VESSELS IN CONTEXT
THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF LATE ANTIQUE DINING HABITS IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN: A PRELIMINARY STUDY OF THE EVIDENCE

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Abstract

This paper sets out to explore the relationship between excavated evidence of dining rooms and table utensils, and changing dining habits in Late Antiquity. In the first part the emphasis is on pictorial representations of dining scenes from the 5th and 6th c. A.D. The second part of the paper examines the archaeological evidence and its relationship to these scenes. On the basis of this evidence, it is not only possible to discuss in detail the architectural layout of the dining room together with its furniture and textiles, but also to give a description of the actual objects (in silver, metal, pottery, glass and in other materials) used on the dining table.

Introduction

In Late Antiquity the focus of the Roman empire was shifting eastwards, towards the new capital and administrative centre Constantinople, although ancient ‘Roman’ traditions remained strong. From the inauguration of Constantinople in A.D. 330 to the period of Iconoclasm (A.D. 726–843), the Byzantine elite continued to use their meals in special designed dining rooms, in a manner derived from the Greeks and Romans. In this paper I will present a preliminary analysis of the archaeological evidence for table utensils which can be associated with the architectural setting of late antique dining rooms in the eastern Mediterranean. In the first part of this paper I will discuss a selection of pictorial representations of dining scenes—both secular and religious—from the 5th and 6th c. A.D. I aim to establish what kind of dining furniture and table utensils these pictures show, and also to note the kind of utensils not represented in pictorial scenes.

In the second part of the paper I will concentrate on archaeological evidence from the late 4th/5th to the 8th c. A.D. that seems to have a clear relationship to the discussed pictures. I will discuss the architectural...