A COMPANION TO FOOD IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

EDITED BY JOHN WILKINS AND ROBIN NADEAU

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Abbreviations

AE  1888–. Année épigraphique.
CMG  1908–. Corpus Medicorum Graecorum. Leipzig.
MAMA  1928–. Monumenta Asiae Minoris Antiquae. Manchester.
SEG  Pleket, H.W., Stroud, R.S., ed. 1923–. Supplementum epigraphicum Graecum. Amsterdam.
TAM  Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften. 1901–. Tituli Asiae Minoris. Vienna.
Introduction

John Wilkins and Robin Nadeau

This is a book about antiquity, but not as conventionally defined. We extend the survey to include Byzantium, Islam, the Middle Ages, and China, as we will go on to explain. The book also belongs to the nascent discipline of Food Studies, which is establishing itself through such bodies as the Institut Européen d’Histoire et des Cultures de l’Alimentation, based in Tours, France, and its associated journal Food and History, the Centre for Food Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, and in a range of journals and publications, among them Petits Propos Culinaires, Food Culture and Society and Scholliers & Clafin (2012), which gives a bibliographical overview of the subject.

A French contribution to food studies will surprise few, nor the declaration by UNESCO of the French meal as part of immaterial world heritage. In an attempt to locate Greek and Roman food, the editors debate robustly in the following chapter the notion of a ‘great food culture’. Is the food of the ancients important because it is old and foundational in certain senses? Is it also gastronomic (a term apparently coined by Athenaeus of Naucratis in the second/third century AD)? Here we are talking about how another culture, such as Greek or Chinese, is important to us: that is, the reception of that culture as influential in other cultures. Few people expect to find a British restaurant when they travel internationally, but many will find a French or Italian restaurant. Many factors may determine this phenomenon, but the production and serving of the food is undoubtedly one of them.

The study of food and drink within the disciplines of Classics and Ancient History has developed strongly in the past four decades, from a number of perspectives. In anthropology, Detienne & Vernant (1989 [1st French edn 1979]) have been most influential. On the history of the symposium Murray (1990a) and Murray & Técușan (1995) made enormous strides, while on food and dining Slater (1991) and Wilkins, Harvey & Dobson (1995) tried to give different approaches to the subject. For Greece and for Rome Dalby (1996, 2000b) approached social history from a text and lexical perspective.
Commensality has been powerfully treated by Schmitt Pantel (1992 [2nd edn 2011]) and Donahue (2004b), and table manners by Nadeau (2010a). Much work has been done on agriculture (including Forbes & Foxhall (1982); see Kron in this volume). The supply of grain is treated by Garnsey (1988), Erdkamp (2005), Oliver (2007), and Moreno (2007). Archeology has made major advances (Pitts and Robinson & Rowan in this volume), in particular on the ancient Aegaean meal rituals (Halstead & Barrett, 2004a; Mee & Renard, 2007; Hitchcock, Laffineur & Crowley (2008). Food in literature has been studied by Gowers (1993), Wilkins (2000a) and De Ornellas e Castro (2011), while discourses of luxury and desire are eloquently explored by Davidson (1997). A general overview may be seen in the work of Garnsey (1999) and Wilkins & Hill (2006).

The chapters that follow set out to give an overview of the topic, and then to add something important to the author, whether a particular example, a particular argument, or an unfamiliar new direction. We have tried to move somewhat beyond the current state of knowledge. Needless to say we do not cover all periods from the Bronze Age to the end of the Middle Ages, nor do we cover all regions. Such a geographical coverage may be found in the work of Horden & Purcell (2000). We have little, for example, on Babylon or Persia, important ancient cultures included for example in the work of Wilkins, Harvey & Dobson (1995). We do discuss Roman Britain but have little on the influential provinces of North Africa or southern Gaul, on which much important work has been done. Geographically speaking, we have approached the matter in a different way. In attempting to escape from the standard problems of center and periphery in the Greco-Roman world, of Athens and Rome as powerful but atypical examples of centers of food consumption and of book production (and thereby of historical records), we have concentrated a section on Asia Minor and the Black Sea, drawing on a region that was peripheral and partly ‘not-Greek’ in the fifth century BC, but much more securely bound within the classical world by the time of Augustus, not least since Rome’s acquisition of the province of Asia in 133 BC was the latest in the surges of foreign wealth into Rome, which moralizing sources saw as the corruption of their ancient way of life, tempting them away from their diet of bacon, turnips and spelt porridge. Braund and Mitchell combine geographical awareness and textual analysis with archeology and epigraphy, greatly expanding what the texts want to tell us. Mitchell, too, covers a broad time period, identifying a stronger Greek influence on food in Asia Minor than Rome was to produce. His wide time frame also takes him up to very late antiquity, leading nicely to Caseau’s chapter on Byzantium, which itself provides a rich balance to Laurioux’s chapter on the mediaeval West.

Though we have chapters on archeology and anthropology, texts remain important, as do ideas of identity and commensality that help to place the foods in the cultures. Sharing in sacrifice helps to strengthen group bonds, as does the subsequent commensality, with the final symposium and entertainments of the convivium introducing philosophy, poetry, and entertainment.

This volume tries to encounter all phases of food eating: production, distribution, preparation, and consumption, and technologies related to them. Our main focus is on the cultural aspects related to food, but one cannot deny the role played by nature in the process of food choices (Horden & Purcell, 2000). Food studies is far from being simple and one dimensional, but it is the purpose of a book such as this to generalize where extended comments are strictly needed to make numerous distinctions between time periods, age, sexual and social groups, even cities and regions. This is the purpose of notes and reading suggestions. In fact, people tend to associate limited types of food and
custom with precise social groups and cultures, but it is never really this simple in reality. Food consumption is not a static cultural component but part of a constant negotiation between the past, innovation, and foreign influences (Dietler, 2007, 224).

The distribution of the chapters can be somewhat deceptive, but it is our claim that food cultures were more porous than it appears. Studies on cross-cultural exchanges are blossoming. If foreign influences such as the introduction of the dining couch in ancient Greece are more widely known (Dentzer, 1982) in food studies, cultural exchanges in ancient societies need to be considered on a bigger scale (Broekaert, Nadeau & Wilkins, 2015). Indeed, the exchange of goods (ingredients and tableware) and information (recipes and techniques) is a natural cultural phenomenon from the beginning of human-kind. Even the food culture of China borrowed ingredients from outside throughout its history (Chang, 1977b, 7).

In booksellers today, we find many more books on food and eating than the ancients ever imagined. Does this matter? Is this just a trend? It is more than that, since we can trace cookery literature way back to the fifth/fourth century BC on the testimony of Plato. Are these books a manifestation of a real “prise de conscience” of the importance of choosing food and of its preparation? Or could it be just another way for bourgeois people to display their wealth and create behaviors which discriminate social classes? One could argue that, after the industrialization of food production, people became more critical of the achievements of modern science and modern production processes and its impact on the human body. However, industrialization of food production must be considered in its historical context of optimism followed by critiques of modernization. In the 20th century, mass production was the answer to the food crisis after the Second World War. It was an era of great industrial optimism. Today, that euphoria is coming to an end. “Real” food that tastes better is the new motto of the Western World (Waters, 2007). This new way of understanding food comes from a new way of apprehending the world, more critical about the outcomes of development through Western models, even if we can find traces in earlier periods of gourmets who favored tastes of fresh and ripe food items (Archestratus of Gela (fourth century BC), Nicolas de Bonnefons (seventeenth century AD)). We have to remind ourselves that some people in many cultures pleaded in favor of artificial and modified flavors, blending them to create something new. Ancient Rome and the medieval kingdoms are good examples (Montanari, 2010, 68–9). Taste must be understood as part of the perception process of the self and of the group (Bourdieu, 1986).

Food reflects a culture perfectly, as in a mirror; food gives access to the human mind, and to its social and cultural constructions. Tastes and food preferences are socially constructed. Since food selection, cuisine, and eating behaviors are so closely linked with society, economy, and culture, food becomes a privileged object to allow access to ancient cultures and thoughts. However, food should not be taken in evolutionary terms, except perhaps when technical discoveries such as razor technology or pottery (for cooking and conservation) made a huge impact on food preparation and human diet. Each society is equally complex in social terms and, in the same way, the relation between food and society assumes the same importance in all of them.

Food choice is a way to express self and/or group identity. Such choices can be prescribed, within a scientific discourse, in a philosophical and religious tradition, but also through the channel of pleasure. Choosing food then involves showing affiliation. The scientific discourse has its own language and principles: humor, balance, and digestion in antiquity, calories, fat, carbohydrates, proteins, and vitamins today. In both, then and
now, moral constraints and self-demeanor are promoted through leading Western philosophical and religious traditions, as also within medical discourse. Epicureanism is an old school of thought from ancient Greece that also finds its followers today (Scade in this volume). In fact, each culture, each social class, comes up with its range of selection criteria: concerns such as taste, origins, and purity are equally important in Rome for example (see Galen On the Powers of Foods, Powell, 2003). Differences may lie in reasons used to explain such choices, reasons in line with a precise social and historical context. For example, in an urban setting such as the city of Rome, pollution was already a concern (Galen On the Powers).

Eating lies at the intersection of biology, society, and culture. While it is true that the environment provides food for the local population (see Harris, 1985), food that is good to eat is also food that is good to think with, as the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss observed (1962). Humans do not simply eat what is available to them. Tastes and distastes are created by culture. Many potential foodstuffs surrounding us are frowned upon, since culture and social expectations play a big role in food selection. A good example is perhaps modern Britain. As an island surrounded by great fishing potential, one would expect that fish and seafood would play a large role in local British cuisine. But this is not the case. Squid abounds off the north Scottish coast, but is rarely found on Scottish plates. Most of the production of fish and seafood is sent to foreign markets. Instead, meat plays symbolically and economically a much bigger role in Britain’s plates, for cultural, economic, and historical reasons. Another example concerns buffalos in the American Mid-West of the nineteenth century. White settlers replaced buffalos with herds of cattle. Even though beef became then commonly available to Native Americans, beef was often ignored by them since it had no social and religious place within their thought system (Wilkins, 2000b, 214, from Douglas, 1987).

Care is therefore needed when studying food in any given society. On the one hand, food selection is greatly influenced by the availability of local products, but its incorporation into the people’s diet is not automatic (de Garine, 1979). On the other hand, locally produced food had to be introduced into collective belief systems to be socially acceptable, since food is an ideal medium of self or social-projection (Bourdieu, 1986; Corbeau & Poullain, 2002, 69–70, 110; Erdkamp, 2012b, 5). We have access to little objective description of reality to aid our understanding of ancient food cultures. For instance, food is highly symbolic in epic poetry and, if it gives an idea of some eating norms, it is representative only in part of reality. One of the most reliable sources comes from the doctor Galen, in On the Powers of Foods from the late second century AD. He makes a clear distinction between what is simply edible and what is more socially acceptable (see Leigh and Wilkins in this volume).

Nonetheless, the environment must be taken into consideration, since noticeable differences can be observed between mountain sites and plains, coastal and deep forest surroundings. The Phoenicians lived mainly in cities and had an economy based on trading, while the Greeks, living in mountains and plains as well as cities, are known as farmers and breeders. This reality is also conveyed in their belief system: the Greeks worshipped gods such as Demeter, Dionysos, Poseidon, and Heracles for cereals, wine, fish and meat (Lucian, Icar. 27). The Celts shared a lifestyle and a set of beliefs oriented towards the forest: hunting, gathering, and pastoralism. It comes as no surprise that food privileged in Christian literature is associated with the Mediterranean regions where it was developed: bread, wine, and olive oil. However, in publications such as this, it is difficult to take into consideration at length differences over time, or variations between
different cities or regions, regular intakes of food and feasts, even differences between rich and poor. We have to admit that it is often difficult – even hazardous – to focus on chronology in antiquity, since we only have access to partial sources of information, scattered over space and time in a very uneven and more or less unpredictable fashion. We would also like to remind our readers that cultural and administrative boundaries are quite elusive and permeable over time.

One distinctive habit of the human race is to eat food together as meals; this makes eating a highly structured and ritualized social activity, with symbolic components. Many studies in anthropology, the social sciences, and, more recently, history, acknowledge the central social role played by food (Becker, 2012). To be fair, the study of food in ancient societies has a long history, but mainly within an antiquarian perspective (Lombardo, 1995, 256–7). Food was a category of knowledge in ancient times, even more evidently amongst intellectuals of Hellenistic and Imperial times. It was a great source of inspiration for ‘encyclopedists’ such as Pliny the Elder and Athenaeus of Naucratis (see Murray and Nadeau (Cookery Books) in this volume). Food and belles-lettres came together again in the works of enthusiasts such as Grimod de la Reynière and Brillat-Savarin in the early nineteenth century. In continuation with this tradition of food as knowledge, our volume follows current trends in ancient food studies, developed in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, which consider food and eating behaviors as a central social, but also cultural, economic, and political, component of society. Adopting a more holistic view of ancient food studies is a good thing to our mind. If our ambition is to reach for a global understanding of food and society in the ancient classical world, broadly understood, readers may feel dissatisfied by a lack of detail from time to time.

However, food studies in ancient times are at a crossing point. New techniques such as bioarcheology, archeobotany, and zooarcheology allow us to compare remains with ideologically based texts on which food studies in ancient times have been mainly based until now. However, if archeology helps us to have a more quantitative approach to ancient food, literature remains the best way to a qualitative evaluation (Halstead & Isaakidou, 2004; see Robinson & Rowan and Pitts in this volume). Since the same ingredients can be used for basic and luxury dishes, traces of the foodstuffs are not enough to reconstruct the social meaning and use of any ingredients. For instance, in Athenaeus, we learn that snow/ice is a refreshing luxury good in Greece and Rome, but difficult to obtain and to preserve in most regions. It is unnecessary to point out that traces of ice cannot be found in situ, but texts and containers can. An interpretation based solely on literature can lead the way to misconceptions too. For instance, Nadeau (2015a) recently argued that the general opinion on the introduction of chicken in Greece was misled by text-based analysis only. Indeed, the modern scholar must not rely on a single source of information to have a clear view of the realia. Although some foodstuffs can be found and analyzed today in archeological records, the whole span of ingredients used by the ancients cannot be uncovered, since some can more easily be conserved and others will quickly perish. It is also often difficult to assess how these ingredients were used, what the recipes were, what the proportions were, which dishes were privileged by some social categories but unreachable or untouchable for other social groups (age group, gender group, ethnic group, and so on). Were these recovered ingredients used for a single feast or over a long period of time? Are they representative of the consumption of a single type of individual or an entire community? It is also very difficult to reconstruct the structure or the sequence of daily food intake from the ingredients. As argued by Mary Douglas,
one meal or one food intake must be analyzed in relation with all other meals and food intakes (Douglas, 1971).

The evidence of jugs, cups, and other tableware, sometimes found in graves and projecting high social status, suggests that food consumption, and most probably the social gatherings of people eating together, is a way to display wealth, social, and political status. It is both an expression of a social class claiming preeminence and a way to distinguish individuals from others of lower rank. Eating together and food selection can designate both horizontal integration and vertical differentiation (Halstead & Barrett, 2004b, 3). Archeologists can even see evidence of competitive feasting, of wealthy prominent individuals who acquire sympathy and political predominance by offering feasts to the community. Such sites for large-scale feasting in Cretan and Mycenaean societies have been proposed by Bendall (2004). However, food studies in prehistoric and ancient societies remain a speculative field.

Humans are omnivorous. It is well known that the first human societies were nomadic groups of hunter-gatherers that migrated following food resources. Although meat seems to have had a great symbolic and social importance for them, most of the nutritional intake probably came from plants (Perlès, 1996, 31). In the Middle Paleolithic (200 000–40 000 BCE), Homo sapiens neanderthalensis and Homo sapiens sapiens efficiently hunted big mammals with sophisticated techniques, while beating techniques and fishing became a common activity in the Recent Paleolithic (40 000–10 000), with hooks and harpoons. Grand-scale successful hunts led to the need for food conservation: drying, smoking, and freezing techniques (in winter). A hunter-gatherer society is characterized by periods of feasting around hugely successful hunts to make reserves in body fat and periods of unsuccessful hunts and lack of food. The relation between plenty and scarcity is integrated in human activities and in mental and social representations of them from those times onward.

As presented in a recent study, cooking, made possible by the domestication of fire, between 700 000 and 400 000 years ago, made us human. Cooking allowed the consumption of new products that were difficult to digest, even some that were previously toxic. The biggest benefit was an easier assimilation of nutrients into the body that liberated energy normally used for digestion for the development of the human brain (Wrangham, 2009). Greek and Roman doctors from Hippocrates to Galen considered cooking food as part of the digestive process. Fire makes an important marker between nature and culture. It is the starting point of cuisine and cooking techniques. It is no coincidence that the ancient Greeks considered fire as a powerful gift from the titan Prometheus, who stole it from the gods and gave it to humans. However, as a result, humans were punished and had, from that time forward, to prepare and cook their own meals (Hesiod, Theog. 511–70; Vernant, 1989). Aristotle states that grilled meat came before boiled meat and reflects on reasons why some vegetables are boiled and others grilled (Pr. 20. 923a17-29; Philoch. FGrH 328 F 173; Var. L 5.109). This makes sense in the evolution of the human species, since meat grilled on spits is likely to have been in fashion long before the invention of clay and cooking pots. Still, many cultures came up with other ways to cook meat: boiling techniques, where heated rocks were put into a container made of wood or leather; à l'étouffé in a hole dug in the ground covered afterwards; or meat cooked in a paunch or in a pelt and so on. Some scholars claimed that the anteriority of grilled meat is proved in ancient Greece by the fact that Homer describes only grilled meat (Reinach, 1996, 563 [first publ. 1923]). However, we should not take this as an empirical description of reality, but rather as a symbolic presentation of
sacrificial meat in a highly idealized society. This symbolic distinction also played a major part in Lévi-Strauss’s studies on the distinction between the raw and the cooked (1963).

All agree in considering the “invention of agriculture” – which, one would assume, was not invented overnight but implied a long process of discoveries, selection of species, elaboration of techniques, and modification of lifestyle – as a major event that modified the way people ate, in agriculturally based societies at least. The Neolithic saw a modification of the entire fiber of society, since social and political structure is closely linked with the environment and the production system. Behind the domestication of plants and animals lies the desire to control production and supplies more efficiently, but, in reality, this economic specialization is also characterized by dependence on fewer foodstuffs. Around 10,000, agrarian societies emerged in the Fertile Crescent, in the Near and Middle East; domestication of plants and animals also took place independently in many cultures between 10,000 and 5000 BCE (Gebauer & Douglas Price, 1992; Perles, 1996, 42–3; Miller & Wetterstrom, 2000, 1124–6). Specific crops were selected and became central to groups of cultures: wheat in the Mediterranean, sorghum and millet in Africa, rice in Eastern Asia, and maize corn and beans in America. Social, economic, and religious life revolved around the cycle of seasons and food production: crop plantation and harvest time. Another invention came shortly after the more sedentary way of life associated with agriculture: pottery (c. 7000 BCE). It revolutionized food conservation and cooking techniques. This stability favored the expansion of larger communities, with the production of significant surpluses over time, and new methods and techniques for food conservation. Larger communities developed around the valleys in the Fertile Crescent and the Nile flooded by the rise of the Euphrates, Tigris, and Nile, leaving natural fertilizer behind. Irrigation systems were developed and contributed to better results in some regions. The combination of such favorable conditions facilitated the development of bigger cities and, eventually, regional and supraregional powers. With the appearance of cities, the political control and administration of food supplies became central in the development of kingship and empire (Pollock, 1999).

Sedentary life and agriculture coexisted, but also implied a new understanding of the world. In the Epic of Gilgamesh, Enkidu is civilized through eating the products of agriculture. Such a story places emphasis on the distinctive mindset and customs of pastoral and sedentary ways of life (Erdkamp, 2012b, 1–2). There is a correlation between one’s mind frame and the economic structure of society. In ancient Greece and the Roman world, wealth, power, and citizenship were based on land ownership and land production. The case is well known for classical Athens: landed property was a privilege for citizens. In Rome, treatises were written to educate gentlemen-farmers in how to get the most out of farming. The focus of these treatises was more on mass production and profit than on quality, despite what one might think. If, on the one hand, farmers tried to produce a wide variety of products in their garden that would be consumed within the household and complement their daily diet, vegetables, fruits, eggs, cheese, and so on, big farm owners would on the other focus their energy in mass producing one or some particular products to make a profit (Galen On the Powers 1.13). They could, or course, trade some of their surpluses against other needed goods or sell them. Stocked surpluses could be used to speculate on the price of grain (mainly). Large producers tried to sell their crops, kept in their private granaries, when the prices in the markets were at the highest. Many denounced speculation with food, since, in a way, the wealthy made bigger profits when the mass went hungry and the prices were high (Nadeau, 2009). We have to bear in mind that harvest failures appear to be quite
frequent in preindustrial societies and that the great majority of farmers possessed only a modest estate to rely upon (Gallant, 1991; Garnsey, 1999). Therefore, small farm owners were vulnerable to bad harvest and natural and political catastrophes out of their control. Common sense implied that a person had to store and make reserves in anticipation of bad crops and drought (Hesiod *Op.* 298–319). Thus, for ancient Greece for instance, undernourishment seems to be ubiquitous for the majority of the population (Galen *On the Powers*; Garnsey, 1999; see Hunter & Koukouzika in this volume). The prestige associated with land owning remained central in Western thought until perhaps very recently. It is central in the representation of the universe (religious beliefs and myths) and in the social and political structure of an agrarian society. In these, cultivating cereals is considered a sign of culture, opposed to pastoralism (Vidal-Naquet, 1986, 18–21). A paradoxical outcome was that hunting and horse riding became an activity commonly associated with the leisure class. Cereals were the main staple of the ancient diet; entire economies were based around its production, hence its symbolic and nutritive importance.

Husbandry is a major part of ancient economies too; some are almost exclusively based on it. Owning animals can be a sign of wealth. In classical Athens, the higher social groups are divided between those who own horses and those who own plough oxen. This is why farm animals are central in our documentation: in epic poetry, Homer’s heroes organized raids to steal them. Cattle, sheep, goats, and pigs also provide work power, wool, and milk, and even provide a food supplement in meat from time to time. Farm animals are an investment. No wonder it is such a big deal in literature when one or many are butchered and eaten. Eating meat is a sign of prestige. It is the main reason why Greek heroes at Troy ate meat: it symbolizes their social status and piety through blood-sacrifice (*thusia*). In fact, meat is such a big deal symbolically that farm animals have a big role in myths, religious beliefs, and social/religious rituals, even though it is only a small part of everyday food intake (Nadeau, 2012b, 97–9).

Killing an animal and cooking and sharing meat is a mystic experience, a confirmation of world order and life cycles. Sharing meat and eating it implies common shared beliefs between the providers and the eaters. In normal communities, killing a large animal often implies collaboration (between hunters in societies based on hunting) and, even more interestingly socially, a distribution of the meat, which creates and symbolizes the political and social structure within the community, between families, sexes and age groups, social statuses, and so on. The selection of the type of animal is symbolically important, but so are the cooking techniques used. The distinction between cooked food and raw meat delimits symbolically human groups and, more broadly, the civilized and the uncivilized (Detienne, 1979a, 88; Schmitt Pantel in this volume). Therefore, if not sacrificed properly, the edible becomes inedible (Vidal-Naquet, 1986, 23–4, 27). People sacrifice what will please the gods, which almost always equates to what they produce and what they eat. This will preserve the cosmic order in their mind.

Cuisine is a cultural marker, but we tend to overestimate the unity of a culture over all social classes, as Jack Goody reminds us (1982, 27). The physician Galen (*On the Powers*) gives a good example of this. If rich people can rely on luxury and foreign foodstuffs, paupers mostly rely on local products, and, as specified by Galen, often on what is socially considered lesser grades of food. Similarly, in ancient China, although a wide range of foodstuffs are known and can actually be eaten in a period of dearth, only a small proportion of these would be consumed in normal years. If humans choose their foods mostly for their symbolic significance, they can also, in times of crisis, be taken as
mere fuel, for sustenance and survival (Collin Bouffier & Sauner, 2006). People were aware of all the basic techniques to preserve food. Survival also implied that commoners adopt a frugal diet in anticipation of shortage and that the elite show its social, economic, and political superiority through grand eating (Chang, 1977b, 9, 15) Occasional communal feasting could bring them all together in a fashion that would explicitly or through inversion rituals display the social stratigraphy in force. Eating unites and creates distinction.

Antiquity saw the growth of many sects who rejected conventional regimes and social conventions in favor of a remote and abstinent lifestyle. The rejection of social values in favor of more spiritual and abstinent ways of life underlines the fact that food is not only a powerful social marker but also a “foreign component” that will create wanted and unwanted effects on the body and on the psyche. Medieval doctors and philosophers, following Galen, considered food as a ‘non-natural’, something beyond the ‘natural’ faculties of growth, nourishment, and reproduction, the product of culture (Montanari, 2010, 13, 41, 55–8). In order to create the desired effect, religious, philosophical, and/or medical authorities set out rules and advice on what should be eaten and avoided. What a person eats and drinks send a message to the community on his/her status and beliefs. The body conveys this message.

One tends to choose not only what tastes good, but also what makes one feel good with oneself in the eyes of the community, to a point that can sometimes be conducive to eating disorder. Bulimia and anorexia are well known problems in modern Western societies caused by the tensions between social ideals and self-acceptance. It is a reminder of the life of Christian hermits and saints who could ignore most basic instincts such as eating and procreating in order to access a higher spiritual experience. (See Caseau in this volume.) For centuries, eaters had to find a middle way between ideal/extreme eating behaviors and reality. Although frugality/asceticism became the model for Christians from the end of antiquity onwards, the majority of the population did not have eating disorder caused by extreme fasting. In fact, the vast majority was more preoccupied in getting food to survive than trying to abstain from it. Asceticism is a concern mostly for the wealthy and the extremely devoted.

Alcohol has been an important part of the human diet since primeval times. Besides its social importance, its psychotropic effect and other effects on brain and body, people must have known that it was sometimes a healthier alternative to water infected by harmful microorganisms and parasites. Alcoholic beverages have a nutritional content too (McGovern, 2009). Ethanol is one of the most controversial items in the human diet. Moreover, its consumption was regulated by rules, because of the intoxicating effects. In ancient India, the Dharmasutras forbid its consumption to Brahmans (Gaut. Dh. Su. II.20). If abstinence is a mark of the ethos of privileged classes, its consumption requires political maturity and an ethos that can be acquired only by well educated male citizens in ancient Greece, excluding children, women, and barbarians – that said, some categories can be exonerated, whores and courtesans for instance, since they have no good reputation to protect. It unites and differentiates those who may or may not drink it (Davidson, 1997; Garcia Soler, 2010).

Men and women, children and the elderly, are prescribed different food in accordance with their status. Ancient Greek and Roman physicians for instance discouraged wine drinking for women (Ath. Med. apud Orib. Inc. 21, 1–3). Although medical reasons are evoked to explain the “weak nature” of their bodies, social conventions based on moral issues can safely be assumed to be the real motive here. For the same reason, food craving
must be controlled for women (Xen. *Lac.* 1.3; Orib. *Inc.* 18.10). Deprivation symbolizes their social subordination. Moderation and exercises were prescribed to pregnant women by doctors who did not want to see them indulge in their craving for delicate food (Gal. apud Orib. *Inc.* 22.13–5). Food can have magical properties too. In the *Upanisads*, it is believed that the kind of food taken by a pregnant woman, but also when feeding the child after birth, will have an impact on the child (Brhad-aranyaka *Upanisad* VI.4.13-28; see Galen *On the Powers*) This is not such a crazy notion since we think similarly, with scientific studies to prove it. In Greek and Roman medicine, recommended food will also differ according to the season, the region, and body types (see Wilkins in this volume).

Viniculture was considered a sign of civilization for some, since it implied technical skills and knowledge. According to drinking manners, there are right and wrong ways to drink wine. To follow the rules is a way to show one’s identity and/or good education (Lissarrague, 1990; Hartog, 2001, 273–9; Garcia Soler, 2010). Drinking is another example of how it can be difficult to draw the line between social projections and reality through iconography and literary documentation. Wine is praised in such a way in Greek and Roman literature that we may ask ourselves if it is not masking common beverages such as milk and beer (Goupil, 2010; Auberger & Goupil, 2010). It implies a certain number of problems: for Greece and Rome, we have mainly access to description of highly ritualized meals in which wine plays an intricate part: the *symposion* and the *cena*. Other cultures, such as Mesopotamia and Egypt, were well known beer brewers and drinkers. Therefore, we must consider the possibility that Greeks and Romans, in presenting themselves as wine drinkers, did it as in a mirror, describing themselves as the exact opposite of beer drinking cultures. The Israelites presented themselves as wine drinkers (*Gen.* 9:20) in such a way that it was made clear that they did not like beer, unlike the Babylonians, who proudly drank it (Geller, 2004, 237–40; Erdkamp, 2012b, 7). The Mediterranean trilogy of bread, wine, and oil survived the fall of the Roman Empire in Western Europe and Byzantium, not only because the culture of these foodstuffs was deeply rooted in the economics and the diets of the people who lived in the regions previously under Roman control but also because they kept a symbolic image of civilization and Christianity, with its Mediterranean origins (Vidal-Naquet, 1986, 15–38; Montanari, 1999, 166–7; see also Auberger, 2010, 9–13; Auberger & Goupil, 2010).

Many scholars offer a romantic view of classical civilization, which can give the impression that these cultures were better prepared against bad harvests and climatic disasters. However, all aspects taken into consideration, ancient cultures seem to be a typical pre-industrial economy and social structure based on agriculture and pastoralism hugely dependent on the fairness of climatic conditions. A few years of bad harvests can mean social unrest and, even, the fall of great empires. Local administration, even huge empires, often steps in to plan ways to manage the production, processing, and distribution of food supplies in a way that will ensure social and political stability. The palatial economy offers a centralized controlled economy. Stocking the surpluses and an overview of trading ensured the stability of the economy, but also a redistribution of wealth that will guarantee the steadiness of social and political hierarchies, in Mesopotamia, Egypt, Minoan and Mycenaean Greece, and so on. Writing and keeping records became consequently quite a handy way to manage surpluses and pay workers: officials, scribes, artisans, and construction workers (Erdkamp, 2012b, 8–11). However, the stability of social and political structure also implied the necessity of making sure that the basic needs were covered *ad minimum.*
Unconsciously, the way people think and act is driven by the need for survival. Survival of the household is inscribed in economic, social, religious, and political structures and interactions (Garnsey, 1999; Nadeau, 2009). Producing food required risk management, since crop failure was a common problem: farmers tried to diversify the type of crop and dispersed their plots (Erdkamp, 2012c, 61–4). In case of need, people could rely on lesser types of food (Galen *On the Powers*). For instance, assistance in case of need could be given by allies (horizontal and vertical ties) or, in the case of Rome, by patrons to their clients. It was also customary to lay by reserves in years of good harvest to anticipate drought and harvest failure. In Egypt and elsewhere in the ancient Near East, it was the responsibility of secular and religious authorities (Gen. 41: 33–6). In ancient Greece, an entire community could come together to make sure that their basic needs were covered in times of shortage or harvest failure for instance, in sponsoring a shipment of cereals from abroad or in making local stocks from local sanctuaries available to fellow citizens. Roman authorities even organized (sometimes free) grain distribution and sold a part of their reserves on the local market (Erdkamp, 2005). In cases of large urban areas such as Athens and Rome where the local production did not suffice to meet the needs, foreign food was imported, mainly grain (Moreno, 2007; Oliver, 2007; Bissa, 2009; Broekaert & Zuiderhoek, 2012). But can hardship and a “great food culture” come together?

* Did the Greeks or Romans produce a “great food culture”? The question seems worth asking in a volume such as this. They had good agricultural production, the Romans especially, a range of cooking techniques, cookery books, courts and centers of wealth and consumption, varied forms of political system. A simple answer might be that the Greeks lived in a terrain too agriculturally poor to produce such a culture, with perhaps exceptions for the Greeks in Asia Minor, the Black Sea and southern Italy and Sicily, as might be argued. And the Romans had sufficient power and wealth, and agricultural produce supplemented with imported foods, in big city centers, but showed little interest in writing cookery books (as the Greeks had done – modestly – from the fourth century onwards; Olson & Sens, 2000; Wilkins & Hill, 2011).

A case can perhaps be made for the Greeks or the Romans: Andrew Dalby has certainly tried to make the case for Greek gastronomy in a number of publications. Perhaps the answer will be a negative one, that many aspects of ancient classical cultures, such as comedy, tragedy, philosophy, satire, roads, and concrete, not to mention democracy and law, have been passed down to the modern world, and underpin many modern cultures; but food and eating is not one of them – or is it? Romans introduced agricultural techniques described by Cato, Varro, and Columella that were transmitted to the Medieval ages, the Italian “antipasti” (prosciutto and melon) is based on ancient medical principles, Modern Greeks drink retsinê, and so on.

RN: Before coming to an agreement, we have to focus on the definition of the words and concepts we use. S. Mennell argued that cultural distinctions are often arbitrary and often subjective (1985). What is a “great food culture”? Is it the equivalent of what Jack Goody called a “high cuisine”? Goody’s association between the kind of cuisine and the social and political structure of a given society is very helpful; food and society go hand to hand (Goody, 1982). It helps understand why a cuisine seems to be more elaborate in a society and simpler in another one. What is different then? “Great food cultures” have things in common: literature. They have left literary records, even an abundant literature concerning food. Therefore, I wonder: were all great food cultures also the
depository of a literary culture? In my mind, there is no “great food culture” without propaganda, or, said differently, without people chanting the merit of a (often its) cuisine (Pitte, 2010, 12). Would French cuisine be a creation from nineteenth-century authors who created a French identity in the context of developing national identities in Europe? Then, cuisine becomes an art form performed by great artists (or chefs). Food becomes thus noteworthy for the intellectual elite, from which we learn most of our knowledge about past food cultures. Consequently, “civilized” and/or influential individuals identify themselves with it and give it its “lettres de noblesse.” We do have elaborate accounts of ancient foodstuffs and ancient dinners in the work of Pliny the Elder or Athenaeus of Naucratis for instance. But can traditional “street food” sold on the street of cities such as Bangkok – or ancient Pompeii – be signs of a great food culture too? Is every culture entitled to have its cuisine acknowledged as a “great food culture” (Pitte, 2010, 16).

JW: I consider a great food culture to be a combination of agricultural production, marketing, and consumption (at home and in cafes and restaurants) in a strong tradition over several centuries that preserves both a sense of the local and a sense of gathering together all kinds of different food at great markets (markets to be sure can be deceptive: a volume by M. de la Pradelle (2006) has shown that in Carpentras in southern France market traders and supermarkets sourced their products from the same wholesalers, even though they were presented very differently to the consumer). Nevertheless, you are concentrating on the artiste, the great chef, while I am saying the practice runs down through all classes. Even if there is a difference in access to the foodstuffs, the structure of a food culture would be the same for people of all classes.

RN: National gastronomy can even be considered worthy of being celebrated and protected, but it implies an idealization of facts and time periods that seems to be symbolically significant for people, for example Pliny the Elder and Athenaeus.

JW: You call it an idealization but I call it small groups of people (producers and consumers) all over the country duplicating these models. Heritage is only a tiny part of good food production.

RN: I am concerned by the definition of a “great civilization” or a “great food culture.” I think that it may be a similar ethnological native category. Someone’s culture and hermeneutic circle will influence how a person evaluates a food culture. The anthropologist Jack Goody made a correlation between professional organized cooking and highly structured political power. It is a very seductive thesis that seems to work most of the time. But, then, we may ask ourselves why our simple Greeks, about whom Herodotus says that only madness can explain why the rich and powerful Persian king tries to conquer the poor Greeks, would “invent” gastronomy (Hdt 9.82)? How could the inventor of democracy invent or be the depository of “high cuisine”/gastronomy at the same time (Goody, 1982, 104; Dalby, 2003b, 157)? The simplicity of the Greeks is a well known topos of ancient literature, as it is for the Roman republic. Foreigners and Greeks of the margins are then said to indulge in excessive eating and drinking: Syracusans for instance. When Plato makes such a claim (Letters 7.326b) it is because he sees great disparities to food access and pleads in favor of another social and political structure. Many sumptuary laws had to be adopted in republican Rome. Food access is the name of the game in Antiquity. I argue that the greatness of Greeks’ cuisine is exaggerated. Is food a qualitative sign of highly elaborated cuisine or a means to mark social differences and political power (Borgna, 2004, 188)? We have to remember that food is only one of the means that can be used to show status. I am under the impression that scholars use concepts such as gastronomy and “haute cuisine” without using objective criteria. This kind
of discourse comes from many factors: a romantic view of ancient/current cultures, a social, political, and ideological agenda, and some ethnological categories or mindsets that need to make a classification between different kinds of cuisine/culture. China is considered a great civilization and a great food culture. France: a great culture and a great food culture. Who are making such a claim: the French and the Chinese themselves? These cultures were also great empires. But, then, why is Great Britain not amongst the ranks of the great food cultures?

JW: Nobody wants to go to a British restaurant outside the UK, Robin. Irish bars, OK. But not British restaurants. I agree with you completely about the Greeks (though Herodotus’ simple Greeks are a cultural construction also), but would remind you that a great food culture is quite a different matter from gastronomy, which is a narrow category pursued by the wealthy.

RN: I come back to the question of categories of classification. What would be a Greek or a Roman food culture? Are they culturally distinctive? Have they defined boundaries and characteristics? Are they just better known or publicized? Or are we in the presence of strong and well known ethnological stereotypes or national discourse (Fischler & Masson, 2008, 11–4, 247, 254)? They are rather complex and ambiguous constructed categories that can include or exclude many different concepts, ideas, techniques, ingredients, and regions. Of course, Greek and Roman food cultures are characterized by local variations and specialties of more or less similar ingredients and structure. However, the lack of clear definitions and boundaries creates difficulty in grasping what they really are in essence. We tend to blend and mix up notions such as regional specialties, terroir, “high cuisine,” and so on. Therefore, they can be everything and anything. A food culture is a complex construction of personal perception influenced by the social and historical context and native categories and feedbacks from outsiders. Greek and Roman food cultures are convenient generic categories, which describe many different things that everyone loosely understands. However, it is almost impossible to come up with an objective, exhaustive, and universal way to define what is Greek or Roman, or a “great food culture.” To my mind, there is no real distinction between a “great food culture” and a “great culture.” An objective description of a cuisine or food culture is almost impossible to find. Scholars of modern Europe created myths around the creation of “national” specialists and historical figures. Furthermore, not only did scholars of the nineteenth century make inventories of local and regional products and describe cuisine as a sign of modernity with a depreciation of folk cuisine, but it also played a significant role in the construction of national identities in the development of modern Europe, as in France and in Italy for instance (Meyzie, 2010, 8–9; 261–3). These discourses emphasized what they considered to be worthy of the nation, excluding also popular dishes that the elite considered with disdain. Likely, we have access to a few descriptions of ancient dishes, but, most of the time, within a social or political discourse that we cannot fully understand.

JW: There we differ, dear colleague. I wouldn’t talk about Greek cuisine, but Greek food, developed within a culture and a flora and fauna that has been written about for hundreds of years.

RN: A recent British television series presented by Gordon Ramsey in South East Asia, Gordon’s Great Escape (2011), made me realize that great recipes can be held in secrecy and passed by from generation to generation in oral cultures. In fact, many interviewed cooks were afraid to have their cooking secrets revealed and stolen by the three-Michelin-stars British kitchen superstar. For them, greatness came in part from knowledge, an
expertise and secret ingredients, but also a reputation acquired locally. Literature and mass media allow expertise and reputation to be transmitted on a bigger scale. However, without traces in written documents, it is difficult for the historian to investigate a lost civilization or a social group that did not leave traces of its cooking in literature (Montanari, 2010, 45–50). Greatness in the kitchen also requires the apprenticeship of techniques and knowledge accessible only to a few. Then, cuisine can be elevated to an “art form.” Food can be used as a symbol that would create stark ideological differences between social classes. Eating like a member of one’s own group would be more or less a social obligation (Montanari, 2010, 46, 82–4). However, such a behavior would be normal in any type of society where the social and political differences must be shown and respected. In a literate culture, the goal would be exactly the same: an elite willing to discuss dishes and practices that would enforce the social and political structure in force. To eat the right dishes and to be able to talk about it in accordance with social conventions becomes a means of social distinction, a way to project self or social identity. Said differently, identity comes from group and self-consciousness. It comes from sharing similar properties: rules, values, region, foodstuff, …, but also the identification of otherness, of foreign cultures (Bruegel & Laurioux, 2002b, 11–2). A great food culture would then correspond to elaborated discourses and similar ingredients and procedures. In a word, a great food culture would be an elitist construction of a category that would exclude by default “lesser food,” food eaten by the masses. It is an illusion constructed by cultural authorities and the practices of an elite, whose words and customs are not critically rejected, but unanimously accepted as factual and ideal.

JW: I concede that some national food culture is a product of bourgeois culture. Nevertheless, a great food culture includes all classes. As described in Galen’s *On the Powers of Foods*, peasants had their own solutions in times of food crises, and made their own recipes with what they had, but still within a Greco-Roman mindset and traditional customs and recipes.

RN: You are right, John. At the end of the day, a culture may be called a “great” food culture because people think that it is a fact. A long partial and chauvinist literary tradition made the case for it. However, in my mind, there is no objective way to evaluate the level of greatness of a culture or a food culture. Therefore, Greek would possess a great food culture because of the general conception people have about ancient Greek culture: a lexicon of local appellations, regional specialties, and techniques are developed and participate in the creation of an entire field of knowledge. Food becomes an intellectual category with its own index at the great library of Alexandria. What can be named and described, then, acquires a reputation, becomes recognizable and recognized.

A “great food culture” would be made from a mix of many elements: an idealized and vaguely conceptualized notion, mixing past and present, national mythology, and some parts of reality (Montanari, 2010, 131–2; Pitte, 2010, 12). This does not imply that there is no (written) attempt to define them. However, it is also a sign that these notions are ambiguous and that their meaning evolves with time.

JW: I take your point, Robin. Quite right. But the issue remains for me food for all classes, not your cuisine.

RN: It has been suggested that Chinese cuisine is the result of the invention of a cuisine of every possible foodstuff available in a culture characterized by “undernourishment, drought and famines.” (Gernet, 1962, 135). Greek and Roman food cultures were certainly influenced by periods of shortage too. My point is that, in Western thought, the development of food habits seems to be described around the dichotomy