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## **Tastes in the Roman Provinces: An Archaeobotanical Approach to Socio-Cultural Change**

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Taste is a complicated matter.<sup>1</sup> Give a plate of Brussels sprouts to a heterogeneous group of people and you will receive a range of responses, from disgusting to delicious. What determines food preferences is subject to much scholarly research, which stresses the social context as an important element in the development of tastes.<sup>2</sup> Conditioned by the social environment, tastes are far from static. When one is faced, for instance, with new products, the choice to partly or fully integrate them into one's diet, or conversely to ignore or reject them, can reflect cultural or social affinities, certain preconceptions, and in the longer term, the development of human relations as well as economic and political choices.

It is such new products and their trajectory within novel social contexts that I explore in this chapter. I sketch what "Roman tastes" meant and how they were perceived and employed outside the core of the Empire, for which less historical, epigraphic and iconographic evidence exists, providing also a framework for comparison with the evidence from Rome presented by Banducci in chapter seven. The provinces I examine here are those included in modern-day Germany, Denmark, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Belgium,

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<sup>1</sup> The *Oxford Handbook of Food History* edited by Pilcher (2012) and the volume *Food: the History of Taste* edited by Freedman (2007) are excellent sources of inspiration that provide a wide range of approaches and a solid foundation for the study of food in general. Archaeobotanical work employing contextual approaches for the study of the dispersal of Roman food plants in the northern provinces includes Jacomet *et al.* (2002), Bakels & Jacomet (2003), Livarda & Van der Veen (2008) and Livarda (2011). For more regionally focused archaeobotanical studies with detailed insights into specific parts of the Roman provinces see, e.g. Wiethold (2003); Bouby & Marinval (2004); Van der Veen *et al.* (2008); Livarda & Orengo (2015).

<sup>2</sup> For example, Rozin and Fallon (1986); Mennel (1996); Conner and Armitage (2002); Wilk (2006).

Luxemburg, France and Great Britain. The time frame I explore in this chapter spans from the mid-first century BCE to the end of the fourth century CE. Archaeology and in particular archaeobotany, the study of plant remains recovered in excavations, is employed as a tool to investigate tastes in the provinces.<sup>3</sup>

The study of food and plant remains in archaeology, however, is not without biases. Several natural and cultural factors determine the composition, preservation and interpretation of assemblages all of which need to be taken into account in order to reduce potential biases in any analysis.<sup>4</sup> Cultural factors include all the decisions past people made regarding procurement, processing, consumption and disposal of the available plant resources, but also current decisions by archaeologists, for instance, about how to sample, process, and quantify plant remains, and identify the routes of entry of the different elements in an archaeobotanical assemblage, in a similar fashion to zooarchaeological datasets, as described, for instance, by MacKinnon in the previous chapter. Natural factors refer to all the taphonomic processes that operate during deposition of the material, such as soil acidity, the qualities of a plant or plant part that can determine its survival rate when in contact, for instance, with fire, and so on. Regarding taste, one of the greatest challenges when using primary evidence is how individual ingredients were combined into foods to produce certain flavours. Archaeologists recover items spilled and charred during food preparation and cooking, discarded leftovers and refuse, stored products accidentally burnt, and so on.<sup>5</sup> Occasionally, processed foods are unearthed, allowing insights into possible ingredient combinations and preparation methods.<sup>6</sup> Normally, however, reconstructing a dish is extremely difficult and, even more so, how this may have tasted. An excellent means to explore taste in archaeology is through seasonings and other foods or snacks that, although not essential for subsistence, provide refinement in flavour.

With their often strong savours, aromas or thermal attributes, seasonings stimulate the senses and can contribute to how people experience and perceive their food and drink.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, spices and condiments had other uses as medicines, incense and in perfumery,

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<sup>3</sup> Plant remains do not always survive well in the archaeological record, but when they do they reveal details relevant to various thematic studies. See chapters above by Banducci, Baker and Totelin, for illustrations of how botanical remains help us better understand the ancient world.

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. Jacomet & Kreuz (1999); Van der Veen *et al.* (2007); Livarda (2011); Jacomet (2012).

<sup>5</sup> For a sense of what these cooked food remains can tell us about Roman taste, see Banducci (this volume).

<sup>6</sup> For example, the fused mixture of fish, barley and peas, discovered at the Neolithic site of Çatal Höyük. See Bogaard *et al.* (2013: 121–2). See also the way that epigraphical remains can be brought alongside material remains to enhance our understanding of taste in Baker (this volume), who brings the material remains in Pompeii together with literary sources.

<sup>7</sup> See also Boulay (this volume) on wine.

further stimulating the senses and enriching experience.<sup>8</sup> The following discussion explores the introduction of herbs, condiments, fruits, vegetables and nuts, referred to conventionally here as “flavourings”, in the northern provinces, and examines their social distribution. The results are then weaved together to investigate taste and its meaning in the Roman periphery. In doing so, this chapter provides an alternative lens through which tastes in the metropolitan centres at the core of the Empire can be understood and evaluated. First, however, it is necessary to establish definitions that will permit a more nuanced understanding of “taste”.

### Defining Taste

Defining taste is a rather challenging task, as can be seen not only from a cursory glance at dictionaries and texts, but also, importantly, in the contributions to this volume.<sup>9</sup> What becomes evident is that on a basic level, simple, one-word descriptions cannot convey the complexities of the aromas and savours that constitute the experience of each plant. Even in modern contexts, attempts to provide more detailed descriptions can seem vague and often resort to references to other species.<sup>10</sup> A useful avenue may thus be to employ the interrelated concepts of *taste*, *gustation* and *flavour*. Although the first two are often used interchangeably in modern scholarly literature, here I will distinguish between taste and gustation to provide a purpose-built definition of the former that will allow for more analytical depth.

*Gustation* is a chemical sense as detected by the taste receptors located on the tongue, mouth and pharynx of individuals and can be classified as sweet, salty, sour, bitter and *umami*.<sup>11</sup> Such a technical description of gustation is thus too basic to convey the full inter-sensory effect on the palate, for example, when consuming a condiment. *Flavour* adds another level of complexity, since it refers to the sensation generated by the combination of the gustatory, olfactory, tactile, and thermal attributes of food and influenced by other somatosensual stimuli, including the visual and auditory.<sup>12</sup> Small and Prescott suggest that flavour is the result of the central integration of multisensory inputs in the brain to produce a

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<sup>8</sup> For an effective summary of sources see Parker (2002).

<sup>9</sup> ‘Defining’ taste in relation to the ancient world is, in part, what this volume seeks to do. Individual chapters attempt to define taste in relation to medical, oenological literary or religious contexts in Greek and Roman culture.

<sup>10</sup> For instance, the *Encyclopedia Britannica* entry (accessed 7 September 2015) for aniseed reports a “flavour that resembles that of licorice”. Ancient sources are sometimes similar; Theophrastus, for example, in *Enquiry into Plants* (*De causis plantarum*) 6.7.5 describes Attic thyme as “like savory and very pungent”.

<sup>11</sup> Daly *et al.* (2012); Ikeda (2002); see also Baker (this volume)

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Daly *et al.* (2012); Auvray & Spence (2008).

single *perception* and thus can be defined by this very function.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Auvray and Spence advocate that flavour should be defined as a *perceptual*, rather than sensory, modality that combines different qualities and senses into one unified percept by the act of eating.<sup>14</sup>

Building on these suggestions, I propose here a working definition of *taste* as the culturally specific and socially subjective “experience of flavour”. This allows the attribution of preferences and the introduction of nominal categories, such as ideas and practices, in regards to foods and their flavours. “Taste” in this respect is something ephemeral, which can, nevertheless, be understood within the socio-cultural framework of a particular period, thereby allowing us access to what such tastes possibly meant to different people<sup>15</sup>. The quest, therefore, to understand the “actual flavour” of food through bodily senses in the Roman northern provinces is considered here as a restricted research avenue without the experiential factor that allows associations to be established; in this case, between ingredients, foods, flavours and, most importantly, contexts. Through its association with particular contexts, food can taste familiar or exotic, comforting or daring, protective or dangerous. Thus, eating choices are intrinsically linked to who we are or who we want to be.<sup>16</sup> Of particular importance in our pursuit of Roman tastes in the northern provinces, is therefore, who had access to the new flavourings and what their spatial and temporal pattern of supply and use would have been. In the sections that follow, I employ such a relational and contextual approach to explore new tastes on the culinary palette of the northern Roman provinces focusing on plant resources.

### **Charting New Flavours**

Before the army came the merchants. Indeed contact between the Mediterranean and the north had been established long before the marching of the Roman armies and intensified by the late Iron Age. Regarding food plants this manifests in the trade of Mediterranean products recovered in central and northern Europe before the onset of the Roman Empire.<sup>17</sup> What changed with the Roman expansion was the scale of these activities. Under Rome, exchanges

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<sup>13</sup> Small & Prescott (2005).

<sup>14</sup> Auvray & Spence (2008) follow Gibson’s (1966) ecological approach and review current cognitive neuroscientific findings.

<sup>15</sup> See also Gowers (this volume) on taste as a metaphor in Roman literary texts.

<sup>16</sup> Most of the contributions in this volume refer to the varying perspectives on the relationship between taste and identity. See especially Banducci, Gowers, Rudolph and Caseau.

<sup>17</sup> For example, see Zohary & Hopf (2000: 206); Kreuz (2004); Wiethold (2010).

became more regular, increasing in both quantity and variety, as attested by a large archaeobotanical dataset compiled and updated since 2004.<sup>18</sup> Seasonings and dressings were quite popular in Roman cooking, at least among the upper levels of society, as suggested by their frequent featuring in surviving Roman texts. Apicius and Columella mention several herbs and spices as ingredients in complex sauces, including many of the archaeologically identified flavourings. Apart from several locally available condiments in the Mediterranean, spices were imported from the south and the east. The Roman ports on the Red Sea, such as that of Berenike<sup>19</sup> and Quseir al-Qadim,<sup>20</sup> have provided ample archaeobotanical evidence for the trade of spices, which were then shipped to Rome, and from there, found their way to places as far north as Britain and Denmark.

Fifty-six condiments, fruits, vegetables and nuts that were largely absent or rare before the expansion of the Empire appear in the northern provinces in this study. Condiments formed the bulk of the “new-comers”, followed by fruits (Table 10.1). The most frequent of the former were coriander, celery and dill. Fruits included several typical Mediterranean species, such as grapes and figs, others that had to be imported from further away, like dates, and possibly different varieties of already existing species, like apples. Turnip was by far the most commonly found vegetable, suggesting that its cultivation and usage increased significantly, and a new suite of nuts also arrived.

To chart the dispersal of these flavourings all records with archaeobotanical information were divided into three chronological phases: early (R1), middle (R2) and late (R3) (Table 10.2). The results show that forty-three of these were present from the beginning of the Roman conquest and another ten were added after the end of the first century CE (phase R2; Table 10.1). The earliest archaeological finds of medlar, lovage and alexanders (horse parsley) were recovered from contexts without precise dating, although that of the first two is limited to first/second century CE. Flavourings added between the second and mid-third century CE (phase R2) were overall rare species. Some of them were very difficult to grow in northern Europe, such as apricot,<sup>21</sup> and their perishable nature may have also prevented regular trade. During phase R2 the infrastructure and network supplying the armies and the

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<sup>18</sup> For methodology see Livarda (2008a, 2011). Many thanks are due to all archaeobotanists who shared their data and to Professor Van der Veen who provided support as my thesis supervisor, during which the bulk of the data collection was completed. This work during 2004–2008 was funded by a NERC grant awarded to Professor Van der Veen, and by the Alexander S. Onassis Public Benefit Foundation and the A.G. Leventis Foundation.

<sup>19</sup> Cappers (2006).

<sup>20</sup> Van der Veen (2011).

<sup>21</sup> Watkins (1995: 427).

towns of the northern provinces had been consolidated, allowing importation and experimentation with a greater variety of food plants among other products. No new flavourings were added during phase R3 according to the available archaeobotanical dataset.

The desire for flavourings in the northern provinces was not short-lived. Figure 10.1 shows the relative proportion of the occurrence of some of the most frequently encountered species in each phase. The picture is remarkably similar for all these flavourings, reaching the highest number of occurrences in phase R2 and in phase R3 returning to their R1 or slightly lower levels. The same pattern is observed for the other flavourings with some exceptions. The occurrence of black mustard, for instance, although declining in phase R3, is still higher than the phase R1 levels, which could possibly indicate its stronger permeation in the tastes of the provinces. For a few other species, such as date, fennel, olive and peach, the decline in phase R3 is much more pronounced. The increased unrest towards the end of the Empire played a part, causing disruptions in the trade network but other socio-cultural reasons would have also contributed. Research on dates, for instance, suggests that their use in the northern provinces was strongly linked with specific ritual contexts and mystic cults, including that of Isis, and was probably employed as a symbolic item in burial customs reinforcing cultural and ritual identities.<sup>22</sup> Thus its waning use and archaeological absence after the mid-third century CE may be partly related to changing customs and forms of religious expression and practice.<sup>23</sup> For the rare species in the dataset (Table 10.1) a pattern is difficult to discern. Although some are present in all phases, most occur only in phase R1 or R2. Preservation issues may play a part.<sup>24</sup> Equally, they may have simply been brought over as specific requests or as attempts to import and try out new ingredients that failed to become popular. Overall, there seems to be a core of flavourings with a greater impact on tastes within the northern Roman world, having a relatively more stable presence throughout, such as those clustered as ‘abundant’ in Table 10.1, like coriander. Others seem to remain in the periphery of culinary regimes, notably black cumin, fenugreek, sesame and other rare flavourings listed in Table 10.1<sup>25</sup> (see also Figure 10.1). With the introduction or increased availability of all these flavourings, blending of new ingredients to produce combinations of stronger or new flavours, and thus distinct culinary experiences, became possible.

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<sup>22</sup> Livarda (2013).

<sup>23</sup> Livarda (2013).

<sup>24</sup> See Livarda (2011).

<sup>25</sup> But always keeping in mind that some of these may be rare due to preservation issues.

Ancient recipes and cookbooks are particularly useful in helping to understand such possible combinations.<sup>26</sup> Here some indicative examples of common combinations attractive to the Roman palate are highlighted. Pepper features in most recipes attributed to Apicius<sup>27</sup> and mentioned as an ingredient not only in savoury dishes, but also in puddings.<sup>28</sup> Combinations of sweet and bitter or pungent are in fact common in Roman recipes.<sup>29</sup> In another of his sweet recipes, pepper, nuts, honey, rue, raisin wine, milk, and eggs are combined to produce a pudding; rue adding a bitter tone to the dish.<sup>30</sup> Several condiments, among which coriander, savoury, celery and mustard, in various combinations with wine, vinegar, must, fruit juice, fish sauce, oil, milk and/or honey, were used as sauces for birds and meat.<sup>31</sup> Raisins and other fruits were also employed in meat recipes. Another interesting combination is that of vinegar with mustard, an example of which is provided in Athenaeus' *Deipnosophists* 4.133e (late 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE) that mentions mixing vinegar and must with pounded raisins and mustard seeds for a turnip dish. The overall impression is thus of a preference for strong and rather complex flavours, sour and sweet, sweet and pungent, bitter and sweet, sour and salty and so on, layered with several Mediterranean bittersweet and tangy herb aromas.

The proliferation of *mortaria* (multi-purpose mixing bowls) since the late Iron Age, but more intensively from the beginning of the Roman period, may add some support to the adoption of more complex flavours in the provinces. Residue analysis of *mortaria* mostly from Britain but also from the Continent showed that both animal and plant products, with a heavy emphasis on the latter, were processed in the same vessel in a novel way of resource preparation.<sup>32</sup> Residue analysis, nevertheless, cannot provide details of the exact ingredients so a direct association with novel flavourings cannot be proven. Indeed, in some sites, continuation in the use of common Iron–Age products has been detected.<sup>33</sup> Local products and traditional tastes would have continued to provide the bulk of subsistence, as after all, food habits are particularly conservative.<sup>34</sup> However, the same ingredients, sometimes

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<sup>26</sup> For a basic introduction to ancient recipe collections see Dalby (2003).

<sup>27</sup> A collection of recipes, possibly ranging from the early to the late Roman period. See Grocock & Grainger's 2006 critical edition for further information; see also Baker (this volume).

<sup>28</sup> In his homemade sweets, *dulcia domestica*, Apicius 7.11.1 mentions, for instance, stuffed palms or dates with nuts and ground pepper, salted and fried in honey; on the inclusion of pepper in Roman recipes see also Baker (this volume).

<sup>29</sup> For a discussion of Roman recipes and common flavourings see, for example, Grimm (2007).

<sup>30</sup> Apicius 7.11.5.

<sup>31</sup> Several examples exist throughout Apicius, such as 6. 7–8, 7.1–10.

<sup>32</sup> Cramp *et al.* (2011).

<sup>33</sup> Cramp *et al.* (2011).

<sup>34</sup> See Atkins & Bolwer (2001).

“peppered” with novel ones, could have been combined in different ways.

Other locally available products became more common in the provinces within the context of diversification or because of the desire for increasing complexity in tastes. Apples and cherries, for instance, although present before the Romans, were used more widely due to the adoption of new technologies, like grafting,<sup>35</sup> and trade expansion.<sup>36</sup> Archaeobotanical evidence<sup>37</sup> also indicates an apparent increase in the collection and consumption of wild fruits, nuts and some herbs, from the Iron Age to the Roman period in the northern provinces. Sykes observed a similar pattern for animal exploitation in Britain and interpreted these trends as evidence of changing attitudes towards “nature” and “wilderness”.<sup>38</sup> She argued that wild resource avoidance in the Iron Age was replaced by greater ordering and taming of the wild by the Romans.

Changing tastes seem to have thus been intertwined with processes of cultural change. Furthermore, the greater usage of wild resources may be translated to a larger resource base, more familiar and accessible to the local population. This could be used in new ways, incorporated into cuisine in order to experiment and achieve new flavour combinations. Recipes, after all, are flexible, allowing those cooking to replace, change and adapt ingredients according to availability and culinary preferences. Apples, berries, sloes and other wild fruits would have added sweet and sour flavours and wild herbs could have added extra aromas to dishes. These could have been used in the context of seeking increasingly composite flavours or as alternatives to other more expensive or difficult to acquire and maintain products. An archaeobotanical example of this might be the case of caraway. Its Roman occurrences are rather limited and localised, being found almost exclusively in modern-day Germany.<sup>39</sup> This has been interpreted as possibly localised adoption of caraway – a known and available herb in that area – for cultivation and trade within the context of a more varied cuisine and the increased demand of condiments by the army.<sup>40</sup>

In reality, the processes involved in the emergence, permeation and fluctuation of new plants and tastes in the provinces were complex and multifaceted, with several factors playing an interrelated role in their development. Appreciating these, however, necessitates

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<sup>35</sup> See Bakels & Jacomet (2003: 554–5); Lowe (2010).

<sup>36</sup> Livarda (2008b: 79–80); Livarda & Orengo (2015).

<sup>37</sup> Bakels *et al.* (1997); Van der Veen (2008).

<sup>38</sup> Sykes (2009). For more on the “taste” for meat in ancient Greece and Rome, see MacKinnon (this volume).

<sup>39</sup> Livarda & van der Veen (2008).

<sup>40</sup> Livarda & van der Veen (2008).



understanding what tastes were “translated” to; this is attempted in the following section by contextualising the archaeobotanical data.

### **You Are What You Taste**

To incorporate contextual information, all sites with archaeobotanical data were categorised according to their function and character.<sup>41</sup> Building on previous studies,<sup>42</sup> the number of occurrences of each flavouring at a given site type was then calculated as a proportion of the total number of this site type per phase (Figure 10.2).<sup>43</sup> As more data are collected these proportions may change but the available sample can be safely used as a relative means of comparison between site types to highlight the emerging general pattern. So, for example in the case of major towns we can trace the proportion of the number of occurrences of dill (*Anethum graveolens*) over the total number of major towns that have introduced food plant remains in the R1, R2 and R3 phase (see Table 10.2 and Figure 10.2).

The results show that significant changes in the consumption patterns may be linked to the movement and emergence of new population groups, like the townsfolk and the army, and the ensuing modifications in settlement patterns, economic links and so on.<sup>44</sup> The analysis also demonstrates that not everybody in the provinces had access to new flavourings, with rural lesser sites, for instance, having generally lower proportions and a more restricted range of these. With the increasing availability, however, of certain new ingredients and spaces for their cultivation, such as herb and vegetable gardens as well as orchards, more people in the provinces became acquainted with their presence and their use in culinary regimes, as we can tell from the widespread distribution, for instance, of coriander and cherries. In fact, with the consolidation of the Empire, incentives were given to farmers to cultivate land to provide for the army,<sup>45</sup> which was responsible for the initial introduction and intensification of both the production and the consumption of several new flavourings, such as many condiments and fruits (Figure 10.2). In a similar vein, in the previous chapter, MacKinnon highlighted the role of the army in pig consumption as witnessed by the

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<sup>41</sup> See Livarda (2008a, 2011).

<sup>42</sup> Livarda (2008a, 2008b, 2011) and Livarda & van der Veen (2008).

<sup>43</sup> The total number of sites is taken from a large database including more than 600 records with at least one introduced food plant (Livarda (2008a) and updating since; see also Livarda (2011)).

<sup>44</sup> Changes to consumption patterns are also found in diverse literary contexts. See Hitch (this volume) on early Greek literature and Caseau (this volume) on taste and consumption in late antique Christianity.

<sup>45</sup> Davies (1971: 123).

increased presence of pig bones in military sites in several areas of the Empire. The movement of people and the settlement of migrants also would have facilitated the spread of culinary knowledge.<sup>46</sup> Non-elite rural settlements<sup>47</sup> and towns in phase R2 seem to have been acting as trading foci for several of these plants (Figure 10.2). Their very nature, attracting people of all ranks and offices, would have also allowed an increasing visibility of these products to a greater cross-section of the population. Therefore, it seems that the overall framework of culinary- and food-related methods or manners, which would have allowed new tastes to develop, was changing.

Similar trends have also been observed in studies focusing on the dispersal of twenty selected food plants in central Europe.<sup>48</sup> Such studies indicate that initially these plants were almost exclusively associated with military sites, but eventually reached civilian settlements, such as towns and rural elite sites. Only some of the most commonly encountered fruits and nuts examined, all of which could be locally cultivated, found their way to other rural sites, where they may also been cultivated.<sup>49</sup> Fig was highlighted in all studies as a surprisingly common import.

In the following sections, I tease out the most conspicuous results outlined so far, suggesting that three “tastes” blend together in the creation of the new culinary world of the provinces: the tastes of memory and power, cosmopolitanism, and globalisation.

### *Flavours of Home, Tastes of Memory and Power*

A very strong association emerged between the northward dispersal of flavourings and the military on the one hand, and major towns, on the other. The most exotic flavourings remained rare and they do not seem to have formed part of the regular diet even for these population groups.<sup>50</sup> Rather, the common denominator in these social sectors seems to be the greater variety and availability of more flavours to them. Fresh fruits provided extra sweetness along with the ever-present dried figs, possibly raisins, and honey. The Roman soldiers when on the march also had regular rations of vinegar, which could be diluted with water and drunk as refreshment, usually containing various crushed products including dried

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<sup>46</sup> See Jacomet *et al.* (2002); Livarda (2011).

<sup>47</sup> Those other than hamlets.

<sup>48</sup> Bakels & Jacomet (2003) focusing on rice, chickpea, bottle gourd, black pepper, almond, pine, date, olive, pistachio, pomegranate, fig, melon, garlic, peach, cherries, plums, apple, pear, walnut and grape. See also Jacomet *et al.* (2002).

<sup>49</sup> Bakels & Jacomet (2003).

<sup>50</sup> Such as black cumin and aniseed (Table 10.1, Figure 10.2).

figs, peaches or other fruits and honey.<sup>51</sup> Vinegar as a preservative agent could have been effective in prolonging the consumption life of fruits in which case it would have also contributed to a sweet and sour/acidic flavour combination seemingly favoured by the Romans.<sup>52</sup> Such concoctions, apart from the possible appeal they might have had to individual palates, would also provide a source of energy and sustenance. Although the army was never a uniform entity, and culinary customs among the Roman forces cannot be standardised<sup>53</sup> it is evident that a new suite of flavourings from the Mediterranean and beyond “followed” the army, since widespread and measurable quantities of their remains appear for the first time in north-western Europe already by the first stages of the conquest. What also seems clear is that an extra effort was possibly made, especially in the more politically unstable first phase of the Roman occupation in the north, to access products from “back home”,<sup>54</sup> such as several typical Mediterranean fruits and herbs like figs, grapes/raisins, coriander and fennel.

The ability to acquire, possibly through central provisions but also through personal transactions, familiar products that would not only taste but also smell of home may have acted as a perceived, often subconscious, emotional and physical support. “Foreign” products and food, as many anthropological studies have identified,<sup>55</sup> initially can feel bland and tasteless; thus herbs and spices are an easy way to achieve a sense of a stronger taste, closer to the familiar one. Eating habits are generally quite conservative and resistant to change. Atkins and Bowler, drawing on studies on immigrants, argue that diet is one of the last things to change even after the language of origin is abandoned: people of the first generation show reluctance in changing their traditional food habits even if certain foods are difficult to acquire, and even in second and third generations, where the level of assimilation is high, certain dishes are still present.<sup>56</sup>

Food has a strongly mnemonic nature<sup>57</sup> and the combination of its smell, savour and sight evokes the senses and can generate emotions and memories.<sup>58</sup> Feelings of pleasure and comfort can therefore arise with the identification of a welcome, familiar stimulus, and condiments and spices especially, with their strong character and fragrance, could enhance

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<sup>51</sup> Brothwell & Brothwell (1998: 161–2).

<sup>52</sup> e.g. Grimm 2007; see also MacMannon (this volume) for the impact of marinades and vinegar on the taste of meat.

<sup>53</sup> e.g. King (1999); Stallibrass & Thomas (2008).

<sup>54</sup> See also Banducci (this volume)

<sup>55</sup> e.g. Brown *et al.* (2010).

<sup>56</sup> Atkins & Bowler (2001: 273–4).

<sup>57</sup> See also Gowers (this volume).

<sup>58</sup> See Hamilakis (1998, 1999, 2011).

such mnemonic sensory effects. As Hamilakis argues, bodily mnemonic practices are deeply ingrained and hence more difficult to be questioned, since they are normally subconscious.<sup>59</sup> The use of flavourings in these new lands could have thus contributed to subliminal feelings of security and temporary enjoyment.

But it is not only the flavour that can be of concern when one is away from the familiar. Perhaps more important is the strong association between food and medicine,<sup>60</sup> seen also in classical texts, such as those by Dioscorides and Theophrastus. Herbs and spices in particular were used as ingredients for medical concoctions but also as *theriaca* (antidotes to poison) and *thumiamata* (incenses) among other uses as suggested by Theophrastus,<sup>61</sup> their presence was often sought out for the healing of the physical and spiritual individual.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, many modern sociological studies have shown medicinal value attached to the diet of the home country and the nostalgia and comfort that this evokes.<sup>63</sup> It is possible that similar factors were at play in the consumption patterns of certain people in the northern provinces.

I argue that such “tastes” of home, not only gave consumers a feeling of familiarity and security, but they could have also reinforced and supported the development of a “taste of power”. At least initially, thus, the taste experiences enjoyed by the army and the urban elite in the provinces, who considered themselves, and often were considered by the local populations to be the political and military victors, also exemplified a certain status and prestige. Thus, these taste experiences not only stimulated subconscious alimentary memories and their positive associations, but also through the accessibility and consumption of these extra foods combined comfort with strength. Within both the overall military structure and the urban communities in the provinces, tastes would have been shared, tried out and adopted by many in a process that contributed to the creation of distinct, powerful identities through their common culinary, among other experiences, attitudes and practices.

### *Taste of Cosmopolitanism and Learned Diners*

Of the new flavourings, some, like rue, aniseed and black cumin, never seem to have been widespread and adopted in the provinces. They were initially associated mainly with the

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<sup>59</sup> Hamilakis (1999).

<sup>60</sup> See also Totelin (this volume).

<sup>61</sup> Parker (2002: 43).

<sup>62</sup> On spiritual aspects of taste in early Christian practice, see Caseau (this volume); on the relationship of food and medicine see also Baker (this volume).

<sup>63</sup> Jamal (1998); Atkins & Bowler (2001); Brown *et al.* (2010). See also Baker (this volume) on the archaeological and textual evidence for notions of a healthy diet in antiquity.

army. In phase R2 they appeared in more site types but they never took off and almost never found their way to lesser rural sites (Figure 10.2). Some of the rare finds may represent attempts at local growing that proved to be relatively difficult in the northern climates and were perhaps abandoned in favour of other products. Preservation difficulties may add to the reduced archaeological visibility of some of them, but these cannot be solely responsible for the observed pattern.<sup>64</sup> The contextual analysis of plant remains indicates that members of the urban elite and Roman officers were among those who most commonly accessed and consumed several rare spices and fruits.<sup>65</sup> Nevertheless, as attested in the transactions recorded on the Vindolanda tablets,<sup>66</sup> lower rank soldiers would also have accessed some of the archaeobotanically rare species, but there is little evidence to support a more widespread use. Notably, studies of the Roman ports of Myos Hormos and Berenike in Egypt suggest that spices were carefully guarded and most of them, apart from black pepper, were in fact traded in small quantities.<sup>67</sup>

It can be, thus, suggested that certain rare flavourings may have been associated with a sense of exclusivity and social aspirations, and perhaps more so in the northern provinces. Their rarity, however, also meant that very few people in this area would have experienced such flavours and aromas, and perhaps even fewer would have been aware of their existence. These flavourings seem to have been ingredients in the culinary regime of a very specific social domain; their meaning translated into a “language” spoken only by a few. Then such flavourings, full of connotations within a small group of people, if ever encountered may have simply been exotic curiosities for the larger part of the populace.

The social meaning of such flavourings among those few communicating in these alternate “languages” of taste is more difficult to tease out. Some of these were perishable products, such as pomegranates and other fruits, and their processing and transport needed special preparation and packing.<sup>68</sup> This would add extra costs to their transportation, preventing their bulk export, and thus, contributing to a sense of exclusivity when consumed in the provinces. Others were imports from faraway places, instilled with overtones of exoticism, daring and danger as implied by the long journeys necessary for their acquisition from across the seas and the inevitable legends that surrounded the unknown.<sup>69</sup> The costs and

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<sup>64</sup> Livarda (2011).

<sup>65</sup> Jacomet *et al.* (2002); Livarda (2011).

<sup>66</sup> Bowman & Thomas (1994: 135–8).

<sup>67</sup> Van der Veen (2011: 62).

<sup>68</sup> Jacomet *et al.* (2002).

<sup>69</sup> For instance, Herodotus, *Histories* 3.110 describes the perils of collecting cassia, which, he suggests, grows in a shallow lake with winged creatures guarding it; likewise at 3.111 cinnamon is said to come from the nests of

the availability of such flavourings would vary from year to year but texts can be of some help here, indicating generally high prices, with pepper occupying their lower range.

Pepper is actually one of the most frequently mentioned flavourings in Roman sources and features in most sauces in Apicius.<sup>70</sup> It was imported to Rome from Indian Malabar through the Red Sea ports;<sup>71</sup> its presence is another testimony to the use of the newly discovered seasonal monsoons, the trade winds, which facilitated sailing in the open ocean and brought Rome, east Africa and India closer together than ever before. The stark rarity of pepper in the northern provinces could be explained by its possibly restricted availability or by preservation issues. Pepper may also have been imported in a ground form, which could have eased its transport. Cappers provided some arguments in favour of its possible unpulverised trade, drawing on references in Apician recipes of pounding pepper before its mixing with other ingredients and the better preservation of its flavour if transported as whole peppercorns.<sup>72</sup> Whether more common than the archaeobotanical finds suggest or not, pepper seems to have been appreciated and valued in Rome. Prices for the different kinds of pepper are mentioned by Pliny the Elder, who also mentions attempts to adulterate it by its mixing with juniper berries “which absorb its pungency in a remarkable manner”, alluding to its attributed high value, although this was seemingly a rather common practice with spices.<sup>73</sup> Perhaps the record that best highlights the value and status attributed to pepper is the 3,000 pounds of pepper offered to Alaric along with 5,000 pounds of gold, 30,000 pounds of silver, 4,000 silk tunics, and 3,000 scarlet skins in exchange of calling off his siege to Rome in 408 CE.<sup>74</sup>

However, pepper’s significance may not lie as much in its cost as in its association with its place of origin. Parker suggests that at the time, goods of a perceived Indian origin, among which pepper is included, carried a sense of exoticism for the Romans; pepper brought a “taste of India” to Rome. He furthermore argues that Latin and Greek authors made an explicit link between India and luxury goods, regardless of their actual origins, sparking the imagination of people’s perception of India, and supporting the often generalising Roman connotations of the East as a land of luxury and ephemeral pleasure.<sup>75</sup> Pepper with its

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birds on precipitous cliffs. For more on the relation between danger and taste in Greek and Roman literature, see Hitch (this volume) and Gowers (this volume).

<sup>70</sup> Grimm (2007: 97).

<sup>71</sup> Dalby (2002b: 88–94); Cappers (2006); Van der Veen (2011).

<sup>72</sup> Cappers (2006: 113). See also Solomon (1995).

<sup>73</sup> Pliny, *Natural History* 12.26–9. See also Parker (2002: 45).

<sup>74</sup> Zosimus, *New History (Historia nova)* 5.40–1.

<sup>75</sup> Parker (2002).

pungent, strong flavour was not a mere ingredient, another seasoning. Its relative “universality” in recipes, employed as it is in both savoury and sweet dishes, may be another indication of its “exotic” taste. Pepper may have thus tasted of the imagined India and the East of the Romans just as the strongly fragrant incense sticks we burn nowadays smell of our imagined Orient, “consumed” in a framework of projections of one’s self leading a life of a certain attitude, philosophy or status.

Consumption of such eastern spices in the northern provinces may have had further connotations, extended to an additional link with Rome itself, as the mediator and facilitator between exoticism and the provinces: the prestigious and powerful Rome that created an Empire, extending across a large area of the known world. In a similar sense several other Mediterranean condiments, such as coriander and the fruits discussed above, although not exotic like the Indian spices, became more common in the provinces. Initially these may have brought an “air” of the Mediterranean, an “air” of cosmopolitanism, a “taste of Rome”, to those that tried them in the north.

### *Taste of a Globalised World*

Among the various flavourings introduced to the northern provinces, a group of true imports, which appear to have become quite common, stand out, with fig being the most prominent example. Fig is one of the most common finds in military sites and major towns, and in phase R2 its occurrences also multiply in small towns and rural non-elite settlements. It is quite rare in rural elite sites and so far it has been found in very few rural lesser sites in phase R1 (Figure 10.2). Since fresh fig is difficult to produce in northern European environments, its widespread presence likely refers to remnants of the dried product. Dried figs had several advantages: they preserved well and lasted long, they could be easily packed for bulk transport, they provided condensed energy necessary for sustenance, particularly during long-distance journeys when food provisioning would not always be easily guaranteed, and added sweetness, improving the flavour of drinks and foods when mixed together following the culinary standards of the period. The presence and strong association of figs with sites that acted as distribution centres and focal market places, such as towns and military extramural settlements (Figure 10.2), highlight their tradable value. Their weak association with the rural elite can lead to questions about their potential luxury status in the northern provinces. Pliny and Columella also refer to the role dried figs played among the

main dietary staples, and the latter, also mention it in conjunction with farmers' work in the Mediterranean, where it is combined, for instance, with other ingredients as a remedy for worms in calves.<sup>76</sup> It is, therefore, possible that the wider adoption of fig was instigated by its commercial and natural qualities. Originally being, perhaps, a trademark of affluent and diverse market stalls with products from various places or brought initially for the army, but soon "marketed" as an indulgent, rather affordable, sweet "urban" snack.

Other plant products of tradable value would have contributed in more indirect ways to new flavours and their associated tastes in the provinces. Pitch, the resin of pine trees, may be just such an example. Specialised industries of pitch production have been identified within the Empire suggesting local intensification in its production for the purposes of the "global" Roman economy that stimulated its distribution to a remarkable scale.<sup>77</sup> Pitch was a widely used multi-purpose product from cosmetics to construction, but most significantly, it was a common waterproof agent for containers, such as wooden casks, amphorae and *dolia*.<sup>78</sup> It is, therefore, possible that its widespread employment in containers for traded drinks and foods over long distances, to the northern provinces in this case, may have contributed to the addition of resinous undertones in some of these products or a slightly resinous fragrance experienced when first opening the containers.

These are some examples to highlight how the diversified economy operating under one Empire instigated and facilitated the circulation of goods from different locales, and in so doing created the circumstances for the gradual permeation of new tastes and their associated perceptions of an ever-expanding world.

## Conclusion

This chapter has showcased the potential of archaeobotanical studies to investigate how and why new tastes may have developed and spread in the Roman periphery and ultimately what these could have actually meant. In a contextualised approach, and drawing upon archaeological and textual evidence, different "tastes" have been identified in the world of the northwestern provinces of the Empire. These tastes, defined here as socio-culturally

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<sup>76</sup> Bakels & Jacomet (2003). For example, Pliny, *Natural History* 12.5, 15.34; Columella, *On Agriculture (De re rustica)* 2.21.3, 6.25.

<sup>77</sup> Orengo *et al.* (2013).

<sup>78</sup> Orengo *et al.* (2013). *Dolia* are large, wide-mouthed, oval ceramic containers for storage and transportation of goods.



circumscribed experiences of flavours, were not independent of each other. They were simply different “ingredients”, adding to an increasing complexity of flavours, blending different experiential lines in the negotiation of identities within the expanding Roman world. Within this framework three “tastes” have been identified and explored, those of memory and power, cosmopolitanism and globalisation, tastes that could potentially overlap and mutually reinforce one another. What the evidence suggests is not a dramatic change in the diet of people, but a selective adoption of individual elements within specific contexts. Flavourings, with their fragrant attributes and their combinations in cuisine, would have played an important role in creating associations and connotations, especially as the increasing adoption of some of them for local cultivation would have altered not just the dining setting but also the living landscape, infusing both with new experiences and ideas about life.

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## Figures and tables

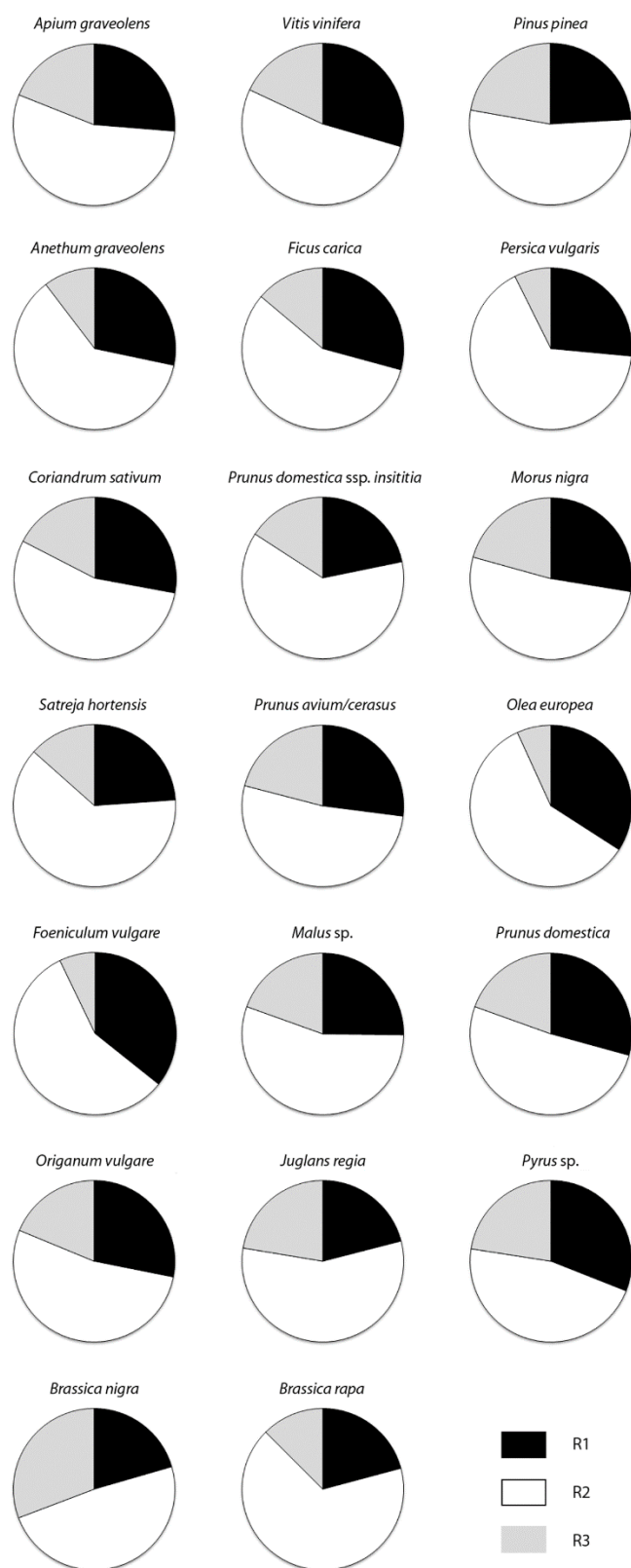


Figure 10.1. Relative proportion of the occurrence of selected flavourings in each phase.

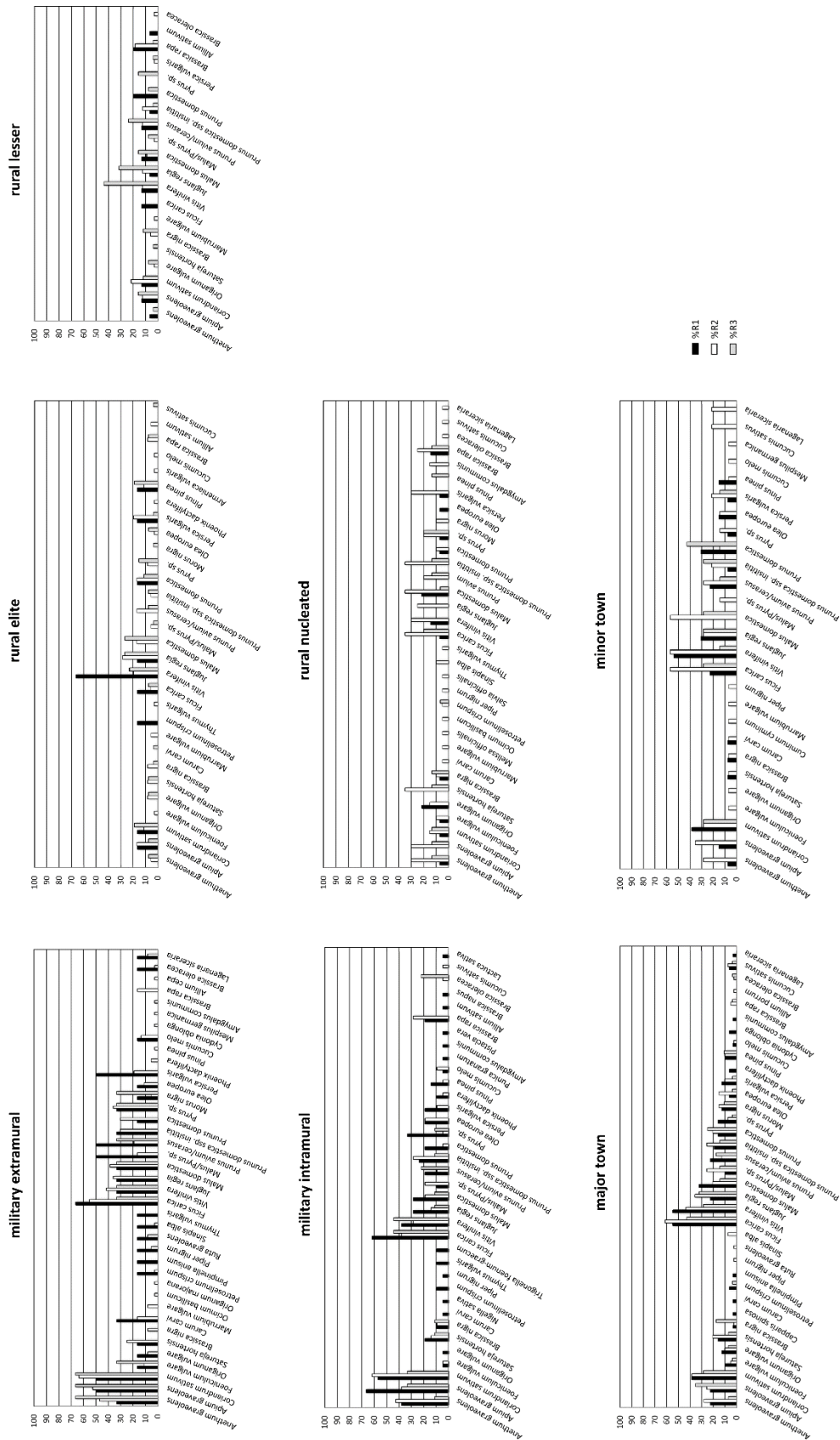


Figure 10.2. The number of occurrences of all flavourings by site type (excluding ceremonial) and phase, as a proportion of the total number of a given site type per phase with all classes of new food plants.

Species name	English name	Plant type	Occurrence	Phase of 1st record
<i>Coriandrum sativum</i>	coriander	condiment	Abundant	R1
<i>Apium graveolens</i>	celery	condiment	Abundant	R1
<i>Anethum graveolens</i>	dill	condiment	Abundant	R1
<i>Satureja hortensis</i>	summer savoury	condiment	Medium	R1
<i>Brassica nigra</i>	black mustard	condiment	Medium	R1
<i>Origanum vulgare</i>	oregano	condiment	Medium	R2
<i>Foeniculum vulgare</i>	fennel	condiment	Medium	R1
<i>Capparis spinosa</i>	capers	condiment	Rare	R1
<i>Carum carvi</i>	caraway	condiment	Rare	R1
<i>Cuminum cyminum</i>	cumin	condiment	Rare	R2
<i>Levisticum officinale</i>	lovage	condiment	Rare	R1 or R2
<i>Marrubium vulgare</i>	horehound	condiment	Rare	R2
<i>Melissa officinalis</i>	balm	condiment	Rare	R2
<i>Nigella sativa</i>	black cumin	condiment	Rare	R1
<i>Ocimum basilicum</i>	basil	condiment	Rare	R2
<i>Origanum majorana</i>	marjoram	condiment	Rare	R2
<i>Petroselinum crispum</i>	parsley	condiment	Rare	R1
<i>Pimpinella anisum</i>	aniseed	condiment	Rare	R1
<i>Piper nigrum</i>	black pepper	condiment	Rare	R1
<i>Ruta graveolens</i>	rue	condiment	Rare	R1
<i>Salvia officinalis</i>	sage	condiment	Rare	R2
<i>Sinapis alba</i>	white mustard	condiment	Rare	R1
<i>Smyrniolum olusatrum</i>	alexanders	condiment	Rare	R-no precise dating
<i>Thymus vulgaris</i>	thyme	condiment	Rare	R1
<i>Trigonella foenum-graecum</i>	fenugreek	condiment	Rare	R1
<i>Brassica napus</i>	rape	condiment/oil producing	Rare	R1
<i>Sesamum indicum</i>	sesame	condiment/oil producing	Rare	R2
<i>Vitis vinifera</i>	grape	fruit	Abundant	R1
<i>Ficus carica</i>	fig	fruit	Abundant	R1
<i>Prunus avium</i>	sweet cherry	fruit	Abundant	R1
<i>Malus sp.</i>	apple	fruit	Abundant	R1
<i>Prunus domestica ssp. insititia</i>	damson	fruit	Abundant	R1
<i>Prunus domestica</i>	plum	fruit	Abundant	R1
<i>Persica vulgaris</i>	peach	fruit	Medium	R1
<i>Pyrus sp.</i>	pear	fruit	Medium	R1
<i>Olea europea</i>	olive	fruit	Medium	R1
<i>Phoenix dactylifera</i>	date	fruit	Medium	R1
<i>Morus nigra</i>	mullberry	fruit	Medium	R1
<i>Prunus cerasus</i>	sour cherry	fruit	Medium	R1
<i>Cucumis melo</i>	melon	fruit	Rare	R1
<i>Armeniaca vulgaris</i>	apricot	fruit	Rare	R2
<i>Cydonia oblonga</i>	quince	fruit	Rare	R1
<i>Mespilus germanica</i>	medlar	fruit	Rare	R1 or R2
<i>Punica granatum</i>	pomegranate	fruit	Rare	R1
<i>Juglans regia</i>	walnut	nut	Abundant	R1
<i>Pinus pinea</i>	pine nut	nut	Medium	R1
<i>Amygdalus communis</i>	almond	nut	Rare	R1
<i>Pistacia vera</i>	pistache	nut	Rare	R1
<i>Brassica rapa incl. ssp. campestris</i>	turnip	vegetable	Medium	R1
<i>Cucumis sativus</i>	cucumber	vegetable	Rare	R1
<i>Allium cepa</i>	onion	vegetable	Rare	R2
<i>Allium sativum</i>	garlic	vegetable	Rare	R1
<i>Lagenaria siceraria</i>	bottle gourd	vegetable	Rare	R1
<i>Brassica oleracea</i>	cabbage	vegetable	Rare	R1
<i>Allium porrum</i>	leak	vegetable	Rare	R2
<i>Lactuca sativa</i>	lettuce	vegetable	Rare	R1

Table 10.1. Flavourings identified in the study area, their occurrence status and phase of first record (R1= early Roman, R2= middle Roman, R3= late Roman, R= Roman).



Phase	Code	Description
Early Roman	R1	mid-1st century BCE to end of 1st century CE
Middle Roman	R2	2nd to mid-3rd century CE
Late Roman	R3	mid-3rd century onwards until the end of the 4th century CE

Table 10.2. Classification of the Roman phases.