Life and culture in the Roman Small Town of Tienen

Transformations of cultural behavior by comparative analysis of material culture assemblages

This dissertation presents a methodological approach for the interrogation of excavated assemblages from archaeological sites, as a means of providing insights into consumer choices and practices in different cultural contexts. The thesis examined the archaeological finds, site formation processes and especially the structured intentional way finds and other archaeological remains were lain down by the people of the Roman Small Town at Tienen in eastern Belgium. Particular emphasis is placed on the comparison of archaeological remains from domestic, cemetery and ritual/ceremonial contexts. These contexts, indeed, show distinct patterns of difference and similarity and clearly demonstrate that these three cultural domains were defined by their own socio-cultural rules and practices. Furthermore the research provides an illuminating focus on how the composition of the burial, domestic and ritual assemblage underwent gradual but consistent changes throughout the Roman period as a result of changing external circumstances, ideas and values and the gradual change of the culture of the vicus community.

Bronze, iron and glass assemblages, in addition to pottery, have clearly also been used within these different cultural contexts throughout the Roman period adding to the insight into practices that could be gained from the study. In funerary and ritual contexts this consumption is less straightforward, because next to the meals for the living, also more symbolical sacrifices and meals for the dead and/or for the gods are provided for. Only a few examples of these specific choices of ‘symbolical consumption’ are the preference for younger animals; for specific species like horse and dog, the use of different parts of the animal; a distinctive trend for some novelties (new forms) in pottery and a clear preference for the use of new or hardly used vessels, the use of valuable glass and bronze objects and the appearance of specific types and sizes of nails.