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Material Culture: Pottery, Glass, and Daily Objects of the Roman World

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Introduction

This book is about how ordinary things—pots, glass vessels, lamps, and other daily objects—can illuminate the extraordinary complexity of the Roman world. Rather than treating artifacts as illustrations for a historical narrative, we begin with the objects themselves and follow the evidence they carry: their materials, manufacturing traces, forms, markings, and find-spots. By learning to identify, date, and interpret these remains, you will see how patterns of consumption, trade, and technological change emerge from the ground up.

Our approach is hands-on and problem-driven. Each chapter introduces the minimum theory needed to make informed decisions in the field, storeroom, or gallery, then offers practical steps for recognition and analysis. You will find typologies broken down into observable features, side-by-side comparisons to distinguish similar forms, and worked examples showing how a rim sherd or a lamp nozzle can anchor a chronology. Where specialized techniques—petrography, chemical analysis, or 3D recording—can sharpen an interpretation, we explain what they reveal and how to collaborate with specialists.

Material culture is not only about production; it is also about people and the choices they made. A fabric recipe encodes access to clays and fuels; a repair on a cracked bowl speaks to thrift or attachment; a cargo of amphorae points to routes and risk shared across seas. By following distribution patterns from workshops to markets and households, we learn how empire-wide systems intersected with local tastes. Differences across regions and communities—urban and rural, civilian and military, elite and non-elite—become legible in the assemblages we study.

Dating is both essential and uncertain. This guide emphasizes relative dating anchored in stratigraphy and typological sequences, then shows how absolute anchors—inscriptions, coins, dendrochronology where available, and closely dated contexts—tighten the ranges. Throughout, we highlight warning signs: intrusive finds, mixed deposits, and recycled materials that can blur timelines. The goal is confidence with humility: precise enough to support arguments, cautious enough to avoid overreach.

Readers come to Roman artifacts from many directions: students learning the craft, fieldworkers making rapid identifications at a trench edge, and museum-goers curious about what lies beneath labels. To serve all three, we pair checklists and quick-reference typologies with discussions that open onto bigger questions about economy, identity, and technology. You can read straight through or dip into specific chapters as needed; cross-references and summaries point you to the next step.

Finally, this book treats artifacts as both data and heritage. We address the ethics of collecting, conservation, and display, and we advocate practices that preserve context and maximize public value. Handling an object connects you to the labor that made it and the lives it touched. If this guide helps you recognize that connection—and equips you to turn fragments into arguments about the Roman past—it will have achieved its purpose.

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CHAPTER ONE: Chronology and Frameworks: From Republic to Late Antiquity

Time is the invisible layer that gives artifacts meaning. A pottery sherd or a fragment of glass is a moment frozen in clay or silica, but it connects to centuries of change in how people made, bought, used, and discarded things. This chapter offers a practical chronological map of the Roman world, built to help you place everyday objects within a coherent sequence. It is not a full history of Rome; instead, it focuses on the material signatures that allow you to sort assemblages by period, recognize cross-currents between regions, and anchor your interpretations in reliable time-markers.

When archaeologists talk about chronology, they rarely mean exact years. Most dating of common artifacts is relative, derived from what lies above or below them and from styles and technologies that appear and disappear in predictable order. Absolute dates—firm calendar years—come from inscriptions, coins, tree rings, or other independent anchors. Your job is to develop a mental framework that lets you move smoothly between these modes, asking which dating tools a given assemblage allows and where its limits are. Confidence comes from knowing what you can and cannot say from a fragment.

The Roman Republican period, roughly the fifth to the first centuries BCE, sets the stage for many habits of production and consumption that persist for centuries. Urbanization in Italy expanded workshops serving a growing market. Iron Age traditions continued in regions like Gaul and Britain, where local pottery and metalwork blended with imported Italian goods. Amphorae from places like Dressel 1B carried wine and oil across the Mediterranean, their thick ridged handles and distinctive profiles becoming hallmarks of the late Republic. Glass was still largely a luxury, formed by core-forming and casting rather than the blowing techniques that would soon revolutionize the industry.

The late Republic also saw the spread of finely decorated Arretine ware, named after Arezzo in Etruria, where potters like Perennius and Celsus stamped their names on elegant red-gloss bowls. These vessels, with their molded reliefs of mythological scenes and vegetal motifs, set a taste for tableware as display that the Empire would refine into terra sigillata. In the archaeological record, Arretine is a key marker for contexts dating from the late first century BCE to the early first century CE. Its presence outside Italy shows early integration of markets, while its absence in some regions can indicate limited access or the persistence of local styles.

With Augustus and the establishment of imperial rule in the late first century BCE, the

material record shifts into higher gear. The famous “Augustan building revolution” in Rome, praised by Augustus himself in his *Res Gestae*, relied on massive supplies of brick, tile, and concrete, but also on standardized tools and vessels to feed and equip workers. Pottery fabrics become more consistent; kiln technologies improve; and distribution networks widen. This is the beginning of a period often labeled High Empire, running through the second century CE, when the empire’s infrastructure and consumer markets reached their broadest reach before the transformations of the third century.

The early imperial period is the golden age of terra sigillata, the glossy red tableware that filled Roman cupboards from Britain to the Euphrates. Italian production dominated early, but before long Gaul (especially Lezoux) and North Africa developed their own styles and exports. On a dig, recognizing whether a sherd belongs to Italian, Gallic, or African sigillata can immediately narrow your date range and point to trade routes. These fine wares are often our primary chronological anchors in domestic contexts because they appear in huge quantities, carry maker stamps, and evolve through distinct shapes and decorative schemes.

Glass transforms dramatically in the early imperial period, thanks to the invention of glass-blowing around the mid-first century BCE, likely in Syria or Palestine. By the first century CE, blown glass vessels are everywhere: cups, jugs, flasks, and bottles in a range of colors and qualities. This is not simply a technological story; it’s a consumer story. Glass becomes affordable, functional, and fashionable, and its forms proliferate. In stratified deposits, the appearance of thin-walled blown glass above thicker cast pieces is a useful chronological indicator, and specific shapes help refine dates within the imperial centuries.

Amphorae provide robust chronological anchors across the empire, particularly the iconic Dressel 20, the heavy Spanish oil container that floods markets in the first to third centuries CE. Its thick walls, prominent kick-up at the base, and frequent stamping make it easy to recognize. African amphorae, later Dressel types, and eastern varieties like Aegean stocks chart shifting patterns of supply. The contents matter as much as the shapes: oil, wine, fish sauce, and grain moved in specialized containers whose distribution maps the empire’s economic arteries. A concentration of a single amphora type can reveal a shipwreck, a market, or a warehouse event.

Domestic artifacts of the High Empire reflect a broadening culture of consumption. Lamps with central filling holes and figured scenes proliferate; cooking pots and storage jars appear in standardized shapes; personal items like bone or bronze pins, cosmetic spoons, and styluses show up in household assemblages. The very mundane nature of these objects is their strength: they appear in many contexts, allowing us to trace social and regional variation. A military camp in Britain and a villa in Africa may share some forms, but differences in fabric, decoration, and condition tell stories about supply lines and local adaptation.

The third century CE is a period of notable instability in the political record but complex transformation in material culture. Inflation and debasement of coinage make dating by coin finds more challenging, and many workshops shut down or consolidate. Some regions see a decline in the production of fine, molded sigillata, replaced by simpler, self-slipped or burnished wares. African cooking wares, however, continue and spread, becoming a backbone of Mediterranean provisioning. Glass compositions start to shift as new sources of soda are tapped and recycling becomes more common. The overall impression is of a system under stress, but also of adaptation and persistence.

By the fourth and fifth centuries CE, we enter what is often termed Late Antiquity, a period of profound change in economy, administration, and culture. Material culture reflects this: forms become simpler, decorations more abstract, and production more regionalized. African red slip ware dominates the western Mediterranean with its large, shallow dishes and plates, continuing a long tradition of standardized tableware but in a new aesthetic. In the East, Phocaeen and other eastern red slip wares circulate widely. Amphora types like the late African 107C2 show continuity in oil trade, while new forms emerge to meet changing supply needs.

Glass in Late Antiquity continues to be blown, but the range of vessel forms shifts toward simpler shapes, and window glass becomes more common in public and elite buildings. Compositional changes reflect adjustments in raw materials, often detected by eye in color and clarity but better confirmed by analysis. A key rule of thumb: later glass tends to be more homogeneous and less varied in color than some imperial products, though regional variation remains. The spread of tesserae for mosaics also increases, tying glass production to architectural decoration and ecclesiastical patronage.

The continuation of lamps into Late Antiquity shows a gradual reduction in the use of figured motifs and a move toward simpler forms, sometimes with rouletted or geometric patterns. In some regions, lamps decline in frequency as other lighting solutions—like oil in open dishes or increased use of candles—become common. Recognizing late lamps requires attention to fabric and shape rather than elaborate iconography. As with pottery, the emphasis shifts from decorative complexity to functional efficiency and local production traits.

The chronology outlined above has a geographic texture. Italy retains significant production and export capacity into the early imperial period, but Gaul and Africa rise as major centers by the second century. Britain, as a province, often shows a slight lag in the adoption of new styles, and its assemblages are a mix of local coarse wares and imported fine wares. The eastern provinces—Syria, Asia Minor, Egypt—maintain strong local traditions and often pioneer new technologies. Keeping these regional patterns in mind prevents misreading a “late” type in one area as equally late in another.

A crucial concept for dating is the “life history” of objects. A vessel made in the early first century CE can be deposited in a late second-century context if it was kept in use, handed down, or reused. This is common for robust storage jars, high-value glass, and tools. Conversely, fragments can be redeposited by later disturbance, creating “intrusive” finds that look older than the layer they are found in. Recognizing these possibilities is part of chronology-building. Ask: is this object in a primary or secondary context? Does its wear pattern match its supposed age?

Coins are a classic dating tool but require caution. A coin found beneath a floor dates the construction or repair event; a coin within the fill may have entered later. Coin hoards represent deliberate deposits and usually give a terminus post quem for the latest coin, but they can be saved for generations before burial. Combining coin evidence with pottery and glass sequences is more powerful than relying on any one category. When coins and pottery tell the same story, your date range narrows; when they diverge, you have a puzzle to solve.

Dendrochronology, the dating of tree rings, is rare for Roman artifacts but invaluable where it occurs, such as timbers in waterfronts or buildings. It provides exact calendar years for the felling of the wood and can tightly date construction phases. Inscriptions on stone or on objects themselves—pottery stamps, graffiti—can also provide precise dates or dateable names. These absolute anchors are rare but transformative. They calibrate the relative sequence of styles, much like setting the correct time on a watch lets you trust its running thereafter.

Stratigraphy is the backbone of relative dating and deserves emphasis. The law of superposition—layers below are older than layers above—sounds simple, but context is everything. Cut features like pits and ditches intrude into earlier layers, bringing older material up and sometimes redepositing it in younger fills. A careful section drawing, attention to soil changes, and understanding of how a site was formed are essential. A good excavator uses the stratigraphic sequence to build a timeline for the artifacts, not the other way around.

Typology is the other pillar of relative dating. Objects cluster into types that evolve over time: changes in rim shape, handle attachments, base profiles, decoration, and fabric. For pottery, the study of rim forms can turn a handful of sherds into a quantified sequence of bowls, cups, and jars. For lamps, the evolution of filler holes, nozzle shapes, and motifs provides a reliable guide. The key is to look for discrete features rather than general impressions. Training your eye to recognize subtle shifts is the craft that underpins interpretation.

Terminus post quem and terminus ante quem are essential tools of chronological reasoning. A terminus post quem (TPQ) is the earliest date an assemblage could have been deposited; for instance, if the youngest coin in a layer is from AD 180, the layer

cannot have been laid down before that year. A terminus ante quem (TAQ) is the latest possible date; if a destruction layer seals a floor that contains coins of Constantine, the event must fall after those coins were minted. Using these concepts precisely helps avoid overstatement.

Mixed deposits are a common challenge. Urban sites, with constant rebuilding, often have layers that contain materials of different ages. Rural sites can accumulate debris over centuries in middens that blend periods. Even well-behaved sites experience disturbance from burrowing animals, tree roots, or later digging. When analyzing an assemblage, ask whether the deposit appears homogeneous. If not, you may need to sample within the deposit, identify intrusions, or treat the assemblage as a palimpsest rather than a single time capsule.

Assemblage composition can also provide chronological signals. A deposit dominated by Italian sigillata and early Gallic imports points to a first- or second-century date. The arrival of African red slip ware and later African amphorae suggests a third- to fifth-century horizon. If both types appear together, look for signs of mixing or consider whether the assemblage spans a long period. Quantification—counting sherds by type and ware—is often more revealing than relying on a single “diagnostic” piece.

Technology introduces another chronological signature. The transition from slow wheel to fast wheel, the introduction of higher-temperature kilns, the shift from open to closed forms in cooking wares, and changes in glass compositions all leave traces. Some changes are sweeping; others are local. Knowing the general technological trajectory—greater standardization, higher firing temperatures, more efficient blowing—helps you place unfamiliar finds in the right ballpark. When you spot a technological shift, you can infer a date range and a possible production change.

Social and economic factors shape the material record as well. The military was a powerful consumer and often demanded standardized equipment; its presence can create localized “fast fashion” in pottery and glass. Elite tastes drove demand for fine wares and decorative items, while rural communities might prioritize durability and function. During periods of disruption or contraction, we often see a simplification of forms and a rise in repair and reuse. These patterns, observed across assemblages, offer clues to the period’s social dynamics without needing a single inscription.

To put the framework into practice, imagine a typical trench profile. In the lowest layer, you find Dressel 1B amphorae and Arretine sherds, alongside a Republican coin. That sets an early horizon. Above it, a demolition layer contains mixed material with Italian and early Gallic sigillata and a few first-century glass fragments. The next layer is a compact floor deposit with abundant Gallic sigillata, lamps with central fillers, and a coin of Trajan. Finally, a pit cut through the sequence yields African red slip ware and a late lamp with rouletted decoration, plus a late fourth-century coin. This sequence makes sense, and the artifacts reinforce each other.

Cross-regional comparisons sharpen your readings. If you excavate in Gaul and find a mix of local coarse wares and Italian imports, that suggests a market integrated with Italy in the early empire. If you find abundant African cooking pots in a British town in the third century, that speaks to long-distance supply chains persisting despite political turbulence. If eastern amphorae cluster in a port in Dalmatia, you can map that onto known trade corridors. The chronological framework provides the skeleton; comparative data adds the muscle.

Precision in communication matters. Avoid saying a pot is “third-century” if you mean it could be as early as the late second century and as late as the mid-third century. Use ranges and qualifying terms like “likely,” “possible,” and “TPQ/TAQ” as appropriate. Note the evidence: a coin in the same layer, a stamp on the pot, a parallel from a well-dated site. These notes will help future researchers and prevent your interpretation from hardening into a fact that isn’t fully supported.

Beware of over-reliance on type-sequences from famous sites. A fine-ware shape standardized in Pompeii may appear elsewhere with slight variations and a different production timeline. Local potters often imitate popular forms in simplified ways, creating “copies” that look close but are not identical. Similarly, glassblowers in different regions might develop analogous shapes using local techniques and materials. Comparisons are useful, but always prioritize evidence from your own assemblage and nearby regions.

When writing up chronological interpretations, integrate stratigraphy, typology, and external anchors. State which elements are strongest and where uncertainty remains. A good interpretation acknowledges the possibility of long use-lives or residual material. For instance, a single sherd of Arretine in a medieval pit is not evidence of Roman occupation on that spot; it could be residual. However, a cluster of such sherds in a sealed Roman layer is a solid chronological marker. Layering your reasoning builds credibility.

Chronological frameworks are not static. New excavations, refined fabric studies, and better absolute dating continually update our sequences. A sherd once dated broadly to “second century” may now be assigned to the late first century due to new kiln evidence. This is normal and healthy. Your framework should be flexible, open to revision, and built on transparent reasoning. The goal is not certainty at all costs but a clear account of how you arrived at your dates.

A final practical tip is to build a personal reference set. Photograph diagnostic sherds from well-dated contexts, note their features, and collect published parallels. If you work in a region, compile a mini-database of TPQs and TAQs for key deposits. Over time, you’ll develop a feel for the rhythm of change: when a lamp type falls out of favor, when a new cooking pot shape appears, when African red slip starts to

dominate. That tacit knowledge, supported by good notes, is what turns identification into interpretation.

Chronology is the spine of material culture analysis. It connects finds to events, markets, and people. With the frameworks of stratigraphy, typology, and regional knowledge in hand, you can place artifacts within the sweep of Roman history and ask sharper questions about what they tell us. In the chapters that follow, we will use this chronological backbone to explore specific materials—pottery, glass, lamps, and small finds—and the ways they illuminate daily life across the Roman world.

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