to the sensible precautions against breakage during lengthy overland transport, but also to the desirability that these cups should survive being dropped on the floor in the course of a barbarian banquet swilled down with strong drink or indeed when used as weapons during brawls on such occasions. Skulls might crack, but not the cups!’ There is, however, no evidence that dining in non-Greek contexts was less refined than in Greek poleis.

Fig. 5: Proportions of diagnostic Attic black gloss fragments by shape from Classical Serra Orlando (Morgantina).
cups arrived in Sicily throughout the century. Consumers’ preferences for other cup shapes at Morgantina were thus not affected by a lack of availability – or, in economic terms, a lack of supply – of stemmed cups.

If a low supply cannot be singled out as a reason why stemmed cups do not appear on Serra Orlando, perhaps a rise in price due to some other factor could explain their absence. It is possible that ABG as a whole became more expensive, either because it was scarce or because it was in such high demand. Comparison of assemblages from both settlements at Morgantina, however, shows that ABG appears in relatively large proportions across all the households sampled. An examination of ABG finds from tomb and settlement contexts at 21 contemporary sites across inland Sicily largely confirms this conclusion – if anything, more ABG found its way to Morgantina than to other, possibly less Hellenised towns, and the ABG that arrived at Morgantina came in a wider range of shapes (Walsh 2006). Stemmed cups appeared in excavations at six other inland sites, none as well-explored as Morgantina. Scarcity or overly high demand cannot be attributed, therefore, as causes for the overwhelming presence of stemmed cups at Cittadella, and their absence in the following half-century at Serra Orlando.

These points seem to show that price was not a significant factor in the adoption or rejection of stemmed cups. Neither is vessel function a useful explanation; stemless cups and skyphoi could easily serve the same purpose as stemmed cups. Yet it seems clear that a choice was made, a preference registered by buyers – individually and as a group – for one type over another. The problem remains to understand that choice. One possibility remains, although it is particularly difficult to deal with rigorously: taste. This nebulous concept, which can also be characterised by the word ‘fashion’, is ‘an embodied preference, a form of practical (and most often, unconscious) comprehension that is often revealed through refusals’, to quote Stahl (2002, 833), working from Bourdieu. Stahl (2002, 835) has identified variables that shape taste-making, including the type of production (household, specialised craft, industrial, etc.), ‘proximity to source’, the diversity of available objects and the quantity of available objects.

10 Sparkes and Talcott (1972, 88) note that Vicups and Acrocups were produced in ABG throughout the 5th century, though stemless shapes become more prominent in this period. For Kamarina, Orsi 1990. For Himera, see Adriani et al. 1970; Allegro et al. 1976. For Lipari see, Bernabò Brea and Cavalier 1965; 1991; 1994; Bernabò Brea, Cavalier, and Villard 2001. An analysis of the ABG pottery from all four sites can be found in Walsh 2006.

11 Stemmed cups were found at Ramacca (Procelli 1988-89, 110-11), Calascibetta (Albanese 1988-89, 366-68), Pergusa (apparently unpublished, but on display at the Archaeological Museum of Enna), Monte Casasia (Frasca and Pelagatti 1994-95, 538), Contrada Piano Camera (Panvini and Caminneci 1993-94) and Monte Maranfusa (Del Vais in Spatafora 2003, 321-46).
While these variables certainly provide a useful starting point for understanding how taste preferences might emerge, some others might reasonably be added, such as the ability of a purchased object to signal something important about its owner and his or her status. A set of ABG cups may have been understood by *Morgantinoi* as indicative of its owner’s good taste, wealth and ability to procure products from far away – something that presumably not everyone would be able to do, at least in the first phase of ABG’s introduction in Sicily. The audience’s recognition of these qualities in the owner would translate into enhanced respect that in turn favoured the owner’s acquisition of greater power, resources and status. In this way, a method of ‘costly signalling’ or ‘wasteful advertising’ would ensure continued (or enhanced) access to resources and power.

Recent work on the distribution of imported kraters on Sicily allows an examination of how taste formed a part of consumption practices on the island (Rabinowitz 2004). As noted, there are few kraters, amphorae, hydriae, pelikai or other large shapes in ABG anywhere in Sicily, including Morgantina. This may be due to the popularity of those shapes in figured wares such as Attic red-figure. In a survey of the find-spots of 1000 kraters around the Mediterranean, Rabinowitz found six fragments of Attic black-gloss kraters – all in Sicily. At the same time, he found 198 fragments of Attic red-figure kraters on the island. The latter vessels were found both in coastal and interior sites, across the entire island. If the pattern discovered by Rabinowitz holds for other large shapes, it may be the case that consumers decided that if they were going to buy large Athenian vessels, they wanted them to be decorated with images. Smaller vessels like cups, with their limited ability to display images, might have been good enough to use as fine ware if they could simply be recognised as Athenian (as indicated, for example, by the large numbers of imitations also present in the assemblages). The issue of display should not be underestimated here; regardless of the ability of Sicilian spectators to interpret the images on an Athenian krater ‘correctly’, the presence of an image seems to have been decisive for buyers because it added value – a value derived from the fact that people would be looking at it.

Further information about consumption practices can be gained when complete assemblages are examined, as has been done for Serra Orlando. A mixture of wares is found for different functions. As noted, across all the assemblages,

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12 A theory known as ‘costly signalling’, developed in the milieu of evolutionary biology, explains how high-cost attributes can be adaptively useful by demonstrating high status or reproductive ability. For an exploration of costly-signalling theory as adapted to archaeological problems, see Neiman 1997.
ABG (and imitations) are found for drinking and, to a lesser extent, eating out of small bowls. Larger, but still individual-sized, local fine ware bowls were also used for eating. Large amounts of liquid or dry goods were stored in plain ware jars or in painted Siclulo-Geometric jars. No plates were identified in any fabric. The sets of pottery found on Serra Orlando seem to have been adapted specifically to a cuisine that included foods such as soups, stews, or porridges – foods that required bowls, rather than plates. This pattern does not fit what we know about Greek cuisine in this period, especially in light of the fact that plates – imported ABG plates – were found in the coastal colonies at this time. Instead, it is indicative of indigenous cuisine still being used in an otherwise heavily Hellenised town. The distribution of ABG at Morgantina shows a priority for collecting the most fashionable Greek fabric of the time for drinking, at both sites, and a concomitant disinterest in the same ware for almost any other kind of use. The purchase of ABG vessels can thus be interpreted as an expression of a local taste for imports, but one defined by the parameters of a commonly-held notion of dining practices.

Much more work remains to be done to construct a theory of taste that is related to consumption. This brief survey of the consumption of Athenian pottery at Morgantina and elsewhere has shown, however, that it is possible to find evidence in the archaeological record for the important phenomenon of consumer choice. By paying close attention to the changes in pottery found at sites over time, the agency of consumers can be discovered and their role in the formation of assemblages ascertained.

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