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A matter of taste? Ancient Italian consumers and Eastern Mediterranean wines

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As the post-classical Latin saying goes, *de gustibus non est disputandum*, "there is no accounting for taste." Or is there? Today, we have algorithms and big data to predict consumer behavior in order to market and sell to us more of the things we already buy and suggest new yet similar products for us to acquire. With so much purchase information and anticipatory technology, it is easy to build comprehensive profiles of our consumption patterns. Yet what of ancient consumers? How can we map their preferences for some products over others and understand their motivations for buying the things they bought through time? These are the central questions that Paulina Komar (K.) asks in her study of Ancient Italy's appetites for Eastern Mediterranean wines from the Bronze Age through Late Antiquity.[1]

They are not easy questions to answer, especially given the broad scope and timeframe K. has chosen to cover and the scattered and fragmentary evidence in the archaeological record for ancient Italian consumption of wines from the East. A revision of her 2015 dissertation, K.'s book promises a synthetic study that brings together literary, archaeological, and oenological data from ancient and modern authors to shed light on patterns of consumption and perceptions of the quality of Eastern Mediterranean wines in Italy.[2] All of this data and history is compiled in the service of elucidating the role these vintages played in the ancient economy and the opinions that Greek and Roman drinkers had about their worth and taste. K. proves herself to be a close reader of both primary and secondary sources on these topics, with an eye to detail and reasoning. The results she delivers, however, are not entirely conclusive, as she presents many hypotheses and perspectives but few definitive solutions.

K. defines this wide-ranging class of wines on the first page: "The term 'Eastern Mediterranean (or simply Eastern) wines' used in this book is to be understood as referring to products that were originally produced in the Aegean area, western Asia Minor, Cyprus, Cilicia, Levant, Egypt, and the Black Sea region" (1). However, depending on the time period, K. also uses the terms "Aegean" or "North Aegean and South Aegean" to refer to wine-producing areas east of Italy. These designations can be slightly confusing, since some of these locations (namely Corinth) are not on the Aegean Sea (48). Vines grown on Italian soil that descend from eastern varietals are also included, such as *Byblinos* and *Aminaios*, further complicating the parameters of what counts as an Eastern wine (58, 104–5, 110). In her search for distribution patterns for Italian consumption and ancient assessments of the quality and quantity of Eastern wine, K. explores other types of wine and markets, namely Etruscan wine production and competition for markets with the colonists of Magna Graecia in the Archaic and Classical periods (Chapter 1), as well as Italian wines produced in Central Italy and what K. describes as Italian "imitations" of Eastern wines, namely Pseudo-Coan wine (114, 116). All of this shows that what one calls "Eastern Mediterranean wine" is far from uniform or straightforward.

K.'s "interdisciplinary" methodology is traditional, combining almost all of the extant literary evidence and a good percentage of the available epigraphic, prosopographical,

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[1] K. uses various means to describe time, including centuries, imperial dates, and epochs such as the Bronze Age, Late Antiquity, the Late Republic, and the Early Empire. For this last category, she does not usually indicate numerical dates for the periods.

[2] K.'s dissertation was part of a Foundation for Polish Science research initiative called "The Eastern Mediterranean from the 4th century BC until Late Antiquity." Before this book's publication, her project already yielded several articles on Roman elite assessments of Greek wines, Cypriot and Cilician wine, and the medicinal uses of Eastern wines: Komar 2014a; Komar 2014b; Komar 2016; and Komar 2020.

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and archaeological materials to build a holistic and diachronic picture of the nature of Eastern Mediterranean wines and their export abroad to Ancient Italy (1, 27). While that descriptor suggests K. will address the entire peninsula, it is a misnomer. Geographically, her main focus is on Rome, the harbor towns of Ostia and Portus, the Bay of Naples, and several northeastern Italian cities on or near the Adriatic (Altinum, Rimini, Oderzo, Padua, nine towns around the Polesine, and Verona, Vicenza, and Aquileia) for a total of 27 sites, settlements, or regions (Chapter 3). She does not provide a justification for the selection of these four areas; however, she does give reasons for not including certain other nearby sites in her calculations (134–35, 155). In examining textual evidence for Eastern wines, she employs epigraphy (relying heavily on *CIL* IV and the Lexicon of Greek Personal Names database) and Greek and Roman literature, providing a useful appendix of these sources in chronological order at the end of the book (Appendix 1), along with a reconstructed timeline of the ancient writers and wines that Athenaeus quotes in his 2nd-c. CE work, *The Deipnosophistae* (Appendix 2).

The book is organized into eight chapters: an introduction, six case studies addressing different questions about the history, trade, and consumption of Eastern wines, and a conclusion. The Introduction provides an overview of theories on the ancient economy, starting with the primitivist-modernist debate, a gazetteer of ancient authors who write about wine, selected amphora studies (from 2017 and earlier), and a summary of each chapter. Chapter 1 surveys the history of viticulture and viniculture in Italy and offers hypotheses on the influence of Greek and Phoenician winegrowing practices on Italian farms. Chapter 2 extrapolates the qualities of Eastern wines as gleaned from the descriptions and vocabulary that Greek and Roman authors applied to them and the adjectives that appear on the *tituli picti* of amphoras containing those wines that were found in the Vesuvian cities. Chapter 3 collects archaeological information on amphora assemblages recorded in excavation reports from Rome, Ostia, Portus, the Bay of Naples, and eight northeastern Italian cities to map distribution and statistically diagram consumption patterns of Eastern amphoras (and by extension, Eastern wines) in these locations from the 2nd c. BCE through the 3rd c. CE. K. also compares these patterns to the ORBIS Geospatial Map to consider transport costs for amphora-borne products. Chapter 4 attempts to enter the minds of consumers, asking whether or not they considered Eastern wines to be luxurious, aristocratic beverages or common tipple. K. suggests that, over time, the perception changes as expensive northern Aegean wines (Chian, Lesbian, Thasian) are replaced by cheaper southern Aegean vintages (Cretan, Coan, Levantine, Cilician). Chapter 5 presents evidence for who was trading these wines, applying prosopographical methods to analyze personal names on *tituli picti* recovered from amphorae found around the Bay of Naples and connecting these names to wealthy elite families, with the suggestion that many wine traders' legal and financial status was as well-to-do *liberti*. Chapter 6 considers Eastern wines' role in the Late Antique Roman economy from the "Crisis of the Third Century" onwards, returning to the Eastern amphora statistics for this period that K. assembled in Chapter 3 to detect and explain any changes in consumption patterns. The Conclusion summarizes K.'s main points, placing them within larger discussions of the ancient economy, Eastern wines, and commodities consumption in the Greek and Roman world.

This study is filled with provocative information and controversies, on the subject of Roman wines in general as well as Eastern ones, that are sure to spark debates amongst economic historians, ceramicists, epigraphers, and archaeologists. In the interest of brevity and utility, I will focus in detail on the two longest contributions, Chapters 2 and 3, to

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highlight the strengths of K.'s approach as well as the more conjectural aspects of her arguments that could be questioned or improved.

Chapter 2 ("*De gustibus disputandem est*—'Fame' or ordinary wines?") takes a quote from the 1999 reprint of M. Finley's seminal work, *The Ancient Economy*, as its premise and asks whether or not Eastern wines had a reputation for being "fame" [sic] wines or "*vin ordinaire*", with the latter perhaps not being worth exporting.[3] In her exposition, K. comes closest to providing readers with the lived experience of drinking these wines, while still allowing that the ancient Greek and Roman palate may have been quite different from modern ones.[4] She deconstructs Finley's false dichotomy of highly reputed, exportable vintages and locally consumed, low-quality table wines by discussing the properties of various Eastern wines (color, age, taste, consistency, sweet vs. dry) according to the literary sources, making inferences about them from the Greek and Latin vocabulary ancient authors used to describe them. She provides an interesting discussion of additives to Eastern wines, such as seawater and resin, and what advantages they might have had in terms of flavor and preservation. For many of the Eastern wines, K. explores the methods used to produce and age them, such as letting the grapes sun-dry on the vine or after picking and then rehydrating them for pressing (96). She also mentions that certain wines had a layer of yeast (*flos*) that developed as a skin on top of the wine as it aged in dolia or pithoi, akin to modern *vins de voile* (89–90). K. dissects the vocabulary ancient authors and *tituli picti* employ to describe the wines in order to determine whether they were sweet, dry, or salty, using the modern comparative work of oenologist Stavroula Kourakou-Dragona to reconstruct the possible flavors, textures, and quaffability of Eastern vintages.[5] This is followed by an overview of the main types of Eastern wines and their qualities in the Republic and the Empire as described by literary and epigraphic sources. In this chapter, K. amplifies and expands André Tchernia and Kourakou-Dragona's experimental work on reconstructing ancient Eastern wines, with intriguing results that bring these vintages back to life (85–86).[6] She goes beyond debating Finley's

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[3] The Finley quote in context, from his chapter on town and country, is as follows: "The Athenians exported some olives and olive-oil throughout their history: that is proved by the Hadrianic law of about A.D. 125 reserving one third of the local production for public use, a law which reminds us forcefully that Greek (and Roman) cities were also large *consumers* of olive oil. Given this latter fact and given the ubiquity of the olive-tree, where were the external markets for the export of this commodity, *from the important urban communities*, on a scale large enough to weigh significantly in the balance of payments? As for wine exports, the same considerations apply with the added qualification in the case of Athens that its wine was poor in quality. The important foreign trade was in famed regional wines; *vin ordinaire* was normally produced at home." In a footnote at the end of this passage, Finley adds, "In the text I have italicized the words, 'from important urban communities', to underscore the irrelevance, in the present context, of such a wine-producing region as the Roman province of Baetica in southern Spain. The much discussed Italian wine trade of the late Roman Republic and the Empire is also largely irrelevant here. Most Italian wines were shipped to Rome, a fabulous consumer of wine, to other Italian cities and to Roman armies in the north, as in Pannonia until it began to produce enough on its own." From the extended quote and footnote, it does not appear that Finley was singling out Eastern wines. He was also not an archaeologist and did not draw upon that evidence to make his consumption arguments: Finley 1999, 133, n. 24.

[4] Gallimore has also posed and thoughtfully answered this question about the quality and export of Cretan wines in the Early Empire: Gallimore 2016.

[5] Kourakou-Dragona 2013.

[6] Tchernia 1986; Tchernia 2001; Tchernia and Brun 1999.

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argument for the qualities that make for desirable export wines and evaluates these vintages from vine to cup. In the following chapters, K. suggests that Eastern wines' reputation was less of a factor in their export than the cost-effectiveness of transporting them to Italy (182–85).

Chapter 3 ("Mass or limited? Wine importations to Italy during the Early Imperial Age") is the longest and most archaeological of K.'s study and consists of an amalgamation of site reports from 27 different locations that she uses to measure and map the importation of Eastern wines to Italy in the Roman Republic and Imperial Age. While the number of sites she has assembled is impressive, the data is skewed by the fact that the contexts vary widely; there is limited critical assessment of the character of these deposits and the extent of the information they can reliably offer about the consumption of Eastern amphoras. K. does provide the caveat that she will not analyze the strata where these vessels were found: "The particular character of each context was not taken into consideration, this was in order to obtain the most general view" (132). Instead of choosing similar types of find spots, K. prioritizes assemblages from sequential time periods so that she can argue for diachronic changes in consumption, despite the fact that the vast majority of these contexts are not reflective of the primary use life of the amphoras as commodities containers. In Rome, many of the contexts with Eastern amphoras that she includes are construction fill layers. This is not an unusual situation in that city's urban, keyhole archaeology, but some consideration of formation processes is necessary when analyzing the finds from such deposits. The only significant assessment one can make about fill assemblages is the presence or absence of forms and sequences; nothing can be gleaned about their use-life contexts. This undermines K.'s arguments for Roman preferences for Eastern wines based on percentages of these vessels found in building debris strata.

Three of the Ostia contexts are footings for mosaic floors or hydraulic or terracing features, all of which belong to the category of construction material reuse rather than a waste heap. In most of K.'s selected Adriatic sites, the Eastern amphoras have been either reused as drainage features or recovered as sporadic finds in modern contexts. Again, their presence suggests that at some point, someone in the area may have purchased them with wine inside, but it is difficult to make that argument when they are serving as building material after potentially innumerable fillings during their use life. The Vesuvian cities provide a few contexts where one can securely point to primary use and discard associated with the find spots, such as the Samnite/Republican House under the Casa di Arianna/ Capitelli Colorati and the House of [the] Menander at Pompeii, the Villa S. Marco and Villa Arianna at Stabiae, and Taberna 4 at Rione Terra (146–49). However, these are the depositional exceptions rather than the rule in K.'s chosen case studies.

For K. and perhaps for the archaeologists who wrote the reports she uses, one amphora sherd equals one amphora. In many cases these sherds are diagnostic (rims, bases, handles), but sometimes they are body sherds from productions that are otherwise unrepresented in the assemblage (132–33, 136). She does not describe the collection and quantification methods for all of the excavation reports used in her statistical analysis.[7] Variations in these methods skew the final results and vessel counts, so it would be helpful to have this information when evaluating the percentages and trends she finds in the regional and site amphora quantifications. She also uses the number of sherds as proxies

[7] K. discusses di Giovanni's (2003; 2013) quantification methods for the Cretan amphoras stored in the Granai del Foro at Pompeii at length, but she does not use this assemblage in her own count and calculations (154).

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for the amount of wine present at a site, since, according to De Sena, amphora capacities do not significantly differ (131).[8] More recent studies have shown there can be significant variation in capacity, not only between forms, but also within the same form, so one should exercise caution when using amphora forms as equivalents for capacity on a grand scale.[9]

Site selection and quantification aside, K.'s exclusive reliance on the field reports of other archaeologists means she is at the mercy of the information they provide, including whether or not they specify and describe the amphora forms and sherd types recovered (diagnostics, condition, etc.) and include profile drawings or photographs. Since she has prioritized chronology over context type in her sampling methodology and the reports come from a wide variety of sources and regions, this naturally means that the available data she employs is uneven. For example, in the Rimini section, she discloses that the source she is using only describes the forms verbally, making visual verification impossible (166). I followed up on most of K.'s source reports to clarify my own questions about amphora forms, use wear, and degree of completeness and can attest to the difficulty in tracking down this information. Despite these uncertainties, K. presents graphs and charts showing percentages of consumption by area that are based on tabulations of the studies she has selected and argues for larger regional (and Italian) patterns of Eastern wine distribution over time. Generalizing from a source-biased dataset like this one should be undertaken with caution and full disclosure of its limitations.

Two further and related problematic assumptions that K. cannot test without autoptic analysis of the finds are that the amphora fabrics of these Eastern forms have been securely assigned and that all of the Eastern forms in her count contained wine. In the Introduction, she discusses the presence of pitch and resin as an indicator of wine contents in certain Eastern and Western amphora productions (19, 23). One could, for example, check for pitch residue on the amphora fragments to verify wine as the final contents before interment. Given the large number of sherds and sites in her study, this may be an impossible task and an unfair criticism, but it is worthy of consideration, especially in light of the changing picture of amphora use and reuse in Italy during the 1st and 2nd c. CE.

Amphora reuse for commodities has become an important line of inquiry in recent years, but K. has not quite reconciled herself to its possible place in her synthesis and distribution patterns.[10] For example, in the Introduction, K. strongly denies that amphora reuse was a factor in commodities trading. She disputes the work of Peña, Abdelhamid, and Lawall, taking pains to discredit shipwreck evidence for amphora reuse that could potentially undermine distribution maps since one could not be sure that an Eastern amphora found in a primary reuse context actually contained Eastern wine, or wine from any region, rather than a different commodity (19–21). Yet a 2012 study by Foley and colleagues that K. cites in her bibliography specifically mentions that an unpitched, 4th-c. BCE Chian amphora from a shipwreck off that island contained DNA from oil and herbs, suggesting that, when it was deposited, it was not used for wine at all.[11] Even if all of the other amphoras from

8 De Sena 2005.

9 Molina Vidal and Corredor 2018; Muslin 2019.

10 Peña 2007; Lawall 2011; Foley et. al 2012; Abdelhamid 2013; Muslin 2019.

11 Traces of wine were also recovered in the form of grape pips, suggesting an earlier primary use for wine. This result is particularly intriguing since contemporary coinage from Chios shows this type of amphora with a cluster of grapes hanging above it, making a visual link between

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that wreck contained wine DNA, one must still entertain the idea that, without DNA or residue analysis, we cannot say for certain that these vessels always contained wine or that they contained wine when they were interred in the archaeological record.

K. is not completely averse to amphora reuse. Later in the book, she cites a *titulus pictus* describing Chian wine (Ar[visum]) on a Dressel 1 amphora found on the Via Ostiense at Rome, clearly indicating a case of primary contents amphora reuse (69, n. 270).[12] She also argues for reuse to disprove the existence of Cretan red wine (117, 119). In Chapter 5, K. discusses another case for Eastern amphora reuse: the House of Amarantus/ Caupona of Q. Mestrius Maximus that contained dozens of AC1, AC2, AC3, and Pompeii 13/Agora G198 amphoras in its atrium (224–25). She describes the *tituli picti* and amphora types, first suggesting that it is a wine shop selling Eastern wines, but then she references and seems to agree with Peña's argument that these imported vessels were to be reused for Vesuvian wine. Perhaps this is the reason she does not include a house with so many Eastern amphoras in her statistical synthesis in Chapter 3.

This is a big idea book. Any one of the topics covered in these chapters could fill its own monograph, but K. brings them all together in a way that can be somewhat repetitive and incoherent. Her writing style makes for dense reading and her argumentation is complicated and at times difficult to follow. For each of the many examples, case studies, and controversies K. discusses, she presents multiple points of view (both those of other scholars and her own), without prioritizing one over the other or making a stand. Two examples of this type of discourse are as follows:

> Although it seems impossible to give a definitive answer to whether the Romans consumed Eastern wines in the Archaic period, the available data does not permit one to exclude such a possibility. (51–52)
>
> Posidonius, quoted by Athenaeus, confirmed that Persian kings drank Chalybonian wine, but he claimed that this beverage was made in Damascus, where the Persians planted vine [sic]. We may therefore assume that Damascus produced wine that bore the same characteristics as Chalybonian, or that they made beverages from the same vine variety. Nevertheless, it cannot be excluded that Posidonius (even though he was from Apamea in Syria) was mistaken, and that Damascus was only involved in the trade of wine from the area of modern Aleppo, where wine trading is confirmed by the Bible. (108)

While from a research perspective, this shows K. to be judicious, as a rhetorical style, it is frustrating, since the reader is left feeling discouraged after trying to understand an argument that the author does not believe to be valid. It suggests that K. wishes to be comprehensive but not conclusive, leaving open what her own perspective might be on these matters.

There are some aspects of this book that make it less user friendly, such as inconsistencies in source citation and an index with omissions and errors. Certain sentences have multiple footnotes for different clauses, while others with named scholars' arguments or other data from

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the form and the agricultural product. However, a visual representation is always an approximation of reality, so the new DNA results should make us pause when inferring too much from art or literature about the nature of commodities trading in the ancient world. Foley et al. 2012, 391, 395–96; Hansson and Foley 2008, 1173–75.

[12] To this author's knowledge, there is no evidence for Dressel 1 amphora production on Chios.

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their research that K. is utilizing are cited after the appropriate quotation or sentence. For example, a separate literary reference is footnoted for each clause in a sentence describing Lake Mareotis as a grape-growing region, instead of having both references together at the end (106, nn. 250, 251). At the other extreme, K. only cites her sources for the wine press and pithoi at Podere Tartuchino in the next sentence, which addresses a 6th-c. BCE visual representation of grape pressing on an Attic Black Figure vase (55, n. 148). These idiosyncrasies make it challenging to connect the information in the text to the relevant sources in the notes.

The index of names and subjects is inaccurate for some terms, a concern for referencing the high volume of information in a book of this size and scope. For example, the first two page numbers for Sicily are wrong (162, 175) and several other mentions of the island and her cities are left out (55, 142, 150, 160–61, 177). Certain houses that K. discusses in detail are left out of the index, such as the House of Amarantus/Caupona of Quintus Mestrius Maximus and the House of the Ephebe/Cornelius Tages at Pompeii (Chapter 5). Diocletian and the Price Edict are mentioned at length in Chapters 5 and 6, but neither appears in the source or subject index (177, 254, 274, 276, 278).

There are also numerous spelling mistakes in proper names that should have been addressed before printing. Ninevah is misspelled as Niniva and Myrthos for Myrtos (38). Agriletum should be Argiletum (139); Felgrei should be Flegrei in S. De Caro's reference (336). One of the three authors of the single bibliographic reference for the Cratere Senga site should be F. Gracea, not Garcea (149, 341) and "Pozzuoli" is twice misspelled as "Puzzuoli" (337, 341). There is also a typo in the Moses Finley quote. In Chapter 2, K. uses the word "fame" in both the chapter title and throughout the book; however, the word Finley uses is "famed", in the sense of having a good reputation.

Despite these issues, there is much to recommend K.'s book. The questions that K. asks are good ones, and she has marshaled much of the available ancient literary and archaeological evidence for Eastern Mediterranean wines to create a nuanced and indeed tasteful picture of these vintages and their buyers and sellers. This book will be useful for scholars seeking a comprehensive introduction to and overview of Eastern Mediterranean wines over time with an invaluable bibliography of primary and secondary sources. Oenologists and wine enthusiasts will find much to learn and value in K.'s work on the nature and reputation of these underappreciated vintages. One hopes that, in future publications, K. will follow up this source-driven study with more autoptic analysis of the ceramic materials and inscriptions included here to road test her intriguing hypotheses about the rich and flavorful world of Eastern wines.

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Burying Greeks in Dalmatia

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The city of Issa on the island of Vis in Dalmatia was one of the oldest Greek settlements in the central Adriatic. Strategically located at the crossroads of sea routes linking both

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