FOOD AND SOCIETY IN CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY

This is the first study of food in classical antiquity that treats food as both a biological and a cultural phenomenon. The variables of food quantity, quality and availability, and the impact of disease, are evaluated and a judgement reached on the health of the population which inclines to pessimism. Food is also a symbol, evoking other basic human needs and desires, especially sex, and performing social and cultural roles which can be either integrative or divisive. The book explores food taboos in Greek, Roman and Jewish society, and food-allocation within the family, as well as more familiar cultural and economic polarities which are highlighted by food and eating. The author draws on a wide range of evidence new and old, from written sources to human skeletal remains, and uses both comparative historical evidence from early modern and contemporary developing societies and the anthropological literature, to create a case-study of food in antiquity.

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In memory of Conant Brodribb
archaeologist, educationalist, raconteur

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Abbreviations

AHR	*American Historical Review*
AJAH	*American Journal of Ancient History*
Annales ESC	*Annales: Economies, sociétés, civilisations*
AJPh	*American Journal of Philology*
ASNP	*Annali della Scuola Nazionale di Pisa*
BAR BS	*British Archaeological Reports: British Series*
BAR IS	*British Archaeological Reports: International Series*
BCH	*Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique*
CAH	*Cambridge Ancient History*
CPh	*Classical Philology*
CQ	*Classical Quarterly*
DArch	*Dialoghi di Archeologia*
DHA	*Dialogues de l'histoire ancienne*
G&R	*Greece and Rome*
GRBS	*Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies*
JHS	*Journal of Hellenic Studies*
JRA	*Journal of Roman Archaeology*
JRS	*Journal of Roman Studies*
JSOT	*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*
JSQ	*Jewish Studies Quarterly*
MEFR	*Mélanges d'archéologie et d'histoire de l'Ecole française de Rome*
PG	*Patrologia Graeca*, Migne
PL	*Patrologia Latina*, Migne
RE	*Real-encyclopädie der klassischen Altertumswissenschaft*, Pauly-Wissowa (-Kroll)
REL	*Revue des études latines*
RHDFE	*Revue historique de droit français et étranger*
SC	Sources Chrétiennes
TAPA	*Transactions of the American Philological Association*
THES	*The Times Higher Educational Supplement*
TLS	*The Times Literary Supplement*

Preface

Greeks and Romans, rich or poor, were obsessed with food. For most people, life was a perpetual struggle for survival. Among the well-off minority, there developed an elaborate *haute cuisine*, and, in reaction, a rhetoric (and in certain contexts, a practice) of rejection or continence, in the service of politics, morality, philosophy, religion or health.

This book presents food as a biocultural phenomenon. Food is at once nutrition, needed by the body for its survival, and cultural object, with various non-food uses and associations. Food functions as a sign or means of communication. It governs human relationships at all levels. Food serves to bind together people linked by blood, religion or citizenship; conversely, it is divisive, being distributed and consumed in accordance with existing hierarchies.

Historians and archaeologists have long been interested in the material aspects of food in classical antiquity. They have traced the origins, diffusion and evolution of particular foodstuffs and catalogued and discussed what was eaten, from where it came, how it was produced and distributed, how it was processed and cooked. Their findings form part of the background of my research, and to some extent I have followed in their footsteps. Some of the early chapters of this book reflect my previous work on systems of production and distribution, and patterns of consumption during times of both relative normality and stress. But I go on here to pose the question of food-availability. Did ancient populations get enough of their staple foods to provide the food-energy and protein requirements for good health, and were the deficiencies of their staples in certain vital proteins and vitamins made up by complementary foods? I develop a thesis which is likely to be controversial on the nutritional status of the population, with the aid of evidence not normally adduced.

A less traditional interest, which marks some recent work by a new generation of historians, lies in the social, religious and cultural functions of food and its metaphorical uses. Their explorations have

influenced the composition of the later chapters, but again, within the confines of this book and my own preoccupations and limitations, I have not followed up all their lines of inquiry. In general, I have found those studies most useful for my purposes which are informative about the nature of Greek and Roman society. Thus, for example, I particularly welcome the attention given to communal drinking (the symposium) and banquets. In any society, group eating and drinking highlight social attitudes, relationships and hierarchies, and these matters form a central part of my subject. My aim is to use the universal activities of food and eating as a way of clarifying the distinctive nature of Graeco-Roman society and culture. Food and eating (in the parlance, 'food and foodways') are a good entrée into a society, an introduction to its cultural traits, social institutions, individual and collective attitudes. Studies of food, however informative and entertaining, do not escape the charge of antiquarianism unless they fully contextualise their subject.

This point has been better understood by social scientists than historians, on the whole. The most interesting historical writing on food has been aware of and in dialogue with anthropological studies. In the English-speaking world, I have in mind a work such as Stephen Mennell's *All Manners of Food*, a historical sociologist's investigation of tastes and manners in France and Britain from the Middle Ages to the contemporary world. A historian of food who neglects Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jack Goody, Mary Douglas and Marvin Harris, to select a few of the more prominent names, will have difficulty asking intelligent questions of the evidence for food from antiquity or from any society whatever. The potential contribution of *physical* as opposed to social and cultural anthropology to the historical study of food and nutrition is of a quite different nature, and has been exploited as yet hardly at all, as regards ancient Mediterranean societies. One of my aims is to begin to rectify this omission.

Between ancient history and modern social science (not to mention biological science) there is a large but not unbridgeable gap. Opportunities have been lost on both sides. Little use has been made of classical antiquity, even as a source of exempla, by social scientists working on the subject of food. This is not surprising. Anthropologists have other societies, often experienced at first hand, to serve as reference-points. One would not expect Lévi-Strauss to refer to ancient sources on the roasting of meat, and it is something of a surprise to find that he cites Aristotle twice on this subject, even if via a secondary source, in his classic paper 'Le triangle culinaire'. At the other extreme,

Mœurs des sauvages amériquains (1724), by the ethnographer Fr Joseph François Lafitau, is built around an extensive comparison of the customs of Native Americans with those of the classical Greeks and Romans. That work is a 'period piece', its approach and methodology dated. Among contemporary anthropologists, Jack Goody stands out as one who has made fruitful use of the comparison with Graeco-Roman antiquity (in investigating the family and literacy as well as food and cuisine). Goody's examples of peoples who developed a *haute cuisine* include, naturally, the Chinese and the French, but also, unexpectedly, the Greeks of the fourth century BC. This is a quite legitimate deduction from an eccentric work called *The Deipnosophists*, or *Professors of the Dinner-Table*, composed by Athenaeus, a minor writer in Greek, born in an obscure Greek town in Egypt and surviving in what may be a cadette, but is still a lengthy, version. Athenaeus himself flourished about the turn of the second century AD, but drew heavily on classical and Hellenistic Greek sources. Again, there would have been no debate on the dietary laws of the ancient Israelites without the intervention of anthropologists and other social scientists such as Douglas, Harris and Simoons.

On the other side, if we except the work of French historians of ancient Greece, especially Vernant, Vidal-Naquet and Detienne, in their structuralist explorations of the role of food in Greek society, anthropology has been slow to make an impact on ancient historical scholarship in the area of food studies. Few ancient historians appear to have asked why the ancient Israelites imposed food prohibitions on themselves whereas the classical Greeks and Romans on the whole did not. Even synthetic studies such as *Consuming Passions: The Anthropology of Eating* by Farb and Armelagos, despite its lack of reference to antiquity, have much to teach students of the ancient world, in setting an agenda for historians to follow. I for one am impressed by their demonstration that material and symbolic aspects of food can be combined profitably in a single study.

This book on food was fed by research begun around two decades ago, and was already in rough draft in 1992, when it was first delivered as lectures to senior undergraduates at Cambridge. My thanks go in the first place to the participants in this course, and to my former graduate students who were already, or became, experts in various aspects of the subject, in particular, Sue Alcock, Sarah Currie, Justin Goddard, Neville Morley, Jonathan Thompson, Jeremy Toner, Onno van Nijf and Greg Woolf. I owe a heavy debt to Paul Cartledge, Robin Donkin, Richard

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