

Evaluation of Gastronomy Items in Roman Mosaic Art [CITATION]

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Abstract

Roman art has been influential on three continents (Europe, Africa, and Asia) for nearly a thousand years and includes many gastronomic elements such as painting, marble, mosaic, silver and bronze works, and earthenware. Mosaic art, an important part of Roman art, was performed both outdoors and in the interiors of buildings and offers rich works. Mosaic artists have demonstrated their artistic talents by developing the traditional Roman style. This study aims to evaluate Roman mosaics in terms of gastronomic elements. Fifteen mosaic compositions containing gastronomic elements were examined using document review and semiotics, qualitative research methods. In these mosaics, vegetables, fruits, games, large and small cattle, and seafood were used as gastronomic elements. Mosaics provide much information about Roman culture, socialization, eating and drinking habits, and food. In particular, the Asarotos Oikos mosaic is an important work regarding the relationship between art and gastronomy. Overall, Roman mosaic art is a unique source of information about Roman life and gastronomy.

Keywords: *Gastronomy, Gastronomy items, Mosaic, Mosaic art, Roman mosaics.*

Introduction

The Roman Empire was an ancient state ruled by emperors following the Roman Republic, with vast territories across Europe, North Africa, and Western Asia. Roman art is a broad subject that spans nearly a thousand years, encompassing Europe, Africa, and Asia, and includes various forms such as painting, marble, mosaic, silver, and bronze works. The Romans adopted the artistic influences of earlier Mediterranean cultures but also created unique art forms of their own.

Mosaic art consists of depictions created by placing small pieces on a surface. In Rome, mosaics were used for decorative purposes in public areas, homes, and various venues. These mosaics include a wide range of gastronomic elements, such as fishing scenes, kitchens, and banquet scenes, providing vivid depictions of life in ancient Rome. Many of these works have been discovered in archaeological excavations throughout different parts of the Roman Empire.

Roman mosaics were used to decorate villas and impress guests, serving as a status symbol for wealthy Romans. While artists made mosaics with local stones, they used colored stones from other countries for special accents. Mosaics also offer important information about ancient history, providing evidence about how people lived and what they thought.

In Rome, mosaics emerged as a combination of local traditions and Roman influence, with styles and fashions evolving over time. These elaborate, large works emphasized the wealth and power of their owners and provided a vivid picture of ancient Roman life.

Through gastronomic activities, archaeological excavations, and works of art, mosaics provide information about the gastronomic culture and food rituals of the ancient world. Roman cuisine is notable for its exotic and familiar ingredients, reflecting the creativity of the Romans. Their food culture developed in harmony with their social life and beliefs.

Mosaics from ancient Rome to the present day offer important insights into food culture and social life, revealing social, political, religious, and economic practices in gastronomic history. These works reflect the lifestyle and artistic achievements of the Romans.

Methodology

Gastronomy is not only about food recipes but also a social symbol that unites societies through the kitchen. Mosaic works have depicted these social scenes in various ways throughout history. In this study, Roman mosaics were examined using the semiotic method. A document review was conducted to analyze the mosaics, with examples collected from official museum websites. The study identified 15 mosaic works containing gastronomic elements. Semiotics examines how visual objects are used to understand social events. The study sought to answer what Roman mosaic artists thought and what inspired them when creating their works.

Results

The semiotic method was used to examine gastronomic elements found in Roman mosaic art. First, a literature review was conducted, and information was collected about Roman mosaics containing gastronomic elements. Roman mosaic works that used gastronomic elements are given in Table 1.

Table 1. Gastronomy Elements Identified in Roman Mosaics

	Description of the Work	Period
1	Asparagus (Figure 1)	AD 350-375
2	Fruit plate (Figure 2)	AD 350-375
3	Mushrooms (Figure 3)	AD 350-375
4	Wild boar and mushroom (Figure 4)	AD 350-375
5	Orange and blue fish (Figure 5)	3rd century AD
6	Double fish (Figure 6)	350-375
7	Fish (Figure 7)	5th-6th century AD
8	Roman Mosaic of an Ethiopian fisherman (Figure 8)	2nd century AD
9	Boats in a sea with fishing rod, fishing net, and hawk (Figure 9)	27 BC - AD 395
10	A child holding a plate of fruit and a bucket of crabs in a kitchen full of fish and squid (Figure 10)	3rd century AD
11	Roman Mosaic with a Symposium Scene from the Eastern Mediterranean (Figure 11)	3rd-4th century AD
12	Poultry, fish, dates, asparagus, and seafood hanging in a cupboard (Figure 12)	2nd century AD
13	Fruits and animals (Figure 13)	2nd century AD
14	Fish (Figure 14)	2nd century AD
15	Asàrotos òikos mosaic (unswept house/floor) (Figure 15)	2nd century AD

The determined mosaic compositions were examined, analyses were conducted, and gastronomic inferences were made on topics such as Roman food culture, social life, and hunting. Roman mosaics are rich enough to be considered masterpieces. Mosaic artists demonstrated their artistry by developing the traditional Roman style. Information about vegetables, fruits, plants, game, fish, cattle, and sheep, which can be considered gastronomic elements of the Romans, can be gleaned from mosaics.

Artworks have been an important element in the active existence of humanity for centuries. Different societies have wanted to reveal their traditional cultures, lifestyles, and tastes throughout the ages, resulting in many branches of art, such as painting, sculpture, fresco, and mosaic. One of these branches of art, "Mosaic Art," emerged and developed in ancient times. Mosaic works have evolved, being processed by different communities and cultures since their inception and have survived to the present day. The dictionary definition of the word mosaic is the art of depiction made by putting together small-sized pieces of marble, stone, glass, or terracotta in various colors and covering the walls, floors, and ceilings of buildings.

Roman art generally did not show a specific style development. The Romans did not hesitate to adopt artistic concepts such as painting and sculpture that were valued in ancient times. In the 18th century BC, the Ancient Greeks arranged stones and seashells on concrete. Each of the Roman mosaics used for decorative purposes in various places, such as city pavements, squares, and courtyards, can be considered a masterpiece. The mosaic artists of the Roman Empire skillfully processed the traditional Roman style by combining it with local colors and patterns and blending them with the techniques they developed, giving Roman mosaics a distinctive quality. Mosaic, which was used in decoration, first spread from Rome to the Mediterranean, then to North Africa, and finally to Europe.

We can access information about what the Romans ate and how they ate from wall paintings and mosaics. In most mosaics from the Roman period, vegetables, fruits, cattle, sheep, plants, terracotta pots, and feasts were the subjects. Additionally, subjects that depicted feast leftovers, such as nut shells, fruit peels, and lobster pieces, were also covered.

Since the Romans lived very close to the Mediterranean, it is likely that they mostly consumed fish, crustaceans, and shellfish. Many mosaics depict seascapes and men fishing.

Food was a popular subject in mosaics throughout the Roman period. A Roman floor mosaic depicting the asparagus vegetable, estimated to have been made between 350 and 375 AD, is shown in Figure 1. During the Roman period, the first example of a study similar to the use of today's frozen foods was conducted with the asparagus vegetable. Asparagus was collected in season and stored for special occasions and holidays in the low temperatures of the Alpine geography. Since it was expensive, eating it was a matter of prestige, and the Romans valued this vegetable for its health benefits as well as its delicious taste. Thanks to the Romans, asparagus was also known in Egypt, Syria, and Spain. However, it was also eaten fresh in season. Emperor Octavian Augustus had a logistics team transport this delicious vegetable to his palace to eat it in season. The Latin phrase “*velocius quam asparagi conquantur*,” meaning faster than asparagus cooks, emerged about this event. There is a recipe for asparagus in the book “*De re coquinaria - On Cooking*” that has survived from the Roman period to the present day.

Popular fruits in the Roman period included apples, pears, figs, grapes, quinces, citrons, strawberries, blackberries, elderberries, currants, plums, dates, melons, rosehips, and pomegranates. Three types of apples were known in the Roman Empire. A Roman floor mosaic depicting a plateful of apples, thought to have been made in the 300s A.D., is shown in Figure 2. Exotic fruits were less common. Generally, fruits were eaten fresh in season or dried and stored for the winter. Apricots and peaches from Central Asia and Iran were consumed in the 30s A.D. They were recognized in the Roman Empire after 100 BC. Oranges and lemons were known due to Rome's dominance in the Mediterranean geography. However, citrus products were used for medicinal purposes rather than for eating.

The book “*De re coquinaria - On Cooking*,” which is considered one of the first gastronomy works, attributed to the wealthy Roman merchant Marcus Gavius Apicius or Caelius Apicius, provides a recipe for mushroom sauce from ancient Rome. When the recipe in the book is examined, it is understood that it was most likely a sauce served with meat dishes. According to the recipe, mushrooms were sautéed in olive oil with spices such as black pepper and coriander and made by soaking in grape must when they were almost cooked. The Roman floor mosaic depicting mushrooms on a plate, thought to have been made in the 300s A.D., is shown in Figure 3.

The famous Roman poet Marcus Valerius Martialis (Martial), who lived between 38 and 102 A.D., mentions wild boar in his poems. He says that to prepare a good meal with the wild boar that was a gift from his friend, the cook needs plenty of fish sauce, Falerna sauce (made from Falerna wine), and pepper. For this reason, Martial decides to send the gift that caused him trouble back to his friend and have a cheaper meal prepared. Despite the ironic poem written by Martial, wild boar used in Roman cuisine was a luxury and elite meat product. A Roman floor mosaic depicting wild boar and mushrooms, thought to have been made in the 300s AD, is shown in Figure 4.

Ancient Romans consumed fish abundantly during times of famine. Over time, this habit made fish an important element of the Roman culinary tradition. Examples of Roman mosaics depicting fish and fishermen are shown in Figures 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9. The most popular fish species, sea bream, sole, tuna, and mullet, were served with boiled vegetables. The ports of Anzio, Civitavecchia, and Fiumicino in the Roman Empire were the centers of fishing. Pork sausages flavored with fish species and fish dishes prepared with wine were quite popular among Roman nobles. Fish depictions can be found in Roman mosaics that adorned the sitting areas in the gardens of large Roman residences and were not removed for centuries.

Other important products cultivated in Ancient Rome include barley, wheat, rye, peas, lentils, chickpeas, cabbage, lettuce, leeks, onions, garlic, and turnips. Vegetables and legumes were frequently used in meals. Cabbage, one of the symbols of Roman culinary culture and especially praised in the writings of Cato and Pliny the Elder, had an important place in Roman cuisine. Soups, main dishes, and garnishes made from these vegetables were frequently consumed in daily life.

Roman mosaics not only provided information about food culture but also offered clues about Roman social life and rituals. Banquet scenes, hunting parties, and culinary activities revealed the Romans' lifestyle and their relationship with food. These mosaics spread to different regions of the Roman Empire and helped carry food culture and art to the present day.



Figure 1. A Roman floor mosaic depicting the vegetable asparagus, estimated to be made between 350 and 375 AD, Vatican Museum, Rome, Italy (WHE, 2023a).



Figure 2. A Roman floor mosaic depicting a fruit, estimated to have been made between 350 and 375 AD, Vatican Museum, Rome, Italy, (WHE, 2023b).



Figure 3. A Roman floor mosaic depicting a mushroom, estimated to have been made between 350 and 375 AD, Vatican Museum, Rome, Italy, (WHE, 2023c).



Figure 4. A Roman floor mosaic depicting a wild boar and mushrooms, estimated to be made between 350 and 375 AD, Vatican Museum, Rome, Italy, (WHE, 2023d).



Figure 5. Detail of a Roman mosaic depicting fish, estimated to have been made in the 3rd century, Archaeological Museum, Tarragona, Spain, (WHE, 2023e).



Figure 6. A Roman floor mosaic depicting fish, estimated to have been made between 350 and 375 AD, Vatican Museum, Rome, Italy, (WHE, 2023f).



Figure 7. A Roman floor mosaic depicting fish, estimated to have been made in the 5th-6th centuries AD, Como Archaeological Museum, Italy, Cartwright, M. (WHE, 2023g).



Figure 8. A Roman floor mosaic depicting a Black African fisherman, estimated to have been made in the 2nd century AD, Antakya Archaeological Museum, Hatay, Turkey, (WHE, 2023h).



Figure 9. A Roman floor mosaic depicting a Black African fisherman, estimated to have been made in the 27th century BC to AD Roman mosaic depicting boats at sea with fishing rods, fishing nets, and hawk nets, estimated to have been made between 395 BC, Sousse Museum, Sousse, Tunisia, Greece, (Sonia Halliday Photo Library, 2010).



Figure 10. Roman mosaic depicting a child holding a plate of fruit and a bucket of crabs in a kitchen full of fish and squid, estimated to have been made in the 3rd century AD, Hermitage Museum, S. Petersburg, Russia, (Webster, 1938:24).



Figure 11. Roman mosaic depicting a symposium scene, estimated to have been made in the 3rd-4th century AD, Phoenix Gallery of Ancient Art, Château de Boudry, Neuchâtel, Switzerland, (Imperium Romanum, 2023).



Figure 11a. A section of a Roman mosaic depicting a symposium scene, estimated to have been made in the 3rd-4th century AD, Phoenix Gallery of Ancient Art, Château de Boudry, Neuchâtel, Switzerland, (Imperium Romanum, 2023).



Figure 11b. A section of a Roman mosaic depicting a symposium scene, estimated to have been made in the 3rd-4th century AD, Phoenix Gallery of Ancient Art, Château de Boudry, Neuchâtel, Switzerland, (Imperium Romanum, 2023).



Figure 11c. A section of a Roman mosaic depicting a symposium scene, estimated to have been made in the 3rd-4th century AD, Phoenix Gallery of Ancient Art, Château de Boudry, Neuchâtel, Switzerland, (Imperium Romanum, 2023).



Figure 12. A Roman floor mosaic depicting poultry, fish, dates, asparagus, and seafood hanging in a cupboard, estimated to date from the 2nd century BC, Vatican Museum, Rome, Italy (Gardner, 2016).



Figure 13. A Roman mosaic from a house in Pompeii depicting fruits and animals, estimated to date from the 2nd century BC, Naples National Archaeological Museum, Italy, (Iacob, 2022).



Figure 14. A Roman mosaic from a house in Pompeii depicting fish, estimated to date from the 2nd century BC, Naples National Archaeological Museum, Italy, (Iacob, 2022).



Figure 15. The missing parts of the Roman floor mosaic depicting an unswept room, known as the Asàrotos oïkos mosaic, are estimated to date from the 2nd century AD, Vatican Museum, Rome, Italy (Soth, 2019).



Figure 15a. Part of a Roman floor mosaic depicting an unswept room, known as the Asàrotos òikos mosaic, Vatican Museum, Rome, Italy (Soth, 2019).



Figure 15b. Part of a Roman floor mosaic depicting an unswept room, known as the Asàrotos òikos mosaic, Vatican Museum, Rome, Italy (Soth, 2019).



Figure 15c. Museum view of a Roman floor mosaic depicting an unswept room, known as the Asàrotos òikos mosaic, Vatican Museum, Rome, Italy (Soth, 2019).



Figure 15d. Part of a Roman floor mosaic depicting an unswept room, known as the Asàrotos òikos mosaic, Vatican Museum, Rome, Italy (Soth, 2019).

Conclusion

Mosaic works were crafted in ancient Rome and adorned houses as symbols of wealth and prestige. Materials such as stone, glass, and seashells were broken into small pieces and laid on surfaces like walls or floors. This art form consisted of depictions or pictures created by arranging colored materials. Mosaics decorated entrances, courtyards, dining rooms, corridors, and sometimes even the bottoms of pools. In ancient Rome, mosaics vividly depicted and provided evidence of life, often including scenes with gastronomic elements. It is challenging to find much-written information about the gastronomic culture of ancient times. However, thanks to archaeological excavations and the artifacts obtained from these digs, we have gained significant insights into the gastronomic culture and food rituals of ancient times. The mosaics unearthed through archaeological excavations also contribute to the discovery of the social, political, religious, and economic practices related to gastronomy. Food has often been a way for societies to express their culture, and Roman cuisine was another area where the Romans excelled, creating diverse dishes with both familiar and exotic ingredients.

Mosaics contain extensive information about ancient Roman life. Roman mosaic art is an important source that provides information about Roman gastronomy. It offers insights into various aspects, such as who the Romans were, what they valued, and their daily activities, not just their food. Given that many mosaics covered the floors of houses and that mosaic art signified wealth and power at the time, it is understood that this art form represented both ostentation and power to guests. Many mosaics feature fish figures, indicating that the Romans consumed a lot of fish and seafood, and that "garum" sauce was frequently used in Rome. Additionally, the variety of fish reveals the abundant blessings the sea provided. Hunting scenes or symposium scenes in mosaics provide information about culture, socialization, eating and drinking habits, and raw materials. In symposium compositions, where many people gathered, a festive and conversational atmosphere is depicted. Some mosaics even depict an unswept floor with food leftovers from banquets scattered across the room, suggesting wastefulness and extravagant eating habits during the Roman period. Mosaic art provides information about the gastronomy of that period, especially its social and cultural aspects, based on these studies and interpretations.

Although many recipes have not survived from ancient times to the present, archaeologists have uncovered detailed information about Roman food. Roman mosaics unearthed from archaeological findings depict many foods such as fish, crab, squid, mushrooms, asparagus, and various fruits. While the types of food used are very similar to those in today's kitchens, there are significant differences in the food culture of ancient Rome. Mosaics provide information about the Romans' food culture, and given their proximity to the Mediterranean, it is likely they consumed more fish and shellfish. Eating asparagus, which was unlikely to be eaten out of season during the Roman period, was a matter of prestige and can be considered an early example akin to today's use of frozen foods.

This study is one of the first to explore the context of gastronomy and mosaics in the Ancient Roman period. It is recommended that future studies on this topic select and examine the Greek civilization and period from a narrow framework. Including the Greek civilization and period, which initiated mosaic art, will be important for the findings

and interpretations. Future studies should thoroughly examine the culinary history of the Greek civilization period, and the mosaic works used should be selected within this scope. The most challenging aspect of conducting this research is the lack of a comprehensive catalog of Roman period mosaic works. It is hoped that this study will serve as a source for new research and the preparation of catalogs within the scope of mosaic works and gastronomy.

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