

KEY THEMES IN ANCIENT HISTORY

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FOOD AND SOCIETY IN
CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY

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*In memory of Conant Brodrick
archaeologist, educationalist, raconteur*

Otherness

PRELIMINARIES

The literary sources of antiquity depict the inhabited world as culturally heterogeneous, and regard food as one or the more significant markers of divergence.¹ Most obviously, they contrast the food choices and eating customs of the urban elite, to which they themselves belong, and those of societies at the farthest reaches of the Graeco-Roman world or beyond its limits: the Scythians of Herodotus' *History*, the Mossynoeci of Xenophon's *Anabasis*, the various Celtic peoples of Strabo's *Geography*, the northern tribes of Tacitus' *Germania*, and so on. The construction is ideological, the details inaccurate or imaginary, and the purpose of the exercise is to emphasise the identity, singularity and superiority of the dominant cultures of Greece and Rome over those of sundry 'barbarians'.²

The fragility of the edifice constructed by our sources is transparent. Discrepant versions are offered of the diets of the same peoples. Contradictions and implausibilities occur in the treatment of major cultures like the Egyptians – for although their level of civilisation was in fact comparable with that of the Greeks, they too were seen by the Greeks as barbarians, simply by virtue of being non-Greek. Then, the inclusion of particular 'barbarian' tribes such as the Celts within the expanding Roman empire, and the cultural advancement that they were making in the view of their Roman overlords, created a particular problem for authors like Strabo, well-practised at imposing pre-fabricated cultural dichotomies. In the assessment of the Celts, a spectrum of civilisation or barbarity might have been a more apposite image to apply than a polarity of opposites.

¹ See especially Rosellini and Saïd (1978), who stress the connection between food and cuisine, on the one hand, and sexual *mores* and the treatment of women, on the other. See also Hartog (1988). On otherness ('alterity') in general, see Nippel (1990); (1996b); Cartledge (1997).

² 'Barbarian' was originally used in a descriptive sense for non-Greek speaker, as in Homer's *bar-barophonoi*, or 'bar-bar speakers'.

Mountain-dwellers were traditionally viewed askance by the 'higher' civilisation, for example, the Ligurians of north-western Italy who came to the notice of Strabo. In his account they are not unambiguously 'barbarian'. For an objective treatment of such 'others', however, one turns not to ethnographers and historians, but to Galen, the physician from Pergamum. Self-consciously adopting a 'scientific' approach to his subject of foodstuffs and their properties, Galen writes with relative detachment of the Macedonian and Thracian use of coarse, smelly, black breads, merely pointing out that these peoples, living in a cold, mountainous environment, had no choice but to grow and eat inferior cereals. There is no hint of the suggestion made routinely by other writers, typically in discussing barbarians at the edge of the inhabited world, that a hostile environment nurtures a savage culture.

Countrymen were regarded as cultural opposites of the civilised, urban elites. In both Greek and Roman literature, they appear as rude, boorish and ignorant.³ Galen is matter-of-fact in depicting their eating habits, displaying patronising interest in rather than distaste for them, and he avoids stereotypes. These people ate badly – inferior cereals or worse, sometimes boiled wheat instead of bread – but in the main only when forced to do so by food shortage, which was aggravated, we are permitted to infer, by the demands of city-dwellers.

Another contrast familiar from Latin literature, and present though less conspicuous, in Greek, is that between their own affluent and decadent society, and a mythical, ancestral one, built on simple, peasant values. The Roman elite were equivocal about the peasantry. On the one hand, they were conscious of the social and cultural distance between themselves and the rustics of their own world, on the other, they kept alive in their moralising rhetoric the myth of the yeoman farmers who had provided the leaders and the rank-and-file of Rome's victorious armies. Rome's pious and patriotic heroes practised frugality and simplicity in their diet and mode of life in general. Athenaeus has Homeric heroes play a similar role: they are champions of a simple fare and life-style, avoiding luxuries and delicacies. Precautions have to be taken in approaching such accounts, which are self-evidently not descriptive. They are composed by moralising writers intent on framing a critique of social practices and values in their own worlds on the basis of idealised portraits of earlier societies.⁴

³ MacMullen (1974), ch. 2; Gallo (1989).

⁴ Whether the social critique in Athenaeus is aimed at his own world is, however, problematic. See below.



7. An ox is led to the sacrifice. The context is funerary. A man has a sacrificial axe in his left hand, a woman carries an offering-table laden with loaves of bread, and a small girl bears a dish of eggs and pomegranates. Andriuolo, Paestum. Lucanian, c. 350 BC.

A thorough treatment of cultural differences reflected in food and foodways would embrace also contrasts between urban communities themselves. Rivalry between Greeks was a more present reality than Greek/barbarian opposition, and this rivalry went deeper than politics. Athenians, Spartans, Cretans, Thebans and so on were considered different, in character and institutions – and food and foodways formed part of the picture.⁵

There remains the most basic of all distinctions, that which is revealed by the act of ritual sacrifice (Fig. 7). In sacrifice, the (normatively domestic) beast is prepared for killing, is killed, its flesh is divided, the meat is cooked and eaten. The sequence of acts marks out the hierarchy of existence: gods, humans, animals. The gods are fed first as a sign of their

⁵ *Athenians*: see Athen. 43bc, 47bc, 50c, 74de, 130c, 131f–132b, 134a–138b; Sallares (1991), ch. 3, esp. 294–313; Long (1986), 69 ff.; etc. *Spartans*: Hdt. 9.82; Athen. 138b–143a; Xen., *Lac. Pol.* 5; Plut. *Luc.* 12; Cartledge (1979), 170–5, cf. (1987), 32–3, 107–8; Figueira (1984); Fisher (1989). *Cretans*: Arist. *Pol.* 1263b30–1264a11; 1271a27–37; 1271b20–1272b24; Plato, *Laws* 625d–e; Strabo C 480–4; Athen. 143; Huxley (1971); Willetts (1955), 139–40, 153ff.; Morrow (1960), 17–35. *Thebans*: Athen. 148d; cf. Hdt. 9.16. *Arcadians*: Athen. 148f–149d. *Macedonians*: Athen. 129de, 126e, 128–130d, cf. 157c.; Tomlinson (1970). *Greeks in general*: Hdt. 1.133.

pre-eminence. Their share of the meal goes up in smoke; it consists of the internal organs, the heart, lungs, liver, bile duct, peritoneum, not to mention the blood. In short, those parts of the animal in which its life resides are for the gods. Humans take the choice portions. As for the animal, its lot is to be burned, cooked, eaten.⁶

Portrayals of otherness have in common the perception of distance, spatial, social and moral. They are essentially self-referential, in that their function is to define the cultural identity of the core-group by reference to another community, so as to represent the latter as the opposite of or at least significantly different from the former, and to the former's advantage, except where the writer concerned is fashioning a critique of contemporary society. I focus below on the Greek–Roman (civilized) / barbarian (uncivilized) and the archaic (pure) / contemporary (corrupt) polarities, with special reference to diet and eating practices.

BARBARIANS

In the *Politics* Aristotle sets out a number of modes of life (*Pol.* 1256a40–b1). Most people are sedentary farmers and live off the land and domesticated plants. They also have to work hardest to survive, which is an index of their moral superiority. The idlest are the nomads, who cultivate mobile, 'living fields'. Hunters who live off the fruits of the chase, and others who live off banditry or fishing, make up the list. Several ways of life might be blended: specifically, pastoralism and banditry, and farming and hunting/gathering (but agriculture and pastoralism are not paired).

Authors from all periods of antiquity exploit a dichotomy between civilised, sedentary farmers who live off the land and domesticated plants, and uncivilised, pastoral nomads who are 'eaters of meat and drinkers of milk'.⁷ The tradition goes back as far as Homer. In Homer, the meat in question is regularly taken from the herd, but it might include the flesh of wild animals or even human beings, as with Polyphemus the Cyclops. The Cyclopes as a whole approached a civilised diet only in so far as they made cheese, but this they did infrequently and with crude results. The irony is that they might actually have adopted a predominantly vegetarian diet had not laziness stood in the

⁶ Detienne (1977); Vernant (1981a), (1981b). Between sacrifices, as it were, the divine food is ambrosia and nectar. It was this alimentary regime that Prometheus abandoned when he stole the fire from heaven. ⁷ Shaw (1982–83).

way, for their land was capable of producing wheat, barley and grapes in profusion.⁸

Herodotus' digression on the Scythians and other peoples of the North is a more elaborate version of the same theme. The Scythian nomads consume meat and milk, eating their own or wild animals. Their neighbours include cannibals. Herodotus alludes (6.84) to the proverbial Scythian weakness for wine. Wine is a civilised drink, but it is the mark of a savage to drink it 'in a Scythian fashion', that is, in excess, and neat. Scythians were more inclined to mix wine with blood than with water, as in their oath-swearing ceremonies.

Yet overtly in Herodotus, and hinted at in Homer, there is a suggestion of levels of civilisation, a spectrum or continuum of barbarity. There are 'good' as well as 'bad' Scythians. Herodotus remarks upon Scythian good order (*eunomia*) and courage (*andreia*) and the rewards for courage include ceremonial, controlled wine-drinking. The Scythians include farmers who 'sow and eat grain, onions, garlic, lentils and millet', as well as others who grow grain but only for sale. Herodotus is prepared, it seems, to admit elements of civilisation among barbaric peoples, even if this is incompatible with, and undermines, a strict dichotomy between the (civilised, Greek) sedentary farmer and (uncivilised, barbaric) pastoral nomad.

For the late Republican and early Imperial periods of Roman history, the counterpart to Herodotus on the Scythians is Strabo on the Celts and other barbarians of north-west and central Europe.⁹ Strabo, writing about the Gauls after Caesar's conquest, is torn between the urge to pass on the picture of the Gauls taken over from earlier, traditional accounts, and the need to praise the Romans under Augustus for converting a nation of soldiers into farmers and turning them away from barbarity towards the civic life:

The Gallic or Galatic race is war-mad . . . if coaxed, they so easily yield to considerations of utility that they lay hold not only of training (*paideia*) but also of language (*logoi*) . . . At the present time they are all at peace, since they have been enslaved and are living in accordance with the commands of the Romans who captured them, but it is from the early times that I am taking this account

⁸ The Cyclopes were unaccustomed to drinking wine – another mark of their barbarity. When inveigled into drinking it by the civilised outsider Odysseus, Polyphemus lost control of his senses. Against Kirk (1970), who thought that the Cyclopes were vegetarians, I follow Shaw (1982–83).

⁹ Strabo also deals with the Scythians, transmitting the standard account with variations, see C 300–3, 311; see Briant (1982), ch. 1.

of them, and also from the customs that hold fast to this day among the Germans. (C 195)¹⁰

Strabo's description of *present-day* Gauls *à table* turns out to be completely traditional and anachronistic. Only the reference to a Gallic export trade in pork to Rome and Italy has a contemporary ring about it:

Most of them, even to the present time, sleep on the ground and eat their meals seated on beds of straw. Food they have in plenty, along with milk and flesh of all sorts, but especially the flesh of hogs, both fresh and salted. Their hogs run wild . . . Flocks of sheep and herds of swine are so very large that they supply an abundance of cloaks and salt meat, not only to Rome but to most parts of Italy as well. (C 197)

Strabo's Gauls are if anything more primitive even than Posidonius' Gauls of two or three generations earlier (Athen. 151c), when the only part of Gaul controlled by Rome was Narbonensis, basically modern Provence. The food of the Gallic Celts of Posidonius 'consists of a few loaves of bread, but of large quantities of meat prepared in water or roasted over coals or on spits'. This at least implies an agricultural sector of the economy, even if overshadowed by pastoralism. However, their manner of eating is uncivilised: though not messy eaters, they attack the meat 'like lions', 'grasping whole joints with both hands and biting them off the bone'. Other dietary details touched on by Posidonius are confirmed and filled out by other authors: the Gallic preference for butter over olive oil, the weakness of their chieftains for wine, which they drink unmixed, and the prevalence of beer among the common people.

We have to turn back from Strabo to Caesar's *Gallic War* to make contact with the reality of a Gallic nation heavily committed to grain production, and not just with a view to brewing beer. The Gauls were farmers, not nomads. It was only in Germany that Caesar was inhibited from campaigning because 'Germans are not keen on agriculture' (6.29), and simply did not grow enough grain to feed his army. For Caesar, it was Germans (and Britons), not Gauls, 'who live on milk and flesh' (4.1; cf. 5.14).

The Germans themselves are not without redeeming features. Tacitus, notoriously, attributed to them practices and values which were

¹⁰ Strabo C 178, 180, 186. Cf. Thuc. 7.27–30 on the Thracians. For the Celts as warlike, see Athen. 154 a–c (gladiatorial bouts at dinner: Posidonius), with Mauss (1925). On the Celts in general, see Feuvrier-Prévotat (1978).

regrettably absent in the corrupt Rome of his day – like liberty. In the realm of food, we note that German mothers breast-fed their babies (*Germania* 20.1), and that the race as a whole was content with a simple diet: ‘they banish hunger without great preparation or appetising sauces’ (23.1). Caesar also noted that they were averse to importing wine, ‘believing that men are thereby rendered soft and womanish for the endurance of hardship’ (4.2). The Gauls on the other hand ‘import items of use or luxury, and have gradually got used to defeat’ (6.24).

These writers, then, are working with a stereotype of barbarians as nomadic pastoralists who eat meat and drink milk. However, the same writers find it convenient to admit degrees of barbarity or civilisation within the barbaric world, as indicated by choice of food and eating customs, among other things. Extreme barbarity is represented by the Irish for Strabo, by the Fenni in the furthest reaches of northern Europe for Tacitus, and by the Huns for the late fourth-century historian, Ammianus Marcellinus. Tacitus on the Fenni:

So hardy is their way of life that they have no need of fire nor of savoury foods but eat the roots of wild plants and the half-raw flesh of any kind of animal whatever, which they put between their thighs and the backs of their horses and thus warm it a little. They all feed upon game and an abundance of milk, which is their main sustenance, on a variety of plants, as well as on such birds as they can take by fowling; and I have seen many of them who are wholly unacquainted with grain and wine. (*Ger.* 31.2.3; cf. 46.3)

At the opposite end of the spectrum, there are peoples who live close to the Graeco-Roman world, or are actually incorporated in it, and who are involved in regular economic relationships with the superior culture. In Strabo, Celtic peoples who are neighbours to the Romanised Turdetanians of Southern Spain are said to have civilised qualities (C 151). The same goes for the mountaineers of Cantabria in the north of the Iberian peninsula, though the toughness of their women, who, among other things, work in the fields (C 165), is definitely not a mark of civilisation.

In Strabo and in this literary genre as a whole, clear, unambiguous criteria of civilisation, and consistency of analysis, are not to be expected. On the one hand, the Ligurian mountaineers of north-western Italy according to Strabo make civilised purchases of olive oil and Italian wine at Genoa in exchange for flocks, hides and honey; on the other hand, they are represented as ‘living on sheep for the most part, and milk, and a drink made of barley’, and as governed by an equestrian prefect ‘like other peoples who are perfect barbarians’ (C 202–3). The

approach of the various writers varies significantly: we need only juxtapose Strabo and Caesar on the Gauls.

We are dealing with ideological constructs, as has been seen. Their artificiality is amply demonstrated when we come to consider how Greeks, and Romans, dealt with other cultures which were old and sophisticated. Egypt was ‘other’, lacking defining features of the ‘core’ cultures, and so technically barbaric. But one could still take up different stances in relation to Egypt. Herodotus pushes the idea of cultural opposition to the limits of absurdity, while Diodorus Siculus, writing around four centuries later, takes a more realistic and pragmatic line.¹¹

The Egyptians, Herodotus says, did the opposite of ‘mankind’ in just about everything, and refused to change their ways (2.91.1). In support of this contention Herodotus claims that ‘they eat their food out of doors in the streets’ (2.35.3), and that, while ‘others make barley and wheat their food, it is a disgrace to do so in Egypt, where the grain they live on is olyra, which some call zea’ (2.36.2). He might just as well have added that Greeks when drunk (with wine) lie on their faces, whereas Egyptians when drunk (with beer) lie on their backs (as a comic poet jokes). Unlike Pliny the elder, Herodotus did not appreciate that Egyptian olyra was a variety of emmer wheat that ‘gave a good yield and was easy [*sc.* to thresh]’ (*Nat. Hist.* 18.92). It also made acceptable or good bread, and the Egyptians were known as bread-eaters as early as Hecataeus (Athen. 418e; 447c–d). Hecataeus died less than a generation before Herodotus was born.

Egyptian culture is given a different appraisal by Diodorus. The Egyptians are still barbarians, but Diodorus is on the whole prepared to let Egyptian myths about the origin of cereal, vine and olive cultivation speak for themselves, and to point to the singularities of Egypt without imposing artificial polarities. Egypt’s main claim to uniqueness is the Nile, ultimately the source of a richly varied and abundant diet. The people of the Delta are particularly well-served, says Diodorus. The rich, alluvial soil ‘produces many crops of every kind’; in the marshes, ‘tubers of every flavour grow . . . and fruits and vegetables which grow on stalks of a nature peculiar to the country, supplying an abundance sufficient to render the poor and the sick . . . self-sustaining’ (1.34). Diodorus also attempted to provide rational explanations of Egyptian food-avoidances. Herodotus makes merry at their expense, but the result is confusion (Diod. 1.87–9; Hdt. 2.37, 47).

¹¹ On the Egyptian diet, see Darby et al. (1977); Morcos and Morcos (1977); Crawford (1979).

We have been exploring the way contrasts are drawn, in the area of food and foodways, between the world of the Graeco-Roman city and the barbarian world, or rather, worlds. The spokesmen of the urban elite operate with a stereotype of the nomadic pastoralist who eats meat and drinks milk. The stereotype changes little from one generation to another (there are variants and elaborations), although the societies to which it is considered applicable do. So, the Romans in the eyes of the Greeks once belonged to the barbarian sphere. However, there is a second strand to the analysis. Coexisting with the generalisations about barbarian diet, it is tacitly recognised that there existed a variety of combinations of foods and ways of consuming them, not all of them equally barbaric. Moreover, those who came under the influence of a higher culture, notably that of Rome, were seen to be in the process of evolving into something that could almost be called civilised. And there were advanced societies like Egypt and Persia to whom the label 'barbarian' hardly applied, except in the technical sense that they were non-Greek.

As for the principles of differentiation, the level of civilisation of a people or a group was a function of its distance from the core society and culture. Distance is a multi-dimensional measure, encompassing culture, economy, politics, geography and time. In the conceptualisation of barbarian societies at the edge of the Graeco-Roman world, all except the last of the various aspects of distance come into play. Geography, or spatial distance, evaluated in terms of remoteness, severity of climate or high altitudes, always compared with the supreme advantages of the Mediterranean region, is notably prominent. Take the Scythians, this time as portrayed in the Hippocratic treatise on *Airs, Waters, Places*. Its main theme is that the physical and mental character of a people, and their manner of life, are a product of the nature of the climate and terrain. The Scythians appear as the representative people of the north, stunted, infertile, moist, feminine and diseased, owing to the severity of the climate and the barrenness of the land. Predictably we are told that 'they themselves eat boiled meats and drink mares' milk'. They also drink water from ice and snow, which is uniformly 'bad' (8.52–3; 19.32–3).¹² In Strabo's Thule and Tacitus' land of the Fenni, too, an inhospitable climate and barbarity, including uncivilised food customs, come together. These places also are set at the limits of the

¹² Cf. Arist. *Pol.* 1327b23: 'Those who live in a cold climate and in Europe are full of spirit, but wanting in intelligence and skill; and therefore they retain comparative freedom, but have no political organisation, and are incapable of ruling over others . . .'; cf. *Ethics* 3.7.7 on the Celts, without reference to diet.

inhabited world. We have seen already that although Galen sees himself in general as writing in the Hippocratic tradition, his discussion of agriculture in Macedonia and Bithynia does not offer a parallel to the Hippocratic portrayal of Scythia, for he is interested in making, without prejudice, what is to us the obvious point, that cold climate and lofty terrain will favour the production of some varieties of cereal over others. Cassius Dio's exaggerated talk of the Pannonians as if they were a barbarous tribe living in miserable conditions at the perimeter of the world tells us more about his own political attitudes and cultural bias than the true nature of the people of the lower Danubian provinces in his day, the late second and early third centuries:

The Pannonians dwell near Dalmatia along the bank of the Danube from Noricum to Moesia, and live of all men the most wretchedly. Both their soil and climate are poor; they cultivate no olives and produce no wine except to a very slight extent and of a very poor quality, since the climate is mostly extremely harsh. They not only eat barley and millet, but drink liquids made from them. For having nothing to make a civilised life worthwhile, they are extremely fierce and bloodthirsty. (49.36.4)¹³

In discussions of less remote or more obviously advanced peoples, the physical environment forms a backdrop at most. The Egyptian climate, says Herodotus, was 'different from that of the rest of the world' (2.35.2), but the peculiarities of Egyptians are not explained thereby.¹⁴ The absence or unimportance of farming in, say, Gaul or Germany is not apparently to be explained in terms of the climate. After all, as Tacitus concedes, 'Germany is fertile in cereals' (*Ger.* 5.1–2). Caesar had written of Germans, that they did not allow private ownership of land 'through fear that they might be tempted by continuous association to substitute agriculture for warrior zeal' (*BC* 6.22). Georges Duby, the historian of medieval France, thought of societies as constrained by their cultures rather than able to change them by choice:

It is unnecessary to believe that a society is sustained by whatever is most successfully produced by the land where it is located. Rather, a society is the prisoner of customs that are handed down from generation to generation, and are changed only with difficulty. In other words, it harnesses its resources to break down the resistance of soil and climate in order to procure for itself to the best of its ability the foodstuffs that social custom and religious rite compel it to consume.¹⁵

¹³ Cf. Garnsey and Saller (1987), 16–17.

¹⁴ The Hippocratic writer's treatment of Egypt and Libya, signalled retrospectively at ch. 13, is lost.

¹⁵ Duby (1974), 26.

None of these authors was inclined to embrace the doctrine of environmental determinism.

We now turn to an opposition which involves not spatial but temporal distance, between earlier and later stages in the development of the culture, morality and diet of the same society.

HEROIC OR ARCHAIC SOCIETIES

Criticism of the misuse of wealth by the rich is a leitmotiv of Greek and Latin literature. Literary tradition attributes sumptuary laws to Greek tyrants and reforming lawgivers such as Solon and Lycurgus, who are represented as promoters of a communitarian spirit against the socially divisive and political disruptive behaviour of contemporary aristocrats.¹⁶ A 'specifically Hellenistic debate' about luxury focused on conspicuous expenditure at the courts of Alexander the Great and the successor kings, and in the households of the rich.¹⁷ The Roman interest in or obsession with the themes of luxury and moral decline showed itself in laws against extravagance from the early second century BC, and in a stream of moralising literature.¹⁸

A number of strategies were available to critics of contemporary society. One that is often thought of as characteristically Roman involved conjuring up a picture of an idealised past society rooted in the values of frugality and self-sufficiency – namely, the Rome of legendary peasant/generals such as Quinctius Cincinnatus – as the moral opposite of contemporary society marked by extravagance and idleness. Was this not just characteristically but also exclusively Roman? Greek interest in luxury (*truphē*), especially in a political context, surfaces in Plato and other fourth-century writers such as Isocrates and Xenophon and continues into the Hellenistic age.¹⁹ Some authors, particularly in the fourth century, looked sideways at Sparta as a living example of a state falling apart because of moral weakness (though Sparta even in decline had its admirers); others looked to the past for examples of city-states destroyed by luxury and the resultant social strife – so Phylarchus writing in the third century BC about Sybaris (Athen. 521c). But there are also traces of

¹⁶ Gallo (1993). ¹⁷ Schmitt-Pantel (1992), 439–66; (1997).

¹⁸ On Roman sumptuary laws, see Gell. 2.24; Macr. 3.17.11ff.; Tac. *Ann.* 3.52–5; Dio 61.10.3; Suet. *Div. Aug.* 34. For (standard) complaints about luxury, see e.g. Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* 33.150; Juv. 10.72–81 ('bread and circuses'). See Toner (1995), ch. 7.

¹⁹ See e.g. Plato, *Rep.* 403dff.; 564ff.; Isocr. *Philipp.* 107c; Xen. *Cyroped.*, passim; Passerini (1934); Bordes (1982).

a 'Roman' line of thought in the advancement of Homeric, heroic society as an ideal against which to measure the decadent present. If the scale and nature of the phenomenon are harder to assess in the Greek than in the Roman context, this is because much of the evidence comes to us second-hand, in fragments, and through the agency of Athenaeus, a Greek in culture and sentiment but a citizen of the Roman empire.

(i) Greece

Homer saw that moderation is the first and most appropriate virtue of the young, harmoniously joining together and enhancing all that is fair; and since he wished to implant it anew from beginning to end so that his heroes might spend their leisure and their endeavour on noble deeds and be helpful to each other and share their goods with one another, he made their way of living frugal and self-sufficient. For he considered that passions and pleasures become very strong, and that foremost among them and innate are the desires for eating and drinking, and that they who abide resolutely in frugality are well-disciplined and self-controlled in all the exigencies of life. (Athen. 8e–9b)

The Homeric heroes, according to Athenaeus, practised frugality and self-sufficiency, virtues that are linked with moderation, generosity and sharing. Their cereal and meat diet was good for the body and the soul, keeping the passions in check. Women and young boys are safe, in Homer. The heroes did drink wine, but in moderation, mixed and consumed with the food. Each hero had his own cup, and could thus control his drinking; he did not swill his wine from a common bowl. There was music and dancing at the heroic symposium, but singers and dancers were self-restrained. The heroes prepared their own meal, it took place without chaplets, unguents and incense, and the meat was divided equally. Athenaeus contrasts the behaviour of Homer's heroes with the primitive 'first men', who behaved like animals. Food was short, everyone grabbed what he could, violence was endemic. Eating was originally the setting for crime. Such was the state of the world before Demeter ushered in the civilising cereal. This contrast is made only in passing. In general, Athenaeus is intent on confronting the idealised world of the heroes with a degenerate present.

But which present? Not apparently Athenaeus' own present, but rather that of his principal sources, the comic poets, philosophers and sundry 'technical' writers of an earlier era, namely, the Greek late classical and early Hellenistic world. Athenaeus shows an almost total lack of interest in Roman sources and Roman history. If his 'then' is

emphatically Greek, his 'now' also lacks any clear Roman reference or resonance. Athenaeus seems to have thought of the period from classical and Hellenistic Greece to his own day as a continuum, and the literature of that period as relevant equally to the late second century AD and to the fourth century BC. It does not necessarily follow that his account of Homeric society was completely derivative. In particular, it is not impossible that he was himself the source of the claim that recurs in his account of the heroic age, that Homer was himself a critic of contemporary *mores*.

The late classical and early Hellenistic period witnessed a major transformation of the diet and food preparation and consumption habits of Greeks everywhere. An *haute cuisine* developed, marked by elaborate, specialist cooking, imported foods (and cooks), conspicuous consumption by the rich and an explosion of a wide range of 'technical literature' on food and cookery and ancillary subjects such as farming and health.²⁰ The 'food revolution' and its impact on Greek culture and opinion at the time merit a thorough assessment. For the moment the issue that concerns us is whether the response of Greek writers and thinkers of the period to these developments involved a confrontation between heroic past and contemporary present at the expense of the latter.

It is possible to establish the existence of such a discourse, but not its importance. Too much literature is lost, and we depend too heavily on Athenaeus, a deeply problematic source. He cites texts, which are very often otherwise unknown, in a casual and haphazard way. Some of them have only a loose connection to the subject (they are there to demonstrate the speaker's erudition), others are apparently cited to support a case (they often fail to do so), but certainly not as parts of a logically structured argument. And they are decontextualised, so that the purpose of the author in question cannot be recovered. The technique can be studied in the case of excerpts from surviving works (a tiny minority of the dozens that are cited). If we were dependent on Athenaeus for our knowledge of Plato's *Republic*, we would possess only a minor part of an intriguing exchange between Glaucon and Socrates, in the course of which Socrates presents two dietary regimes for his new citizens, one frugal, labelled by Glaucon a pig's dinner, and one luxurious, a civilised

²⁰ A long list of works, many of them known only by name, can be recovered from the pages of Athenaeus. The considerable number devoted to food and eating were of course, directly or indirectly, celebrating the new art of gastronomy. See Degani (1990); (1991). Among the more colourful and famous of these works was the *Hedupatheia* or the *Life of Luxury* of the Sicilian Archestratus, of which work Athenaeus preserves 61 fragments. See Wilkins and Hill (1994).

dinner, to meet Glaucon's requirements (*Rep.* 372a). As it is, Athenaeus fails to quote a highly relevant text in which Plato prescribes a regime for warrior athletes, which follows Homer's prescriptions for his heroes:

You know that when his heroes are campaigning he doesn't give them fish to feast on, even though they are by the sea in the Hellespont, nor boiled meat either. Instead he gives them only roasted meat, which is the kind most easily available to soldiers, for it's easier nearly everywhere to use fire alone than to carry pots and pans. . . . Nor I believe does Homer mention sauces anywhere. Indeed, aren't even the other athletes aware that if one's body is to be kept in good condition, one must abstain from all such things? (*Rep.* 404b-5a)

This is I believe the first comment on the Homeric diet in a moralistic context in extant Greek literature, though it presumably had predecessors. Athenaeus does make use, though in a tantalisingly oblique and abrupt way, of a lost philosophical work, *On the Pleasure and the Good* by the third-century Stoic philosopher Chrysippus. One fragment conveys the message that philosophical schools, specifically the Academy and Lyceum, were hostile to culinary pretensions and tricks (137e-f), and others suggest that Chrysippus was prone to making comparisons with the regime of the Homeric heroes in a moralistic mode (9c, 18b). His work may well have followed up Plato's charge in the *Gorgias* that cooking, like rhetoric, pursues pleasure rather than virtue.

What of the comic poets, much cited by Athenaeus? It is hardly to be expected that comic poets would make common cause with philosophers. Yet one of Athenaeus' learned diners, Plutarch, is given these words:

Whoever wrote *Beggars*, generally attributed to Chionides, says that when the Athenians set before the Dioscuri a collation in the prytaneion, they place upon the tables 'cheese and a barley-puff, ripe olives, and leeks' in memory of their ancient discipline . . . Solon prescribes that a barley-cake be served to all who dine at the prytaneion, but that a wheat loaf may be added on feast days, thus following Homer. (Athen. 137e)

The connection between Solon and Homer, however, is made by Athenaeus' spokesman, Plutarch, not by the poet.²¹ In general, it would be rash to ascribe to comic poets, on the basis of isolated fragments in Athenaeus, a sustained attack on their contemporaries for substituting luxury and extravagance for antique frugality and self-control. Satire of absurdly pretentious cooks, gourmands and food-experts, and of

²¹ In case we were tempted to read Plutarch as an old-fashioned moralist, elsewhere in the same speech he is given the role of mocking the poverty of the Athenian diet, with the aid of selected passages of comedy. (See Athen. 137c-d.)

ostentatious rich men, and occasional references to the diet or behaviour of Homer's heroes, as once in a fragment of Eubulus,²² comes to rather less than this. Comedy can be didactic,²³ but it is full of cross-currents and its messages are hard to pin down. What for example is to be made of the frequently voiced criticism in Athenaeus of exiguous Athenian diets? The Athenians may have learned refinement, but they still ate small and cheap. So say observers. Who is the object of satire here? Who scores highest in comparisons between 'small-tabled, leaf-eating' Greeks, meat-eating Macedonians and Thracians, extravagant Romans and magnificent and luxurious Persians? Other comic fragments appear to be highlighting a growing divide between rich and poor, visible in the different foods they buy and consume, but this seems to fit more naturally into a democratic rather than an oligarchic/aristocratic social critique, and does not imply an appeal to the high authority of a Homer or Solon.

Thus far we have seen some evidence that Greek writers and thinkers moralised on the subject of food and eating through making adverse comparisons between their own society and an idealised heroic age, but little to suggest that they did this on a grand scale, at a level comparable with the Romans. We have still to ask where Athenaeus' description and assessment of Homeric society come from. This is obscure, but he did provide one clue, in citing by name a discussion by Dioscurides, introduced simply as a pupil of Isocrates, the celebrated teacher of rhetoric at Athens in the mid-fourth century.²⁴ The reference to Dioscurides is intriguing, because it seems to involve Homer himself in a critique of drunkenness. It is a feature of Athenaeus' account of heroic society that Homer is presented as a social critic of his age, promoting an idealised image of the heroes at dinner with the aim of influencing the behaviour of his contemporaries. There is an alternative to the assumption that Athenaeus' discussion is completely derivative, namely, that he himself made a contribution, including this crucial ingredient. Turning Homer into a Roman-style moralist was, one might say, Athenaeus' solution to the riddle that exercised various Hellenistic scholars, of the conflicting

²² Athen. 25c, from Eubulus; see Hunter (1983), 219–20, with bibl. ²³ Cf. Hunter (1985).

²⁴ Athen. 11a–b. The identity of Dioscurides is disputed, as is the authorship of the treatise 'On the life of the Heroes in Homer' from which Athenaeus is held to have drawn his discussion with the same title. See Schwartz, *RE* 5.1128–9; Jacoby on *FGrH* 594 F 8. Athenaeus may have drawn some details of his account from the early third-century BC historian Dicaearchus, a pupil of Aristotle. See Porph. *De Abst.* 4.2, with Athen. 12d–13a. But Dicaearchus appears to be interested in the reign of Kronos. For Alciphron, *On the Truphe of the Ancients* (second century AD) as a source for Athenaeus, see Athenaeus, Loeb edn. 5, p. 333.

versions of the heroic diet in Homer. The heroes of the *Iliad* eat only plain and noble fare, roast meat and bread, whereas in the *Odyssey* their diet is more varied, including vegetables, fruit, fish, birds and boiled meat. Homer is represented as trying to protect heroes engaged in active warfare from the charge of gourmandise:

But the poet is silent about the eating of vegetables, fish and birds because that is a mark of greed, and also because it would be unseemly for the heroes to spend time in preparing them for the table, since he judges it beneath the level of heroic and godlike deeds. (Athen. 25d)²⁵

The question whether Athenaeus or one of his sources foisted on Homer the role of social critic remains problematic. The general point seems secure, that moralistic attitudes that were characteristically Roman were already circulating in late classical and Hellenistic Greece.

(ii) Rome

Men's bodies were still sound and strong; their food was light and not spoiled by art and luxury, whereas when they began to seek dishes not for the sake of removing but of rousing the appetite, and devised countless sauces to whet their gluttony – then what before was nourishment to a hungry man became a burden to the full stomach. (Seneca, *Epistles* 95.15)

When I am reminded by the records of many writers that it was a matter of pride with our forefathers to give their attention to farming, from which pursuit came Quinctius Cincinnatus, summoned from the plough to the dictatorship to be the deliverer of a beleaguered consul and his army . . . from which pursuit came also Gaius Fabricius and Curius Dentatus, the one after his rout of Pyrrhus from the confines of Italy, the other after his conquest of the Sabines, tilling the captured land which they had received in the distribution of seven iugera to a man, with an energy not inferior to the bravery in arms with which they had gained it . . . I understand that yesterday's morals and strenuous manner of living are out of tune with our present extravagance and devotion to pleasure. All of us who are heads of families have quit the sickle and the plough and have crept within the city-walls; and we ply our hands in the circuses and theatres rather than in the grainfields and vineyards; and we gaze in astonished admiration at the posturings of effeminate males, because they counterfeit by their womanish motions a sex which nature has denied to men, and deceive the eyes of the spectators . . . (Columella, *De Agricultura* 1, pref. 10–21, excerpts)

²⁵ For Hellenistic discussions of the Homeric diet, especially the question of fish, see Schmidt (1976), 182–7; Davidson (1997), 16–17. One commentator, Aristarchus, suggested that the diet of the heroes in the *Iliad* reflected Homer's interest in avoiding *mikroprepes*, the demeaning, any suggestion of the plebeian.

Romans were determined critics of their own society. Their literature, here represented by two spokesmen from the mid-first century AD, one technical (Columella), the other philosophical (Seneca), has a pronounced moralistic tone, as writers routinely exposed the corrupt values of their society and sought to explain their origin. Between the age of the elder Cato (d. 150 BC) and the Augustan Principate (31 BC – AD 14), moralists formulated a myth of archaic Rome which was centred on the idea that their empire-building ancestors lived lives of extreme poverty and frugality, and they confronted this legendary world with their own society, decadent from top to bottom. The Romans were victims of their own success. Once the last major foreign foe, Carthage, was eliminated, the austere self-discipline of their ancestors was abandoned under the impact of the inflowing riches of empire, which fuelled the growth of avarice, ambition and the love of luxury.²⁶

Frugality could be represented as a general virtue, as in Cicero's claim that, while being rooted in temperance, it encompassed the three other cardinal virtues of fortitude, justice and prudence (*Tusculan Disputations* 3.17). But its primary reference was to the individual's attitude to food, its nature and quantity, and the way in which it was produced and consumed (this last is the subject of the citation of Seneca above). As Valerius Maximus wrote (2.5.5): 'The great simplicity of the ancient Romans in eating is the clearest gauge of their civilisation and self-restraint.'

Frugality was an appropriate virtue in a people whose life was necessarily devoted to the raising of crops for their own consumption. Self-employment and self-sufficiency were of the essence. Food was grown to satisfy basic wants, and no more. For this purpose a small property would suffice: in the tradition, early Roman farmers worked properties of from two *iugera* (the *heredium* established by Romulus) to seven. The food too was basic: *puls*, a meal porridge made by boiling ground cereals, especially *far*, in water, supplemented by dry legumes. As befitted a pious people, their staple food accumulated religious functions. The roasted grains were beaten and ground. Salt was added to the flour, *farina*, thus obtained to make *mola salsa*, essential for sacrifices: *immolare*, 'to sacrifice', involved the sprinkling of the victim with *mola salsa*. *Far* gave its name to *confarreatio*, a solemn marriage ceremony celebrated by the pontifex maximus and not countenancing divorce: the bride was given a cake of

²⁶ Goddard (1994a); Toner (1995). For frugality, see Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* 18.6–15, 19–21, 24, 32, 35, 41–3, 83–4, 107; Athen. 274. And nn. 18, 27.

far. This way of life was practised by leaders as well as followers, by exemplary farmer/generals such as Columella's trio, Cincinnatus (worked four *iugera* of land, elected dictator twice), Manius Curius Dentatus (seven *iugera*, conqueror of the Sabines), and C. Fabricius (a humble shack, conqueror of Pyrrhus).²⁷ It did not matter that image did not match reality and could not have done. A stark contrast between past and present could be assumed. The achievement of past Romans and the decadence and corruption of the generations of the present and immediate past were only too visible. So were the consequences associated therewith – endemic political strife, repeated civil war, the collapse of the Republican order, the arrival of monarchy.

Nor did it matter – and this is more interesting – that the spokesmen for frugality and the traditional morality in general did not adopt the life-style of their celebrated ancestors or preach the desirability of its adoption. The gap between contemporary Romans and 'the other', in this case the legendary heroes of early Rome, was not to be bridged. A life of poverty and full-time farming was not contemplated by the elite of the late Republic and early Principate. Thus, for example, Columella, a champion of frugality, as we saw, has limited objectives. In the preface to his work on agriculture, he can be seen fashioning an 'honourable compromise' between the polar opposites of a legendary past of rustic simplicity, and a corrupt present marked by the extravagant urban living and the reckless disdain for agriculture of absentee landowners. Columella did not call upon the propertied classes to abandon their city-based political careers and to till minuscule farms, but rather to take an active and informed interest in their (ample) estates. Meanwhile frugality (as we saw in Cicero) was presented in certain contexts as a general virtue equivalent to moderation and self-restraint such as even a rich man could aspire to possess.

CONCLUSION

We gain access to ancient societies and cultures mainly through the mediation of a rather narrow range of literary spokesmen, drawn from the social and political elite of the cities. Consciously or not, they are busy constructing images of themselves, and contrasting them favourably in terms of civilisation and way of life with images of others. Food

²⁷ Val. Max. 4.4.11, with 4.3.5; 4.4.6–7; Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* 18.18. On the evolution of the Roman diet, see Pucci (1989).

is often at the centre of the confrontation, because the food we eat and the way we eat it are an integral part of social behaviour and cultural patterns, which themselves differ in ways small or large.

The factual base for these broad comparisons is often insecure, for there was ideology at work, sometimes in the service of practical political ends. Greek/barbarian polarity was more than a tool of foreign policy, but it was certainly exploited and popularised by Greeks anxious to rally support against the Persian invader.²⁸ Romans, once themselves classed as barbarians, and educated Greeks who found it advantageous to be friends of Rome, used the same polarity to explain and justify their conquest of the world away from the Mediterranean.

The Roman polity was more inclusive than the Greek, built to expand. This is the source of a problem facing writers such as Strabo, that of keeping the cultural stereotypes alive while the barbarian world was succumbing to 'Romanisation' before their eyes. A modern historian seeking to understand cultural transformation within the Roman empire may well find the image of spectrum or continuum more relevant than that of binary opposition.

In addition, the broad distinctions between Greeks/Romans and barbarians, civilised and uncivilised, were not the only ones that bulked large in their thinking, nor did they appeal to everyone. The Greeks in particular were first and foremost men of their own polis rather than ethnocentric. Like everyone else they preferred their own customs, as Herodotus put it (3.38). Few Greeks opposed the invading Persian king Xerxes with conviction, and some fought together with him. In fourth-century Greece, the 'Greek crusade' manufactured by the Macedonians against the Persian empire was a damp squib.

Finally, the image of alterity might be directed inwards, acting as a marker of social and moral change and conflict within a community, when, for example, the norms and hierarchies of a traditional aristocratic society were perceived to be under threat in a time of social and economic change. The creation of the myth of early Rome as a society marked by the stern morality and austere life-style of its citizenry was an aspect of the response of conservative Romans to the transformation of social practices and values, as the wealthy, from both old and new families, conspicuously consumed the riches of empire.

Moralistic archaising of this sort was a Roman speciality, but there was a Greek counterpart in the construction of a legendary heroic past

²⁸ Hall (1989).

where old-fashioned values prevailed. This is first visible in the extant literature in Plato – drawing presumably from an earlier source. In general, philosophers were the most conspicuous critics of luxury and extravagance, through their treatises, and, in the case of certain Cynics (most famously, Diogenes) and Pythagoreans (such as Diodorus of Aspendus) in their life-style. How far the then/now contrast coloured other literary genres is unclear. The case of comedy is especially problematic. If comedy had didactic purpose, the message is hard to identify, especially on the basis of fragments separated from their original context, or given a new context by the idiosyncratic later writer who preserved them. A more promising place to look for the source of Athenaeus' picture of the heroic age and the mind of Homer is in the attention given by late classical and early Hellenistic commentators, historians and grammarians to Homeric and archaic Greek society.