A Roman Coarseware Casserole in the Kelsey Museum

North Africa, Roman period, late second or third century CE
Roman coarseware casserole
Burnt-orange clay, Diam. 15.7 cm; H. ca. 12 cm
Donated by Byron Count De Prorok in 1924, Kelsey Museum 7000

Coarseware vessels were used for cooking and dining by the vast majority of people in the ancient world and are the type of artifact most commonly encountered by field archaeologists throughout the Mediterranean. Simple and undecorated, such pottery has occupied a modest place in modern scholarship, but the ubiquity of these vessels and their functional, rather than decorative or ceremonial, role make them excellent sources for understanding the food and foodways of ancient people.

A small casserole in the Kelsey Museum, said to have come from Carthage, is a prime example. Made of rough, burnt-orange clay, the bowl is badly damaged and only a little more than half remains. It has a sagging, rounded bottom and slightly convex sides, which flare outward toward the rim to present an S-shaped profile. The exterior has been burnished rather than slipped, and the only decoration is a thin incised line just below the rim. The rounded, everted rim has a slight lip on the interior to support a lid.

Despite its condition, it is possible to identify the type, date, and probable source of the bowl. The casserole is typical of many small cooking pots manufactured in North Africa between the late second and fourth centuries CE. The form (Hayes Type 183) is extremely common at sites in the Tunisian Sahel and at Sabratha in Libya and was probably made in both areas (Dore and Schinke 1992, 154–156, fig. 13; Dore and Keay 1989, Type 58). The shape is known at Carthage but is much less common there (Hayes 1972, 203, ex. 5).

The casserole, which is accompanied by a mismatched lid (KM 7001) of a different fabric, was originally published in the Corpus Vásornum Antiquorum (Van Ingen 1933, 74 and pl. 45.23) and was used as a type vessel by John Hayes in his monumental Late Roman Pottery (1972, 203, ex. 3). Cf. Hayes 1980, xlvi, lxxix.

Strictly speaking, Hayes Type numbers apply only to slipped vessels deserving the label “African Red Slip” (ARS). Nevertheless, Hayes provided a number for this class of casseroles, almost all of which are unslipped and therefore not ARS.
The casseroles were certainly produced in kilns at the ancient site of Leptiminus (Modern Lamta, Tunisia), where large quantities of poorly fired or malformed pots were located near the ancient amphitheater by the University of Michigan archaeological survey of the urban site (Dore and Schinke 1992, 138). Immense quantities have also been recovered in and around kilns recently excavated at the site, where they were manufactured in three distinct sizes (Stone et al. 1998, 312; Stirling et al. 2000, 196–197). The presence of vessel fragments at individual urban domestic sites (Dore and Schinke 1992, 156) confirms that the form was used by the local inhabitants and was not produced only for export.

The fact that casseroles of this type were produced in large quantities, and remained relatively uniform in shape and size over a considerable period, also suggests a stable need for these vessels, and therefore the possibility of a standard or traditional food preparation technique, in coastal Africa. The forms may have been less common farther inland, but coarsewares are better known archaeologically along the coast, so it is not yet possible to draw detailed conclusions about variations in distribution between those areas.

Although African pottery, especially African Red Slip fineware, was extremely popular throughout the Mediterranean in the third to sixth centuries CE, and was widely exported, this particular coarseware form and others like it are found only rarely outside Africa. In general, coarsewares seem to have developed in distinct regional styles throughout antiquity. The low value of the pottery and the high cost of transport made the long-distance trade of coarsewares unprofitable, even in volume, although they were sometimes loaded onto ships as ballast and thus found their way to far-flung locations (Green 1986, 162–166). A few pieces may have been transported among the personal possessions of individual travelers. Nevertheless, coarsewares seem to have enjoyed relatively limited distribution.

Given this fact, coarsewares may serve as better indicators of regional dietary variation than the finewares that are usually illustrated in discussions of ancient dining. This would be true especially of forms that have no fineware equivalents and that were rarely exported. With a slightly rounded bottom, the vessel from the Kelsey Museum would not have been particularly stable on a hard surface but would have been appropriate for suspending on a stand above a fire or for resting in ashes—both of which would have provided low, even heat to the contents. The nearly vertical sides would have helped to ensure uniform cooking, while the lid would have prevented the evaporation of moisture—much like a modern stock pot. Combined with the relatively small size of the vessel, the shape suggests soup, stew, or sauce prepared in modest quantities.
Could it be that this particular form was better suited to indigenous cooking techniques than to those practiced outside the Sahel and Tripolitania? The pottery of the Sahel was linked culturally to Carthage until the second century CE, when it began to show more affinity to styles in Tripolitania (Dore and Schinke 1992, 156). Given the fact that food is so closely related to identity, could the change in vessel shapes indicate an alteration in self-perception? Another possibility is even more intriguing: from the third century CE onward, there was a tendency toward ever larger serving trays, especially fineware serving trays, while cooking vessels remained more or less constant in size (Hayes 1997, 60). Could this imply continuity of regional food preparation but changing dining practices empirewide?

It is common to view coarseware pottery with a certain amount of contempt. Lacking the artistic prestige of fineware ceramics, it is viewed as somehow less interesting and less informative. Nevertheless, as the main type of artifact used by people for dining and cooking, it is extremely informative about the everyday food and foodways of the vast majority of the population.

R. James Cook
PhD Student, Classical Art and Archaeology

Works Cited


