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Luxury at Rome: *avaritia*, *aemulatio* and the *mos maiorum*

This article sets out to put into perspective the ancient Roman discourse about luxury, which our extant literary sources almost universally condemn, on moral grounds. In it, I aim to define the scope and character of Roman luxury, and how it became an issue for the Romans, from the end of the third century BC to the beginning of the second century AD. With the aid of modern thinking about luxury and the diffusion of ideas in a society, I shed light on the reasons for the upsurge in luxurious living and, in particular, on how luxuries spread through the elite population, an issue that has been largely neglected by modern scholars. Books and articles on Roman luxury have been primarily concerned with examining the discourse of contemporary writers who criticised luxury;² analysing the nature of Roman luxury;³ analysing the nature and impact of sumptuary legislation;⁴ or comparing the luxury of the Romans with that of other cultures.⁵ The only significant article dealing specifically with the diffusion of luxury is a provocative piece by Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, the focus of which is, however, limited and specific.⁶

For a series of moralising Roman authors, the second century BC saw the beginning of the corruption of the traditional stern moral fibre, as they saw it, of the Republic by an influx of

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² Andrew W. Lintott, 'Imperial Expansion and Moral Decline in the Roman Republic', *Historia*, 21:4 (1972), 626-38; Barbara Levick, 'Morals, Politics, and the Fall of the Roman Republic', *Greece & Rome*, 2nd ser., 29 (1982), 53-62.

³ Eva Dubois-Pelerin, *Le Luxe Privé à Rome et en Italie au 1^{er} Siècle après J.-C.* (Naples: Centre Jean Bérard, 2008); Andrew Dalby, *Empire of Pleasures: Luxury and Indulgence in the Roman World* (London: Routledge, 2000).

⁴ Ewoud Slob, *Luxuria: Regelgeving en maatregelen van censoren ten tijde van de Romeinse Republiek* (Zutphen: De Walburg, 1986); Alan E. Astin, 'Regimen morum', *JRS*, 78 (1988), 14-34; Marianne Coudry, 'Loi et société: la singularité des lois somptuaires de Rome', *Cahiers Gustav Glotz*, 15 (2004), 135-71; Giuseppe Dari-Mattiacci and Anna E. Plisecka, 'Luxury in Ancient Rome: Scope, Timing and Enforcement of Sumptuary Laws', *Legal Roots*, 1 (2010), Amsterdam Centre for Law & Economics Working Paper No. 2010-03, <<http://ssrn.acl.e.nl>> [accessed 12 July 2010]; Emanuela Zanda, *Fighting Hydra-like Luxury: Sumptuary Regulation in the Roman Republic* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2011).

⁵ Notably, Ludwig H. Friedländer, *Darstellungen aus der Sittengeschichte Roms in der Zeit von August bis zum Ausgang der Antonine*, 7th edn, 4 vols (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1889-90), trans. by Leonard A. Magnus, J.H. Freese and A.B. Gough, as, *Roman Life and Manners under the Early Empire*, 4 vols (London: Routledge, 1908-13), II, passim.

⁶ Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, 'The Social Spread of Roman Luxury: Sampling Pompeii and Herculaneum', *PBSR*, 58 (1990), 145-92.

luxuries from the east.⁷ Although the many Roman authors who comment on the rise of luxury differ as to precisely which military victory and subsequent triumph was the trigger for the decadence that the import of luxuries and luxurious habits entailed, none of them voiced any significant doubts about the effect. Luxury was linked in the rhetoric of the day, both in court and in writings, with greed (*avaritia*), drunkenness (*ebrietas*), debauchery (*stuprum*, *flagitium*), adultery (*adulteria*), lust (*libido*, *voluptas*), obscene feats of gourmandise (*gula*, *ganea*), vulgar ostentation (*extra modum sumptu et magnificentia [prodere]*), corruption (*licentia*), extravagant wastefulness (*sumptus*) often leading to bankruptcy, and – a general catch-all form of Roman abuse – effeminacy (*mollitia*). All this and more can be found, for example, liberally scattered through Cicero's speeches; are a constant undercurrent in Sallust's history; and, Seneca's *Epistles* are full of it.⁸ It is generally the luxurious lifestyle that is criticised, rather than specific luxury products, as the list above makes clear.

This is, of course, a classic *topos*, and Andrew Lintott provided an excellent overview and historiographical critique of it in 1972.⁹ But, however we approach it, there is no doubt that the Romans were alert to, and wary of, the idea of *luxuria*, just as the Greeks were suspicious of *tryphe*.¹⁰ Luxury, however, was there to stay, and most of the elite indulged in some form of it, to the extent that charges of excess became the common currency of both political abuse and forensic attacks, from which few senior politicians could entirely escape.¹¹

Roman luxury is, however, somewhat problematic. While it was regularly used by politicians and writers as a focus of abuse and it seriously concerned an elite group of backward-focused moralists,¹² with a more or less utopian view of the *mos maiorum*,¹³ we know relatively little about

⁷ Greece, or simply 'the east'. See especially Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 6.101, 12.84. All ancient texts are Oxford editions, unless otherwise stated. See Erich S. Gruen, *The Hellenistic World and the Coming of Rome*, 2 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), I. The theme can be found in Polybius, Cicero, Sallust, Diodorus, Livy, Velleius Paterculus, Valerius Maximus, Seneca, the elder Pliny, Tacitus, Plutarch, Dio Cassius, etc.

⁸ See, e.g., Cicero, *De officiis*, 1.140 (*vulgar ostentation and extravagance*); Cicero, *In Verrem*, 2.2.115.9; Cicero, *Pro Murena*, 13.15 (*lust*); Cicero, *In Verrem*, 2.5.137.13 (*greed*); Cicero, *In Pisonem* 6 (*gluttony, drunkenness*), 10 (*debauchery*); Sallust, *Bellum Catilinae*, 11.1 (*greed*), 13.3 (*gluttony, lewdness*), 52 (*effeminacy*); Sallust, *Bellum Jugurthinum*, 15.5 (*corruption*), 70 (*effeminacy*); Seneca the Younger, *Epistulae*, 47.2, 78.23-4 (*gourmandise*), 51.4 (*drunkenness*), 78.13.6 (*greed*), 86.6-7 (*vulgar ostentation*), 95.42, 123.7 (*extravagance*), 114.3 (*effeminacy*).

⁹ See especially, Lintott, *passim*, also Levick.

¹⁰ See Coudry, p. 1, n. 1 and references there.

¹¹ Catharine Edwards, *The Politics of Immorality in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1993). Cicero's speech against Piso and his Philippics are prime examples. Cf. Caelius's speech against C. Antonius, quoted in Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, 4.2.123-4.

¹² Characterised by what Coudry calls 'idéologie passéiste', see Coudry, p. 14.

¹³ 'Ancestral tradition': a standard shorthand for the (simpler and more constrained) customs of an earlier time, which may or may not have been precisely as the writer or speaker described it. See Cicero, *Pro Sestio*, 98.13; Cicero, *Tusculanae Disputationes*, 1.1.2; Sallust, *Bellum Catilinae*, 9; Livy, *Ab Urbe Condita*, 5.6.17. For a discussion of the

the motivations that inspired wealthy Roman citizens to indulge in luxurious behaviour, and about how, and how far, specific luxuries became diffused among the elite, let alone a wider population. As Andrew Wallace-Hadrill observed over 20 years ago, ‘Roman luxury as a social phenomenon still awaits proper treatment’.¹⁴ We do not often hear the voice of Roman luxury-lovers: there is little in the contemporary literature in favour of luxury, though some of Statius’s *Silvae* and elements of Martial’s epigrams can be read in this way, while Horace’s *Satire* 2.4 can be construed as praising a tasteful and refined luxury.¹⁵

Understanding luxury

In order to understand Roman luxury, we need to place it in its context, and to recognise how luxury markets work. Context is essential, because, as scholars such as Mary Douglas have made clear, luxury is a labile concept: today’s luxuries may be tomorrow’s day-to-day necessities; and what is luxurious in one society may be ordinary in another – think of furs in London and among the Inuit.¹⁶ Ludwig Friedländer discussed luxury at length in Volume 2 of his substantial analysis of Roman life, and dismissed the vaunted luxury of rich Romans as insignificant compared with nineteenth century European princelings’ extravagance.¹⁷ He suggested that in Rome we hear only of a minority of egregious examples which can safely be assumed to be exceptional, and that the vast majority of the population had no access to such things. His first point *may* carry some weight; the second underplays the close similarity of the structure of Roman society to that of the European statelets he compares Rome with – in both cases, a tiny proportion of the population accounted for the vast majority of wealth and surplus income, and hence of luxury consumption.

Luxury is also a concept that economists have trouble with. In the eighteenth century, Adam Smith argued that the distinction between luxuries and necessities was meaningless for economic analysis, since one man’s luxury might be another’s necessity.¹⁸ As Neville Morley has pointed out, the distinction between luxuries and staples has been adopted more or less unthinkingly by ancient historians interested in the development of trade, but it is virtually impossible to

slipperiness of the concept, see Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, *Rome’s Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2008), p. 217; Edwards, pp. 1–4.

¹⁴ Wallace-Hadrill, ‘The Social Spread of Roman Luxury’, p. 146, n. 2. But see now Dubois-Pelerin, Dalby.

¹⁵ For the latter, see Zanda, pp. 20–21. See also Ovid, *Ars Amatoria*, 3.121–128.

¹⁶ Mary Douglas & Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption* (London: Allen Lane, 1979).

¹⁷ Friedländer, II, *passim*.

¹⁸ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. by R.H. Campbell, A.S. Skinner, and W.B. Todd, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), II, p. 148.

operationalize the distinction in the economic analysis of trade.¹⁹ The fact remains, however, as Morley readily admits, that luxury clearly had meaning for the Romans, and it is necessary to take note of this in any overview of elite Roman society.²⁰

Modern marketing analysts have a clear idea of what a luxury market looks like and how people behave within it – though in recent years practitioners have divided luxury markets into a variety of sub-categories (super-luxury, mass luxury, sub-luxury, and now ‘meta-luxury’).²¹ To apply these sub-divisions to the Roman world in detail would be difficult: they reflect the fact that luxury is a labile and relative concept.²² By way of illustration, in Book 9 of the *Natural History*, Pliny says that by his day women of all sorts wore pearls, as a matter of course; but he makes clear that there were grades of pearls, some larger and more lustrous, and therefore more valuable, than others, and that when they were first introduced to Rome they were an exclusive luxury – by his time they had become, in effect, a mass luxury.²³

As a marketer working in luxury markets for companies such as de Beers, Rolex, and Ferragamo, I have seen the development of a set of criteria that are widely agreed to define luxury brands in general (the order may vary in different people’s formulations):²⁴

¹⁹ Neville Morley, *Trade in Classical Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2007), pp.41-43.

²⁰ Morley, p. 43.

²¹ Manfredi Ricca and Rebecca Robins, *Meta-Luxury: Brands and the Culture of Excellence* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). The term is used to define a special level of excellence above and beyond what the authors regard as the by now over-used and excessively loose term ‘luxury’.

²² See n. 15.

²³ Pliny the Elder, 9.106 ff. As he says (9.114), even ‘the poor’ (*pauperes*) want pearls. See Wallace-Hadrill, *Rome’s Cultural Revolution*, pp. 347-66 for indications of the extent of diffusion of luxury down the socio-economic scale.

²⁴ For a good modern overview, see Franck Vigneron and Lester W. Johnson, ‘A Review and a Conceptual Framework of Prestige-seeking Consumer Behaviour’, *Academy of Marketing Science Review*, 1999:1, <<http://www.amsreview.org/articles/vigneron01-1999.pdf>> [accessed 8 January 2012].

Characteristics of luxury markets and brands

- **High quality, well-designed, and crafted by experts. Both well-made and aesthetically pleasing**
- **Rare, special, unusual, exotic: possibly obtained only by great or risky effort**
- **Reflecting authentic heritage or history: ideally with a good, credible, and even slightly ‘magical’ story behind them**
- **Highly-priced – too expensive for most people, but not for the true connoisseur – hence, exclusive**
- **Recognizably used by high-status/wealthy people: seen in the ‘right’ places**
- **Indulgent – to be experienced and enjoyed with enthusiasm.**

Source: Red Cell Advertising. Cf. Dubois, p. 241; Vigneron & Johnson, p. 3, Table 1; Kapferer & Bastien, pp. 21, 53.²⁵

Within this, I would argue that some luxuries are in a sense ‘absolute’: for example, precious jewellery, ivory, and fine art. Others are more relative: fine wines and rich clothing materials, for example, which are more accessible in terms of absolute cost and availability. Nonetheless, at any given time in history, in a given society, it should be relatively easy to recognise what can be defined as luxuries, by applying the criteria in the above table. In seventeenth century Europe, tea, for example, was an absolute luxury.²⁶ Today, though connoisseurs can identify some rare varieties of tea that are sufficiently obscure and costly to come into a luxury category, tea is an everyday product, at least in the UK. In modern consumer markets, generally, the extreme ‘top of the range’ is usually in some sense luxury. In ancient Rome, as we shall see, the above criteria apply.

Roman Luxury and Conspicuous Consumption

For the Romans, the key to luxury and the discourse surrounding it was the way in which elite citizens used certain commodities to make statements about themselves.²⁷ Traditionally, and with

²⁵ Jean-Noel Kapferer & Vincent Bastien, *The Luxury Strategy* (London: Kogan Page, 2011).

²⁶ Samuel Pepys records in his diary for 25 September 1660: ‘I did send for a cup of tee (a China drink) of which I never had drank before’. See, *The diary of Samuel Pepys: A New and Complete Transcription*, ed. by Robert Latham & William Matthews, 2nd edn, 11 vols (London: Harper Collins, 1995), I, p. 167. Cf. Wallace-Hadrill, ‘The Social Spread of Roman Luxury’, pp. 148-49.

²⁷ Numerous examples can illustrate this. See Plutarch’s description of Lucullus’s luxurious lifestyle, especially *Lucullus*, 39-41. At a different level, Petronius’s Trimalchio presents a beautifully exaggerated picture of self-presentation – see Petronius, *Satyricon*, 25 ff. The fact that the conspicuous display of luxury was recognized by the Romans is illustrated by the numerous examples in Pliny’s *Natural History* of distinguished citizens being the first to

the approval even of morally-concerned writers such as Cicero, the way to do this was to present public buildings or monuments to the city and to finance gladiatorial and theatrical shows. Some of this was routine: the *aediles* were expected to commission theatrical performances for a range of festivals.²⁸ More conspicuous were the building or refurbishment of temples, such as the building of the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus by Q Lutatius Catulus in the 60s BC, and the temple of Saturn by L Munatius Plancus in 42 BC; while Asinius Pollio established the first public library, in the Atrium Libertatis, which he also built.²⁹ As Cicero says, ostentation of this kind was a public good, in contrast to its private use.³⁰ While he criticized private ostentation, however, he also said that a leading citizen must have a house (or houses) that was consonant with his status. Cicero spent plenty of money (much of which he had to borrow) on his Palatine house and his various villas. His attitude is amply reflected in the first century BC architectural text of Vitruvius, who makes it clear that powerful people needed what might be called power houses.³¹ It was only towards the end of the second century BC that rich and powerful Romans began to build their own town houses with marble columns and collect sculptures for their own gardens and courtyards, and to upgrade their out-of-town living space by building luxury villas, especially down the Campanian coast. By the end of the first century, both were normal practice among the elite, leading to intense competition in the design and decoration of houses among the rich.³²

With the increasing wealth flowing into the city from the expanded empire, the leaders of Roman society were able to embark on a process of increasingly conspicuous consumption, in Veblen's terms.³³ This could be – and was – justified as an essential element in the competitive

exhibit a particular luxury – decorating a house with marble columns (M. Scaurus, in Pliny the Elder, 36.5-6): serving a whole boar at a banquet (P. Servilius Rullus, in Pliny the Elder, 8.210 – *tam propinque origo, nunc cotidianus rei est*: 'so recent an origin for what is now seen everyday'); plating a banqueting couch with silver (Carvilius Pollio, in Pliny the Elder, 33.144), and so on.

²⁸ See, e.g. Livy, 6.42.

²⁹ Suetonius, *Divus Iulius*, 15; Pliny the Elder, 7.138 (Catulus); Tacitus, *Historiae*, 3.72; *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* (1863–), X.6087 (Plancus); Pliny the Elder, 35.10 (Pollio).

³⁰ Cicero, *De officiis* 1.138-9. See Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, 'The Social Structure of the Roman House', *PBSR*, 56 (1998), 43-97 (especially, pp. 43-45); Zanda, pp. 17-18.

³¹ Cicero, *De officiis*, 1.138-9. Cf. Vitruvius, *De architectura*, 6.5.2: *nobilibus vero qui honores magistratusque gerundo praestare debent officia civibus, faciunda sunt vestibula regalia alta, atria et peristyla amplissima, silvae ambulationesque laxiores ad decorem maiestatis perfectae* – 'But for nobles, who in bearing honours, and discharging the duties of the magistracy, must have much intercourse with the citizens, princely vestibules must be provided, lofty atria, and spacious peristylia, groves, and extensive walks, finished in a magnificent style' (trans. by Joseph Gwilt).

³² See Cicero, *De officiis*, 1.140 for Lucullus's response to his (socially inferior) neighbours' house-building projects. Cf. Velleius Paterculus, *Historiae Romanae*, 2.14; Pliny the Elder, 36.109-110. See Helen Platts, 'Keeping up with the Joneses: Competitive Display within the Roman Villa Landscape', in *Competition in the Ancient World*, ed. by Nick Fisher and Hans van Wees (Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2011), pp. 239-78.

³³ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: an Economic Study of Institutions* (London: Macmillan, 1899; repr. New York: Dover Publications, 1994). See, H. Liebenstein, 'Bandwagon, Snob, and Veblen Effects in the Theory of Consumers' Demand', *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 64:2 (1950), 183-207.

projection of political clout (*auctoritas*) and social position (*dignitas, existimatio*), without which no aspiring politician could expect to gain elected office.³⁴ What is clear, however, is that the borderline between *magnificentia* (admirable) and *luxus* (excessive) was narrow – and where exactly it lay depended on the judgements of others, usually political opponents, who were more likely to criticise private ostentation than public benefaction.³⁵ As Cicero suggests in his *Pro Murena*, *magnificentia* was ideally public, *luxuria* usually private, and even public *magnificentia* could raise questions of scale and taste.³⁶

The mere fact of ostentation laid rich Romans open to criticism. Much of the discourse of politics and the law courts revolved around aspects of morality, and, especially, the morality of luxury.³⁷ The critique of luxury is exemplified quite early in the first century BC by Cicero's attack on Verres.³⁸ Verres was accused of 'acquiring' a vast range of artworks and precious luxury objects both from private individuals and – even worse – from temple buildings and their treasuries, and keeping them for his own private use.³⁹ Verres and his agents stole and expropriated whole-heartedly, and it can be argued, for example, that Cicero's speeches against Verres, coupled with Verres's evident enthusiasm for the material, stimulated a craze for Corinthian bronze that lasted for the next 150-odd years.⁴⁰

³⁴ See e.g., Cicero, *Orator ad M. Brutum*, 2.182.6-8; Cicero, *Epistulae ad Quintum fratrem*, 1.3.6; Seneca the Younger, *Epistulae*, 95.58; Pliny the Younger, 2.9.1.

³⁵ Cicero, *De officiis*, 1.140; Cicero, *Pro Murena*, 76.4: *Odit populus Romanus privatam luxuriam, publicam magnificentiam diligit*.

³⁶ See Cicero, *Pro Murena*, 38.18, 38.23, 76.4. For private *magnificentia*, see Cicero, *De legibus*, 3.30.12. Note that Cicero seemed to have no qualms about having several country villas as well as his Palatine mansion.

³⁷ See Edwards, especially, pp. 136-72. Moralistic criticism of luxury remained the central discourse on the subject up until the eighteenth century, when it gradually began to become 'de-moralized': see Christopher J. Berry, *The Idea of Luxury: a Conceptual and Historical Investigation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1994), pp. 19-21. As Zanda, pp. 7-8, makes clear, politics and *mores* were not separated in Roman thought.

³⁸ Verres's lust for luxury plunder is the continuing theme of Cicero's speeches *In Verrem*. In particular, Cicero, *In Verrem*, 2.4 contains a catalogue of illegal acquisitions of artworks, precious furniture, etc., summed up briefly in 2.4.1: *I say that in the whole of Sicily, such a rich and ancient province, with so many cities and so many so wealthy families, there was not a single vessel of silver or of Corinthian or Delian bronze, no jewel or pearl, nothing made of gold or ivory, no bronze or marble or ivory statue, not even any picture, painted or embroidered, that he did not seek out, inspect and, if he liked it, take possession of it* (my translation). Cf. Cicero, *In Verrem*, 2.5.1. Further examples are scattered through Cicero, *In Verrem*, 2.2, especially at 2.2.83 and 2.2.176.

³⁹ For the latter, see Cicero, *In Verrem*, 2.4.4-17, 64-7, 71, 74-81, 84-88, 93-97, 99, 109-10, 122-124, 127-130; 2.5.184-88.

⁴⁰ See Cicero, *In Verrem*, 2.4, passim, for Verres' pillaging. Corinthian bronze was a sophisticated form of bronze combined with either gold or silver (or both) chiefly used for luxurious tableware. See Pliny the Elder, 34.5ff. It seems to have been unknown at Rome before the sack of Corinth in 146 BC, and effectively disappears from the literary record by the time of Hadrian (AD 117-38), apart from some antiquarian mentions in later writers. See D.M. Jacobson and M.P. Weitzman, 'What was Corinthian Bronze?', *American Journal of Archaeology*, 96:2 (1992), 237-47. For Verres' agents in his activities, see Cicero, *In Verrem*, 2.4.30ff. For Corinthian bronzes, see Cicero, *In Verrem*, 2.2.83, 176; 2.4.1, 50, 51, 98.

Towards the end of the first century AD, Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* is consistent in its criticism of luxury – there are over sixty passages spread across its 37 books attacking aspects of luxury, mostly in terms of unnecessary expense and effort.⁴¹ It is clear that luxury held a fascination for Pliny, even if it did not fit with his personal lifestyle as described by his adopted son.⁴² Early in the second century, Tacitus observed that a century of competitive ostentation had ruined many senatorial families and that by his time the pace of competition in conspicuous luxury had slowed, in consequence.⁴³ Tacitus did not see luxury as a critical cause of decline, unlike earlier writers.⁴⁴ By then, too, the political rewards for competitive ostentation had been reduced by the power of the Emperor and the absence of any semblance of democratic elections, and it was the emperors who led the way in luxury, epitomised by Nero's *Domus Aurea*.⁴⁵

Luxuries were mostly imported, or made from imported ingredients, and these tended to come from relatively long distances.⁴⁶ Indeed, there has long been a theory that long-distance trade was originally developed for, and depended on, luxury commodities.⁴⁷ It is quite easy from classical sources to generate an extensive list of luxury imports to Rome, primarily from the mostly jaundiced comments of Pliny the Elder: ivory, precious stones, amber, pearls, silk, myrrhine (probably fluorite), exotic timber and furniture (especially citronwood (*thnja*) and ebony), marble (from a range of sources), perfumes, incense (chiefly frankincense and myrrh), jewellery, pepper and other spices, precious metals (especially as tableware), exotic beasts (mainly imported for the arena), educated slaves or those with special skills (including cooks, doctors, and teachers), exotic fruit, a variety of fish, and artworks (especially bronze sculpture).⁴⁸ It's interesting to compare this with the biblical list in Revelation (18.11-13) of commodities which would suffer from the fall of 'Babylon the great' (i.e. Rome):

⁴¹ For example: Pliny the Elder, 5.12, 7.93-4, 9.68, 9.104, 9.122, 13.1, 17.220, 21.11, 33.22, 33.148-50, 36.114, etc.

⁴² Pliny the Younger, 6.16.

⁴³ Tacitus, *Annales*, 3.55.

⁴⁴ See Wallace-Hadrill, *Rome's Cultural Revolution*, pp. 329-30.

⁴⁵ Pliny the Elder, 36.111; Suetonius, *Nero*, 31; Tacitus, *Annales*, 15.42. For luxury under Nero see, e.g. Tacitus, *Annales*, 47.

⁴⁶ See, e.g., Statius, *Silvae*, 5.1.60-3; and the 'Alexandrian tariff' in *Digesta*, 39.4.16.7. As Jasper Griffin has shown, 'Roman' luxury was essentially 'Greek' in character (Jasper Griffin, 'Augustan Poetry and the Life of Luxury', *JRS*, 66 (1976), 87-105. Cf. Wallace-Hadrill, *Rome's Cultural Revolution*, pp. 338-345.

⁴⁷ See Rahul Oka and Chapurukha M. Kusimba, 'The Archaeology of Trading systems, Part 1: Towards a New Trade Synthesis', *Journal of Archaeological Research* 16, (2008), 339-95 (p. 346).

⁴⁸ All of these, with their countries of origin, can be found in Pliny, and many in Seneca's letters: Pliny the Elder, 5.12, 13.91 (citronwood), 5.12, 8.7 (ivory), 6.54 (silk), 8.4 (elephants), 8.53 (lions), 8.64 (panthers), 8.96 (hippopotamus), 9.106-117 (pearls), 12.17-20 (ebony), 12.30ff (pepper and other spices), 12.58-71 (frankincense, myrrh), 13.1ff, especially 13.18 (unguents and perfumes), 34.5ff (Corinthian bronze), 36, especially 48ff (marble), 37.18-22 (myrrhine), 37.30-49 (amber), 37.54ff. (precious stones); Seneca the Younger, *Epistulae*, 76.13 (ivory), 86.6 (marble), 86.7 (artworks), 110.14 (slaves), 123.7 (myrrhine, perfumes, cosmetics).

¹¹ And the merchants of the earth shall weep and mourn over her; for no man buyeth their merchandise any more: ¹² The merchandise of gold, and silver, and precious stones, and of pearls, and fine linen, and purple, and silk, and scarlet, and all thyine wood, and all manner vessels of ivory, and all manner vessels of most precious wood, and of brass, and iron, and marble, ¹³ And cinnamon, and odours, and ointments, and frankincense, and wine, and oil, and fine flour, and wheat, and beasts, and sheep, and horses, and chariots, and slaves, and souls of men.⁴⁹

Both Pliny and Seneca were critical, not just of the range of luxuries available, but of the expense of importing them.⁵⁰ As can be seen, the list fits well with the modern criteria of luxury listed above.

A particular field of luxury that attracted both criticism and legal interventions was food and drink – *luxus mensae*.⁵¹ The idea of serving exotic and sought-after ingredients at dinners can be traced to Greek society, and was becoming familiar to the Romans as early as the time of the first significant Latin poet, Ennius (*ob.* 169 BC) who used the ideas of Archestratus in his *Hedyphagetica*, the only extant fragment of which discusses where best around the Mediterranean to acquire a variety of different fish.⁵² By the beginning of the first century BC, the initiative of Sergius Orata, one of the circle of the exceedingly wealthy Lucullus,⁵³ led to the first commercial oyster farming on the bay of Naples. Pliny, and before him, slightly improbably, the poet Ovid, deplored the interest of wealthy Romans in eating fish.⁵⁴ By contrast, the satirist Juvenal had a field day in his fourth Satire recounting the appearance at the imperial court of Domitian of a giant turbot and the excitement and sycophantic manoeuvrings that followed.⁵⁵ From all this, it is clear that the fashion for serving expensive and exotic fish, in particular, had developed into

⁴⁹ Revelation 18.11-13, King James Version.

⁵⁰ See especially Pliny the Elder, 5.1, 12.84, Seneca the Younger, *Epistulae*, 95.42.

⁵¹ For an overview of dining, see Emily Gowers, *The Loaded Table: Representations of Food in Roman Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993).

⁵² Quoted in Apuleius, *Apologia*, 39.2.

⁵³ Lucullus, a byword for luxury, had introduced the cherry to Rome: Pliny the Elder, 15.30. See Plutarch, *Lucullus*, 39ff. for Lucullus's banquets; Pliny the Elder, 9.168 (Sergius Orata).

⁵⁴ Ovid, *Fasti*, 6.171-4; Pliny the Elder, 9.64-68.

⁵⁵ For an earlier example, under Tiberius, see Seneca the Younger, *Epistulae*, 95.42.

something approaching a competitive game between Roman gourmets, complete with aggressive bidding in the markets.⁵⁶ What started as simple emulation had become, for some, vicious rivalry.

While moralising Romans were happy to criticise their contemporaries for their gluttonous obsessions with exotic foods, they were much less priggish about fine wines, though some of the sumptuary laws (see below) tried to restrict the range or cost of wines to be served at public banquets – basically because too much good wine could be viewed, probably rightly, as bribery of the electors (*ambitus*). Italian – Roman – wine only began to become important in the mid-second century BC: Cato's *de Agricultura*, published shortly before his death in 149 BC, both shows that wine-growing was becoming of interest to the Roman elite and that there was already an established habit of drinking Greek wines. Cato gives a couple of recipes for making imitation Coan wine, which is clear evidence of its popularity.⁵⁷ Roman wines effectively came of age with the famous vintage under the consul Opimius in 120 BC: people were still claiming to be drinking Opimian wines 200 years later.⁵⁸

By the end of the first century BC, we already find writers complaining that their hosts serve inferior wines to their less important guests while quaffing top-quality Falernian or Caecuban wines themselves, and this becomes a regular topos in Juvenal and Martial, by the end of the first century AD.⁵⁹ Fine wines were clearly seen as a luxury (almost the only one to be widely favourably written about); and the rich liked to keep them for themselves. Even in a bar in provincial Pompeii, the wine list says that a glass of wine costs one *as*, a better wine 2 *asses*, and Falernian 4 – ratios that still seemed to hold in the *Price Edict* of Diocletian more than 200 years later.⁶⁰ Of course, if the Falernian was genuinely old, it would have cost far more.

Sumptuary legislation

It might be expected that, if they saw luxury as pernicious, the authorities would take steps to suppress or discourage its manifestation. So-called sumptuary laws were the attempted answer,

⁵⁶ Exotic foods and game could be bought in the *macella*, purpose-built marketplaces. Rome had several. See Claire Holleran, *Shopping in Ancient Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 162-80.

⁵⁷ Cato, *De Agricultura*, 105, 112.

⁵⁸ Petronius's Trimalchio notoriously served his guests an obviously fake 'Opimian Falernian' (Petronius, 34) – see refs in n.79 below. But see Pliny the Elder, 14.55, Martial, *Epigrams*, 1.26, 3.82, 9.87, 10.49 (In Martial, 'Opimian' is probably a shorthand for 'very old and very good').

⁵⁹ See, e.g., Horace, *Satirae*, 2.3.143-4; Martial, 1.18.3, 3.49, 6.92, 9.2, 10.48; Juvenal, *Satires*, 5.25-34, 7.121.

⁶⁰ *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* (1863–), IV.1679; *Edict of Diocletian*, 2.

both in antiquity and through almost to modern times.⁶¹ Curiously, however, the series of Roman sumptuary laws passed between 215 BC and 18 BC concentrate almost entirely on aspects of eating and drinking.⁶² Closer inspection shows that this was especially concerned with the use of public banquets (which were undoubtedly numerous)⁶³ as electoral ‘bribes’.⁶⁴ So the laws tended to limit the value of the food and/or wine provided at banquets for the public, or to limit the number of people who could be entertained at home.⁶⁵ Apart from the wartime *lex Oppia* of 215 BC, which restricted the rights of women to wear jewellery and rich clothes, and stopped them riding around the city in chariots, and which was repealed, in spite of Cato’s vehement opposition, twenty years later, the Romans did very little to restrain by law the spread of luxury in either clothing or building.⁶⁶ Eventually, the senate under Tiberius banned the wearing of silk by men and the use of gold tableware in AD 14.⁶⁷ Some senators tried to go further in the same year and restrict the use of silverware, some furniture, and slaves, but this was turned down.⁶⁸ These are rare examples of attempts to limit luxury outside *luxus mensae*. In spite of a whole series of sumptuary laws, it seems that these had little effect, as Tacitus later makes clear.⁶⁹ He quotes a letter of Tiberius to the Senate in AD 22, suggesting the wide variety of areas, beyond the pleasures of the table, where legislation could be proposed: country villas, huge slave households, silver and bronze tableware, artworks, rich and ostentatious dress, gemstones, etc.⁷⁰ Tiberius regarded the whole idea of legislation as unnecessary, and no action was taken.

Less clear is what action was taken from time to time by the Censors, in their role as guardians of public morality, the *regimen morum*, in this field. As long ago as the early third century BC, a consular senator was expelled from the senate for having 10 lbs of silver tableware, which was

⁶¹ See Alan Hunt, ‘Moralizing Luxury: Discourses of the Governance of Consumption’, *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 8:4 (1995), 352-73 (p. 353).

⁶² For a summary listing, see Coudry, pp. 170-71.

⁶³ Varro RR. 3.2.16; Cicero, *Pro Murena*, 74; Cicero, *De republica*, 4.fr.8: see Zanda, pp. 55-57, John H. d’Arms, ‘Control, Companionship and Clientela: Some Social Functions of the Roman Communal Meal’, *EMC*, 28 (1984), 327-48.

⁶⁴ See Dubois-Pelerin, p. 41; Coudry, p. 5, n. 22. There is much argument among scholars (see Dari-Mattiacci and Plisecka, p. 3) as to the precise purpose of this (largely ineffective) legislation, arguments that go back to our main sources of information about it, Aulus Gellius (*Noctes Atticae*, 2.24) and Macrobius (*Saturnalia*, 3.17), writing in the late second and early fifth centuries respectively.

⁶⁵ For detailed analyses of Roman sumptuary laws see Coudry, Dari-Mattiacci and Plisecka, Zanda.

⁶⁶ See Livy, 34.1ff. for the debate on the law’s repeal.

⁶⁷ There were strict rules about the kind and colouring of togas that could be worn by citizens of different status, but although purple dyes were a luxury, these rules were in place long before *luxuria* became an issue.

⁶⁸ Tacitus, *Annales*, 2.33.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.52-5.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.52. For a rather different but undated summary of Tiberius’s attitude to luxury, see Suetonius, *Tiberius*, 34.

regarded as excessively luxurious.⁷¹ This suggests that luxury was an issue some time before later historians located its origins, and before the ‘east’ could become relevant.⁷² First-century AD hoards of silverware from the Bay of Naples have been found with ten times this volume of silver, in what was merely a provincial sector of Italy, albeit a wealthy one containing the villas of many prosperous Romans, especially around the notorious luxury honeypot of Baiae.⁷³ Although the censors at various times barred the sale of ‘exotic unguents’ and tried to hold down the price of imported wines, most of their actions were directed at individuals, and we have little or no detail of the offences of which most of the senators and *equites* downgraded by them were accused.⁷⁴

The diffusion of luxury: the importance of word of mouth

The adoption and diffusion of luxuries was, largely, a matter of imitation. Once one powerful citizen adopted a particular luxury, others were quick to follow. This is how most fashions still develop, as the human ‘herd’ behaves in a herd-like manner.⁷⁵ The basic modern model of how new ideas percolate through a population (either society at large or a relevant subset of it) is derived from Everett Rogers, whose *Diffusion of Innovations*, based on earlier research among farmers by Ryan and Gross, remains the key text describing the process.⁷⁶ Essentially, Rogers postulates the development of the acceptance of new ideas broadly following the statistical normal curve: a small group of ‘innovators’ adopts an idea, a brand or a product; here, we are talking of only perhaps 2-3% of the *relevant* population.⁷⁷ These are followed by a larger group of ‘early adopters’. By this time the idea may have been accepted by 15-20% of the population. Successful innovations then get accepted by the much larger ‘early majority’, which takes penetration over 50%, to be followed over time by the ‘late majority’ and, perhaps, even the

⁷¹ P Cornelius Rufinus, in 275 BC. According to Pliny the Elder, 33.141, Scipio Allobrogicus was the first Roman to own 1000 lbs. of silver, in the late second century BC.

⁷² Lintott, pp. 629-30.

⁷³ One of the emperor Claudius’s *slaves* was reported to have a silver plate weighing 500 lbs, with 8 side plates each weighing 250 lbs (Pliny the Elder, 33.145). On Baiae, see Seneca the Younger, *Epistulae*, 51.1-3; John H. d’Arms, *Romans on the Bay of Naples* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), *passim*.

⁷⁴ Pliny the Elder, 13.35 (unguents), 14.95 (wines). More generally, see Slob, Astin.

⁷⁵ For example, Pliny the Elder, 17.3, 34.6, 37.85. See Wallace-Hadrill, *Rome’s Cultural Revolution*, pp. 323, 347. For excellent modern analyses, see Mark Earls, *Herd: How to Change Mass Behaviour by Harnessing Our True Nature* (Chichester: John Wiley, 2007) and Alex Bentley, Mark Earls, and Michael J. O’Brien, *I’ll Have What She’s Having: Mapping Social Behavior* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011). Emanuel Mayer, *The Ancient Middle Class: Urban Life and Aesthetics in the Roman Empire, 100BCE-250CE* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), argues, primarily on art historical grounds, that the ‘middle class’ – merchants, craftsmen, businessmen – did not so much imitate as reinterpret elite artworks, but the argument seems tenuous.

⁷⁶ Everett Rogers, [*The Diffusion of Innovations*] *Communication of innovations: a cross-cultural approach*, 2nd edn (New York: Free Press, 1971); B. Ryan and C. Gross, ‘The Diffusion of Hybrid Seed Corn in Two Iowa Communities’, *Rural Sociology*, 8:1 (1943), 15-24.

⁷⁷ In the original research, farmers. In this paper, the Roman elite.

‘laggards’. Unsuccessful ideas fail to penetrate enough of either the innovator or the early adopter group, and fizzle out. In the absence of statistical data, it is not possible to produce similar analyses for the penetration of individual luxuries among the Roman elite, but the process is evident in the growth in (for example) wearing of pearls, the adoption of serving whole boars at banquets, the architectural fashion for *sardonyx*, and the evolving fashions in silver plate.⁷⁸

A corollary of the diffusion model is the idea of the ‘opinion leader’. This concept comes from the work of Paul Lazarsfeld and Elihu Katz, whose two-step model of communication postulated that new ideas, or new products, were fostered by a small group of ‘leaders’ who were well-connected, knowledgeable, and authoritative within their social milieu.⁷⁹ More recently marketing practitioners have attempted to develop this general concept, with Ed Keller’s theory of so-called ‘influentials’.⁸⁰ This is based on market research findings that around 10% of the (American) population appear to be key influences on the consumption (and voting) behaviour of the other 90%. Both versions of the theory suffer from the criticism that it is highly unlikely that the same group will be credible role models, and hence influencers or leaders, in every field. Further, as Duncan Watts has demonstrated, the presence of influentials is not essential to the diffusion of new ideas.⁸¹ Nonetheless, the shape of the diffusion curve, as Watts points out, is common to all current models of the process, regardless of whether they involve influentials or opinion leaders, or not.⁸² What is clear, however, from these modern analyses is that even in a world apparently saturated with advertising and other commercial messages, ‘word of mouth’ (WOM) is a key source of consumers’ information about new brands.⁸³ In a world without mass media, how much more important WOM must have been. Roman elite society was highly interconnected. In this tightly-knit world, in which gossip was the common currency of the baths, the Forum, and the dinner table (see below), it is not difficult to see how new ideas – or new luxuries

⁷⁸ For the wider penetration of luxuries, beyond the elite, see n. 22 above. Pliny the Elder, 8.210, 9.114, 33.139, 37.85.

⁷⁹ Elihu Katz and Paul F. Lazarsfeld, *Personal Influence: The Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communications* (New York: Free Press, 1955).

⁸⁰ Jonathan Berry & Edward Keller, *The Influentials: One American in Ten Tells the Other Nine How to Vote, Where to Eat, and What to Buy* (New York: Free Press, 2003).

⁸¹ Duncan J. Watts and Peter Sheridan Dodds, ‘Influentials, Networks, and Public Opinion Formation’, *Journal of Consumer Research*, 34:4 (2007), 441–58; Mark Earls & Alex Bentley, ‘Forget Influentials, Herd-like Copying is how Brands Spread’, *Admap*, 499 (2008), 19–22.

⁸² Watts & Dodds, p. 442.

⁸³ Gerard Prendergast, David Ko, and Siu Yin V. Yuen, ‘Online Word of Mouth and Consumer Purchase Intentions’, *International Journal of Advertising*, 29:5 (2010), 687–708; Rick Ferguson, ‘Word of Mouth and Viral Marketing: Taking the Temperature of the Hottest Trends in Marketing’, *Journal of Consumer Marketing* 25:3 (2008), 179–82.

– could quickly become widely accepted. Similarly, the potential role of notables as opinion leaders can readily be recognised.⁸⁴

If we apply Rogers' model to the luxury markets of Rome, it seems clear that it would require no more than about a dozen prominent senators to start a powerful trend among the small senatorial order (only 600 families). With the help of comments from their patronage networks, including – possibly – a good poet or two, the recognition of a new concept or commodity could rapidly become widespread among senators. Thence, it would quickly overlap into other wealthy groups – the equestrians and, especially, rich freedmen, who seem to have been inveterate imitators of their social betters, if Petronius's parodic Trimalchio has anything more than purely comic value.⁸⁵ We can see clues to the process of the diffusion of valued products among the elite at work through the writings of the elite themselves, where these survive. As already noted, Cicero's concentration on Verres' predilection for Corinthian bronze seems to have been an influence on what Pliny later called the *mira adfectatio multorum* for these artefacts.⁸⁶ Similarly, Horace's *Odes* are full of wine origins: he is the earliest Roman writer to mention different wines in numbers, and talks in all of 16 different origin brands, most of them more or less favourably.⁸⁷ By contrast, Varro's earlier agricultural treatise *de Re Rustica* only mentions 10, where it might have been expected to be more comprehensive, but Columella, in the next century, mentions twice this number in a similar work.⁸⁸ At the end of the first century AD, Martial includes over 40 wine brands, though some of these are roundly abused.⁸⁹

Important Romans' houses were more or less 'public' in character: every morning a throng of clients, supplicants and hangers-on would arrive for the *salutatio*, and then accompany the Big

⁸⁴ 'Notables': see Paul Veyne, *Bread and Circuses*, trans. by Brian Pearce (London: Allen Lane, 1990), pp. 42-54, following Max Weber.

⁸⁵ See, e.g., Gilbert Bagnani, 'Trimalchio', *Phoenix*, 8:3 (1954), 77-91; Paul Veyne, 'Vie de Trimalcion', *Annales ESC*, 16:2 (1961), 213-47; Barry Baldwin, 'Opimian Wine', *The American Journal of Philology*, 88:2 (1967), 173-75; Baldwin, 'Trimalchio's Corinthian Plate', *Classical Philology*, 68:1 (1973), 46-47; Gareth Schmeling, 'Trimalchio's Menu and Wine List', *Classical Philology*, 65 (1970), 248-51; Lauren Hackworth Petersen, 'Collecting Gods in Roman Houses: The House of the Gilded Cupids (VI.16.7, 38) at Pompeii', *Arethusa*, 45 (2012), 319-32; Emanuel Mayer, 'From Silver Cups to Garden Gnomes: Toward a Contextual Reception of Standardized Images', *Arethusa*, 45 (2012), 283-303.

⁸⁶ Pliny the Elder, 34.6 – 'an amazing craze among many'.

⁸⁷ References for all the Italian wines cited by Horace are listed in Appendix II of André Tchernia, *Le vin de l'Italie romaine: essai d'histoire économique d'après les amphores* (Rome, École française, 1986), pp.321-41. In addition, Horace names three Greek wines – Chium (*Carmina*, 3.19.5; *Epodi*, 9.34); Coum (*Satirae*, 2.4.29, 2.8.9); Lesbium (*Epodi*, 9.34) – and one Egyptian: Mareoticum (*Carmina*, 1.37.14).

⁸⁸ Columella, *De Re Rustica*, 3.2.39, 10.4.

⁸⁹ Data derived from my research, expanding Appendix 2 of Tchernia.

Man as he progressed through the streets to the Forum or the Senate.⁹⁰ As Cicero in effect says, the larger the accompanying crowd, the more important the personality concerned.⁹¹ The crowd will have been able to see exactly how the Big Man's house was furnished and decorated – the paintings, sculptures, mosaics, and furniture of the public rooms and courtyards – and no doubt anything of interest, or evidence of excess, would be eagerly commented on. Gossip was, as Juvenal and others make clear, the fuel of much of society, and circulated freely, especially among those who frequented the baths.⁹² What is certain is that this sort of gossip did in fact occur. Subsequent commentators, often writing from a jaundiced nostalgia for a simpler, possibly golden age, noted who was first to decorate a public building, and then his own house, with marble columns; who introduced the idea of fish farms to provide oysters or prize mullets; who was honoured with an ivory statue or carried on a funeral couch inlaid with gold and ivory.⁹³ These examples (and there are many more) are an essentially negative form of the Roman love of *exempla*: famous incidents in which the behaviours of well-known figures from the past are held up as models to current citizens. The surviving work of Valerius Maximus consists entirely of *exempla* and we find them throughout the works of Cicero, Seneca, and Pliny.⁹⁴

An additional influence, though we know little in detail about this, is the retail environment. Especially from Martial, we know that in first century AD, Rome luxury goods of various kinds could be found especially in the Via Sacra, the Vicus Tuscus, and the Saepta Julia.⁹⁵ Buying goods in the 'right' places seems to have been important in Rome, just as it is in some circles today, and storeholders in these elite shopping areas will have been happy to tell their customers what they ought to be buying. Auction sales, too, were evidently widely used to sell a variety of goods especially high-cost items such as property and slaves, and also works of art.⁹⁶ This would provide anyone interested with very public evidence of what was in demand among the wealthy.

⁹⁰ For the concept of the Big Man, see Marshall Sahlins, 'Poor Man, Rich Man, Big Man, Chief: Political Types in Melanesia and Polynesia', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 5:3 (1963), 285-303.

⁹¹ Cicero, *Epistulae ad Atticum*, 1.18.1.

⁹² See, e.g., Seneca the Younger, *Epistulae*, 43.1; Martial, 2.72; Juvenal, 11.3-4. Several Roman authors use the phrase *in circulis et in conviviiis* – 'social gatherings and dinner parties' – Livy, 44.22.8; Cicero, *Epistulae ad Atticum*, 2.18.2; Tacitus, *Annales*, 3.54.1.

⁹³ Marble columns: Pliny the Elder, 36.7 (Licinius Crassus); Fish farming: Pliny the Elder, 9.168 (Sergius Orata); Ivory statue, funeral couch: Suetonius, *Divus Iulius*, 76. 84 (Julius Caesar).

⁹⁴ Cicero, *Orator ad M. Brutum* and *Tusculanae Disputationes*, and Pliny the Elder, 7.88 ff. are particularly rich sources.

⁹⁵ Ovid *Ars Amatoria*, 1.8.97-100; Propertius, *Elegiae*, 2.24.14; Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, 73.24.12 (Via Sacra); Martial, 10.87.9-10, 11.27.11 (Vicus Tuscus); Pliny the Elder, 36.29; Martial, 2.14.5-6, 9.59, 10-80 (Saepta). See Holleran, pp. 245-54 for an up-to-date, detailed view of what little is actually known of elite shopping.

⁹⁶ Holleran, p. 254.

Dining out at friends' houses and entertaining were essential elements of elite Roman life,⁹⁷ and the rich and famous entertained both each other and their hangers-on to exotic foods, prepared by skilful chefs and richly served, and to a variety of entertainments, which might range from a very serious poetry recitation or a philosophy reading to something altogether more louche. One of Cicero's letters recounts his (mild) embarrassment at finding himself at dinner with a notorious courtesan.⁹⁸ Dinners of this type were not necessarily orgies, in spite of the racier accounts of imperial (and other) excesses in Suetonius and other writers.⁹⁹ But they provided fuel for gossip, and a forum from which new ideas could be picked up and circulated, whether they were new dishes created by the expensively-imported chef, the latest political scandal, or an exotic ingredient praised in a poem recited by the house poet.¹⁰⁰

The importance of imitation as the means whereby the habits and trappings of luxury were disseminated through the wealthy population is amply demonstrated by the fictional banquet of Petronius's comic creation Trimalchio. Trimalchio's dinner, which takes up some 50 chapters of the *Satyrica*, shows a millionaire nouveau-riche freedman using his immense wealth to entertain his cronies in the style of the wealthy aristocracy, as he interprets it.¹⁰¹ He gets the fine details wrong, and frequently exposes his ignorance – of geography, literature, mythology, history, etc. – but he provides a rollicking entertainment for his guests and the reader. It rings, in fact, horribly true as a picture of misdirected and underinformed social imitation. And it reflects the undoubted fact that there were in Roman society very rich freedmen with the money and instincts to take up the luxuries of the elite and run with them – even if in slightly the wrong direction.¹⁰² Trimalchio is of course fiction, and we have no way of knowing how accurately Petronius has portrayed the society of rich Campanian freedmen. As Paul Veyne pointed out, Petronius's account of Trimalchio's business is a *conte de fées* based on a limited stereotype, and

⁹⁷ Dining alone as a sign of social failure: Horace, *Satirae*, 2.7.29-32; Martial, 5.47, 11.24.15.

⁹⁸ Cicero, *Epistulae ad familiares*, 9.20.

⁹⁹ See, Cicero, *In Pisonem*, 22, 67; Suetonius, *Tiberius*, 42; Suetonius, *Gaius Caligula*, 37; Suetonius, *Divus Claudius*, 32-33; Suetonius, *Vitellius*, 13; Seneca the Younger, *Epistulae*, 47.2, 6, 8.

¹⁰⁰ Specific examples of verses that appear to have been recited at dinner parties include Statius, 1.5, and Martial, 6.42 (See Peter White, 'The Friends of Martial, Statius, and Pliny, and the Dispersal of Patronage', *HSCP*, 79 (1975), 265-300). For an account of after-dinner entertainment, see the articles in *Dining in a Classical Context*, ed. by William J. Slater (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991); especially C.P. Jones, 'Dinner Theater', pp. 185-98; John H. D'Arms, 'Slaves at Roman *Convivia*', pp. 171-83; and, G. Paul, 'Symposia and *Deipna* in Plutarch's *Lives* and in other Historical Writings', pp. 157-69. Specifically on symposia, see *Symptica: a Symposium on the Symposium*, ed. by Oswyn Murray (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994); *In Vino Veritas*, ed. by Oswyn Murray and Manuela Tecuşan (London: British School at Rome in association with American Academy at Rome [and others], 1995).

¹⁰¹ Petronius, 26-78.

¹⁰² Lucullus, criticized for the opulence of his house, was reported as saying, in effect, that he had to keep ahead of his wealthy freedmen neighbours. See Cicero, *De legibus*, 3.30, for the story and Cicero's criticism. For *luxuria* in housing, see Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, *Houses and Society in Pompeii and Herculaneum* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 1-4, 144-60.

the detail of Trimalchio's home and dinner entertainment may be similarly insecurely based.¹⁰³ Most of the elements of Trimalchio's dinner can be paralleled in other sources, from Horace's account of dinner with Nasidienus to Juvenal's Virro. Even Trimalchio's private troupe of *pantomimi* (mime actors) is matched by Pliny the Younger's elderly lady friend Ummidia Quadratilla.¹⁰⁴

The significance of Roman luxury

What, for the Romans, was the point of luxury? Clearly, a key trigger to its growth was simply the opportunity created by the massive influx of wealth and the imports of (looted) luxurious artworks and furnishings that accrued from the conquests of the second and first centuries BC.¹⁰⁵ During this period, Rome conquered most of the Balkans, Macedonia, Greece, Asia Minor and the Levant, Egypt, Gaul, Spain, and North Africa, and with them vast riches in cash, artworks, and above all, perhaps, slaves. At the same time, this meant that new trade routes to far-off territories were opened up, and increased quantities of exotic goods began to be shipped in, much of the traffic going through Alexandria, with its established contacts with the east and south, described by Strabo as 'the greatest mart in the world'.¹⁰⁶

With their increasingly wide contacts, especially with Greece and western Asia, Romans acquired new cultural influences, and were exposed to new products and patterns of consumption. The moralists were not mistaken in attributing the growth of luxury to the influence of Greeks and Easterners: Hellenistic princes had established an enviable pattern of rich living.¹⁰⁷ For the moralists, this simply stimulated (possibly latent) greed (*avaritia*).¹⁰⁸ What was perhaps less predictable, at least to the Romans themselves, was the effect that all this had on an elite who had long established a pattern of aggressive competition for military and political positions. The thrust for power required the trappings of power to be credible, and the availability of rare and valuable luxury goods that could be flaunted competitively as evidence of status and success

¹⁰³ Veyne, *Bread and Circuses*, p. 235.

¹⁰⁴ Horace, *Satirae*, 2.4 (Nasidienus); Juvenal, 5 (Virro); Pliny the Younger, 7.24 (Ummidia Quadratilla). See Gowers, pp. 135-161, for Nasidienus, pp. 213-219 for Virro.

¹⁰⁵ See, e.g., Cicero, *De republica*, 2.7; Livy, 39.6.7.

¹⁰⁶ Strabo, *Geographica* 17.1.15. The first-century AD *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* lists the many luxury items that could be acquired in India, most of which would be shipped to Alexandria via the Red Sea ports of Berenice and Myos Hormos, and hence overland to Koptos on the Nile. For the role of Alexandria in general, see Pliny the Elder, 12.59; Strabo, 2.5.12; Peter M. Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972). Cf. Rodziewicz, Elzbieta, *Bone and Ivory Carvings from Alexandria: French Excavations 1992-2004* (Cairo: IFAO, 2007), especially p. 38.

¹⁰⁷ See, for example, Athen. 5.201A (Ptolemy II's accession procession, 285 B.C.); Polybius *Histories*, 30.25.12 (Antiochus IV's army review at Daphne, 166 B.C.).

¹⁰⁸ *avaritia* is almost a leitmotif of Cicero's Verrine speeches.

proved irresistible – and competition led to imitation, and the development of costly crazes, like that for Corinthian bronze. While much of this wealth and influence flowed to the long-established nobility, the rise to power of individuals of less distinguished pedigree, such as Marius, Sulla, and Julius Caesar, represented a threat to the old order.¹⁰⁹

I would argue that the critique of luxury in so much Latin literature is a direct response to the way in which the (sometimes newly) rich and powerful used the flaunting of luxuries as an aid to achieving political power through enhanced status. We can see a parallel today in the way in which the spending patterns of celebrities and of wealthy businessmen are criticised – or idolised – in the media, though here the discourse is far from being purely elite. As both Edwards and Zanda show, a problem for modern historians in understanding the Roman critique of luxury is the conflation in Roman thinking between the moral and the political: a politician's moral behaviour – his *mores* – were seen to reflect his ability. Challenges in political invective were almost automatically directed at an opponent's moral standing, and, as Quintilian makes clear, these challenges were expected to be exaggerated.¹¹⁰

Rome was a hierarchical society, in which connections and networks of friends and acquaintances were crucial to business and, more importantly, political success. As Cicero makes clear, especially in two of his important philosophical works, *de Officiis* and *de Amicitia*, a key objective of the serious Roman politician was to manage his acquaintanceship in such a way that his generosity (*liberalitas*) would be expressed in the form of favours (*beneficia*), which would incur the recipients' gratitude and require some form of requital (*officium*).¹¹¹ But the rich man's favours would be sufficiently generous to make it impossible for anyone but an equal or superior to repay in full, leaving a 'debt' of *gratia* to be drawn on in the future, and usually cashed in the form of political support when it was needed. All of this should be done in such a way as to enhance the rich man's *dignitas* and *existimatio* – his reputation. One form of *beneficium* was, clearly, the invitation to dinner. Here, the rich politician could impress his inferiors – and, indeed, his equals – with the quality of his furnishings, the style and richness of his tableware, the refinement of his

¹⁰⁹ For Marius's background, see Plutarch, *Marius*, 3; for Sulla, Plutarch, *Sulla*, 1; for Caesar, Suetonius, *Divus Iulius*, 1.

¹¹⁰ Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, 3.7. Edwards, pp. 12-15.; Zanda, pp. 6-9.

¹¹¹ This analysis is effectively repeated in Seneca the Younger's *de Beneficiis*. See Miriam Griffin, 'De Beneficiis and Roman Society', *JRS*, 93 (2003), 92-113. For an overview of Roman gift-exchange and euergetism, see Veyne, *Bread and Circuses*, pp. 5-54.

catering, the skill of his cook, the age and excellence of his wines, and the sophistication of his after-dinner entertainment.¹¹²

Some of this might be shared on equal terms with all the guests. In some cases the quality of the food and wine offered might be (all too obviously) graded by the importance of individual guests. Martial and Juvenal, regularly, and even Horace on occasion, complain about being given second-best food and drink.¹¹³ But whatever the quality of the fare provided, the occasion represented an opportunity for the host to display his wealth, power, and discrimination; and to create among both equal and inferior guests an obligation to return his hospitality. In most cases, it would be impossible for the guest to repay on equal terms – and there are plenty of Latin verses telling rich patrons that the poet cannot offer them the finest wines and richest meats. *Recusatio* is a well-recognised feature of Latin poetry.¹¹⁴

But, of course, Rome, like all cities in which there is a quite limited segment of society that circulates among the rich and famous, was a hotbed of gossip. It is possible to see how the introduction of anything new, exotic, or overtly extravagant into a wealthy host's furnishings or entertainment would be all over town within twenty-four hours, either from a quick aside in the forum or, more likely, chatter in the baths.¹¹⁵ Given the small scale of elite society in Rome, it would be easy for a new idea to become common currency among senators and at least the upper strata of equestrians in a short space of time. Modern network theories can be used to model the process, at least in theory. If network models are taken in conjunction with equally modern understanding of how innovations are diffused in a population, it is easy to see how a new form of luxury – or at least awareness of it – could become widespread among the elite in a very short time.¹¹⁶

¹¹² For an emperor, see Suetonius, *Divus Augustus*, 70, 74. For Lucullus, notorious for luxury, see Plutarch, *Lucullus*, 39ff. Entertainers: Martial, 11.21.3; Pliny the Younger, 1.1.5.3, 3.1.9, 7.24, etc.; Plutarch, *Quaestiones convivales*, 7.8; Aulus Gellius, 19.9.4.

¹¹³ For example, see Martial, 1.20, 2.19, 3.13, 5.78, 6.11, etc..

¹¹⁴ For example, see Horace, *Carmina*, 1.20, 2.18, 4.8; Propertius, 2.1, 2.10, 3.5, 3.9; Ovid, *Ars Amatoria*, 1.205-222; Ovid, *Tristia*, 2. 331-48; Juvenal, 11; etc.

¹¹⁵ See n. 65. The prevalence of gossip in general is evident from the allusions in much Latin poetry, from Lucilius and Catullus through to Martial and Juvenal, quite apart from the numerous anecdotes about important people throughout most Latin (and contemporary Greek) prose. There is a good analysis of the political use of rumour by Ray Laurence, 'Rumour and Communication in Roman Politics', *Greece & Rome*, 2nd ser., 41:1 (1994), 62-74. See also Amy Richlin, *The Garden of Priapus: Sexuality and Aggression in Roman Humour*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), pp. 83-86, on gossip in Cicero's letters.

¹¹⁶ The basic modern text is Rogers (see above). This should be read in conjunction with analyses such as that of Watts & Dodds. For an attempt to apply network analysis to Cicero's letters, with limited results, see Michael C. Alexander and James A. Danowski, 'Analysis of an Ancient Network: Personal Communication and the Study of Social Structure in a Past Society', *Social Networks*, 12 (1990), 313-35.

Conclusions

In short, “I’ll have what (s)he’s having” seems to have applied just as strongly in ancient Rome as in today’s consumer world. Sallust, the most consistent and articulate historian-critic of Roman luxury, attributed the growth of *luxuria* to a combination of *avaritia* and *ambitio*, though he seems uncertain which order to put them in.¹¹⁷ This still leaves the question of whether *avaritia* and *ambitio* were inherent characteristics of the senatorial order, simply waiting for the opportunity created by an influx of wealth; or whether the influx of wealth somehow created them.¹¹⁸ At least as far as *avaritia* is concerned, the extant Roman historians (especially Sallust) incline to the view that it was latent, and merely waiting for the right opportunity. *Ambitio* seems to have been an established feature of senatorial-political life far back into the life of the Republic, but it was not until Rome began to acquire an empire outside Italy, with opportunities for both military glory and proconsular profit, that it became a source of impossible tensions in elite Roman society.¹¹⁹

The lesson of Roman luxury, if there is one, is that the rich will seek out ways to spend their money: in a competitive society, they will do so above all in ways that boost their prestige and status (*dignitas, existimatio*); in an expanding empire, there will always be new opportunities to exploit the rare, the marvellous, and the exotic. Money buys these things, and rich men were quick to imitate and adopt what they saw as desirable trappings of wealth and power. It was, as I have shown, easy enough for the news of a novel luxury to circulate rapidly among the Roman elite. That the growth of luxury, as perceived by the Romans themselves, coincided with a period that took Rome from the acquisition of an empire through political disintegration and into a new political settlement, the Principate, that changed both the rules of the political game and the potential rewards for players in it is, arguably, more coincidence than cause. The Romans do not, however, appear to have thought that the principate had come about as a consequence of the growth of luxury, at least not explicitly. Furthermore, Augustus’s moral legislation was primarily concerned with sexual morality and the promotion of a traditional view of marriage, not with the curbing of rampant luxury. Nonetheless, it is possible to discern signs of a linkage in Horace’s *Odes*, which include exhortations to discard wealth and gems, as well as support for the

¹¹⁷ Sallust, *Bellum Catilinae*, 3.4.1, 11.1.1; Sallust, *Historiae*, fr. 1.11.8. Cf. Valerius Maximus, *Facta et Dicta Memorabilia*, 9.4.3; Seneca the Younger, *Epistulae*, 90.36.2; Pliny the Elder, 2.125.10. See Lintott, pp. 627-28.

¹¹⁸ Lintott, see previous citations: nn. 1, 8, 71.

¹¹⁹ Levick, pp.53-56. For a broader view of these tensions and the social problems of the late Republic, see Clifford Ando, ‘From Republic to Empire’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Social Relations in the Roman World*, ed. by Michael Peachin (Oxford: Clarendon, 2011), pp. 37-66.

traditional values inherent in Augustus's (later) legislation.¹²⁰ Luxury, too, continued to be a potent factor in the perceived lifestyles of the rich and powerful, at least under the Julio-Claudians, even if the influence of more austere provincials was becoming more important as the old patrician families declined.¹²¹

The *mos maiorum* was always something of a utopian fiction, but it provided a ready reference-point for writers and politicians who wished to criticise the current state of Roman society.

¹²⁰ See especially Horace, *Carmina*, 3.6, 3.24, with the comments of Gordon Williams, 'Poetry in the Moral climate of Augustan Rome,' *Journal of Roman Studies*, 52:1-2 (1962), 28-46 (pp. 29-35).

¹²¹ Ronald Syme, *The Roman Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), pp. 382-88, 454-60.

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