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INTRODUCTION

Food, substance and symbol

PRELIMINARIES

There is no god like one's stomach: we must sacrifice to it every day.
 (From 'Hunger', a Yoruba song)¹

I hate the belly: it dogs you shamelessly,
 making you remember it willy nilly
 in the midst of stress, in the midst of sorrow of heart.
 (Homer, *Od.* 7.216–18; transl. A. J. Bowen)

Food comes first. No food, no life. In myth, the satisfying of this primary need was a struggle and a burden. The sin of Adam (issuing from the gut rather than the loins) condemned humanity, the flower of creation, to getting its food the hard way, through tilling the soil. Prometheus, Adam's counterpart in Greek myth, through his act of stealing fire from heaven, brought upon the human race the harsh necessity of agricultural labour, without which the seed, sunk in the earth by a vengeful Zeus, could not be converted into an edible plant. Agriculture was a punishment imposed upon mankind, and a diet of cereals a drastic come-down from the divine menu of nectar and ambrosia, or from the free produce of the Garden of Eden.

In antiquity, as in all pre-industrial societies, most people were of necessity engaged in food-production. In the Mediterranean environment this was often a hazardous enterprise carried on in hostile surroundings. The grimness of the terrain worked by the people of Palestine is reflected in the prominence of miracles of feeding in the New Testament, and in the Old Testament prophets' dreams of a Promised Land of abundant food and drink (Is. 35:1; Ezek. 47:7–12).

It used to be orthodoxy among anthropologists that the transition from hunter/gatherer to agricultural economies in prehistoric times

¹ In Chinweiza, ed., *Voices from Twentieth-Century Africa* (London, 1988), 423–4.

enhanced the quality and stability of food supplies and improved the health of the community, while reducing the burden of labour on producers. More recently, under the impact of the models of the economist Boserup and newer anthropological literature on hunter/gatherer societies, the view has gained ground that the adoption of sedentary farming, while bringing 'progress' in its train in the form of demographic growth, cultural development and, in time, sophisticated civilisations, also had undesirable consequences, namely, poorer diets, lower nutritional status and greater vulnerability to famine and malnutrition among ordinary members of the expanded communities.² A modified version of this theory denies population growth the status of an independent variable, and argues for the adaptability and equilibrium-seeking tendency of human communities in the face of social and economic change. I aligned myself in earlier work with this last position. I stressed that Mediterranean peasants and urban communities employed a variety of strategies in response to the risk, and reality, of harvest shortfall and food crisis, and I concluded that they were largely successful in heading off real catastrophes, that is, famines. I did find, however, that food shortages which were less than famines, and the human suffering that attended them, were a common occurrence in Graeco-Roman society.³ In this present work, I shall take the further step of arguing that endemic undernourishment or chronic malnutrition underlay those periodic shortages, just as it underlies the famines that afflict developing nations today.

It is not difficult on the basis of the sources from antiquity to establish the regularity and inevitability of crises of food shortage and hunger. The literary texts are haunted by the spectre of famine, food crisis, and the resulting *episodic* malnutrition and hunger – as distinct from the *endemic*, long-term, malnutrition and hunger to which I have just referred. The upper classes, from whose ranks the authors of those writings were inevitably drawn, may not themselves have been commonly exposed to food-shortage and temporary hunger-stress. But the communities they presided over *were* thus vulnerable, and this made their position as political, social and economic leaders insecure. Food crisis threatened the dominance of the elite and the stability of the society over which they presided.

Anxiety over food is manifested, for example, in the establishment, survival and centrality of the cycle of religious rituals and celebrations

² Boserup (1965); (1983); Cohen (1977); (1989). ³ Garnsey (1988).

in honour of food-associated deities such as Demeter in Greece and Ceres in Italy. It is also shown, more practically in our view (not necessarily in theirs), by the laws issued and institutional arrangements made to safeguard the supply and distribution of food. An additional, general, indication of the fragility of the food supply, and the vulnerability of the mass of ordinary people to dearth and hunger, is to be found in the very obsession of the sources with food and its lavish consumption by the rich. The conspicuous consumption of food was an important index of wealth, status and power. This was appropriate in a social context where food was a relatively scarce, highly valued and unequally distributed commodity.

Directly and indirectly, the ancient sources testify to the reality and fear of food crisis. On the other hand, one would have one's work cut out if one wanted to demonstrate that *malnutrition* was the normal condition of large numbers of people in antiquity. The literary sources identify no such phenomenon. It is easy therefore to argue against its existence, and that has occasionally been done, largely by a priori reasoning. How, it has been asked, could the dazzling civilisations of Greece and Rome have been built on the backs of malnourished people? Students and observers of antiquity more often do not even consider the possibility of widespread malnutrition, while those who give attention to food commonly write as if most inhabitants of the ancient Mediterranean world enjoyed an adequate diet and a satisfactory health status during their lifetimes. The probability that those lifetimes were severely abbreviated has not been allowed to cast doubt on this assumption.

The problem of the absence of malnutrition from the texts can be resolved by a two-stage strategy. One must first escape the perspective of the upper classes, as reflected in the literary sources, by drawing on quite different kinds of evidence, both ancient (human skeletal remains, an important and hitherto under-utilised source of information on nutrition and health status) and comparative (from other historical societies, including the contemporary developing world, in which malnutrition is a familiar and much-studied phenomenon). That done, one can then turn back to the ancient literature with new questions and hypotheses.

Food, then, was a vital concern in the advanced societies of antiquity, much more so than is now the case in the developed West, which has long since slipped the net of famine, food shortage, malnutrition and hunger. For most of us in our affluent society food is part of the routine of life. It comes to us almost automatically; we have to do little to secure

it. We are aware of hunger, but as something that exists somewhere else. Unlike the Old Testament prophets, we do not need to dream of paradise, because we have no personal experience of the meaning of hunger. Hunger in our society has to be artificially induced by war (the siege of Leningrad of 1941–42, the blockade of Holland in 1944, more recently, the siege of Sarajevo), or it is the result of a tragic accident. An air-crash in the remote Andes in 1972 made cannibals of The Old Christians rugby team from Uruguay. For the two who survived, the return to civilisation was the Garden of Eden rediscovered.⁴

In so far as there is concern over malnutrition in our own society, it is principally over the malnutrition that is associated with overnutrition or unhealthy diets. Ancient medical writers, too, sometimes asserted that excessive eating could endanger health. (However, when Anthimus, a Greek doctor of the early sixth century, addressed the King of the Franks in these terms, his main target appears to have been overindulgence in raw meat and other uncooked foods!⁵) Today, the fascination of food is reflected in publishers' lists, but most of the books that load the booksellers' tables are written for gourmets, dieticians or food-faddists. Among scholars, food is studied chiefly by anthropologists, and for its non-food uses and symbolic significance. Only in the contemporary developing world does food stand centre-stage as indisputably a bio-cultural phenomenon, a subject fit for biological scientists and social scientists alike. So it could be for students of antiquity.

THE FOOD AND NON-FOOD USES OF FOOD⁶

Food is food, in the first instance. It is substance taken into the body which can satisfy hunger and give nourishment. Other items consumed, as is written in al-Biruni's *Book on Pharmacy and Materia Medica*, are poisons, or drugs which may be taken against poisons but none the less weaken the body.⁷ A primary question therefore is, what was the quality of the diet or diets potentially available to residents of the ancient Mediterranean? The quantities of foods actually consumed are beyond our grasp, just as they are for other pre-modern societies. But the consequences of diets of such-and-such quality and quantity for the nutritional status of consumers can be pondered. For certain select populations the direction of the inquiry can be reversed, where skeletal

⁴ P. P. Read, *Alive: The Story of the Andes Survivors* (London, 1974), 227–42.

⁵ Anthimus, *De Observatione Ciborum*, pref., with Grant (1996).

⁶ Fieldhouse (1986), pref., lists 19 non-food uses of food. ⁷ Hamarneh (1973).

data (relating to stature, or the presence of deficiency disease) point to the adequacy or inadequacy of diets. Also, the likely incidence of hunger and malnutrition can be investigated with the aid of comparative evidence.

The consumption of food that is adequate in quantity and quality hangs in the first instance on the production of enough suitable food and on its efficient distribution to all sections of the population. If food was short, hunger endemic, and life a continuous struggle for survival, there are negative implications for the productivity of agriculture and/or the efficiency of trade and markets. Either not enough food was being grown, or it was not reaching non-producing consumers, or both. The problems might be endemic or episodic. In the former case, hunger was long-term and steady-state; in the latter, it occurred in short, sharp shocks through the agency of individual food crises. Food crises were certainly frequent occurrences in Mediterranean communities. What needs to be explored is the context from which they emerge, what constitutes the norm, and whether the norm includes endemic hunger.

In any case, an investigation of the place of food in both the economic and the political life of the societies in question is a desideratum. Two questions pose themselves under the heading of food and the economy: first, how far conditions were favourable for the production of food, that is to say, the physical environment, the state of agricultural technology, and the way ownership of and access to land and its resources were distributed among the population; and second, how far market mechanisms and institutions promoted the circulation of food between areas of surplus and areas of deficit.

Whatever the nature of the economic system, political factors might operate to obstruct the flow of food to those who needed it, to those of low 'entitlement' – to use Amartya Sen's term for access to, possession of, or control over food resources.⁸ Under this head one looks in particular for indications of intervention by governments in the market and in extra-market distribution of food among consumers. If it turns out that the involvement of governments in the food supply was as a rule very limited, that commerce in foodstuffs was essentially unregulated and institutions for food distribution rudimentary, it would not necessarily follow that people often starved. For there would remain to be investigated the social as distinct from the political power of the rich, that is to say, the private mechanisms of redistribution. Did patronage and charity

⁸ Sen (1981).

succeed where public institutions (controlled by the same people, to be sure) failed, or was the private redistribution of food resources too selective and on too small a scale to act as a socio-economic leveller? One way or another, by studying systems of redistribution we can hope to arrive at a deeper understanding of the ways in which inequalities of wealth and power were confirmed and preserved in Graeco-Roman society. For food is divisive. It is distributed and consumed in accordance with the differences and hierarchies that exist in the society. Are we what we eat, or what we are forced to eat?

That food separates and divides is true in existential, cultural, social and economic terms. In Greek myth, food plays a role in defining a hierarchy of being: there is food for gods, food for men, and food for animals. It was not so clear-cut when man shared the food of the gods at the Heavenly High Table. Prometheus' deceit, in stealing the fire and then in his division of the first sacrificial animal, introduced a more precisely differentiated hierarchy of diets.⁹

In Graeco-Roman society, food was a marker of ethnic and cultural difference. In the literature from antiquity, that is, in the perceptions of the literary spokesmen of the elite, Greeks were differentiated from barbarians, urban-dwellers from rustics, farmers from nomads, and so on, in terms of the food they ate, amongst other things. Within the family, the distribution of food might be expected to be an index of relative power and status, as between male and female, parents and children, young and old. Then, food reflected the vertical social and economic distinction between rich and poor. Greater purchasing power gave access to foods of superior quality and quantity, and of wider range. The conspicuous consumption of food by the elite advertised the social and economic distance between them and the mass of the population. *Nouveaux riches* aped the elite.

On the other hand, food involves 'commensality', that is, 'sharing a table', with 'companions', that is, 'sharers of bread'.¹⁰ Food assembles and binds together those linked by blood (family), class (the symposiasts of archaic and later Greece), religion (the Passover Seder, the Eucharist) and citizenship (the civic banquet).

Food, then, stands as a pointer to distinctions of status, power and

⁹ The god's share was the bones wrapped in fat, or the smoke that ascended from the altar as they burned; Prometheus reserved for man the edible portion of the animal.

¹⁰ Augustine, *Serm.* 138.7: 'People are called companions, you see, because they eat together.' Augustine adds the conceit, that *sodales*, 'companions', means *quasi simul edales*, 'as if to say eating together'.

wealth, of group-separateness and -belonging, and of cultural differences in general. In saying this, we have already made the transition from food as food, as a biological necessity, to its non-food uses. In the classic formulation of the structuralist Claude Lévi-Strauss, food is ‘bon(ne) à penser’, ‘good to think (with)’. Food and cuisine express fundamental human attitudes. Their meanings are written in code, and to decipher the code is to penetrate the ‘deep structures’ of a society: ‘The cooking of a society is a language into which it unconsciously translates its structure – or else resigns itself, still unconsciously, to revealing its contradictions.’¹¹ Among those influenced by his work, Vernant, Detienne and Vidal-Naquet have applied the Lévi-Straussian paradigm, the raw/cooked/rotten triangle, and his technique of analysis, in particular, the search for contrast and correspondence (binary opposition and homology), in the study of Greek myth and ritual.¹²

The structuralist enterprise has received a mixed response. One can concede that oppositions and contrasts within the raw material of myth were seen by Greek authors as providing *a* clue to mythical meaning; also that food and its preparation form a significant element of that material. One can say this without wishing to endorse the model of the Greek mental universe created by structuralist ingenuity or ‘bricolage’.¹³ Further, it is noteworthy that Lévi-Strauss, though considering himself a semiologist, was preoccupied with investigating the patterns or organising principles of signs and symbols, rather than analysing their meaning – the primary concern of semiology as defined by its founder, Saussure.¹⁴ Specifically, and with relevance to my own interests, while Lévi-Strauss proposes to move from food-relationships (as depicted in the culinary triangles) to social and economic relationships, this never achieves any other status than a programme of research. Meanwhile, one may question, as some have done, whether using the culinary procedures of a society to elucidate its social hierarchy or religious nature is the proper way to proceed, rather than vice versa.¹⁵

Roland Barthes also thought in terms of a ‘code’ (or ‘grammar’) of deep meanings underlying the food system of a society, but he was more intent on investigating the symbolic meaning of particular foods than on unveiling any pattern formed by such meanings. Any particular item of

¹¹ Lévi-Strauss (1966), 595. See also Lévi-Strauss (1969); (1978).

¹² See the essays in Gordon (1981), section 2.

¹³ Here I echo Buxton (1994), 198–9; other gentle criticism in Gordon (1979), who talks of ‘bricolage’. The word is used by Lévi-Strauss himself for mythical thought. See Sperber (1975), 71, on its significance. ¹⁴ Cf. Sperber (1975), 68. ¹⁵ Goody (1982), 14–29; Gellner (1985).



1. The laying out of the dead (*prothesis*). The basket (*kalathos*) is filled with eggs and pomegranates. Customarily symbols of life and fertility, in the funerary context they are food for the dead and carry hope for life beyond the grave. The pomegranate is associated with Persephone, wife of Hades. Andriuolo, Paestum. Lucanian, c. 350–340 BC.

food might carry a system of symbolic meaning. A simple example from antiquity is foods such as eggs, apples, pomegranates, that represent life and fertility and commonly make an appearance at marriages, or for that matter, funeral ceremonies (Fig. 1). Sugar, for Barthes, ‘is not just a foodstuff, even when it is used in conjunction with other foods; it is, if you will, an “attitude”, bound to certain usages, certain “protocols”, that have to do with more than food’.¹⁶ In a Chinese New Year dish as consumed in Singapore, the ingredients are carefully chosen ‘auspicious’ foods, sugar among them, which combine to produce a potent message of prosperity for the household and its guests:

Fish . . . is a compulsory New Year dish because the Chinese word for ‘fish’ sounds the same as the word for ‘financial surplus’. One particular dish consists of raw fish (‘raw’ sounding the same as ‘grow’), ginger (sounding the same as ‘expand’ – expanding wealth and family), sweet plum sauce (sugar sounds like ‘home’, and ‘sweet’ is synonymous with ‘peace’ and ‘harmony’), sesame seeds (they look like gold coins), and fired bits of batter (more gold). Each ingredient

¹⁶ Barthes (1979), 166–7. For sugar as symbol see Mintz (1985), 74–96.

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is added in layers, and the server recites the meaning of each layer with the prefix 'Wishing you . . .' Then we all have to get up and toss all the ingredients together, the term sounding like 'digging for happiness'. Then we eat it.¹⁷

Sugar was unknown in ancient Mediterranean societies. With bread, a staple food, Barthes finds an 'interesting difference': 'Bread does not as such constitute a signifying unit: in order to find these we must go further and look at its varieties.' Each variety of bread is a 'unit of signification'.¹⁸ This calls to mind the 72 kinds of bread that Jack Goody found in the pages of Athenaeus. Some of these, in company with other foods listed by the same writer, 'marked out the social hierarchy, the emphasis being placed on riches, luxury and on difference itself'.¹⁹

Athenaeus' breads sometimes have distinctive shapes, for example, that of a sexual organ or of a flower, and carry an altogether simpler message. In general, food lends itself readily to use as a metaphor in other spheres of activity, and this reflects both the centrality of food and its emotion-evoking capacities. Some metaphorical usages have lost something of their earlier piquancy (e.g. ham, lemon), while others are ancient but still potent, for example, woman as food to be consumed or as prey.²⁰ Sex is a fertile field for food imagery, then as now. Food and sex were intimately linked in traditional agrarian societies, for they were seen as equally productive and reproductive. In such societies women were expected to devote themselves to the cause of social reproduction: in literature from Hesiod to Soranus (and beyond), woman is the field to be ploughed and sown, the cultivated furrow, or the oven in which the fruit of the man/earth is transformed into a finished product to be nurtured, or consumed. Thus the pursuit of virginity and chastity in the context of Christian asceticism was seen as challenging the inherited value system and as disruptive of the existing social order.²¹ Nowadays, sex is less closely tied up with the propagation of the species, and interest in that end has declined. The association of food and sex lives on none the less in literary discourse and popular parlance.

Food operated as a powerful signifier in many different contexts and

¹⁷ I am grateful to Tao Tao Huang for this information. ¹⁸ Barthes (1979), 168–9.

¹⁹ Goody (1982), 103.

²⁰ The hunting metaphor: Schnapp (1989); (1997). Food and sex: see e.g. McCartney (1925); Loraux (1990), 30–3 (gluttony and virility); Winkler (1990), 79–82 (aphrodisiacs); Henry (1992) (the theme in Athenaeus); and see next note. I am grateful to Sarah Currie for bibliographical advice.

²¹ DuBois (1988); also Mason (1987); Olender (1990). Foucault (1988), 125–8, is a basic account of the relation between sex and diet, as seen by doctors. On Christian sexual abstinence (closely bound up with abstinence from food, see below pp. 95–8), see e.g. Brown (1988), e.g. chs. 13 and 18; Walker Bynum (1987), e.g. 33–48, 208–18.

throughout society. Literature provides most of the evidence, and it emanates from and is directed at the upper classes. But literature was sometimes aimed at a wider audience. Drama in democratic Athens was a civic event, open to all citizens. In this context, Aristophanes' suggestion that the ostentatious purchase of fresh sea-perch might be seen by the seller of humble sprats at the next stall as conveying undemocratic social and political attitudes may not be merely a figment of his comic imagination (Ar. *Wasps* 493–5).²² Nor is it plausible that the food/sex link, which Aristophanes also exploited (and which was much more easily arrived at than the connection between food and politics), was made only in upper-class parlance.

Yet clearly the elite developed symbolic systems to which their social inferiors had little access. The subtleties of Horace's food imagery were not so much lost on, as unavailable to, the mass of Romans. That goes too for the whole theme of the dinner party, which is the focal point of a great deal of Latin literature, and a preferred setting for the critical evaluation of Roman society and culture, not to mention the creative activity of the authors themselves.²³ The role of food in moral discourse in Greece and in Rome was of little relevance to ordinary people, and was not intended to be. The charges of overindulgence in food and drink, a standard political weapon in late Republican and early Imperial Rome, and the creation and elaboration of the myth of archaic frugality, were intended for upper-class consumption.²⁴

Barthes wrote that food's value as protocol 'becomes increasingly more important as soon as the basic needs are satisfied, as they are in France'.²⁵ It is likely enough that the value of food *as nutrition* received greater emphasis in the relatively poor societies of antiquity than it does in modern France. It does not follow that the metaphorical value of food was unimportant then, that food, or individual foods, carried little symbolic baggage among the many who were commonly hungry, as well as among the few. It is, however, entirely plausible that for the few the metaphorical rather than the nutritional aspect of food was paramount.

Each of the 'twofold values' of food, as nutrition and as protocol, merits discussion in a study of food in ancient societies. It is indeed difficult, and ultimately I suspect unnecessary, to make a rigid distinction between the two roles or 'values' of food. But what if they appear to be

²² See Davidson (1993).

²³ Gowers (1993) argues that Roman poets when they talk food, cooking and eating are in fact making assertions about their own compositions.

²⁴ Goddard (1994a); (1994b); Edwards (1993). See below, pp. 77–9. ²⁵ Barthes (1979), 172.