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VESSELS FOR MUSHROOMS?

ANNE HELTTULA

At the beginning of the first century AD a new delicacy appeared at Roman banquets: mushrooms.¹ The first recorded experiment was not successful: Cicero had a severe attack of diarrhoea after eating some unspecified *fungi* at a vegetarian dinner (fam. 7,26 = Shackleton Bailey 210). But by Tiberius' time the imperial mushroom-hunters had learned to pick the right ones for the Emperor's table, and the *boleti* were already competing with *ficedulae*, *ostreae* and *turdi* for his favour (Suet. Tib. 42,6). The *boleti* were the divine food, *deorum cibus*, that raised Claudius into the company of the gods (Suet. Nero 33,1).² In spite of this calamity the mushrooms established their place among exotic delicacies, oysters, game and rare kinds of fish. Eating mushrooms became a symbol of luxurious living, and as such it was severely criticized by moralists, e.g. Seneca (epist. 108,15 *Inde ostreis boletisque in omnem vitam renuntiatum est; nec enim cibi sed oblectamenta sunt ad edendum saturos cogentia, quod gratissimum est edacibus et se ultra quam capiunt farcientibus, facile decensura, facile reditura*) and Juvenal (14,6 *Nec melius de se cuiquam sperare propinquo / concedet iuvenis, qui radere tubera terrae, / boletum condire et eodem iure natantis / mergere ficedulas didicit nebulone parente / et cana monstrante gula*).

The description given by Pliny the Elder (nat. 22,92–93) makes it clear that the famous and highly appreciated *boletus* was *Amanita caesarea*, Caesar's agaric, typical of northern Italy and southern France. This

¹ See A. Helttula, Mushrooms in ancient Greece and Rome, *Opuscula IRF* 4 (1989) 20–21.

² Claudius' death seems to have been caused by a dish of poisoned mushrooms (*boletus medicatus*; Suet. Claud. 44,4), not by any poisonous species; cf. also Plin. nat. 22,92; Tac. ann. 12,67.

identification has been generally accepted.³

The word *boletus* is used in the 1st and 2nd centuries AD by many Latin writers (Seneca, Pliny, Tacitus, Suetonius, Pliny the Younger, Martial and Juvenal). It is not found in Greek before Galen (alim. fac. 2,67,1–2), who considered the βωλίτης the best and safest kind of mushroom, the only one, as far as he knew, that had not yet killed anyone.⁴

Therefore, the Greek word could well be a loan from Latin.⁵ But I find it even more likely that *boletus* was the local name of this mushroom, used in the main areas of its appearance, Northern Italy and Southern Gaul, and borrowed into both Latin and Greek as the name of this particular commodity.⁶

Two names of vessels have been explained as derivatives of *boletus*.

According to Mart. 14,101 the vessel called *boletar* (*voletarium* Vet.Lat. Marc. 14,20 cod. c)⁷ was named after *boleti*: *Cum mihi boleti dederint tam nobile nomen, / prototomis (pudet heu!) servio coliculis*. But was it a plate or bowl originally used for serving mushrooms?

Apicius uses *boletar* for *isicia* (rissoles; 2,1,5), *apothermum*⁸ 2,2,10), lentils (5,2,1–2), peas (5,3,4), roast fowl (6,2,5) and roast pork (8,7,13) – but he does not mention it in his recipes for mushrooms. It is a serving dish used after the food had been prepared in a *caccabus* (2,1,5 *coagitabis et exinanes in boletari*; 2,2,10 *in boletari inferes*; 5,2,2 *cum in boletar miseris, addes oleum viridem*); cf. anth. 142,3 Shackleton Bailey (153,3 Riese) *comptas*

³ Cf. G. Maggiulli, *Nomenclatura micologica latina*, Genova 1977, 47; Helttula, 32.

⁴ The form is βωλίτης in glosses too (III 315,19 βωλίται *boleti*) and in geop. 12,22,6; βωλήτης only in Athen. 3,113c. G. Redard (*Les noms grecs en -της, -τις*, Paris 1949, 68 and 70) explains the Greek form as analogous: -της was a normal suffix in names of plants.

⁵ P. Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque*, Paris 1980, 203, and A. Ernout & A. Meillet, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine*, Paris 1959⁴, 72. In ThLL II 2066,65 the Latin word is given as a derivative of the Greek one.

⁶ The element *bol*, *bul* is found in Celtic(?) plant names: **bolo-sero-n*, Gallic for 'ivy' in Apul. de virt. herb. 99 (cf. A. Holder, *Alt-celtischer Sprachschatz I*, 1896, 477); *bulluca/ga*, name of some *poma parvola* (wild berries?) growing in the wilderness, Vita Columb. 1,9 (cf. Holder 631).

⁷ ... *qui tingit mecum manum in catino* Vulg.; Vet.Lat. cod. a *in catinum*, cod. q *in acitabulo*, cod. c *in voletario*, cod. d *in parapside* (εἰς τὸ τρύβλιον).

⁸ Explained as "une bouillie ou un gâteau de semoule mélangée de vin de liqueur" by J. André in his edition of Apicius, Paris 1974, 148.

nolo dapes, vacuum mihi pone boletar.

Catili boletari are mentioned in the potters' tally-lists found at La Graufesenque in Aquitania (Nos. 163, 166 and 167 Marichal; [...]oletari No. 154).⁹ These records have been written on discarded fragments of their own ware.¹⁰ The adjective *boletarius* defines the type of the *catillus* – plate or shallow bowl – in question. Abbreviations (*bol.*) and fragments of the word appear fourteen times (Nos. 46, 86, 94, 96 and 159). The order is reversed in No. 86, where *bol(etari)* [..., *bol(etari) cat(ili)* and *bol(etari) par(axidi)* (= *paropsides*)¹¹ appear.

Both *catillus* and *paropsis* (παροψίς) were dishes in which food was served at the table. *Catillus* was probably a plate or a shallow bowl,¹² *paropsis* a little deeper.¹³ In the graffiti of La Graufesenque these nouns are often qualified by adjectives which define the form, colour, decoration, quality, or method of manufacture of the dish;¹⁴ according to Marichal, however, *boletarius* would have described its use.¹⁵ This was also the interpretation given by J. André to Apicius' *boletar*.¹⁶ According to Hilgers (121), the *boletar* was used for fish (he refers to hist. Aug. Claud. 17,5; see below), mushrooms and cabbage.¹⁷

I have shown above that Apicius used the *boletar* for many kinds of dishes, among which mushrooms are **not** mentioned. Martial only said that it was **named after** the mushrooms, not that it was originally used for serving them. The connection with the type *atramentarium pultarium*

⁹ Les graffites de la Graufesenque, ed. by R. Marichal, Paris 1988 (suppl. 47 of "Gallia"); earlier edition by F. Hermet, La Graufesenque, Paris 1934.

¹⁰ For the hypotheses advanced to explain these lists, see D.P.S. Peacock, Pottery in the Roman world, London & New York 1982, 126.

¹¹ For the forms of this word used at La Graufesenque, see Marichal, 90.

¹² Cf. W. Hilgers, Lateinische Gefäßnamen, Düsseldorf 1969, 48–49 and 142–144. For the names of the dishes produced in La Graufesenque, see also Hermet, La Graufesenque, 320–322, and Marichal, 80–92.

¹³ Hilgers, 33–34 and 238–239.

¹⁴ Marichal, 83–84.

¹⁵ This was already the opinion of F. Hermet, RA 4 ser. 3 (1904) 82, and La Graufesenque, 321; similarly explained by others too, e.g. D.E. Strong, Greek and Roman Gold and Silver Plate, London 1966, 129.

¹⁶ Index of the utensils, 224.

¹⁷ According to J. Loth (Les graffites gaulois de la Graufesenque, RC 41, 1924, 28) *boletar* was "terrine pour légumes frais" (reference to Mart. 19,10).

vinarium, i. e. vessels in *-arium* named after the substance they were used for, is secondary, because *boletarium* is an analogous singular formed from the plural *boletaria*. Besides, why would mushrooms have needed a particular kind of dish – in fact two, a *catillus* and a *paropsis*?

I find it much more probable that the word describes the outward appearance of the vessel. Apicius called the caps of the mushrooms *caliculos*, "little bowls" (diminutive of *calix*; 7,15,5); could the *boletar* have been a dish that resembled the cap of a *boletus*?

In fact, both Chantraine (see footnote 4 above) and Frisk¹⁸ think that the corresponding Greek word – as the other Greek derivatives of *boletus* too (see below) – describes the shape, not the use of the object.

The Greek word appears twice in a papyrus from the 2nd cent. AD (BGU 781 I 1; III 8.10). The fragmentary text contains a list of various sets of dishes, which are also described. In col. III πινάκια βωλητάρια [= *catilli boletari!*] ... σὺν ποδίοις καὶ διαπηγίοις are mentioned, i.e. vessels equipped with feet and transverse handles, as the latter word is explained by F. Preisigke.¹⁹

In its basic form the *boletar* (*boletarium*, βωλητάριον) could have been a dish with a distinctive foot supporting a wide, shallow, plate-like upper part. It could also have been a dish decorated with radiating flutes or ribs resembling the gills of a mushroom.

There are fine examples of fluted (ribbed, 'pillar-moulded') bowls made of silver and glass.²⁰ Perhaps the Gaulish potters at La Graufesenque imitated the forms and decorations of such finer wares. In fact, the *catilli boletari* seem to have been a rare and special type of dish: of the total of 155,058 *catilli* mentioned in the graffiti, only 5,800 are specified as *boletari*.²¹ We also know about a *boletar halieuticum* in silver, mentioned among precious gifts sent to the Emperor in hist. Aug. Claud. 17,5. It could have been meant for serving fish, but the word *halieuticum* could also refer

¹⁸ H. Frisk, *Griechisches etymologisches Wörterbuch I*, Heidelberg 1960, 278.

¹⁹ F. Preisigke, *Wörterbuch der griechischen Papyrusurkunden I*, Berlin 1925, 280 (adj. βωλητάριος) and 358 (διαπήγιον).

²⁰ For ribbed silver bowls, see e.g. the illustrations in Strong: Pl. 43A (bowl found at Berthouville), 51A (Chaourse) and 65B (Kaiseraugst). For glass bowls, see D.B. Harden, *Glass of the Caesars*, 1987, 19–20, Nos. 26–28; D.F. Grose, *Ancient Glass*, 1989, 211–212, 244–249 and Nos. 228–242.

²¹ These are Hermet's figures (La Graufesenque, 328–330).

to a decorative motif, perhaps a frieze around the edge of the bowl.²²

By the time that Apicius' cookery book appeared in its final form (4th–5th century AD?), the meaning of the word had been generalized. The serving-dishes mentioned by Apicius are *boletar*, *discus* and *lanx*.²³ Their difference must have been in size and shape, certainly not in decoration. The *voletarium* which, according to the translator of the *Vetus Latina* manuscript c, was used by Jesus and the apostles at their last supper must have been quite an ordinary dish. Its distinctive features could have been the foot and the plate-like upper part, but hardly the ribbed pattern.

According to B. Meinersmann,²⁴ both the *πινάκια βωλητάρια* quoted above and the *βωλήτι[ο]ν* only found in a 3rd century papyrus (P.Oxy. 1657,4) were mushroom-shaped bowls with a foot.

The assumed *βωλήτιον* is one of the bronze items contained in a mess kit. According to the editors, *βωλητάρ[ι]ν* for *βωλητάριον* would be a possible reading, but it would suit the papyrus less well.²⁵ Their translation is "saucepan".

The existence of the noun *βωλήτιον* is supported by the adjective *βωλητίνος* found in Athenaeus' discussion on bread (3,113c). Athenaeus claims that there were mushroom-shaped loaves of bread (*ὁ δὲ βωλητίνος καλούμενος ἄρτος πλάττεται μὲν ὡς βωλήτης*). His source was a treatise on bread-making (*ἄρτοποιικόν*) by Chrysippus of Tyana, of unknown date but certainly later than Apicius, since he named a type of cake after him (*Ἄπικιανόν [κλοῦστρον]*, Athen. 14,647c). In the passage different methods of baking bread are discussed (3,113a *ὁ ἀρτοποιικός ἄρτος καλούμενος κλιβανικίου καὶ φουρνακίου διαφέρει*; cf. Plin. nat. 18,105 *furnacei vel artopticii aut in clibanis cocti*).

The making of the *βωλητίνος ἄρτος* is described: it is clearly an *ἀρτοποιικός* type of bread, i.e. baked in an earthenware dish (*ἀρτόπτης*).²⁶

²² The other dishes included in the gift are defined in terms of their material and decoration; e.g. *discus corymbiatus argenteus*, *lanx argentea pampinata* and *patena argentea hederacia*.

²³ Cf. Hilgers, 170 (*discus*), and 206–209 (*lanx*). Cf. also André's index of the utensils, 224–226.

²⁴ B. Meinersmann, *Die lateinischen Wörter und Namen in den griechischen Papyri*, Leipzig 1927, 13.

²⁵ *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri XIV*, ed. B.P. Grenfell & A.S. Hunt, London 1920.

²⁶ "The kneading-trough is greased and sprinkled with poppy-seed, on which the dough is spread, and so it does not stick to the trough during the rising. When it is placed in the

Perhaps βωλήτιον was the type dish used, and the bread was named after it. In Athenaeus' text, the dish is called simply κέραμος. The use of this method could have produced a "mushroom-shaped" loaf broadened above the rim of the dish, perhaps also decorated with gill-like radial cuts.

To conclude: the βωλήτιον – if it existed – and the *boletar*/βωλητάριον were different kinds of vessels, the first a cooking or baking dish, the second a serving-dish (with a foot? with a rib-pattern?). But since the pan in the soldier's kit was made of bronze, it was perhaps a βωλητάριον after all.

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oven, some coarse meal is sprinkled over the earthenware pan, after which the loaf is laid upon it and takes on a delightful colour, like that of smoked cheese" (transl. by C.B. Gulick in the Loeb CL edition of the *Deipnosophistae*, 1937).