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Introduction

The food of previous eras is intriguing. The experience of eating and smelling the same dishes and aromas which would have been part of life at another stage of history may be the nearest one can come to understanding the pattern and texture of everyday life, the reality of being there rather than an academic exercise in recalling the ups and downs of political and battleground life.

This is not a matter of cooking up possible recipes and re-creating dishes from well-documented feasts. Rather it is a question of exploring the tastes and preferences of the time, the preconceptions and misconceptions held about food and eating, and their impact then, as now, on what was served both to the wealthy and to the poor, for grand occasions and for everyday eating.

There is little advantage to be gained in exploring the diets of people who lived near the brink of famine. They ate what they could and used whatever was edible and grew or lived around them. More interesting are the choices made by those with the ability to pander to preferences.

In theory these preferences should be fairly straightforward and unchanging through the centuries. In practice they are complex and respond to many social and perceived medical pressures, and these do change. Contemporary ideas regarding the dangers of a fatty diet and the desire to be thin are in stark contrast to post-war notions when a well-fed baby would be regarded as bonny, a cause for joy rather than a worry concerning future obesity.

We choose from what is available to us, so a brief scan of what may have been obtainable will throw up major differences between now and then. Not least because seasonality was a much greater influence on meat as well as fruit and vegetables, storage techniques were more

restrictive and more likely to alter the nature of whatever was being stored through salting and curing, and of course a deep hole in the ground was the nearest cooling device to the chiller cabinet.

The greatest barriers to understanding what may have been on offer are preconceptions regarding the 'Mediterranean diet' which have firmly lodged in the consciousness. Fish and cereals are fine but much of what we think of as part of the term is post-Columbus. So of course, amongst other things, no tomatoes, peppers, maize for polenta, or chillies. Wheat came in various guises, all of which were too expensive for the poorer classes who had millet and barley as staples. Lesser strains of wheat like emmer and spelt could be made into flat unleavened sheets like pasta, and finer strains like durum, which makes the best bread, were at a premium and, during Roman times, grown and imported in quantity from across the Empire.

The time span of our work is large, Homeric times until Early Christian, so some account must be taken of changes not just in availability but in religious sentiments, relative prosperity and even fashion during this period. The sources for our work have also to be considered and evaluated for reliability in this context. Writers like second-century AD Athenaeus, who gave great insight into food-writing now completely lost to us, were products of their time, with all the prejudices and preconceptions then current. Any analysis and comment on food and eating before then will have filtered through these. References, for example, to the gastronome and writer Archestratus, who wrote and lived in the fourth century BC, are touched with ridicule as his stern views on food and cooking, along with the metre in which he wrote, were no longer smart to hold. Think of a book on Elizabethan or Jacobean food and attitudes written from today's perspectives and the time gap becomes clear.

Actual recipes can be conjured out of some texts but not many. Cooks were unlikely to be avid readers and collectors of cookbooks, if they could read at all. There are some usable recipes, of course, a good explanation of the pastry 'tracta' by Pliny, for example, and some interesting recipes from Cato in his 'de agricultura', a treatise on farming written around 160 BC, one for a pudding made with flour, cheese, egg and honey. Mostly though, we have to work on descriptions of the food by those who ate it rather than anyone who expected us to cook it.

A dilemma arises. If we prepare the dish exactly as it was made over two thousand years ago, the unfamiliarity of the tastes and textures may overpower our ability to judge nuances of flavour that would

have been apparent to anyone of the period, like giving a curry to somebody who had never experienced Indian food and expecting them to notice subtle variations in the spicing rather than just be hit by the chilli. If we re-create the dishes exactly we will have to re-create the palate and expectations of the time also.

Alternatively, if we lower the intensity of the spicing and flavouring so that the general character of the food comes across, have we weakened the authenticity of our efforts? We are now fairly familiar with Thai and Vietnamese cookery and many of the ingredients used are comparable to those in the Mediterranean in the period we address. The universal dipping sauce, *garum*, was made in much the same way as *Nam Pla*, by fermenting small fish, and it's interesting to note that the results are quite delicate, not the stinker that the idea of rotting fish conjures up at all.

What emerges is the fondness for rank flavours in foods like *garum* or cheese combined and contrasted with sweet flavours such as honey and dried fruit. Not significantly different, in fact, from the use of fruit sauces with game, or sweet biscuits and port with blue cheese. Stronger spices like *asafoetida* and more astringent herbs like hyssop that would seem medicinal now were in use, presumably to sharpen up the cereal porridges which would have otherwise made for a dull eating experience.

Restaurants did not exist as such. There were inns to feed and lodge travellers, of course, but serious dining was the preserve of private houses with cooks and servants, staff meals the mainstay of agricultural labourers and street food the preserve of the urban poor.

Within these diverse groups, there were similarities of flavour objectives and shared cultural ideas on food and diet. Snobbery and pretension went with wealthy dining then as now, and the ignorance and superstition on food matters that seem laughable now point uncomfortably towards the amusement that our current ideas may hold for future diners.



An Overview of Food in Antiquity

This introductory chapter is in four parts. First we set out the broad historical framework. Next we present the evidence and how we propose to interpret it. We then summarize the main elements of the diet. A final section shows how food and eating were incorporated into Greco-Roman culture to a striking degree.

The Historical Framework

This book covers a broad period, roughly from 750 BC to AD 200, and focuses on the cultures of Greece and Rome. In that period Greece developed into a large number of city states ruled by oligarchic governments and sent out colonial settlements throughout the Mediterranean. The city states had varied constitutions, including a few democracies, and remained largely independent until the rise of Macedon in the fourth century BC. Alexander the Great and his successors then dominated the Greek world (now including Asia Minor, Syria and Egypt, along with southern Italy) in a series of dynasties, all of them eventually taken over by the end of the first century BC by the Romans. In the same period, the Romans had been developing their strength as an Italic people, coming to terms with the Greek cities of Sicily and southern Italy, with the Carthaginians, and with all the influences these neighbours exerted on them. By the time of the first Emperor, Augustus, the Romans had a world empire many of whose inhabitants in the East spoke Greek and Latin. There was much cultural exchange between these two systems. This book draws in particular on three authors who tried to make sense of this cultural fusion as far as food was concerned.

These are Plutarch of Chaeronea (in particular his *Symptotica* or *Table-Talk*), Athenaeus of Naucratis (his *Deipnosophistae*) and Galen of Pergamum (in particular his treatise *On the Powers of Foods*). All three were Greek authors writing under the power of Rome in the second or early third centuries AD. Their commentary on food, eating, medicine, religion and regional diversity is rich and stimulating.

This book does not confine itself to the homelands of ‘the Greeks’ and ‘the Romans’. It takes into account a vast area, from the Black Sea and Syria to Spain, from the steppes of Russia to the sea and deserts of North Africa. The seaboard will be the main focus, but many people in the region did not live by the sea. There were mountain dwellers, farmers and many who did not travel. The Romans, indeed, constructed themselves as originally a people of small farmers who had nothing to do with influences from outside. Thus Ovid in his *Fasti*, for example, describes the goddess Carna as one who dislikes travel by sea, and exotic birds and fish, preferring instead traditional Roman beans, bacon and emmer wheat (6.169–86). But in many ways, trade and travel were vital to the history of eating in antiquity. Foods and perhaps technologies tended to move westwards. Furthermore, the Greeks and Romans were influenced by other cultures. A particularly striking example was the Assyrian practice of reclining at a meal, which the Greeks, Etruscans and Romans seem to have imported from the seventh and sixth centuries BC onwards. This major development is discussed further in Chapter 2.

The movement of people, too, was crucial. Foods and other goods were traded extensively, to meet local shortages, to meet the demands of local elites for distinctive goods, and for other purposes. Travel came to have a close relation with food. We can see this first in Homer, where Homer’s Odysseus travels round the Mediterranean meeting people who do not eat the grain and olives and drink the wine that he does. Later, in the ‘symptotic’ literature attached to the symposium or drinking session, wines and other products imported from many different places were listed and celebrated. In Rome, the impact of expansion produced strong political and literary reaction, from the time of Cato the Elder onwards (late third/early second century BC). Cato and others voiced concern over the influence of imports, the richness and attractiveness of foreign foods and goods, and the perceived neglect of Roman traditions. We shall explore the latter in particular in Chapters 7 and 9. This Roman tradition, however, only serves to highlight the impact and importance of foreign foods. Cato’s fears in



FIGURE 1.1 An Indian plant, the citron was the member of the citrus family that was certainly known to the Greeks and Romans. At first glance less appetising than the lemon, this huge and pithy fruit has a fragrant juice. Galen says people ate it with vinegar and fish sauce. He also noted its complex pharmacological properties. It was also believed to be an antidote to certain poisons. See Dalby (2003). Reproduced by permission of the Dean and Chapter of Exeter Cathedral

the second century may have reflected new pressures, but the interest in foreign imports, both material and intellectual, as his own writings display, was substantial and had been so for decades.

Evidence and Interpretation

Archaeology is able to make a large contribution to our understanding of these developments. Analysis of plant, animal and fish remains has revealed much about the distribution and kinds of animals and plants that were eaten, and some idea of the distribution by trade of plants and cereals, fish and all the equipment of the table (Renfrew 1973, Luce 2000). Much too is revealed of food technology (Curtis 2001) and means of preparing and storing a wide range of foods (Sparkes 1962, Forbes & Foxhall 1995). So too vessels for dining, in particular silverware and painted pottery (Vickers & Gill 1994); and the architecture of the dining room, including buildings, wall-coverings and flooring. Mosaics are particularly well preserved (Dunbabin 1999 and 2003).

A further class of evidence is provided by the analysis of human bones and of residues in cooking and eating vessels (Garnsey 1999). An example may be found in recent studies on evidence from Minoan Crete which reveal the diet in the late Minoan III period (fourteenth century BC) of a population of over 350 adults and children buried in the cemetery at Armenoi, south of Rethymnon (Tzedakis and Martlew 2002). There is no evidence for seafood (even though contemporary pottery has plentiful marine imagery), though the remains do suggest a 'fair amount of animal protein' (whether milk or meat) and plant protein. Furthermore, the researchers found little differentiation between the diets of the rich and the poor, as expressed in chemical deposits in the bones; but there is evidence that men ate more animal protein than women. Infectious diseases found include osteomyelitis, brucellosis (transferred to humans from infected goat's milk), tuberculosis (transferred from infected cow's milk), and nutritional diseases such as osteoporosis, scurvy, rickets and iron-deficiency anaemia. A smaller sample of bone tissues from Grave Circle A at Mycenae revealed some eating of seafood, with men eating more than women. However, there was little or no marine protein in the chemical analysis of bones from Grave Circle B at Mycenae. As far as alcoholic beverages were concerned, both wine and beer appear to have been drunk. These findings confirm some evidence already considered by Garnsey (1999), and are

also suggestive in other areas. It was possible, it seems, for Greeks to drink milk and beer, even though many texts link such beverages with foreign peoples. I shall return to this evidence.

Archaeological evidence is supplemented in abundance by literary and technical sources. The written text is a feature of Greek and Roman culture which is not found in many other food cultures until the modern period, if then. Food plays a major role in many different kinds of text, from Homer and Herodotus onwards. The Greeks were the first people in Europe to produce cookery books (in the fourth century BC). And Greeks and Romans produced texts which had a particular focus on eating and drinking. Comedy and satire are the best examples (Gowers 1993 for Rome, Wilkins 2000 for Greece).

There is a considerable mismatch between many of the literary sources and the vast majority of the population. The nature of the literary sources is explored further in Chapter 9. Even where literature does turn its attention to poorer members of society, they are likely to be idealized in a discourse that reflects more on criticism of the city than on the poor for their own sake. Simylus in the poem *The Moretum* (*The Ploughman's Lunch* in Kenney's 1984 translation) and the poor huntsmen in the Euboean Oration (7) of Dio Chrysostom exemplify the idealized literary peasant.

A more accurate picture of food in the rural economy (though not of peasants) is given by the agricultural writers. Cato writes for rich investors, but sets much practical detail beside this focus. Varro writes for his wife, with apparently a broader focus than Cato. Columella combines much practical detail with standard moral concerns of the period. All of these writers have a broad geographical overview. Cato focuses on Campania but has much Greek material in mind; Varro and Columella are concerned with much of Italy and beyond. All this contrasts with the *Works and Days* of Hesiod, an early Greek hexameter poet, who wrote within a tradition of wisdom literature on the agricultural year. For all its detail, the moral framework of thrift, hard work and focus on the locality, in contrast to foreign trade, is at the heart of the poem. Varro and Columella also reflect the moral tradition, but to a smaller extent. Thus on imported birds for fattening, Varro says of the peacock (3.6.6), 'Quintus Hortensius is said to have been the first to serve these at his inaugural dinner as aedile. The fact was praised more by men given to luxury than by the severe and upright.'

There were also technical texts in many other areas related to food, on medicine from the fifth century BC, and from Aristotle and

Theophrastus in the fourth century BC onwards, on zoology and botany. These helped to place the human animal in its context in the natural world. There were texts on the different cities of the Greco-Roman world; there were works on agriculture; there were travel books and geographical surveys; and in the 'Hellenistic' period (the last three centuries BC) and Roman period encyclopaedic works were written that reviewed and summarized all this information. The *Natural History* of Pliny is an important example, as are the works of Plutarch, Galen and Athenaeus already mentioned. All these encyclopaedias came with ideological perspectives both on the history of food and on contemporary eating practices.

Of particular interest to this book are the two Greek authors of the Roman Empire in the second and third centuries AD, Galen and Athenaeus. The first was a medical writer with enormous philosophical and cultural interests, the second is hard to define but is a food encyclopaedist of a kind. Athenaeus does not always follow an alphabetical order like *Larousse gastronomique* or the *Oxford Companion to Food*. His decision to follow the order of the meal and to encourage as much quotation of evidence as possible makes him difficult for the modern reader to follow. The reasons for his decision, however, are revealing.

Both Athenaeus and Galen were writing about a millennium later than Homer. They each provided a cultural overview of this thousand-year period and at the same time offered an impressive summary of how Greek and Roman culture had interacted over a period of four centuries and more. They reveal, too, how local diversity might have survived within an empire-wide system, and also where the major influences for change arose. With their assistance we will thus be able to trace differences and influences between and within the two cultures.

We do not go on to explore the gradual development of these cultures into Christian cultures. There is much valuable material available from such authors as Clement of Alexandria, Philo of Alexandria and the church fathers such as Tertullian. Veronika Grimm has used such material to reveal different approaches to fasting in the pagan, Jewish and Christian traditions of late antiquity. For this book, our latest author is the NeoPlatonist Porphyry, whose *On Abstinence*, written in the third century AD, reviews arguments for and against abstaining from meat. This is a fundamental text for the history of vegetarianism, but also, like Athenaeus, a repository of earlier thought on eating in Greek culture.

It is Galen and Athenaeus, however, who make the greatest contribution to this study. They each wrote extensive works on aspects of

food and nutrition around the end of the second century AD. They wrote during a period in which writers reflected more than ever on the past, on the vast cultural heritage of Greece, and how it might be deployed and negotiated. The great overviews of food and eating that they provide help us to chart how the world looked in their time and in earlier times. They reveal how much technical literature was written on food: treatises on botany, vegetables, salt fish, drinking cups, symposia, garlands, diet, pharmacology and many other areas. Furthermore, these authors help us to define what we might mean by ‘food’ in Greco-Roman culture. Athenaeus’ inclusion of riddles and music, for example, shows what is relevant to such a study. They are also particularly strong on regions outside Athens and Rome. This is important, for these two great cities both contributed much to food and culture and at the same time were exceptional because of their size and influence.

Naturally, Galen and Athenaeus have different objectives. Galen, the doctor, identifies (in *On the Powers of Foods*) the standard foods in the diet, many of which are surprising to the modern eye. Along with the expected cereals and fruits there are many unpleasant grasses, wild plants and strange animals. Athenaeus, meanwhile, bases *The Deipnosophistae*, or *Philosophers at Dinner* on the symposium and sympotic literature produced for the leisured Greek elites. He too lists many different and surprising foods and quotes from many authors who had written on the subject. Athenaeus focuses in particular on Homer, Plato, the comic poets and the accounts of the Hellenistic kings who succeeded Alexander. But Galen too sometimes draws on Homer, Plato and comedy – these authors were part of the mental world of an educated person of the period and Galen considered their references to foods important. Conversely, Athenaeus has Galen as one of his semi-fictional ‘Deipnosophistae’ or philosophers at dinner, and quotes extensively from Hellenistic treatises on diet and nutrition by such authors as Diocles of Carystus, Mnesitheus of Athens and Diphilus of Siphnos. Nutrition is discussed in detail in Chapter 8. We should add to these literary riches the dining practices that Athenaeus’ diners follow. Although they are mainly Greek, and quote mainly Greek authors, they drink wine from the beginning of the meal, in Roman style. They appear to have synthesized Greek and Roman dining customs. The implications of this for the structure of both Greek and Roman meals are discussed in Chapter 2.

Between them these two authors name hundreds of foods, from hundreds of cities and regions. They bring home the diversity of eating

in the Roman Empire of the second and third centuries AD. They also have a focus which is not solely Rome or Athens, as was mentioned above. Athenaeus reports on the cities of the Greek mainland, the Celts, the Egyptians, the cities of Asia Minor and Syria; Galen on Macedonia, Bithynia, Asia Minor, Alexandria and Italy. Galen too offers the best evidence available to us in a literary text of what poorer people and countrymen ate. His diet is the human diet, not merely the diet of the leisured classes. In this respect his testimony is priceless. It is discussed in Chapter 4.

Galen and Athenaeus reflect also general cultural features in their discussions of foods. There was a demand for more foods and new foods from outside; there were new ways to prepare these and well-known foods. Both areas, along with pleasure and refinement, were a focus for competition within the city elites. In contrast with these pressures for innovation, a desire for simple foods based on local agriculture was also frequently expressed, as noted in Ovid above. A 'technical' author is not immune from these cultural assumptions. To take an example, Galen distinguishes himself from cooks at *On the Powers of Foods* 2.51: 'For we physicians aim at benefits from foods, not at pleasure. But since the unpleasantness of some foods contributes largely to poor concoction, in this regard it is better that they are moderately tasty. But for cooks, tastiness for the most part makes use of harmful seasonings, so that poor rather than good concoction accompanies them' (trans. Powell). We shall see in Chapter 7 that Galen's words closely echo Plato's influential distinction six hundred years earlier between the useful doctor and the meretricious cook. But the doctor and the cook are not complete opposites. The cook aims mainly at pleasing the palate. However, the doctor cannot ignore pleasing tastes, since unpleasant food is generally bad for the digestive system.

The interests of the two authors intersect, further, in their desire to identify, define and classify. This applies to terms: Which plant does the term X identify? What is the Latin equivalent? Has the name changed over the centuries? When was it introduced? Both authors were at pains to discover what earlier experts had written about a particular food, only to find that there were confusions in identification and terminology. We may take as an example Athenaeus' entry on the cherry (*kerasia* 2.50b). He quotes several Greek authorities, among them Theophrastus, and the Bithynian grammarian Asclepiades of Myrlea. Larensis, the host, counters with the claim that Lucullus the Roman

general was the first to import this tree to Italy from Cerasus in the Pontus. A further speaker recalls that the medical author Diphilus of Siphnos mentioned cherries in a work of the third century BC.

At first this appears to be a pedantic argument in which Greek and Roman claims take precedence over historical priority. Athenaeus quotes his sources, enabling us to put dates on the information. In the late fourth century, Theophrastus described in some detail a plant, which Athenaeus identifies as a cherry. Athenaeus' editor, Charles Gulick, identifies the plant described by Theophrastus as the berry of the hawthorn. The next authority quoted by Athenaeus, Asclepiades of Myrlea in Bithynia, is, in Athenaeus' view, describing an arbutus. He was writing in the first century BC, roughly in the same period as the campaigns of the Roman general Lucullus in the Pontic region (the Black Sea). Diphilus of Siphnos, the final authority, was writing at the court of Lysimachus in western Asia Minor in the third century BC. We thus have dates on the evidence. We also have location. Theophrastus describes a bush – perhaps in Attica and perhaps not a cherry. By the time of Diphilus, there is a variety of the proper Pontic cherry in Miletus. But is it a cherry? Asclepiades explicitly describes a different variety, in Bithynia. Lucullus brings about the major move from the Pontic region to Italy and Rome. This passage bears witness to an interest in cherries and to discussion of cherries over several centuries. But in itself it raises as many problems as it solves. It is unclear which species precisely is described in each text and also which plant(s) the term *kerasos* and its relatives accurately describes. Furthermore, the term may change from city to city. Then, the identification of foods may be subject to regional variation, ideological claims and pressures such as Larensis reveals. These do nothing to aid scientific precision. This example brings home the vastness of the ancient world; the thousands of cities over many centuries. How are we to capture any of its essence? Only a broad treatment with specific examples is possible. But Athenaeus' approach, bringing together a number of texts, is instructive for us as a general principle. When does a food become established? What counts as evidence? Who is asking the questions?

So Larensis and Daphnus slug it out. What can we do in our turn, if we consider, for example, the domestic fowl – the hen or chicken? We can resort to archaeology and faunal remains. We can look in texts. But the texts give very ambiguous evidence. Safest for us is not to pronounce on the quantity of chicken consumed in the Athens of Aristophanes – where it is still attested as the 'Persian bird' – or in the



FIGURE 1.2 Like the citron, the chicken or domestic fowl was an immigrant from Asia. It (and its eggs) was eaten as a bird among others, and, although common, it never had the prominence in the diet that it now enjoys. Reproduced by permission of the Dean and Chapter of Exeter Cathedral

Italy of Augustus. Rather, we may note the increase in consumption and familiarity over time, its use as a sacrificial animal, and its normal inclusion as one bird among others. Galen suggests it was *the* bird for human consumption, but not on the scale it now is.

Terminology is a problem that will not go away. There are many other examples in Athenaeus and Galen where which plant or animal is in question is unclear to them, let alone to us. Galen tries to establish a general principle in his discussion of small Italian mammals (*On the Powers of Foods* 3.1, trans. Powell). Galen says that when an unusual animal is eaten, the doctor is best advised to compare it with a similar animal known to him. ‘At any rate I shall no longer need lengthy statements to discuss all indigenous animals in all countries, such as the small animal in Spain which resembles the hare, that they also call “rabbit”; and the one in Lucania in Italy that lies somewhere between bear and pig; as also the one eaten in the same part of Italy and in many other places, that is halfway between the so-called *eleion* and field-mice or dormice.’ Galen identifies a new arrival (the rabbit) and indigenous species. A doctor newly arrived in an area needs a broad

framework for identifying animals and an analogous species for comparison, in order to prescribe food with confidence.

Clearly terminology was a problem for Galen and Athenaeus and continues to trouble us now. The classification of fish and certain plants is still far from agreed. At the same time, the massive body of reference to so many foods in Galen and Athenaeus, along with the lists in Pliny's *Natural History*, is a tremendous resource. They attest a great curiosity in the foods indigenous to Italy and Greece as well as noting new introductions, such as the rabbit from Spain. We should view new introductions as a continuous process, moving normally, unlike the rabbit, from east to west. Cultivated plants arrived early (if the technology was imported from the Near East and was not developed indigenously on many sites). These include the olive, the vine and cereals. The domestic fowl arrived considerably later, migrating slowly from the forests of Thailand to the Mediterranean. The pheasant was introduced. The peach and the apricot reached Rome apparently by the time of Augustus. It is not clear when the lemon arrived in the Mediterranean. The citron was certainly present in antiquity, the lemon possibly not. It is certain that the lemon, the orange, the aubergine and rice all came to the Mediterranean under Arabic influence after 700, possibly earlier. The main centres of power and commerce drew new foods to them, just as the European courts of the sixteenth century became interested in the foods of the Americas such as chocolate, tomatoes and potatoes (see e.g. Coe and Coe 1996). Courts, as we shall see, were important generators of innovation. They competed in display; they also sought to acquire the best antidotes in order to deflect poisons. A special ingredient for an antidote might go on to prove a pleasing addition to the diet.

Comparisons of this kind between the ancient world and later historical periods and indeed the twenty-first century will be an important feature of this book.

Food plays a number of major roles in modern western culture. Agriculture, global corporations, advertising and our social structure, together with a long history, all contribute towards embedding food and ideas about food in our culture. In contemporary Britain and the United States, the separation of the consumer from agricultural supply is more pronounced than in countries such as France and Italy. Similarly, in Britain and the United States, industrial production and distribution through supermarkets are particularly strong, as are foreign influences, for example from India, China and Italy.

In many ways, the societies of the Greeks and Romans resembled pre-modern societies in experiencing recurring food shortages (particularly in the spring) and disease. For example, shortages were frequent in Britain until the twentieth century; and France, for all its modern sophistication and the richness of its markets paraded weekly throughout the country from the smallest villages to the streets of Paris, also struggled to feed itself until the nineteenth century. ‘Seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century France was wracked by spasmodic “mortality crises” which saw the number of deaths in a locality spiral upwards three-, six-, even ten-fold, under the impact of hunger and famine. In the “pays de grande culture” [in North and North-eastern France] in particular, the price of grain acted as a kind of demographic barometer, high prices caused by bad harvests sending the number of deaths spiralling upwards in so-called “steeple” of mortality . . . Peasants starved in their droves in the final years of the “Grand Siècle” of Louis XIV’ (Jones 2002: 151). We shall see reports from Galen on food shortages in the countryside, particularly during the spring.

In a book of this kind it is imperative to introduce the small farmer and the poorer citizens at the earliest stage, for it is they that form the vast majority of the population and produce the majority of the food. At the same time, it is the political elites that ‘develop’ ‘culture’, demand the best food and drive forward innovation and gastronomy. Consequently, histories of food frequently focus on small and privileged groups – in Hollywood terms, those who participated in the orgies of the Roman imperial court. In Chapter 2, we shall see analogues in antiquity for Colin Jones’ account of eighteenth-century France. While the court was developing fine foods, and to some extent sharing the benefits with the troublesome citizens of Paris, the provincial peasantry starved. Even when food was plentiful, the peasants sent the best food to market: ‘vast cornfields growing rye (for local consumption), oats (for local livestock) and wheat (for the towns and the rich) stretched away as far as the eye could see’ (Jones 2002: 149–50).

The food supply is a vital concern for all states, ancient and modern. But it is not the only concern. Food did not only keep people alive; it also helped them to shape their identity. Colin Jones again gives an early modern analogy: ‘just as the conventional wisdom had it that the king should “live off his own”, so the ideal of rural living was the household, which was at once a unit of production and consumption, and which had the wherewithal to look after most of its own needs. Most peasant family heads spent most of their time producing enough

food for themselves and their families to live on. The staff of life was bread, and home-produced tasted sweetest . . . In the peasantry's lexicon, *gagner son pain* ("to earn one's bread") was synonymous with *gagner sa vie* ("to earn one's livelihood, living or life") and people had as many names for bread as the Eskimos for snow and the Bedouin for sand, each richly encrusted with connotations of nutritional quality, geographical provenance, economic status and social aspiration. Thus the rich might afford white, wheat-based loaves; the hard-up a black unleavened loaf of rye and barley or a maize-based porridge; and the very poorest – like the disinherited paupers of the Vivarais – a practically indigestible chestnut bread which comprised, one village proudly boasted, "our aid, our principal foodstuff, the wherewithal on which we nourish our families, our servants, our pets, our livestock, our poultry and our pigs" (Jones 2002: 148–9). With the exception of maize, which came from the Americas post-Columbus, we shall find Galen and literary authors making very similar statements about patterns of food consumption in the Roman Empire.

In addition to comparative approaches to the ancient evidence, we shall also draw on the work of anthropologists. Food is an important feature of all cultures. As mortals, human beings must eat, and to do so they must harness the natural and cultivated products of their local and wider environment. In doing so, human beings establish a relationship with the natural world, with the plants and animals that they consume, and with the natural forces of which they are part and to which they are subject. These relationships generate powerful religious, social and intellectual constructions, which lie behind the economic activity of the production and distribution of food. The consumption of food is often ordered to reflect essential aspects of the social structure of a society, such as the relationship between the genders and the structure of power. These relationships are a concern for anthropology, but anthropological studies have not always focused on food as much as on other aspects of life, such as social hierarchy, the life cycle and death ritual. Over the past half century, however, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Mary Douglas and Jack Goody, for example, have made a major anthropological contribution to the study of food. Douglas (1966) tackled the Jewish food laws and issues of identity; Douglas and Nicod (1974) decoded the structure of the British meal, while Douglas (1984) explored the interaction of native and immigrant food cultures in the United States, again touching on cultural codes and identity. Goody (1982) explored the determinants of 'development' in food practices

between different cultures: how does France come to have a 'cuisine' and other countries not? Of these studies, the work of Lévi-Strauss has provoked most comment (see Buxton 1994, Goody 1982, Garnsey 1999). His system is based on methods of cooking and the place they are considered to have within the thought and linguistic systems of the cultural order, in particular expressing the relationship between nature and culture in that order. While some of the categories of Lévi-Strauss can be shown to be too culturally specific and arbitrary to allow for general application, Greek culture has proved to be a very fruitful area for its application, since the Greeks integrated religious, mythical and cultural thought in particularly instructive ways. The work of Jean-Pierre Vernant and Marcel Detienne, for example, will inform this work, for example in the discussion in Chapter 3 of the festivals of the Thesmophoria and of Adonis.

Much of the evidence about food in the ancient world, as we have said, derives from written texts complemented with archaeological finds. Many important aspects of eating, however, are simply not attested and many questions can only be answered partially. One such area is the division of eating according to gender in Greek culture. If Greek men of status dined apart from women of status, where and how did women of status dine (if at all)? Did they not dine with friends? Did the genders dine together when only in a family group without strangers present? If they did so, did males and females eat the same food? Where textual or archaeological evidence is lacking, anthropological and comparative studies have a vital role to play in helping us to suggest answers.

The Foods and Drinks of the Ancient Diet

This section sets out an indicative picture of the ancient diet and then suggests how that might have been modified over time, and in particular according to place, since regional influences were strong.

The Hippocratic treatise *Regimen II*, which was written around 400 BC, offers a convenient and focused summary of the Greek diet at a comparatively early date. The main cereals were barley and wheat, the former normally made into 'cakes' and porridges, the latter, much rarer on the Greek mainland and islands, made into bread and other cereal products. Primitive wheats were also widespread, in particular emmer, einkorn and spelt. Oats too are mentioned, and millet. To

supplement cereals, there were beans and pulses (in particular fava and other beans), peas, chickpeas, lentils, vetches, linseed, sage, lupin seeds, hedge-mustard, cucumber seeds, sesame, safflower, beef, goats, pork, lamb, donkeys, dogs, wild boar, deer, hare, fox, hedgehog, doves, partridge, pigeon, cocks, turtledoves, geese, ducks and other waterfowl. Fish are mentioned from over twenty species, including cuttlefish, shellfish and crabs. There are eggs, cheese, water and wine, vinegar and honey. Vegetables and herbs listed are garlic, onion, leek, radish, cress, mustard, rocket, coriander, lettuce, anise, celery, basil, rue, asparagus, sage, night-shade, purslane, nettles, mint, sorrel, wild spinach, cabbage, beet, gourds, turnip, pennyroyal, marjoram, savoury, thyme, hyssop, wild vegetables. Fruits mentioned are: mulberries, pears (wild and cultivated), apples, quinces, service berries, cornel berries, pomegranate, gourds, grapes, figs, almonds, other nuts and acorns.

This summary is intended to be a working guide. It is distorted by the medical objectives of its author, particularly in the number of herbs mentioned. On the other hand, it is not a list drawn from myriad authors with no uniform indication of purpose. Such a list of foods drawn from a wide range of texts is available in Dalby (1996) and in particular in Dalby (2003), *Food in the Ancient World from A to Z*. Dalby indicates all known foods, at least those for which terms were written down. It is not always possible to give an indication of date, location and context. Thus, for example, pepper is mentioned in a fragment (274) of the comic poet Antiphanes. The quotation comes from a lost play written in the fourth century BC, and concerns hostility towards someone seen taking pepper home. We do not know how often pepper was used or in which cities, only that the name was mentioned. It would be reasonable to conclude that pepper was reasonably well known in Athens, if a comic poet mentioned it in front of an audience of 15,000 fellow citizens. This source might indicate wider use than mention by a Hippocratic doctor alone. The term 'pepper', at the very least, had registered in the Greek mind. As Dalby makes clear, many foods arrived in Greece and Rome at different times over a period of some millennia, and were slowly assimilated into the diet. It is often not possible to be certain when any particular food became widespread. To return to pepper, however, we may note that in the 'de re coquinaria', the cookery book of Apicius, which was probably compiled in the fourth century AD, it is to be found in a majority of the recipes.

What are the important foods omitted from this summary list? We might have expected silphium, a powerful and characteristic flavour (see below) and a drug at the same time. We might have expected

more birds and fish. But, herbs apart, the list appears to give a reasonable summary as it stands. Galen's list, in *On the Powers of Foods*, includes more items but none radically new, other than such items as peaches and apricots, which may have been brought from the East in the first century BC. In other words, new foods in the Roman period were not all that numerous. It is, however, likely that foods imported from Asia became more plentiful – such as pepper and other strong flavours with pharmacological applications – during the Hellenistic and Roman period.

Medicine was often the spur for the import of new products, rather than their pleasure-inducing tastes. When the tomato and chocolate were introduced into early modern Europe, they did not immediately appeal to the palate, but had desirable medical applications, including use as aphrodisiacs. Silphium was thus both medicine and essential flavour. So too the indigenous garlic and onion. Pepper, possibly an essential taste later in the Roman empire, was first and foremost a medicine, and one of a class particularly sought after in Hellenistic courts, namely as antidote to poison. This quality in pepper was noted as early as Theophrastus, who says that there are two kinds of pepper, both of which are heating and counteract hemlock (9.20.1 and Athenaeus 2.66e). Athenaeus' discussion seems to embrace both flavour and medicine. The court of Mithridates in the kingdom of Pontus perhaps contributed to the luxury of Rome; but it also promoted the use of antidotes against poison. Mushrooms, on the other hand, are as often cited as a poison as a food.

This brief review of foods aims to be indicative rather than comprehensive. The important question to ask is what are the status and position of the person classifying the food? Doctors were likely to find pharmacological uses for many foods that were not otherwise palatable, such as bitter vetch (normally a cattle food), puppy or camel. Hippocratic authors mention all of these. Vegetables played a large part in the diet of the poor. Wealthy people often scorned them, unless they were aiming at the simple life. But for the ascetic philosopher and the doctor, vegetables had many virtues, as Galen shows in the second book of his *On the Powers of Foods*.

Above all, certain criteria are crucial. First, location. A camel is a frequent sight in Egypt or Mesopotamia but not in Greece. Then geography and climate. Then season. Some people had to live or chose to live by season, others could ignore season, certainly as far as food shortages were concerned. Few could obliterate seasonality outside paradises such as that of the Homeric Phaeacians and Cyclopes and of

literary utopias (for which see Chapter 9). The closest to achieving this seems to be the Ptolemaic festival in the Nile valley, for which see Chapter 3.

Greek culture and Roman culture

This book surveys a millennium of food consumption in Greek culture and some six hundred years of Roman culture, together with brief consideration of certain other cultures, including Persian, Egyptian and Celtic. A word is needed on the composite structure of 'Greco-Roman' culture. Greek culture was highly distinctive and cooking played a central, defining role within it that may allow the Greeks to claim a place among the great food cultures of the world (see below). This book begins with the poems of Homer which are conventionally dated to the eighth century BC. The Romans, with whom we engage from the third century BC onwards, conceived of themselves as in some ways very different from the Greeks. We consider in Chapter 7 their self-characterization as originally simple farming folk untainted by foreign influence and the luxury trade. There is plentiful evidence, however, that the Romans engaged with the Greeks and with Greek-influenced Italic peoples from the sixth century and even earlier. Furthermore, the Greeks had established cities on the Italian peninsula from the eighth century BC onwards. This helps to collapse the distinction between Greek and Roman, and the distinction is further blurred after Roman expansion annexed Greece in the second century BC and ruled Italy and Greece as a vast Mediterranean empire for the next four centuries of our period. Greeks, then, were not confined to Greece – the greatest culinary advances normally did not come from the Greek mainland at all – nor the Romans to Italy. Once Roman imperialism had transformed itself from Republican to autocratic government by an emperor, it was the Roman – in effect the Greco-Roman – Empire which had become in Andrew Dalby's phrase the 'empire of pleasures'. To help bring all this together, this book draws on the four encyclopaedic works of synthesis by Pliny, Plutarch, Galen and Athenaeus.

What is distinctive about food in Greco-Roman culture?

While a study of Greek and Roman food as a distinctive cultural system is desirable in its own right, a stronger claim for this system can perhaps be made. Greek culture, together with its close Roman relative, is a

cultural system into which food is built to an unusual extent, which bears comparison with the great food cultures of China and India. As well as reflecting the patterns of production, distribution and social structure, food also lay at the heart of the medical system developed by the Hippocratic doctors of the fifth and fourth centuries BC. The liquids of life (the humours) of the plant and animal world were closely related to those that governed the human body and were as subject to seasonal and climatic factors. One Hippocratic treatise, *Regimen I*, even placed human beings within a cosmic order based on fire and water. A further Hippocratic theory imagined the process of digestion as the cooking of nutriment with bodily heat. Cooking the food before eating was simply part of the civilized way to assimilate food for human absorption. For many ancient authors, human beings were animals, but a race of animals apart. A different rationale governed the religious system, but here too food – both animal and non-animal – remained at the heart of exchanges between gods and mortals. The lesser being, the human, offered the higher being, the god, the life of the animal or plant that was being sacrificed. The religious order combined mythical thought with the ritual activities of festival and worship, and it also integrated the individual into the community.

A further distinctive feature of Greco-Roman culture is an extensive literary production – both oral and written – which reflects food and its multiple associations in many of its genres. This production even includes cookery books, which many cultures do not produce. These were produced by 400 BC, within half a century of the earliest medical treatises. As far as other literature is concerned, food plays a powerful role in Homer, the earliest literary text known to us. Later, some literary genres, such as tragedy and comedy, were linked with festivals, where sacrifice and consumption on stage reflected in coded forms appropriate to each genre what actors and audience had been doing in the ceremonies preceding the drama. Other genres were linked to ceremonial drinking (or symposia), including much early poetry and, in a paradoxical way, quite a lot of philosophy. Roman satire, too, found food and dining a particularly vivid medium for its invective against all the social evils it claimed to detect. Then there was the technical literature, of farming manuals, medical treatises on nutrition and pharmacology, the cookery books already mentioned, zoological and botanical works, and strange mixed works such as the cookery poem of Archestratus (fourth century BC) and the fishing poem of Oppian (second century AD).

Regional foods

Regional considerations are of particular importance for this study. Many examples will be found in Chapters 4 and 5. First of all, such differences highlight the diversity in time and space of the area under investigation. There was the greatest difference between major centres – the large cities of Rome, Alexandria and (on a smaller scale) Athens – and all other places. There were also differences between east and west, between mountain and plain, as we shall see in ancient and modern accounts of Italy (p. 122). There was diversity too between places very close together: the microclimates of Greece favoured different cereals and other crops in different places. The medical botanist Dioscorides insists the doctor inspect each plant in its place, because location is decisive. The comic poet Eubulus lists special plants from special cities (fragment 18): ‘Cypriot mustard and scammony sap, Milesian cress, Samothracian garlic, silphium stem and silphium from Carthage and Hymettian thyme, oregano from Tenedos’ (trans. Dalby). At sea, *The Life of Luxury* of Archestratus guides readers to the best fish to be found in particular cities. For example, fragment 35.5–7 advises, ‘it is good in Byzantion and in Karystos, but Kephaloïdis on the famous island of the Sikels raises tuna that are much better than these’ (trans. Olson and Sens). Dalby’s *Empire of Pleasures* (2000) studies just these regional connections with food and drink, which pervade ancient texts.

Regional considerations also help us to see the ancient Mediterranean in terms similar to those of the modern world. Just as modern Italy is intensely regional, so was its ancient counterpart. No sources bring out these differences better than our encyclopaedic sources Pliny, Galen and Athenaeus. Pliny reveals the excellence of regions of Italy; Galen distinguishes cereals in regions of Asia Minor; Athenaeus distinguishes Greek cities in Greece and Asia Minor. Particular claims are made for Sparta, Crete, Thessaly, Boeotia and many other regions. Social systems influence agricultural produce and consumption: see Chapter 2 on Sparta and Athens.

Athens is our first location – a city state with some fertile plains, such as the grain-producing area of Eleusis, many rocky hillsides, and much land suitable for vines, olives and woodland products such as charcoal. With a large urban centre, the city state did not find it easy to be self-sufficient and so imported heavily. This gave access, particularly during the Athenian imperial period of the fifth and to a lesser

extent the fourth centuries BC, to all sorts of imports which are celebrated by comic authors, and also by Xenophon (*Poroi* 1) and Pericles in Thucydides' account (2.38). Accounts of eating set a certain pattern to Athenian eating. There were possibilities of over-indulgent eating, especially of fish (Davidson 1997, Wilkins 2000). There were pressures too for simplicity and restraint, as discussed above. Athenaeus (4.131f–132f) brings out an Athenian style of eating, with many small dishes like a modern Indian meal. (His sources are comic and so may be misleading.) Festivals reflected in religious ritual certain ideological attitudes. These festivals, of which Athens had a great many, possibly allowed the Athenians to eat more beef and other meats than some other Greeks. Festivals, too, celebrated her imperial strength and caused goods to be brought to Athens, which could be reflected in the comedies put on at the festivals of Dionysus. To judge from the comic evidence, Athenian audiences appear to have revelled in the portrait of their war-torn neighbours the Megarians as starving and now in need of what they normally exported, namely salt and garlic. By the same account, Boeotians were dim witted and prepared to sell rich agricultural produce and eels at a loss (Aristophanes, *Acharnians*). Athens emphasized her simplicity in particular at the central hearth of the polis, in the prytaneion, where, again according to a comic source, Chionides fragment 7, barley pastry and olives reminded everyone of the simple foods of early Athens. This self-presentation shares much with Rome in a later period. An instructive comparison could be made with a polis that was far from the sea and in a mountainous area. In the latter, there would be a possibility of milk-drinking, even beer-drinking, and less likelihood of fish-eating and of foods imported from abroad. It is important to consider these, if only as theoretical possibilities. We hear less about them, because, of course, the major cities were centres not only of more diverse eating but also of the production and dissemination of texts. See further Chapters 4 and 5.

Consideration of the mountainous areas of Greece and Italy (let alone Asia Minor in the Roman period) can lead us to ask whether the inhabitants of these less populated areas shared certain foods with non-Greek peoples. Herodotus vividly brings out different eating practices in descriptions of the Persians, Egyptians, and the pastoral Scythians and Libyans in books 1, 2 and 4. This focus on contrast masks similarities, which a regional perspective helps to bring out. Consumption of wheat or olive oil, for example, is as much determined by geographical considerations in the Mediterranean as by cultural

practices. Those who lived away from the classical centres of the world may have been more likely to drink milk, eat butter, grow different cereals and even sacrifice slightly differently from city people. In other words, to lead a life that was not based on olive oil and wine to supplement the cereal staple. If there were similarities between pastoralists in Italy and Greece and those on the fringes of the Greco-Roman world, there were also two further similarities with 'barbarian' peoples. The first is the diversity of Greek and Roman cities as they came into contact in their hundreds with other peoples and other ways of life. Thus, even though the Greeks did not sacrifice fish, Athenaeus was able to find some surprising cases of such a practice. And many surprising practices are brought to light in his vast survey of Greco-Roman culture, as Greeks and Romans came into contact with native peoples around the Mediterranean. The second feature, present on a vast scale in imperial Rome as in many Greek cities, was a taste for luxury and excess. This pleasure-seeking often appears in Classical texts as a vice of the barbarians which all too often found its way into Greco-Roman culture. See the discussion in Chapter 7 of Rome's early image of herself as a culture which knew nothing of maritime trade and fish, and of Pliny's recoiling in horror from a discussion of shellfish which he found to be wickedly sensual. Such luxury seems to have flourished in certain Greek settlements, deriving in particular from good agricultural production. It flourished in Rome because the centre of a world empire could draw wealth to itself. Some of this supposed luxurious living, such as in the cities of the Ionian coast of Asia Minor, was influenced by Persian and other eastern cultures. Other examples, particularly in Sicily and southern Italy as far north as the Bay of Naples, seem to have grown within Greek culture. The cities of Sybaris and Croton are early examples.

Within the Greek world and Roman world, therefore, we should expect, and will find, much variation, which is brought out in many different ways.

Other cultures

We have referred on a number of occasions to particular practices or ingredients that are linked with specific places. But we have also seen that influence of one place on another and the movement of foods and technology from one place to another are also important. There was much movement for trade and military and political purposes around the Mediterranean, which brought extensive dissemination of

goods and techniques. Thus it is very difficult to speak of the Greeks and Romans as being confined in the Greek mainland and in Rome and Latium respectively. From a very early period, southern Italy was colonized by Greeks, and by the time of Augustus, Roman influence on Asia Minor was considerable. Consequently, comments on whether 'barbarian' drinks were consumed in Asia Minor at the time of Aeschylus in the early 5th century BC would have to be posed in a rather different form in the first century AD. Greeks and Romans had a notion of the Mediterranean as their sea, with their spheres of influence surrounded by peoples who were different, the meat-eating Celts of northern Europe, and the nomadic peoples of the north Sahara and the Russian steppes. But there were also cultures which controlled parts of the Eastern Mediterranean before they did; the Persians and Egyptians, among others. These were people who were not Greek, but presented a different form of non-Greekness from the Celts. It was possible to describe the Persians and Egyptians as luxurious and decadent, topics which I explore in Chapter 7, but a stereotypical description of that kind fails to do full justice to these complex neighbours, with whom many Greek communities were on very close terms.

Egypt was always a special case in the Mediterranean because of the unique contribution of the Nile to agriculture, and the unusual wealth that the Nile brought. Egypt was thus an important case study for Herodotus in the fifth century BC, and the site for the Greco-Egyptian culture of the Ptolemies in the Hellenistic period. It was also an important point of reference for our summarizing authors, Galen and Athenaeus (the latter an Egyptian Greek himself, from Naucratis), in the second and third centuries AD.

Persia too was the subject of much comment on food and culture. The Great King sat at the apex of an elaborate hierarchy that distributed food and other resources from the centre. Some Greek authors described this system as 'luxury'. But it also reflects a different religious system, and attempts were made to describe it in terms that were not prejudicial. The Great King expressed his pre-eminence through the distribution and consumption of meat, through hierarchical mealtimes, and by stimulating innovation. Heraclides of Cumae, author of *ta Persika*, or *An Account of Persia*, which he wrote in the fourth century BC, describes royal meals:

Of those who are invited to dine with the king, some dine outdoors, in full sight of anyone who wishes to look on; others dine indoors in the king's company. Yet even these do not eat in his presence, for there are

two rooms opposite each other, in one of which the king has his meal, in the other the invited guests. The king can see them through the curtain at the door, but they cannot see him. Sometimes, however, on the occasion of a public holiday, all dine in a single room with the king, in the great hall. And whenever the king commands a symposium (which he does often), he has about a dozen companions at his drinking. When they have finished dinner, that is the king by himself, the guests in the other room, these fellow-drinkers are summoned by one of the eunuchs; and entering they drink with him, though even they do not have the same wine; moreover, they sit on the floor, while he reclines on a couch supported by feet of gold; and they depart after having drunk to excess. In most cases the king breakfasts and dines alone, but sometimes his wife and some of his sons dine with him. And throughout the dinner his concubines sing and play the lyre; one of them is the soloist, the others sing in chorus. (trans. Gulick)

Heraclides proceeds next to describe the meal itself, the king's *deipnon*.

The 'king's dinner,' as it is called, will appear prodigal to one who merely hears about it, but when one examines it carefully it will be found to have been got up with economy and even with parsimony; and the same is true of the dinners among other Persians in high station. For one thousand animals are slaughtered daily for the king; these comprise horses, camels, oxen, asses, deer, and most of the smaller animals; many birds also are consumed, including Arabian ostriches – and the creature is large – geese, and cocks. And of all these only moderate portions are served to each of the king's guests, and each of them may carry home whatever he leaves untouched at the meal. But the greater part of these meats and other foods are taken out into the courtyard for the bodyguard and the light-armed troopers maintained by the king; there they divide all the half-eaten remnants of meat and bread and share them in equal portions. Just as hired soldiers in Greece receive their wages in money, so these men receive food from the king in requital for services. Similarly among other Persians of high rank, all the food is served on the table at one and the same time; but when their guests have done eating, whatever is left from the table, consisting chiefly of meat and bread, is given by the officer in charge of the table to each of the slaves; this they take and so obtain their daily food. Hence the most highly honoured of the king's guests go to court only for breakfast; for they beg to be excused in order that they may not be required to go twice; but may be able to return to their own guests. (trans. Gulick)

These extracts from Heraclides are preserved by Athenaeus (*Deipnosophistae* 4.145a–146a), who tries to calculate the comparative cost of this system against the expenses of Alexander the Great – an important but unsuccessful attempt. Athenaeus also considers Herodotus’ comparison between the Greeks and Persians, and Xenophon’s valuable comparison with Greek tyrants and the discourse of pleasure, which we consider in Chapters 2 and 7. Athenaeus also adds innovation in recipes and the broader influence on Antony and Cleopatra. This is a very valuable consideration – it is too fragmentary to be called a study – of the transfer of royal dining from Persia to Rome, by way of the Greek tyrants and Hellenistic kings. For a discussion of dining and distribution in Persia see Briant 1996: 297–309.

Cultural development?

The magnificence of the Persian court predates much of the period we are considering in this study. By the end of our study, the imperial court of Rome had access to even more wealth than the Persian king. Can we talk of the ‘development’ of ‘gastronomy’ in the Greco-Roman world in this period?

Broadly speaking, regional products and social rituals were tied to agriculture and climate and were not subject to rapid innovation, though there might be changes over time in products grown or political and social systems. Change in styles of eating and products available more often came from outside. Thus consumers in Rome benefited from new fruits such as cherries, peaches and apricots that came to the city as the empire extended its influence in Asia Minor. New birds and fish seem to have become available. At an earlier period, as we shall see in Chapter 2, the practice of reclining rather than sitting at meals was introduced into the Greek and Italic worlds from the Near East. There were other developments in food and eating that we will explore. Is it possible to declare therefore, that at the end of the period covered by this book, people ate in a more advanced way than they had at the beginning? As we shall see below, the Greeks certainly believed in cultural developments of this kind, at least as expressed through the medium of ideology and myth. We can be reasonably sure that the majority of the population in general did not enjoy any such development, and that for the rural poor, food shortages were as endemic in the second century AD as in earlier centuries. Galen attests eloquently to this truth. Among the privileged elites, there were developments,

but they do not appear to have been sustained throughout the period. Here I review briefly two cultural phenomena, the cook and the cookery book – and their implications for cultural development.

Cooks, by their nature, are ambiguous figures. The Greek word for ‘cook’, *mageiros*, covers roughly the modern trades of cook and butcher, and in addition the role of cutting the animal’s throat in sacrifice. They were artisans who on the one hand performed arduous and dirty work, the slaughter and butchering of animals, the cooking of meat and other foods in smoky and greasy conditions, and on the other were linked with meat which carried status and high religious regard. In the ancient world, they might be camp followers or slaves, or skilled artisans for hire. In contemporary Britain, they might stand at the barbeque; they might also be one of our great restaurant chefs. Because of this ambiguity, they are to be found in a number of different settings. Inscriptions record them making sacrifices at certain religious gatherings (Berthiaume 1982). They are also found in the retinues of powerful rulers. The King of Persia and his generals had cooks on their staff. Herodotus makes a telling contrast between Persian and Spartan practice (9.82):

when Pausanias saw [the tent of Xerxes], with its embroidered hangings and gorgeous decorations in silver and gold, he summoned Mardonius’ bakers and cooks and told them to prepare a meal of the same sort as they were accustomed to prepare for their former master. The order was obeyed; and when Pausanias saw gold and silver couches all beautifully draped, and gold and silver tables, and everything prepared for the feast with great magnificence, he could hardly believe his eyes for the good things set before him, and just for a joke, ordered his own servants to get ready an ordinary Spartan dinner. (trans. de Selincourt)

In parallel with this, according to Xenophon, novelties were offered to the Persian king: ‘for the Persian <king>, they travel round the whole country seeking out what he might drink with pleasure, and myriad people devise dishes that he might eat with pleasure’ (*Agesilaus* 9.3). The king is thus attended by cooks in his royal palace, and when he was on the move, whether with his army or not. The Persians had meals that were distinctive from the Greeks, as Herodotus makes clear (see above).

Whether this constitutes a ‘cuisine’ is difficult to say, but the retinue of cooks certainly helped to express the supreme power of the king. When the Greeks discovered the possibilities of cooks, did they eat

more 'royally' or use more of them? There is no clear evidence that they did, though there is much comic comment on cooks introducing 'luxury' into private households.

A stronger case for a court cuisine can probably be made for the Greeks of Sicily. Cooks from the courts of tyrants there are attested in Xenophon, Plato and a Hippocratic text (see Chapter 2). Cooks begin to appear in Athenian comic texts of the fourth century BC. Does this reflect significant competition among the Athenian elite to display the latest and the best in modern cooking? The evidence does not really allow us to go that far.

A speaker in Athenaeus claims (14.659a) that cooks were normally free men before the Macedonian period, after which they were slaves. The Macedonians certainly used cooks at court, and in their turn exported them to Rome in the second century BC, along with all the other luxuries that Cato and Polybius complained about in the wake of the conquest of Macedonia and Greece. Cooks and bakers were these alien influences, as they had been in the tent of Mardonius. In Rome, cooks appear to be slaves. They certainly are in Athenaeus' *Deipnosophistae* and in Petronius' dinner of Trimalchio, where they appear to be skilled slaves attached to the household.

The connection between cooks and cookery books is interesting. The books instruct, and assume the requisite skills are in place. Mithaecus, Archestratus and Apicius concern themselves with cooking skills, but also have other interests, as we shall see. But when considering the development of cooking in the Greco-Roman world it is difficult to see the development of a cuisine in a systematic way. Too little of Mithaecus survives to allow us to judge his style of cooking. Archestratus rejects complex flavours and promotes the cooking of the freshest fish with simplicity and sophistication. Nothing could be further from the heavy spicing of Apicius who uses multiple flavours that derive from both imported and local plants. What survives of these works and such writers as Paxamus is too scarce and too diverse to allow us to describe developments in gastronomy. The Greeks do not clearly inherit significant features from Persia and Egypt, which they then pass on to the Romans. Rather, Rome seems to adapt Greek ways with enthusiasm in this area as in so many others, and then adapts it to its own political system. Meals in Rome are expected to be lavish and to reflect produce from all over the empire, as it had for the Persian king. Food was also important for display. It should be on a lavish scale, or should perform, as a shield of Minerva (Suetonius, *Vitellius*) or a hunted boar (Petronius,

Dinnes of Trimalchio). But there is no apparent interest in essences or delicacy of flavour, as there had been for Archestratus. The imperial court at Rome would appear to have everything necessary for a great cuisine – apart from the interest in discernment in food. Grandeur and display seem to have taken the place of sophistication and refinement – as far as we can tell.

Mythical Accounts of Cultural Development

We have considered ambiguous evidence for the development of cooking in Greece during the period. Whatever the actual practice, the Greeks and Romans certainly believed that cooking was closely linked with culture and the development of civilization. Food in this system seems to bear comparison with the other great food systems of the world, for example those of India and China which build ideas about food and a medical system around man's place in the universe.

Greek culture, and (with modifications) Roman culture, built food into its view of the world. At a comparatively early stage, accounts of cultural development showed how mankind had declined from a golden age where food was automatically available; an alternative model showed how mankind had progressed from a primitive, bestial, base to a sophisticated cultural life. I give some examples below. At an early stage too, myths were developed which accounted for the arrival of certain important foods in Greece and Italy. These foods arrived with the help of gods and culture-heroes. These, too, I explore below. Particularly important were the myths which defined the relationship between human beings and animals, the myths of Heracles the bringer of cattle to the classical world and of Prometheus, who established the complex system of animal sacrifice to the gods. Cooking was at the heart of these myths of development. It was at the heart of the medical system, too. As a theory of digestion was developed by Hippocrates and others, the model adopted seems to have been a process of cooking of the food within the body, which was tied to the body's own heat and was a way of breaking down food into nourishment of the blood and other tissues. So too in philosophy, Plato in his *Timaeus* builds the nourishment of the body into his account of the creation of the cosmos and the human form (see Chapter 7).

The Greeks and Romans gave a number of different accounts of human progress, from primitivism or the Garden of Eden to divine intervention. Examples to be given here are Hesiod's version of the

myth of Prometheus, the early *Hymn to Demeter*, and a later mythical account of the arrival of the wine god Dionysus in Greece. Beside these mythical accounts of how gods brought civilization we will place a scientific account from a Hippocratic author and a moralizing account from Ovid. Moralizing reflections on eating and drinking were ubiquitous in antiquity and need to be identified for what they are.

First, Hesiod's version of the myth of Prometheus, which is a Greek version of the Garden of Eden story in Genesis. Men had hitherto eaten with the gods and had no concerns about heat or food provision. Then a dispute arose between the Titan Prometheus and the Olympian Zeus. Prometheus divided up an ox into different, unequal portions. Zeus chose the portion of thigh bones wrapped up in fat, leaving for the human beings the meat wrapped inside the great stomach of the ox, like a giant haggis. Zeus was angry and in retaliation removed fire from man. Prometheus, concerned for fragile man with no fire, stole back Zeus' fire and gave it to man in a fennel stalk. Zeus retaliated by instructing the gods to create the first woman, Pandora. Furthermore, both man and woman have to work in the fields because Zeus has concealed the means of life in the soil. Humanity now has to farm the land. There are various complicated details, but the great interpretation of Jean-Pierre Vernant (1989) emphasizes certain elements. This is a negative myth in Hesiod's telling (farming is hard and women are extremely suspect), and there is clearly established bad feeling between gods and humans, based on the concealment of vital things, in particular the means of life. Food can now only be wrested from a reluctant earth through agricultural production. Zeus was angry with the Titan Prometheus, but human beings were punished in the dispute between these gods. Human beings remember their subservience to gods by performing animal sacrifice whenever they eat meat.

But it is also a rich cultural myth. Humanity now has fire, cooking, sacrifice, technology; it has agriculture; it has marriage. Sacrifice in future depends on equal parts for all, which are cooked. Cooking is at the centre of the cultural system. The animal, which must be a domesticated animal, the product of agriculture, is carefully cut up, with the parts most associated with life, the marrow in the thigh bones and the vital organs, being roasted in sacrifice to the gods. The mortal flesh and entrails are boiled for human consumption. Hesiod presents the myth of Prometheus in both his *Theogony* (*Generations of the Gods*) and his agricultural poem *Works and Days*. The myth is thus early (Hesiod is thought to have written the poems in the eighth century BC). It also lies at the heart of Hesiod's accounts of the gods and of

farming. Vernant's analysis of the myth demonstrates its power as a culture myth, and this power was felt in later centuries. Homer appears to share the same basic presentation of sacrifice as Hesiod, though he has a number of variations in detail. That sacrifice is based on the killing of the domesticated animals of agriculture is made clear in *Odyssey* 12. Homer describes how the cattle of the Sun god were not domesticated and could not be sacrificed in the normal way. The companions of Odysseus, driven by hunger, ignore this command and begin the sacrifice:

'and because they had no barley-meal in the ship, they plucked instead the fresh tender leaves of a tall oak. Prayer over, they slaughtered and flayed the cows, cut out the thigh-bones and covered them with a double fold of fat, then laid the raw meat above. They had no wine to make libation over the burning sacrifice, but instead poured water as they set to roasting the inward parts. When the thigh-bones were quite consumed and the entrails tasted, they sliced and spitted the rest . . . Then the gods began to show signs and wonders to my crew. The beasts' hides began to move; the flesh on the spits, raw or roasted, began to bellow; and there was a noise like the noise of cattle.'

The sacrifice did not work because the companions of Odysseus used natural products, oak leaves and water, in the place of the correct agricultural products – barley grains and wine – as Homer points out. They also used divine rather than agricultural cattle. (Vidal-Naquet 1981)

The Promethean myth gives an account of human relations with the gods and an 'explanation' or 'origin' for the Greek form of sacrifice. Three other myths 'explain' how the Greeks came to have cattle, grain and wine, and the explanation centres on a divine culture hero like Prometheus. The dispute between Zeus and Prometheus was thought to happen at Mekone, a place in the Peloponnese. The other myths that follow emphasize movement, the bringing of foods into the Mediterranean world.

Cattle were first brought to Greece by the demi-god and culture hero Heracles. As one of his labours he was set the task of stealing the cattle of the triple-headed monster Geryon, who lived on an island in the Atlantic. Heracles managed to perform this task, ferrying the cattle to the Spanish mainland in a giant drinking-cup. He then drove the cattle through southern France, round the Italian and Sicilian coastline, through the Balkans to Greece, stopping at many places on the way to

sacrifice one of the animals. At each of these places of sacrifice, an altar was set up, which later formed the basis of a settlement. The most spectacular of these many sites was Rome, where the altar in question was the Ara Maxima or great altar in the 'Cattle Forum'. Nearby, Heracles killed the monstrous Cacus who lived in a cave and tried to steal the cattle. As with all the myths now under consideration, the myth of Heracles and the cattle of Geryon shows how a vital food came to Greece from elsewhere. As too in the other cases, the journey and arrival of the new food was linked with cult and festival. There was no separation of myth and religion (Burkert 1979).

Grain was brought to Greece by Demeter and her consort Triptolemus. Sophocles is known to have written a play entitled *Triptolemus* which seems to have shown the progress of the culture hero through Asia Minor. Only odd words of the play survive, mostly noted by Athenaeus, and they refer to various foodstuffs, some cereal based, such as rice and beer, some not, such as *garum* (fermented fish sauce). Once cultivated cereals were established in Greece, the Greeks honoured Triptolemus, Demeter and her daughter Persephone at a number of cult centres, the most important of which was at Eleusis. Here the goddess received the first fruits of the harvest. A mystery cult developed, which somehow linked the life of the corn with the life of the human being. A kind of afterlife was on offer to those initiated. The myth of the rape (or abduction) of Persephone was told in an early poem, the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*. This sets out the relationship between the life and 'death' of Persephone, the growing of corn, and human dependence on the goddesses: when Demeter mourns, famine strikes the population (Foley 1993). The myth of Demeter was also linked to a major festival in Athens and many other towns, the Thesmophoria, which is discussed in Chapter 3. It is clear that with the grain Demeter brought other social benefits, the *thesmoi* or ordinances by which men live, and also the patronage of conception and some control over life and death.

A similar extensive power is seen in our third myth concerning food, wine and Dionysus the god of the vine. In the prologue to Euripides' play *The Bacchae*, the god tells us that he has journeyed through Asia bringing the technology of wine with him. He comes to Thebes, his birthplace, where he punishes the royal family for not accepting his divinity. Other versions of the myth recount the arrival of the god in Attica. Icarius accepted the god's wine, but when he gave it to fellow villagers, they fell down drunk. Suspecting magic, they killed Icarius.

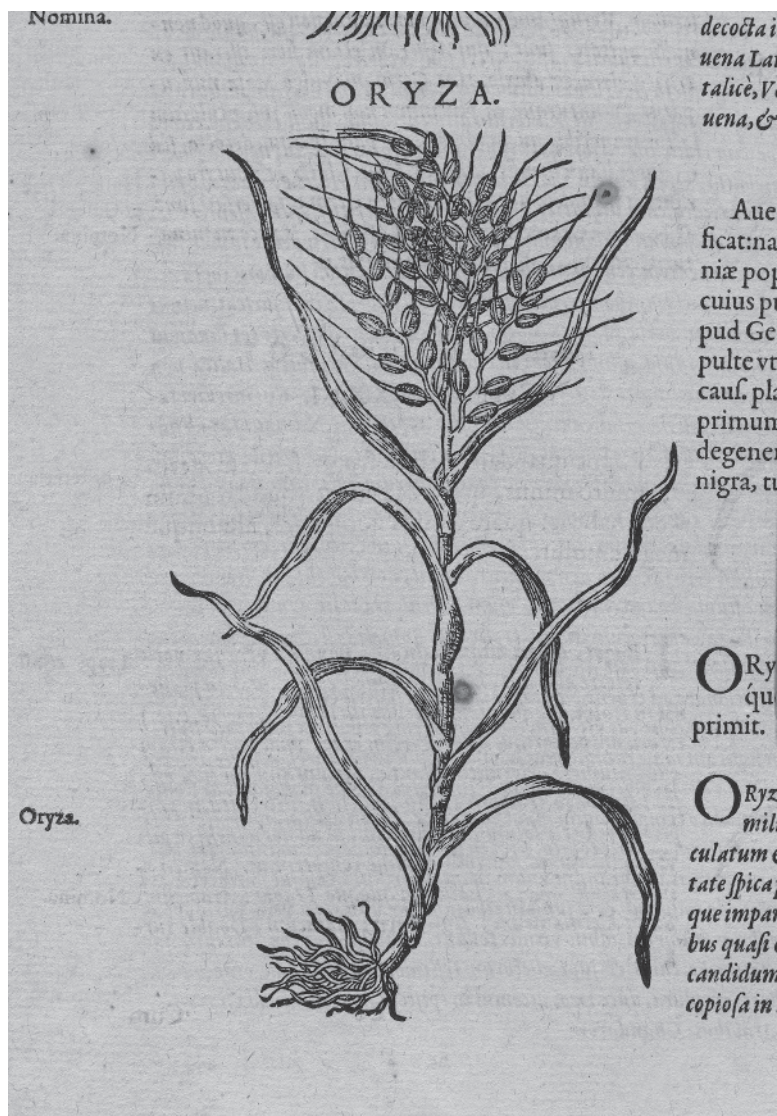


FIGURE 1.3 Rice is a cereal that now belongs to the Mediterranean (for example in Spain and Italy) but in antiquity was seen as an Asian rarity. Nevertheless, it made its way into the pharmacopaea of Dioscorides and Galen, and was even mentioned in Sophocles' tragedy, *Triptolemus*, which was named after the consort of Demeter, goddess of grain. Reproduced by permission of the Dean and Chapter of Exeter Cathedral

His daughter Erigone hanged herself. Death was linked with the drinking of wine; indeed Dionysus was a god of the underworld as well as of the vine. The ambivalent festivals associated with Dionysus are discussed further in Chapter 6. For the present, we note the arrival of wine-making from outside.

These arrivals from elsewhere, cattle, cereals and wine, were fundamental to Greek and Roman culture. But their functions were not the same. Cereals formed the staple food. Animals, especially cattle, held a high status but were eaten comparatively infrequently, by the majority of the population, at least. Wine was a staple drink, but, being inherently destabilizing, had to be treated with respect.

These accounts of the development of civilization and of the arrival of staple foods establish certain basic principles. Food is wrested from the earth only with much agricultural labour. Success is difficult without divine help, but that help is grudgingly given, and only on tough terms. Foods imported into Greece and Italy are a feature not only of trade in the historical period, but also of myth from the earliest times. Developments in food and culture bring benefits and problems. The latter, of course, are inevitable if the pattern of thought of Hesiod's myth of Prometheus prevails, namely that human beings lived in harmony with the gods before that fatal meal.

Scientific and poetic accounts of human development

Hippocrates in *Ancient Medicine* gives a valuable account of the development of medicine (3):

'the art of medicine would not have been discovered in the first place, nor would there have been any research – for it would not have been needed – if for those people who were sick, the same regime and diet was suitable as the food, drink and regime of those in good health, and there were not better options than these. But as it is, necessity herself has forced men to research and discover the art of medicine, because sick people did not benefit from the same food as those in health, nor do they benefit now. From a still longer perspective, I do not think that the diet now in use for those in health would have been discovered if it sufficed for men to eat and drink the same things as the cow, the horse and all animals except man, such as the plants of the earth, fruits, wood and fodder. For they get nourishment from these and grow and lead a life without pain, having no need of any other regime. Now I think that originally men lived on a food of this kind. The way we live now has

been discovered and fashioned, developing, it seems to me over a long period. How many and terrible things they suffered from this strong and bestial regime eating raw and unmixed foods with great powers. People would now suffer similar things from these foods, and would fall into strong pain and disease, and would swiftly die. It is likely that they then suffered less from these because they were used to them, but they were violent at that time too. It is reasonable to suppose that most of them died, in particular those with a weaker constitution, while the stronger held out for a longer time. So now, some deal easily with strong foods, and others with great pains and misfortunes. For this reason, indeed, the ancients seem to me to have sought out a food that fitted their nature and to have discovered the food we now have. So from wheat they soaked the grain, winnowed it, ground it, sifted it, kneaded it and baked it, to end up with bread, and from barley they made barley cake. They went through many other procedures with them and boiled, baked and mixed, mingling strong and unmingled with weak, moulding everything to human nature and power.

The Hippocratic author follows a model of progress, basing the advance of medical science on the necessary improvement of the human race as it separated itself in diet from its animal neighbours. This is the reverse model to the decline from the golden age set out by Hesiod and others, for whom work and skills are the necessary evils forced on humanity when Zeus imposed want and powerlessness on them.

With this account of the development of civilization we may compare the comic version given in a late play, fragment 1 of the *Samothracians* of Athenion. There a cook claims that his profession has moved humanity forward from cannibalism to civilized living and good conduct: 'Because of the pleasures I've been speaking of, each person desisted from eating a corpse. They saw fit to live with each other, the people gathered, and cities wen-inhabited – all because of the cook's art, as I say' (lines 34–38, quoted by Athenaeus 14.661c).

The reverse model to that set out by the Hippocratic author is regularly found in Roman poetry. This follows Hesiod's pattern of decline from a golden age. Striking versions are seen in Ovid *Metamorphoses* I and Lucretius *On the Nature of Things* V.

The earth itself, without compulsion, untouched by the hoe, unfurrowed by any share, produced all things spontaneously, and men were content with foods that grew without cultivation. They gathered arbut berries and mountain strawberries, wild cherries and blackberries that cling to thorny bramble bushes; or acorns fallen from Jupiter's spreading oak. . . .

In time the earth, though untilled, produced corn too, and fields that never lay fallow whitened with heavy ears of corn. Then there flowed rivers of milk and rivers of nectar, and golden honey dripped from the green holm-oak. (Ovid 1. trans. Innes)

Lucretius, writing a poetic cosmology according to the teaching of Epicurus, describes (*On the Nature of the Universe* 5) early human beings roaming like wild animals and living from fruits and berries, with water from rivers and no knowledge of fire.

These are myths of civilization, as the Greeks and Roman conceived it. The myths are not entirely dissonant from some aspects of current scientific accounts. The hunter-gatherers of early human societies are still to be found in Ovid and Lucretius, while the possible movement of agricultural technologies to the Mediterranean from the Near East appears to find expression in the myths of Dionysus and Triptolemus.

The Greeks and Romans were different from other peoples in the Mediterranean, and marked themselves as different with their foods, their relationship to animals and the land, and in their development of the polis or independent city state. The advance to this level of civilization could be celebrated, as in a famous fragment from the *Basket Bearers* of the comic poet Hermippus (63), which imagines Dionysus as a ship's captain bringing all good things to Athens for a dinner and symposium (quoted p. 274 Wilkins 2000, ch. 4). Or arrivals by sea can be presented as a problem. The sea brings dangerous things from outside and threatens the purity of the indigenous people. This is very much the view of Pliny (9.53 and elsewhere), as he surveyed the state of Roman civilization in the first century AD.

What to conclude from these varied accounts? In an essential way, food was at the heart of many cultural exchanges and intersections. Greek was distinguished from foreigner in terms of food. Philosophy identified the importance and also the limitations of food, which needed to be recognized, to prevent its becoming morally dangerous. Plato made the crucial distinction between food that was pleasurable (produced by the cook) and food that was useful. This moral danger feeds through ancient thought to Porphyry and the later ascetics; also through medicine, at least as seen in Galen. Medicine, however, had fostered different perspectives on food and cooking. Cooking was part of the useful process of preparing food for digestion, itself a form of cooking. In the Hippocratic *Art of Medicine*, cooking is part of the civilizing

process and fits with the Hesiodic model as a crucial time that separated human beings from animals (though Hippocratic thought is more progressive in its application of the idea than the gloomy Hesiod). Elsewhere in the Hippocratic corpus, the dietary rules of *Regimen II* are developed from the elemental theories based on fire and water in book one. All is derived from fire and water, the cosmos, the world, human beings, animals and plants.

In all that we shall review in later chapters, these positive and negative interpretations will be evident. These thought patterns importantly underlie and inform social and religious patterns seen in Chapters 2 and 3. They also inform much literary expression, which has made a major impact on the reception of eating in the ancient world, in such works as Juvenal, Petronius and Suetonius.