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## THE ROMAN CITY AS ARTICULATED THROUGH TERRA SIGILLATA

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*Summary. Debates on the nature of the Roman city and its relation to the countryside have recently moved towards questioning the validity of the very category of 'the city', both analytically and in terms of past reality. While archaeology has long been mobilized within these debates, this paper argues for the unexplored potential of a range of specialist pockets of qualitative knowledge about specific artefact classes. Terra sigillata, the red-gloss imperial tableware, is a case in point. By adopting a bird's eye view of sigillata production, distribution and consumption across a geographical and chronological range, this paper develops a new metaphor for the role of Roman cities: as switching devices in the building of networks. By describing the role of cities in structural rather than categorical terms, this metaphor allows for contingency and for the integration of different analytical and interpretive scales.*

### FROM CITIES TO NETWORKS AND FLOWS

Despite many claims to the contrary (e.g. 'moving beyond' as per Parkins 1997), the consumer city model remains the red herring of the debates on the Roman city, inevitably imbuing statements and evidence with a 'pro' or 'con' aura. The crux of the matter is the relation between city and countryside in the Roman world: that the city was dependent on agricultural surplus is now commonplace, but whether this relation was a productive one whereby a flow of manufactured goods or services would be redirected to the countryside (Morley 1996, 14) or a purely parasitic one (Finley 1973, 125 and *passim*; Fulford 1982) remains highly contentious (Kehoe 2007; Pitts forthcoming; Whittaker 1995).

Critical voices have tried to shake the foundations of this debate by questioning the validity of the label of 'Roman city'. Whereas Finley confidently claimed to have access to an ancient emic definition where '[t]he aesthetic-architectural definition was shorthand for a political and social definition' (Finley 1973, 124), scholars today struggle even to pin down their subject matter in analytical terms. Wallace-Hadrill (1991, ix) asks, 'What does it mean, in the context of Greco-Roman antiquity, to call your theme "the city"?', and Morley (1997, 44) is led to wonder 'whether "the city" is a defensible or productive category of analysis'. Fundamental

deconstruction is also called for from an archaeological angle, with Millett (2001, 65) worrying ‘if we do not know what functions a town was fulfilling, how can we know how to approach its relationship with its hinterland?’

Horden and Purcell (2000, ch. 4) have perhaps most forcefully critiqued the usefulness of a universal and bounded category of ‘the city’ (or of its twin ‘the countryside’, for that matter) as an analytical guide. But, if we refuse to start from cities as analytical entities, then considering the interconnections between those cities (e.g. Millett 1982, 422 (who had already introduced the term ‘network’); Morley 1997, 45) brings no solution either. Whether the Roman city makes for a meaningful category can no longer be an *a priori* question. The theoretical answer seems to be to zoom in on (or, rather, out to) ‘larger ecological processes’ (Horden and Purcell 2000, 90) – often approached as flows and networks – and to examine whether cities acquired certain attributes as a result of these flows, and, the other way round, whether cities caused tensions, bottlenecks or accelerations to form in those flows. Implementation of this theoretical template in practice, however, still awaits exploration. With talk of ecological processes and flows, all eyes are on archaeology.

#### ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE ROMAN CITY

In dealing with a debate as old and worn as that concerning the nature of the Roman city, the threat of reinventing the wheel looms large. The project of tackling this predominantly historical debate from an archaeological angle can thus not be claimed to be a new one (e.g. Mattingly 1997; Millett 1982; 1991). Space for innovation is not to be found in the use of new types of evidence, but in new ways of mobilizing existing – *in casu* archaeological – evidence.

As long as ‘the Roman city’ stood as an analytical *a priori* to the debate, archaeology’s role was one of identifying empirical correlates for predefined analytical tags (critiqued by Mattingly 1997, 212; Millett 2001, 64). These tags and their correlates (e.g. monuments; craft activity; population size) then received variable leverage depending on which side of the debate they were inserted in (but e.g. Woolf 2000 for a more nuanced account). Advancements could be made through the ‘greater geographical and chronological accuracy’ and ‘increased precision’ afforded by archaeological evidence (Parkins 1998, 2–3), but remained limited to refinements of existing models (e.g. Pitts forthcoming).

What has changed in the use of archaeological evidence now that the category of ‘the city’ no longer stands as the container for our analyses? As far as archaeology has become an independent voice in the debate, this has primarily taken the form of quantification, where the key question is that of ‘how much’ (especially the Oxford Roman Economy Project: Bowman and Wilson 2009; Wilson 2009). But ‘quantification’ as a research question is bound to find a certain kind of economic structure, where ‘more’ and ‘less’ are the defining economic parameters. As a result, the question of ‘how much’ – while a necessary qualifier of any inquiry into the nature of the Roman city – has tended to be linked to the issue of the city in a straightforward way, with ‘less trade’ reinforcing the consumer city model, and ‘more trade’ undermining it.

Arguably, the qualitative side of archaeological evidence – in particular artefacts, or portable material culture – has been included in the debates on the Roman city through the method of surface survey. Having long outgrown its infancy, when simple distribution maps were the norm (e.g. Millett 1991), survey archaeology can now build on sophisticated tools to reconstruct the surface footprint of past activity on the landscape as a whole (Alcock and Cherry

2004; Barker and Lloyd 1991; Francovich and Patterson 2000; Johnson and Millett 2013; Millett 2011). The lengthy debates over the identification of sites and their character can now be reinterpreted as a precursor to the more general unease with *a priori* labels like ‘the Roman city’ expressed in the previous section. As such, survey archaeology, with its regional and diachronic vision, seems to fit well into an analysis of how flows (of goods, people, ideas, etc.) constituted something of ‘a Roman city’, and vice versa. While this is no doubt true, the role of individual material categories within these analyses largely remains unchanged. Terra sigillata pottery, for example, is still taken to represent a date in the first instance, or, in a second instance, an indication of the nature of the site.

This in itself is of course not wrong. What this paper seeks to highlight, however, is the immense but unexplored potential of the qualitative knowledge amassed in the dense fields of Roman artefact studies (but see Hingley and Willis 2007; Perring 2002; Perring and Pitts 2013; Pitts forthcoming). What if we examine how something of ‘a Roman city’ emerged from the flows of a single, well-studied artefact class, like terra sigillata? Instead of pinning down our empirical gaze on a single site or region – as with survey – such an approach allows us to follow the production, distribution and consumption of sigillata wherever it leads us, and to come close to something of analytical surprise at the ripples caused in this trajectory by cities.

#### DOES ANYONE NEED AN INTRODUCTION TO TERRA SIGILLATA?

Terra sigillata is the archetypical class of Roman tablewares, which was produced throughout the western Roman empire<sup>1</sup> and distributed widely (Fig. 1 locates the main sites mentioned in this article). Production started in Italy around 30 BC, then gradually new production sites were set up in southern Gaul around the last quarter of the first century BC, reaching Central Gaul by the beginning of the first century AD (see Fig. 2 for an example of a Central Gaulish sigillata bowl) (Bémont and Jacob 1986; Brulet *et al.* 2010; Ettlinger 1990). The second and third centuries AD saw the emergence of a true mosaic of production sites in the regions of Argonne, Mosel and north-east Gaul, but these have been excluded from most keystone analyses and models of western sigillata production (e.g. Picon 2002a) because of their technical and organizational (and, possibly, conceptual (Van Oyen 2013b)) differences. For reasons of length, the current paper will not consider those East Gaulish products.

The reach of some sigillata production sites was very wide indeed: pots produced in southern Gaul made their way to Britain and the army camps along the Rhine (Marsh 1981; Willis 2005). Moreover, the quantities were large for a pre-industrial economy – current estimates of production volumes in La Graufesenque, the largest production site in southern Gaul in the first century AD, are of 15 million pots per year (Hartley 2005, 116). Although pottery had a relatively low value per unit, and was probably not a prime trading good in itself, its preservation does provide us with a proxy for other – now invisible – flows of goods along with which it travelled: metals (e.g. Middleton 1980), foodstuffs, fuel, etc.

Sigillata’s degree of standardization in production (Picon 2006) has meant that it has lent itself to fine-grained dating and provenancing, based on form, decoration, stamps (Hartley and Dickinson 2008–12), etc. This detailed knowledge allows us to trace how this product moved through production, distribution and consumption. Moreover, as one of the most emblematic

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1 This study will not discuss Hispanic sigillata, Eastern sigillata, or African Red Slip Ware.

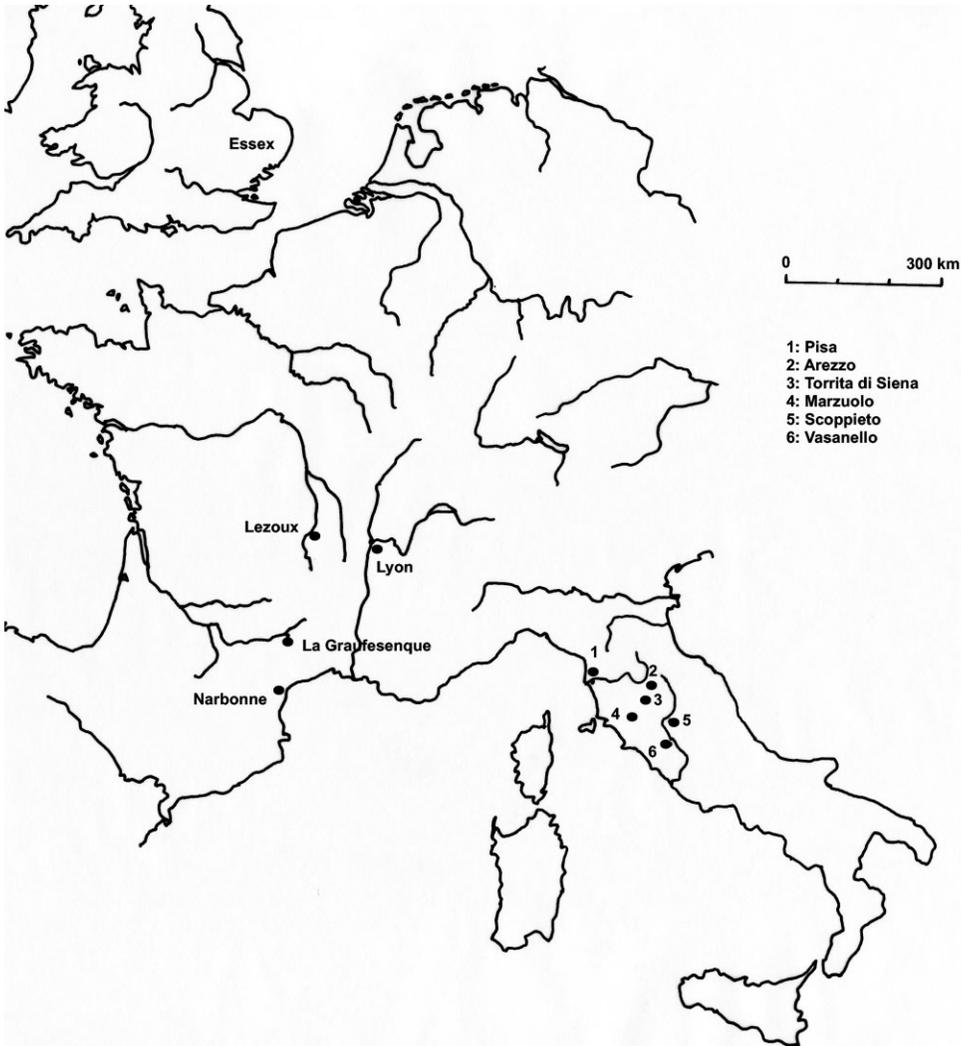


Figure 1  
Map of sites mentioned in text, north at top (drawing: author).

artefact classes of Roman archaeology (Greene 1992; recently Fulford and Durham 2013), sigillata has shaped some of its major narratives, such as the debates on Romanization (Woolf 1998, 185–205; Wallace-Hadrill 2008, 407–21) or those concerning trade and the Roman economy (e.g. Harris 1993; Peacock 1982). A qualitative analysis of how flows of sigillata intersected with the Roman city, and whether these confirm or challenge something of a category of ‘the city’, thus prove to have wider resonance with such debates.

But let us first pause and reiterate the basics of sigillata production. As for all kinds of pottery, the raw materials needed were clay, water and fuel (mostly wood). Sigillata production, however, imposed specific constraints on these general requirements. Firstly, very fine clays were



Figure 2

Lezoux sigillata (second half of second century AD), decorated bowl Drag. 37 by Paternus (photo: Richard Delage).

selected of a specific, calcareous kind (Picon 2002b; Van Oyen 2012). Secondly, in order to obtain a shiny, bright red surface, sigillata had to be fired in a strictly oxidizing atmosphere, which meant that the vessels could not enter into contact with the fumes. But because chemical processes occur more slowly in an oxidizing atmosphere (Picon 1973), more and slow-burning wood was needed to maintain very high and consistent firing temperatures (Fernandes *et al.* 2005).

Given these stipulations, sigillata production also required craftsmen skilled in a particular process, and a higher investment than was necessary for the production of coarse wares. This investment was probably catered for by landowners, who owned clays, and maybe the production infrastructure – although it remains unclear just how production was organized and whether this was consistent in between sites and periods (Dannell 2002; Fülle 1997; Strobel 1992). Finally, production sites also needed to be linked to transport facilities and distribution networks (Picon 2002a sees this as the decisive factor in investment).

In what follows, these general requirements will be amplified in relation to specific cases. This paper will be structured chronologically, tracing a series of subsequent trajectories of sigillata production, distribution and consumption, and discussing how these articulated the nature and role of the Roman city.

#### ITALY (LAST QUARTER OF THE FIRST CENTURY BC): DENSITIES AND DISTRIBUTION NETWORKS

Production of terra sigillata in Italy started off around 30 BC (Ettliger 1990). But this was not an instant innovation. Rather, terra sigillata followed on, both temporally and technically, from the so-called black-gloss fine wares of the Republican period (Morel 1981). The transition was gradual, and involved some new forms, a new colour (red instead of black), and a modified firing technique to obtain the red exterior colour (Cuomo di Caprio 2007). Just how and when the transition occurred remain unclear.

Research has traditionally focused on a couple of cities, most notably Arezzo – where discoveries of production evidence have been made since the Renaissance (Menchelli 2005) – and Pisa. In addition, smaller-scale production had been known since the late nineteenth century at sites like Pozzuoli and Cales in Campania (Kenrick 2004; Soricelli 2004). Scholarship has thus tended to approach Italian sigillata production squarely as an urban phenomenon. Projected onto the debates about the nature of the Roman city, this seemed to argue for a producer city model on a par with medieval towns, with workshops and craftsmen actively creating a thriving urban centre from which trade goods radiated.

However, this strictly urban focus has recently been challenged. Firstly, considering the evidence for production at Arezzo itself, for example, '[t]he locations of production sites outside the ancient town boundaries [. . .] suggest that the Arretine *terra sigillata* industry was suburban' (Fülle 1997, 145). This calls into question how we delimit the city from its territory – where did the suburban area end and the countryside begin? This is not only a salient question for a giant and expanded metropolis like Rome, with functional differentiation in its suburban zones (Morley 1996) and some attestations of possible sigillata production (Olcese 2004), but also for smaller-scale cities like Arezzo. Moreover, it is very likely that the city's boundaries were defined multiply rather than singularly, in relation to different sets of practices or goals (e.g. burial, tax levying, jurisdiction, etc.). Secondly, given the results of new excavations, it is becoming increasingly clear that sigillata production in Italy was not restricted to (sub)urban sites, but also took place in smaller-scale settlements in the countryside (Bergamini and Manca 2008; Cuomo di Caprio 2007, 337–48; Poblome *et al.* 2004; Sforzini 1987). Especially in Etruria we now have evidence for rural production: in relation to a villa and other types of production activity such as tiles and bricks at Torrita di Siena (Pucci 1990), on a small-scale artisanal site built on a former temple platform in the Tiber Valley at Scoppieto (Bergamini 2004; Bergamini and Gaggiotti 2011), and in the context of an artisanal settlement at Marzuolo (Vaccaro forthcoming).

The chronology is not always clear: for example, it is hard to tell whether the suburban production activity at Arezzo took off much earlier than that in rural Etruria. What we can tell, however, is that at most sites a process of experimentation preceded standardized sigillata production. As such, chemical analysis has assigned sigillata with a black slip found at Magdalensberg to an early production phase at Arezzo (Maggetti *et al.* 1986). At the rural site of Marzuolo, too, some provisional evidence points to an experimental stage in sigillata production around 30/20–10 BC, while proper sigillata production is attested at least for the third quarter of the first century AD (Vaccaro forthcoming). Whether or not ideas, know-how and techniques thus radiated from an urban centre like Arezzo to the countryside, these ideas had to be established in each centre instead of being transplanted as a ready-made package of knowledge.

As a consequence, sigillata production sites were not differentiated by their active or passive roles, but by the scale of their production activity and the distribution of their products. Firstly, many more production units or workshops were present in Arezzo than at rural sites like Torrita di Siena. Just how sigillata production was organized and who invested in it remain unresolved questions, but for Italian sigillata the use of slave labour is generally confirmed (Fülle 1997), although this does not rule out varying modalities of tenancy (cf. Foxhall 1990). In terms of investment, the link with villas and rural agricultural estates is probably key, at least for the rural production sites.

Secondly, as far as distribution is concerned, too, there is a clear difference. Products from the rural site of Torrita di Siena, for example, have only been attested in the immediate

locality (Kenrick 2004, 254; Pucci 1990). Granted, research on these rural sites is still in its infancy, and as a consequence it is likely that products from those sites have gone unrecognized in older assemblages. But, still, it is quite clear that those smaller-scale sites generally did not engage in long-distance trade. This is in contrast to the larger, urban sites like Arezzo and Pisa, whose products have been identified up to the northern army frontier along the Rhine and the Lippe. It has even been shown that contemporaneous workshops at Arezzo had specific distribution networks. P. Cornelius' output, for example, mainly travelled to the Iberian Peninsula and Morocco, while the products of L. Gellius were predominant in northern Italy and along the Danube (Kenrick 1993). In Italy, products from both workshops are more or less equally represented. This differential distribution is likely to have been the result of contacts with specific traders specializing in geographically specific markets (cf. Bang 2008; Frier and Kehoe 2007). Again, the difference between (sub)urban and rural sigillata production seems to have been one of scale rather than of fundamental organizational principles (networks of personal ties).

Such presumed targeting of distribution is traditionally also seen to be the motivation behind the much-discussed move from Arezzo to Pisa of the potter or workshop identified as Ateius (Kenrick 1997). In combination with chemical analysis, the study of stamps has shown that the Ateius workshops were transplanted from Arezzo to Pisa at the end of the first century BC. Meanwhile, it has become clear that these workshops were geared towards export via Gaul to the Rhine frontier. The rationale invoked here is one of strategic positioning in view of economic possibilities: in contrast to inland Arezzo, Pisa was situated near the Tyrrhenian Sea coast, providing easier access for overseas trade, in particular to southern Gaul (Kenrick 1997, 186; Menchelli 1997). This particular trade route had seen heavy trafficking of wine and accompanying fine wares during the previous two centuries (Tchernia 1983; 2009).

In sum, what role did the city play in Italian sigillata production, or, conversely, how did sigillata production define the city? Whereas production has tended to be ascribed to cities, this assumption is now being countered by showing how those workshops were actually located in suburban areas, and by demonstrating the existence of rural production sites. But maybe the urban/rural dichotomy is not the right model to characterize differences between Italian sigillata production sites. Instead, what we observe empirically is more of a difference in scale than nature. We could conceptualize the production landscape as a series of varying densities, with these densities directly linked to the extent of the distribution network they serve. This reading would fit an agglutinative model of growth in the Roman economy, where structures for vertical integration were poor, and preference was given to a more flexible and reversible process of horizontal multiplication (Fülle 1997, 130; Hawkins 2012; Poblome *et al.* 2012, 399).

#### EARLY PHASES IN GAUL (LAST QUARTER OF THE FIRST CENTURY BC): COLONIAL INTERVENTIONS

By the last quarter of the first century BC both the forms and the techniques of sigillata production started to be taken up in southern Gaul. The picture is a complex one, which has spawned terminological and conceptual debates about which of the resulting products can be characterized as 'real' sigillata, and which were 'imitations' or 'pre-sigillata' (Van Oyen 2013a). Suffice it to say here that a multi-stranded process of transformation took place between previously existing practices of fine ware production and the introduction of sigillata.

A first phenomenon of interest to this paper is the so-called 'South Gaulish pre-sigillata' production (Passelac 1992; Van Oyen 2013a). This term covers a series of sites which produced

– among other products such as tiles and cooking wares – fine wares akin to sigillata in form, clay and appearance, but using a different firing technique. In practical terms, these probably resulted from the involvement of at least some Italian potters (Passelac 2007), who possibly joined local potters.

What matters for the argument of this article is that the associated production sites were all linked chronologically and temporally to the colonial landscape created around Narbonne. Narbonne was the first civil Roman colony in Gaul, founded in 118 BC, and subject to a second colonial installation of veterans by Caesar in 46/45 BC (Gayraud 1981, 175–86; Goudineau 1978; 1996). There is evidence of pre-sigillata production at Narbonne itself (Passelac *et al.* 1986; Sanchez 2001; 2009), and the other sites all stood in a clear relation to the new landscape created by colonization: all were located near new crossroads, or linked to *villae* (which probably occupied newly allocated plots of the *centuriatio*) (Passelac 1992). The city here was thus a clear product of political and administrative voluntarism (Sanchez 2002), which brought in its wake a flow of ideas, skills, people and – probably – money for investment (Provost 2002), and thus also created a new landscape of economic opportunities. Pre-sigillata pots, however, never became the subject of long-distance or extra-regional trade (Martin 2005; Martin and Tilhard 2005).

Another, more or less contemporary phenomenon is that of sigillata production at Lyon, which started around 20–15 BC. Sigillata sherds with an ‘Ateius’ stamp were found along the northern *limes*, and initially assigned to Pisan workshops. But chemical analysis later traced these sherds to Lyon (Picon and Garmier 1974) – where sigillata workshops have been attested at the site of La Mulette (Desbat 2001; Desbat *et al.* 1996) – and identified fragments of moulds found at Lyon as made in Arezzo (Picon and Lasfargues 1974).

This has traditionally been explained as the Ateius ‘firm’ setting up a branch workshop at Lyon, for the same reasons as their move to Pisa: Lyon provided easy access by river (Rhône) to the major Roman army camps in the north. But recently the interpretation of Lyon as a branch workshop has been called into question. Based on analysis of the stamps and their structure, it has been argued that stamps containing the Ateius *nomen* might actually represent freedmen previously working for an Ateius workshop, but now free to set up businesses without any economic dependence (Fülle 1997) (this could even be true in the case of socially dependent slaves acting with *peculium* (Frier and Kehoe 2007)). The jury is still out on exactly where the decision-making resided, but it is clear that strong links existed between Italian production and the workshops installed at Lyon. Moreover, Lyon was an obvious choice to set up production, as it was extremely well connected in view of distribution, and it boasted a density of craft activity (Desbat 2001). What is more, here, too, we can link this to an act of political and administrative voluntarism: Lyon had become a colony in 43 BC, and by 27 BC Agrippa instituted Lyon as the provincial capital of the Three Gauls, and provided for a road link directly northwards to the Rhine army front.

To conclude, while Lyon was explicitly geared towards long-distance export (Brulet *et al.* 2010, 56), the pre-sigillata pots spread over many small-scale and lesser-connected sites in the countryside (Martin and Tilhard 2005), much like what we observed for Italy. Here, too, we can distinguish a pattern of varying densities within a network, but, significantly, these do not map onto a city/countryside continuum: as major cities, Narbonne and Lyon catered for strikingly different (pre-)sigillata distribution outlets. What is different for this early phase in Gaul is the decisive role of cities – Narbonne and Lyon – as nodes of political intervention, and as transmission channels of ideas and people (in this case, techniques, investment and potters). Their reshaping of the economic landscape and its opportunities – as far as we can judge based

on the flows of sigillata – was a secondary consequence, rather than a prime characteristic of their qualitatively distinct role as colonial identifiers.

MAJOR PRODUCTION SITES IN SOUTH AND CENTRAL GAUL (FIRST AND SECOND CENTURIES AD):  
POINTS OF TURNOVER

*Production*

But neither the production of sigillata in and around Narbonne nor that at Lyon continued for very long, both dwindling before the turn of the millennium. So there seems to have been more at stake than positioning in an administrative centre, or near well-connected nodes for distribution. Indeed, the major production sites that reached an unsurpassed scale tended to be ‘illogically’ located from the point of view of a distribution rationale. La Graufesenque, where something akin to pre-sigillata production under Italian influence had started at the end of the first century BC (Genin *et al.* 2002), became the main provider of sigillata for most of Britain, the northern frontiers, Gaul and even Italy during the first century AD (Brulet *et al.* 2010, 60–88; Genin 2007; Peacock 1982, 119–20; Willis 2005). The site of La Graufesenque, however, was situated not in or near a city, nor in a well-connected area. Instead, it was located near a smaller-scale settlement (*Condatomagus*), and near the River Tarn, in a steep valley at the northern edge of the plateau of the Causses (Schaad 2007; Middleton 1980). Every single pot that left the production site was carried up the valley slopes on mules or donkeys, before being reloaded on carts (Middleton 1980; Nieto 1986). Lezoux, in Central Gaul, which in turn became the major sigillata production centre in the second century AD, was also situated in the countryside (Bet 1988; Bet and Delor 2002; Brulet *et al.* 2010, 95–125). The nearby town of *Augustonemetum* did not have any direct bearing on production or transport: in this case, the main export route for pots is indicated by Lezoux’s proximity to the River Allier, leading to the Loire (Delage 1998).

This shows that once sigillata production became a large-scale enterprise, more was needed than tapping into a network of distribution infrastructure. Granted, overall, the production sites moved northwards, and, hence, closer to their eventual destinations, but this is not the whole story. We can wonder, for example, why this gradual relocation did not happen earlier. Indeed, the presence of military markets along the northern frontier can hardly be called a novelty of the later first century AD. In addition, why did sigillata production never properly take off in Britain, where a large share of the Gaulish pots ended up?

One factor is the nearness to raw materials. Even though in principle these were fairly abundant throughout the Roman West, shortage of wood as fuel in particular has been invoked to account for the demise of sigillata production at Lyon (Desbat *et al.* 1996, 241). It is clear that millions of cubes of wood would have been consumed by such large-scale production activity as that of La Graufesenque, for instance – especially given the fuel-intense technique of sigillata production (Fernandes *et al.* 2005; Picon 2002b) – and that cities would not on the whole have scored very well in terms of wooded environment. On the other hand, studies of woodland in Britain suggest that potters often act as woodland managers through coppicing, for instance, strategies which can maximize the return, in particular on slopes and in areas not otherwise suited for agriculture (Rackham 1990, 195 and *passim*).

Another factor to be considered is the products or staples along with which sigillata is thought to have piggybacked. For Italian and initial South Gaulish products this is likely to have

been wine (Tchernia 1983; 2009), and it has been suggested that for at least some of the output from La Graufesenque and Lezoux this might have been metals mined by military or imperial ventures (Mangin 1988; Middleton 1980). Here, too, debates remain undecided (Lewit 2013). Finally, we need to take into account changes in settlement pattern that started to impact not only on the hinterland of the major colonies and cities, but also on the countryside further inland. In the region of Lezoux, for example, there is evidence of increasing agricultural activity and parcelling of villas (Bet 1988; Daugas *et al.* 1982; Trément 2010). It is not unlikely that this forms the missing but crucial link of investment and land ownership.

So cities no longer acted as the locus of sigillata production, and were no longer key in the restructuring of the economic landscape that they had, in a way, initiated. But did they still act as bottlenecks of people and ideas? Not necessarily. Stamps and chemical analyses demonstrate considerable interaction among the larger production sites, but also between sites of various sizes (Bet and Delor 2002, 241; Bet *et al.* 1994; Vertet 1967, 257–62; Hoffmann and Juranek 1982). Potters, moulds and figure types travelled, along with their styles, techniques and fashions, and cities were no longer needed as points of passage to structure these interactions.

It thus seems that cities had lost much of their pivotal role in sigillata production once it really took off in Gaul. This would suggest a model of consumer cities, depending on products and staples drawn from their countryside to feed their population and maintain expenditure for e.g. monumental building projects. Sigillata production – as a proxy for other resources – seems to epitomize city- and army-oriented extraction (cf. Hopkins 1980). But again the picture is more complicated than one that dichotomizes city and countryside, or production and consumption.

### *Distribution*

Cities did indeed still enter the picture of sigillata, but during distribution rather than production. Sigillata from La Graufesenque did on the whole not reach its consumer without passing through the warehouses at Narbonne or Arles, depending on whether pots would travel to the Mediterranean or northwards (Dannell and Mees 2013; Middleton 1980; Nieto 1986). Traces of warehouses, including a dump of brand-new sigillata from La Graufesenque, have been attested at one of Narbonne's seaports (Fiches *et al.* 1978; Sanchez 2009, 271–4), while the Rhône in Arles has yielded the loads of many ships and warehouses (e.g. Djaoui *et al.* 2011; Long *et al.* 2006). For later Lezoux sigillata, we can cite the example of an important dump of unused pots from a quayside warehouse in the port of Roman London (New Fresh Wharf: Miller *et al.* 1986).

By virtue of their infrastructural role as well as their connectedness, cities now acted as important points of turnover and transshipment in sigillata's trajectory. But not only the wholesale of sigillata and the associated warehouses are attested in cities. We also have evidence for retail trade, as in the shops identified in Britain at Colchester, or in the forum at Wroxeter (Rhodes 1989). At Colchester – the most important Roman colony and administrative centre of Roman Britain until AD 61 – two shops selling South Gaulish sigillata have been excavated dating to the third quarter of the first century AD (Hull 1958; Millett 1987). In one of them sigillata was stacked on a single shelf, while the shelf above it contained glass vessels, and some foodstuffs were also sold in the same shop. At Wroxeter – the fourth largest city in Roman Britain – excavations have revealed the fallen stacks of Central Gaulish sigillata from one of the stalls adjoining the forum (Atkinson 1942).

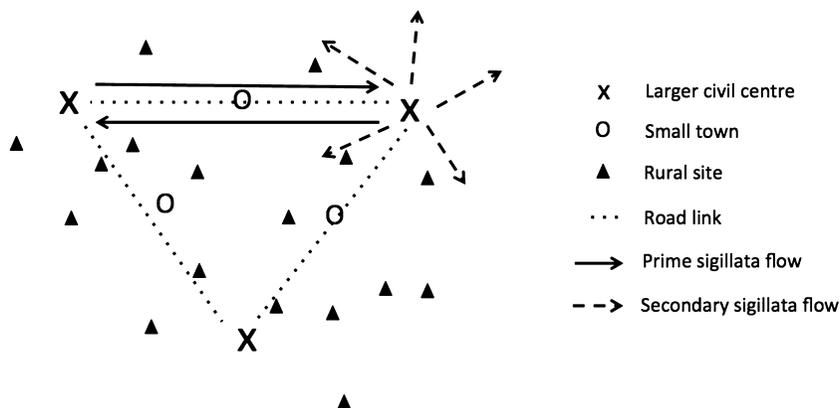


Figure 3

Hypothetical model for sigillata distribution among civil sites in Britain (drawing: author).

As a consequence, even though sigillata was no longer produced in cities, it still almost always passed through a city before reaching the consumer. Besides illustrating how cities thus retained an infrastructural role, this suggests that it was not unlikely that sigillata was perceived by its consumers as ‘coming from the city’ – as an urban commodity. Indeed, some consumers would buy their sigillata pots either at an urban market or shop, or, for most of them, from traders and peddlers coming from the city. Sigillata may well have belonged to the realm of the city in the imagination of its average consumer (cf. Perring and Pitts 2013; Pitts forthcoming). This would have been true regardless of whether we read the specific distribution pattern of sigillata as the product of commercial or state-sponsored trade (Fulford 1977; Woolf 1998, 199–201).

Willis (2005) has gathered data from assemblages throughout Britain to assess patterns and differences in the consumption of sigillata, on which we can build for the purpose of this paper. A first deduction based on his observations is that it is likely that sigillata was distributed directly between cities and larger nucleated settlements, with finds at smaller civil centres being curiously underrepresented, both quantitatively and qualitatively (e.g. lower percentage of decorated pots: Willis 2005, 7.3.8). The rural sites located in the larger nodes’ hinterlands would then be provisioned not via this primary flow of goods, but through secondary radial redistribution from these centres (Fig. 3). It would follow that the relatively low proportion of sigillata at smaller civil centres is a product of their further distance from larger centres, in comparison to the rural sites in an intermediate geographical position. In this regard, it is interesting that Willis (2005, 7.2.5) notes that ‘while the “Small Towns” and roadside settlements [...] are associated with generally low levels of samian [i.e. Gaulish sigillata], many of them lay on main arterial roads between major centres which themselves have high levels of samian’.

If this testable hypothesis proves to be true, it would strengthen the point we made about cities possibly featuring as a notional origin of sigillata in the perception of many of the consumers. We can tentatively push this even further, and suggest that the observation that sigillata distribution was directional (to larger towns), rather than trickling down the sequence of transport routes, hints at its integration with the social and political dynamics associated with those nodes.

Cities were thus not the driving forces behind sigillata trade, but functioned instead as channels for other forces to flow through and gather momentum. Different hypotheses emphasize

different agencies: we have already mentioned the possibility of military provisioning, whether or not in relation to supplies in metal or other goods (Delage 1998; Middleton 1983; Wells 1992). Others are keen to attribute decision-making to traders and their organizations (Picon 2002a; Pucci 1983), although given what we know of those who actually executed or arranged for e.g. shipping, it is unlikely that they would have controlled anything like the whole distribution process (Middleton 1983). What is clear, however, is that in spite of no longer assuming an active role themselves, cities still offered important anchor points for the flow of sigillata.

### *Consumption*

But were cities in any way marked out as different from other sites with regard to actual consumption patterns? For reasons of chronology and data availability, we will again follow Willis' (2005) quantitative study of sigillata consumption in Britain. What stands out regarding sigillata consumption is that it generally occurred on all kinds of sites, and in all kinds of contexts. Nevertheless, some differences can be noted between consumption of the earlier South Gaulish sigillata and the later Central Gaulish products – roughly speaking, this adds up to differences between contexts dating to the first and second centuries AD. South Gaulish sigillata tends to be more highly represented on military and urban sites than on smaller roadside settlements, rural sites or *villae* (Willis 2005, 6.2, 6.5.1). Central Gaulish sigillata, instead, reached much more widely and made up important percentages of assemblages on all kinds of sites, including small towns and rural settlements (Willis 2005, 6.5.1; cf. Perring and Pitts 2013 and Pitts forthcoming, who interpret this pattern as increased market integration).

This difference is partly to be explained by chronology: many of the army camps and major cities were Flavian foundations, whereas most of the site classes occupying the countryside only really developed in the early and mid-second century. Nevertheless, it is likely that the pattern also in part reflects the reality of past distribution mechanisms (cf. Pitts forthcoming). For example, it has been shown that decorated sigillata bowls were particularly highly valued in smaller rural sites of the immediate post-conquest period (Willis 1998, 110; 2005, 7.3.2, 7.3.9). Such specific valuation would not be unexpected in case of a scarce product, and would thus confirm that sigillata in the first century more rarely reached out into the countryside in comparison to the cities (the military sites are another matter entirely, and there are indications that they were supplied by separate network(s) (unpublished work by Jeremy Evans cited in Willis 2005, 6.3, 13.1.1)). In sum, earlier on, there is some evidence to suggest that cities were the prime civil destination and consumer of imported sigillata. But this changed, and by the second century at the latest, sigillata made up a substantial share of assemblages of all site types.

Even in the second century, though, there were important quantitative differences between the total number of sigillata pots consumed in cities and in non-urban sites (again with the exception of military sites: Evans 2005). Moreover, judging from the relative proportions of vessel types in different classes of sites, the nature of consumption was slightly different, too, in an urban context. These data – which group all sites according to predetermined types and regardless of date – show in particular that cups were markedly more common at large civil centres than at other site types (Willis 2005, 8.2). This could indicate different consumption habits and preferences, perhaps with an emphasis on drinking (although the functional correlates of the different sigillata forms are debated (Dannell 2006; Monteil 2012)). Ideally, of course, this type of analysis should be fine-tuned through further statistical methods (cf. Pitts 2010) and

linked with other types of material culture. What matters for the argument developed in this paper, however, is that such analytical differences can only be read as social distinctions (*sensu* Woolf 1998, 181) once the same repertoire is shared. Cities played a pioneering role in facilitating the effort of building and spreading this repertoire.

To conclude, consumption of sigillata in cities in Britain was both quantitatively and qualitatively differentiated from patterns at non-urban sites. This suggests that something of a 'city life' existed that was different from 'country life' or 'military life'. But, as with production, we cannot support the wholesale adoption of the model of the consumer city. Indeed, consumption of sigillata was not limited to cities but occurred on all kinds of sites, and the differences observed are gradual rather than binary in nature. Again, the model of overlapping networks with varying densities may be a better fit than one of cities and their hinterland (cf. Taylor 2013). But the replacement of binary categories by gradually varying densities does not lead us to do away entirely with the city as a meaningful unit in the past. Their key position in such networks would have led to cities being both a notional and an infrastructural node for sigillata consumption.

#### DISCUSSION: CITIES AS SWITCHING DEVICES

How then was 'the Roman city' articulated by the trajectory of a single product, terra sigillata? Despite the deliberately broad-angled design of this paper, one aspect that comes to the fore rather clearly is the degree of variation and change. 'Cities' as such were embedded within wider social, political and economic landscapes, which were subject to regional and chronological change. Cities have traditionally been seen as playing an active role in such change (e.g. Creighton 2006; Millett 1990; 2011; Woolf 1998). But did they do so for the changing landscapes of sigillata production, distribution and consumption?

For Italy, we have seen that sigillata production and distribution were not organized around a town/country divide. Instead, 'rural' and 'urban' mapped onto different densities within a broader, branching network: agglomeration of workshop units happened where the arteries of the distribution network thickened, and vice versa. As far as the flow of sigillata was concerned, we thus cannot discern a difference in *nature* between city and countryside. In contrast, the earliest instances of the sigillata phenomenon in Gaul were directly related to the foundation of cities as colonial instruments in the second half of the first century BC. In that case, cities acted as political and administrative vehicles in whose wake followed new structures for exploiting economic opportunities. Once production took off on a massive scale in Gaul, it was firmly anchored in the countryside. Cities did, however, still enter the picture, as points of turnover – and hence, possibly, notional origins – and as one of the registers within a shared but subtly differentiated field of consumption.

At no point were cities active drivers of the flow of sigillata. Rather, our study of the trajectory of sigillata articulates the role of the Roman city as something of a switching device within networks. Put differently, cities were, above all, amplifiers and mediators of the flow of sigillata across the western Roman empire: they were not implicit in or excluded from any stage of its trajectory, but could, through their structural position within the network, add or reduce connections. In that sense, the metaphor of switching device can be related to the very matter-of-fact sort of switching done for instance by railroad switches. This parallel resonates with the cities' capacity to tap into new networks and connections, while emphasizing their infrastructural rather than driving role. Indeed, much like railroad switches are necessary to make trains reach

a certain destination even though they do not actively drive trains forward, so, too, cities facilitated the circulation of the sigillata phenomenon without themselves exerting driving force.

In Italy, cities provided a mechanism to tap into the economic potential of long-distance distribution; and in later first century BC Gaul, the politically devised urban nodes and their input of people and ideas shuffled the landscape of production. Similarly, with regard to investment – which remains hard to substantiate empirically – it is very likely that the same class of landowning elite invested in sigillata production throughout its history. The locus of their investment, however, shifted from the city and its immediate surroundings to the countryside. This can be read as a progressive embracing of more and more areas within the structure of empire: as a (new or old) landowning elite gained control of rural properties and villas, it became easier to invest in production there via the established socio-political channels. Again, the cities can be argued to have provided a springboard for the sigillata phenomenon and its conditions. Finally, with regard to sigillata consumption, too, cities functioned as something of a switching device. Firstly, they acted as points of physical turnover, which led them to become a notional origin for sigillata flows. Secondly, as discussed above with regard to Britain in the first two centuries AD, they featured as benchmarks for the creation of a shared repertoire on which to map distinction through variations in consumption practices. Even though all of the cities discussed had a different contingent history and character, their articulation through sigillata flows suggests that they shared something of a *role* as structural components in the network.

Indeed, in their capacity as switching devices, cities helped establish the network through which sigillata pots were being pushed by forces analytically external to those cities themselves. It was, in a way, inherent in their role as network builders, aligners and solidifiers that cities would transform initial categorical differences (e.g. town/country) between themselves and their hinterlands into differences of density and scale. From this perspective, the history of the western provinces can be reframed as the progressive extension and ramification of a network, from a network of cities interspersed with the ‘blanks’ of the countryside, to one in which town and country were nothing but variations on a shared theme. As a result, the description of a shared role for cities does not freeze their nature and relations in time (in contrast to the consumer city model; cf. Millett 2011, 26): dynamic change is a corollary of their role as switching devices. Just how encompassing and solid the resultant networks were remains to be examined. Based on sigillata, at least, we suspect the answer would veer towards ‘very’ rather than ‘little’. But given the importance of contingencies in history-making, different artefact categories might well urge us to draw a different picture, which will in all likelihood be regionally textured.

Meanwhile, we should emphasize that the analysis presented here is not conclusive: especially in Italy, the state of research is constantly improving, and refinements can be expected (e.g. Vaccaro forthcoming). Similarly, despite unique evidence such as firing lists and potters’ stamps, we still await agreement on the specifics of sigillata production organization (Dannell 2002; Fülle 2000a; 2000b; Strobel 1992). Nevertheless, these lingering questions should not keep us from building more ambitious narratives based on artefact analyses.

#### CONCLUSION

Despite these inevitable provisos, this paper has started to mobilize one of the densest pockets of knowledge about Roman artefacts for one of the most central debates in Roman studies. The potential of this kind of qualitative, broad-angled archaeological study for

composing a dynamic and textured historical picture is huge, but largely untapped (but see Tchernia 1986). The fine-grained nature of specialist knowledge about certain omnipresent Roman artefact categories (*terra sigillata*, but also amphorae, coins, etc.) allows us to combine precision and sensitivity to variation and change with the ability to speak to more general empire-wide processes. Indeed, as to the latter, archaeology is often a better guide than a blueprint based on historical suspicion and some flagship cases (rather like the consumer city model). This could help balance a trend in archaeology during the last decades to steer clear of the big narratives, and, with it, – and more problematically – of the big questions in Roman studies.

In addition, tackling such pockets of specialist artefact studies from the angle of long-standing historical debates on the Roman period can help mediate a current divide in Roman studies between theoretical models and empirical evidence (Willis and Hingley 2007; Woolf 2004). The scale at which the resulting narratives can be pitched – as exemplified in this paper – can be combined with the regional processes derived from survey archaeology, and with the site-specific data provided by the analyses of assemblages. As such, the unitary *role* of cities as switching devices for *sigillata* networks can accommodate the kinds of temporal, regional and historical variation that were increasingly neutralized by the one-for-all consumer city model. But the flexibility of this kind of analysis does not entail a neutral, colourless compromise in the debates on the Roman city (cf. Woolf 1998, 127). Rethinking the city/countryside divide in terms of the building of networks and the facilitation of flows does not do away with power dynamics, but moves from a model of Machiavellian full causal agency to one of Foucauldian distributed power and its material channels (Foucault 1975). We can thus conclude that plotting the trajectories of production, distribution and consumption of a single type of material culture counts as a useful methodological entry for qualitative archaeological research into the nature and role of Roman cities.

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