

# Wine and “conspicuous consumption” in antiquity - some literary and empirical evidence

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## 1 Abstract

The concept of “conspicuous consumption” is associated with Thorstein Bunde Veblen (**Veblen**, 1899) who, together with John R. Commons is widely considered to be the founder of institutional economics.

Put very simply, the doctrine claims that the rich and poor alike attempt to impress others through ostentatious behaviour patterns. The doctrine is not as simplistic, however, as this brief characterization might make it appear. It has given rise to interesting reflections on atypical behaviour relevant for the economic price theory (**Leibenstein**, 1950). Over the years, this doctrine has also found entrance in several branches of quite useful consumer research. The approach has been put to fruitful use in wine marketing research as well (**Benjamin and Podolny**, 1999). A recent wine consultancy firm even adopted the name of Thorstein Veblen as brand name for its commercial activities (**Veblen Wines**, 2010).

But the behaviour patterns described as “conspicuous consumption” are not a phenomenon limited to our time. Quite to the contrary, they are also characteristic for ancient societies and it can be rather illuminating for our understanding of the interaction of the economy with the legal system and with the rest of society to study ancient developments in this field (**Dari Mattiacci and Plisecka**, 2010).

A particularly fertile field for the study of conspicuous consumption in the ancient world is the study of wine economics and the role of wine in social differentiation

and in social change. A classical source for such a study are the writings of **Petronius Arbiter** (Trimalchio), a contemporary of emperor Nero – and probably a victim of the emperor. Petronius’ writings are full of acute observations about the economic and social conditions of his time and there is a copious secondary literature which covers and evaluates these information ( **Bicknell** (1968) **Schmeling** (1970) **Purcell** (1985) ) The paper will cover the literary information concerning wine and conspicuous consumption as may be found in **Petronius Arbiter** (Trimalchio), in the secondary literature to this work, and in more general coverage of the ancient conditions in the consumption and production of wine (**Remark** (1927), **Seltman** (1957)). The literature-oriented findings will be checked and corroborated with empirical data as may be found in surviving legal documents (**Lauffer** (1971), **Dari Mattiacci** and **Plisecka** (2010)) and in archeological sources.

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