

## REVIEW ARTICLE

### Food for Thought: Some Recent Books on Ancient Greek and Roman Food

Susan Weingarten

J. Wilkins, (text) S. Hill (intr. and recipes), *Food in the Ancient World*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005. 300 pages. ISBN 0631235515 pb, ISBN 0631235507 hb.

H.E.M. Cool, *Eating and drinking in Roman Britain*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. 282 pages. ISBN 052100327X pb; ISBN 0521802768 hb.

S. Grainger and C. Grocock (eds., trans. and comm.), *Apicius: a critical edition with an introduction and English translation*, Totnes, Devon: Prospect Books, 2006. 414 pages. ISBN 1903018137.

S. Grainger, *Cooking Apicius*, Totnes, Devon: Prospect Books, 2006. 128 pages. ISBN 1903018447.

Classicists have never neglected food entirely. The nineteenth and early twentieth century encyclopaedists dutifully included articles on subjects such as *cena* or *mensa* or *pistores* in the earliest editions of Pauly-Wissowa and Darembourg–Saglio, with lists of references and black and white illustrations. These are still valuable today as an introduction to their subjects. By the twentieth century everybody had read Trimalchio's feast, and knew that the Romans ate dormice.<sup>1</sup> Food belonged to the little regarded sub-discipline of 'everyday life', where it merited at best a subsection of a chapter on dining, as in Jerome Carcopino's *Daily Life in Ancient Rome* (1941). A very few scholars took up some separate foodstuffs and wrote occasional articles — about Horace's pot of *lagana*, leeks and chickpeas, for example: *porrum et ciceris refero laganique catinum* (*Sat* 1.6.115). Was this a minestrone-type soup with leeks and chickpeas and *lagana* as noodle-like pasta, an ancestor of lasagne? Or a stew of leeks and chickpeas solid enough to be scooped up by *lagana* as crisp pieces of dough which had been fried in oil?<sup>2</sup> Here perhaps we should single out for honorable mention A.C. Andrews, who produced a long series of articles on single foodstuffs — codfish, hoary mustard, hyssop etc. — in the mid-twentieth century. The major exception to this general neglect was, of course, a Frenchman, Jacques André, who took a broad view of the subject and actually wrote a general book on *L'alimentation et la cuisine à Rome* (Paris 1961), as well as editing the collection of recipes attributed to Apicius.

Food History is still a relatively new discipline, at least in the English-speaking world, but in the last two decades much progress has been made in the study of Greek and Roman food and eating practices. Most Graeco-Roman literature dealing with food was written by the aristocracy, for the aristocracy and told of food that was of interest to the aristocracy, with little information

<sup>1</sup> C. Kaufman, *Cooking in Ancient Civilizations* (Westport, 2006) has a recipe for roasted dormice based on *Apicius* 8.9. She suggests substituting squirrels, which are apparently available in a few areas of the United States. On the 'dormouse test' for modern fiction or films see Mary Beard 'Apart from vomitoriums and orgies, what did the Romans do for us?', *The Guardian*, Oct 29<sup>th</sup> 2005. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,3604,1604024,00.html>

<sup>2</sup> See *inter alia*, B.L. Ullman 'Horace *Serm.* i, 6, 115 and the history of the word *Laganum*', *Classical Philology* 7 (1912), 442-449.

about everyday food of ordinary people. However, our knowledge of ordinary food can be supplemented by the evidence from farming manuals, medical texts and papyri and above all from archaeological excavations, where both tools and utensils, as well as the remains of actual food-stuffs, add to the picture.

Modern studies on Graeco-Roman food which are based on written sources can be divided into those which look at the literary construction of food — food as a language, in the words of Emily Gowers — and those which are interested in reading the sources to find out what people actually ate, although it is not always easy or even possible to distinguish between the two categories. Studies which investigate food as a nuanced cultural mediator expressing the *mentalités* of society, include Emily Gowers' *The Loaded Table* (1993) and John Wilkins' *The Boastful Chef* (2000). Both of these are classics of their kind, with subtle and enlightening analyses of the meanings of food in literary texts. We would not want to be without them. But what has been missing up to now is an interest in what people actually ate, rather than what they meant when they wrote about food. Thus the new phenomenon of works which display greater interest in the real foods of the classical world is welcome. Such works include Andrew Dalby's *Siren Feasts* (1996) and the same author's *Empire of Pleasures* (2000) (which is more integrative). Note the appetizing nature of the titles, common to many food writings in any period. Perhaps the best instance of all, where even the subtitle is enticing, is James Davidson's *Fishcakes and Courtesans: The Consuming Passions of Classical Athens* (1997). The covers of these books are part of the game too: sensuous, over-indulgent pre-Raphaelites for Dalby, and the genuine ancient *trompe l'oeil* mosaic of an unswept room, complete with its food remains, for Davidson. These illustrations certainly outshine the serious black and white pictures on the dust jackets of Gowers and Wilkins.

Dalby has also produced a very useful reference work, *Food in the Ancient World from A to Z* (2003), where ancient authors, places, individual foods and such are listed alphabetically: each entry includes a list of ancient references and at least one modern article as an introduction to the scholarly literature. Wilkins' latest book is yet another *Food in the Ancient World* (2005). Both these works should in fact have been entitled *Food in the Ancient Classical World*, since they include very little outside classical sources. Both also tend towards the Greek, rather than the Roman world. Thus Wilkins writes that rice did not arrive in the Mediterranean world until the Arabs brought it around 700 CE. This indeed appears to be the case for Greece and Rome, but the evidence of the Mishnah would seem to point to the use of rice in Palestine rather earlier. Still, the very presence of this sort of discussion of the time of arrival of rice shows us that Wilkins' magisterial new book has more stress on real food, as opposed to literary constructs, than his previous work. The new volume was written together with S. Hill, a practising chef, who comments on real food and even provides a handful of recipes. Hill divides modern cookery books into two classes, although stressing that neither is superior to the other, the manual and the 'aspirational' book. While the manual, he says, is a modern phenomenon, the 'aspirational' book has plenty in common with food writing through the centuries and aims to inspire and amuse the diner rather than the cook. Wilkins has written chapters on the Social Context of Eating, Food and Ancient Thought, and Food in Literature, as well as on individual foodstuffs and wine. But perhaps the most considerable contribution of this book is the chapter on Medical Approaches to Food, where Wilkins has expanded the literary basis for the study of food, making excellent use of the work of Galen, and not only the more obvious sources such as Athenaeus and Apicius. His use of Galen means that he does not concentrate as exclusively on the food of the aristocracy as do other writers, ancient and modern alike (although he is very good on Plutarch and the analysis of Greek and Roman identity through food). Galen is an excellent source for the food of the poor, and discusses, for example, the nutritional value of acorns at time of famine. Wilkins brings wide knowledge of useful anthropological parallels with peasants' use of chestnuts in France and Northern Italy in the eighteenth century (quoting P. Camporesi, *The Magic Harvest*), as well as more modern accounts

of the debilitating effects of the Mediterranean winter when food supplies had run out and people were forced to scavenge for wild foods. He cites Patience Gray's *Honey from the Weed*, as well as the now classic work of Peter Garnsey, *Famine and Food Supply in the Graeco-Roman world*. It is clear that many were forced to rely on pulses: Galen reports 'with apparent surprise', writes Wilkins, that it was possible to survive on these and remain healthy, in spite of the scorn poured over such foods by writers like Archestratus: 'all these other dainties are signs of wretched poverty — boiled chickpeas and fava beans and apples and dried figs'. We might remember here the book of Daniel (1.3-15), where the hero and his companions, who did not eat the king's meat or drink his wine, but lived on a diet of pulses, were healthier than their companions at the end of a trial period. The courtiers seemed just as surprised at this result as Galen.

Galen is, in fact, a basic source for the study of Palestinian literature, for Palestine, of course, was a Graeco-Roman province and its food belonged to the Graeco-Roman world, based as it was on what has been called the Mediterranean triad: wheat, grapes and olives, which were made into bread, wine and olive oil, the staples of the Mediterranean diet.<sup>3</sup>

Having said this, perhaps 'Roman' Palestine is something of a misnomer. Palestine as an eastern province was strongly influenced by Hellenistic and Greek culture, including their culinary culture. This is clear from many of the terms for foods mentioned in the Talmudic literature, which have much more in common with those from Greek authors than Latin ones (although it is true that Latin culinary culture was also influenced by the Greek, as we see from the pages of the collection of recipes attributed to Apicius). Wheat, wine and oil were also used in Talmudic Babylonia, but in general, diet in Babylonia differed from that of Palestine. There was for example much more meat available in Babylonia, and barley and date beer were probably drunk more than wine. Indeed, there are a number of occasions when it is clear from the recorded discussions that Babylonian rabbis simply do not understand the Graeco-Roman food mentioned in the Palestinian Mishnah: Maimonides in the twelfth century already noted that the Babylonian Talmud misunderstands the nature of the barely cooked egg called in the Mishnah by the Greek name of *termita*.

Thus, it is not surprising that we can find parallels to Jewish Palestinian foods as described in the Mishnah and Jerusalem Talmud in Galen (who was active in the second century CE and who actually visited Syria). As a doctor, Galen was more interested in everyday food than the aristocratic Latin authors living far away in Rome. We are fortunate, then, to have now three recent translations with commentary of Galen's works on food: P. Singer, *Galen: The Thinning Diet* (1997); M. Grant, *Galen: On Food and Diet* (2000); O. Powell, *Galen: on the properties of food-stuffs* (2003).

The major ancient work on food is, of course, the *Deipnosophistae* (*The Philosophers at Dinner*), by the third century CE Athenaeus, of Naucratis near Alexandria in Egypt, who wrote in Greek and was clearly a product of Greek culture. There is a seven-volume Loeb translation of Athenaeus by Gulick which is now quite old and not always reliable, but a new edition is now being prepared by Olson under the title of *The Learned Banqueters* (*non vidi*). Indeed, quite a lot of new work has been done and is being done on this author, particularly in connection with the Athenaeus project at Exeter University. Some fruits of this project are collected in J. Wilkins, M. J. Dobson and F.D. Harvey (eds.), *Food in Antiquity* (1995), while the fragments of Archestratus preserved in Athenaeus has been published and discussed separately: J. Wilkins and S. Hill (eds.), *The Life of Luxury: Europe's Oldest Cookery Book* (1994). John Wilkins and David Braund have

<sup>3</sup> For the other raw materials of the Palestinian diet, the standard work has long been I. Löw, *Die Flora der Juden* (1924). It is high time there was an update. (On the early history and spread of plants, we have the now standard work of M. Zohary and M. Hopf, *Domestication of plants in the Old World: the origin and spread of cultivated plants in West Asia, Europe and the Nile Valley* (1988, rev. 2000). Slightly earlier than Löw is, of course, Samuel Krauss' *Talmudische Archäologie* (1910), still the basic starting point for any work on everyday life in Roman Palestine, with an excellent section on food and food preparation, not to mention sections on ovens, mills, etc.

also edited another new collection of articles on Athenaeus: *Athenaeus and his World* (2000), although as the sub-title *Reading Greek Culture in the Roman Empire* warns us, the stress here is less on real food than on food as a literary metaphor.

When it comes to the archaeological evidence, an excellent blueprint for how artifacts can be used for evidence of local diet is provided by Hilary Cool's *Eating and Drinking in Roman Britain*. Cool analyses the evidence provided, among other things, by the relatively small amounts of animal bones and relatively large amounts of pottery found in archaeological excavations in Britain. Her study is an exemplary textbook for every archaeologist and historian, showing the questions posed by this sort of evidence, what can be learned from it, as well as its limitations. Thus, while we may think, after reading the pseudo-Virgilian poem *Moretum* and the recipes of the Apicius collection, that we know what *mortaria* were used for, Cool demonstrates how problematic this evidence is, pointing out that in Britain *mortaria* are commonly found with soot deposits on them, and might have been used for actual cooking. She proposes an analysis of food residues (using techniques like gas chromatography) and wear patterns to help solve this problem, without, however, taking into account the cost of such sophisticated analyses of food residues. Within the limitations she discusses (especially the lack of agreed standards for quantifying finds), Cool has assembled data for a large number of different sites from the first to the fourth centuries in Britain, and has been able to show a range of eating habits and preferences in the different regions, and how these changed through time.

Much of the archaeology of *provincia Britannia* at the limits of the empire is inevitably the archaeology of the Roman army. The finds of writing tablets from Vindolanda, with their shopping lists, have contributed much to our knowledge of the Roman military diet, but Cool points out that delays in publishing the finds of actual bones and food remains from the site make a complete picture of diet in this Roman fort still unattainable. In her discussion of wine amphorae from the second and third centuries, she demonstrates just what the study of food might be able to contribute to Roman army studies in the future. Cool notes that there are far more Gallic amphorae in the forts at York than along Hadrian's Wall, where it has been suggested that the wine came from the Rhineland in barrels. This, then, would indicate that the Yorkshire forts and the Wall forts were being supplied by different quartermasters. Cool thus suggests that further tracing of the boundaries of distribution of Gallic amphorae might have something to tell us about the logistics and hence even the command structure of the Roman army in the north.

Another trend in learning about ancient food is the new interest in the foods of the Bible. This has led to the proliferation of sites all over present-day Israel aiming to show a modern audience, mostly children, how people ate in ancient times. So far the trend has been restricted mostly to hands-on demonstrations of pressing olives or baking *pita* (a round wheat flatbread made with yeast), but Tova Dickstein at Ne'ot Qedumim has taken a more serious interest in ancient food, including experimentation with methods of baking mentioned in classical sources and Talmudic literature. Dickstein was scientific advisor for a pamphlet by Miriam Feinberg Vamosh, *Food in the Time of the Bible*. This includes so-called 'authentic recipes from the time of Jesus'. And indeed what is now known as the 'Jesus diet', eating what it is supposed Jesus ate, is currently fashionable in the United States and Europe and has led to a whole new popular literature. J. Hutt and H. Klein, *Rezepte aus der Bibel: Einfach göttlich, vom paradiesischen Apfelkuchen bis zum wüzzigen Passah-Lamm* (2000) is one example satirising the many.

This leads us to latest aspect of Graeco-Roman food studies: the serious attempt to reconstruct ancient food, using methods of cooking and tools as far as possible identical with ancient ones. Nineteenth and early twentieth century scholars interested in food, such as Samuel Krauss (n. 3 above), often had little concept of methods of cooking or the properties of foodstuffs. By the mid-twentieth century, Barbara Flower and Elizabeth Rosenbaum claimed to have tried out the Apician recipes they translated (Apicius, *The Roman Cookery Book* [1958]), but they made no real attempt to reconstruct the conditions of the ancient kitchen, using substitute foods and modern ovens and

equipment. Nor were they always aware that ancient cooks often used different parts of a plant: beetroot, for example, probably meant the leaves, rather than the root, which was hardly utilized until later times. There are a number of good Roman cookery books still being produced in this way: Mark Grant's *Roman Cookery* (1999), for example, takes recipes from sources outside the Apicius collection and makes particularly good use of the medical authors: he has also produced editions of Galen (2000; see above 206), Anthimus (1996) and Oribasius (1997). Grant is well aware that his interpretations of these recipes are not always 'authentically' classical. For example, he suggests substituting shop-bought cheddar cheese for the cheese made by more primitive methods. This problem is also tackled in Cathy Kaufman's *Cooking in Ancient Civilizations* (including ancient Mesopotamian and Egyptian food as well), which was written as a school textbook and hence makes its methodology very clear. Kaufman writes that her book contains 'reconstructed recipes, based on scientific data about ancient ingredients and the immutable chemistry of cookery, and invented recipes, based on artistic representations' as well as adaptations: 'only with the Roman chapter do we have complete, explicit recipes that can be directly adapted for modern kitchens'. As she herself is the first to admit, her training in modern classical French cuisine may have influenced her as much as the ancient sources. Kaufman is particularly good on the different natures of different types of grains and flours.

But the leading reconstructionist Roman cook is undoubtedly Sally Grainger. She collaborated with Dalby some years ago to produce *The Classical Cookbook* (1996) for the British Museum, and has now joined with a scholar of late Latin, Chris Grocock (who has worked on the Venerable Bede) to produce *Apicius: A Critical Edition with an Introduction and English Translation*. This is a considerable contribution to the study of Roman food. There is a long introduction discussing text, context and audience, as well as a more general discussion of ancient cooks and cookery, and appendices with a glossary. G and G have looked at all surviving manuscripts and propose many new readings and interpretations of the *de re coquinaria*, based on their combined philological and culinary expertise. For example, *Apicius* i, 32 and iii, 18, 2 are very similar recipes, but G and G (171 n.1) convince us that i, 32 is the version to be preferred because it makes better culinary sense. There are long discussions of vexed questions in the study of Graeco-Roman food, in particular an appendix on the fish-sauces *garum* and *liquamen*. Grainger has made these sauces, with their lengthy process of months of fermentation, herself, and comes to conclusions based on real experience. (The process is very similar to the fermentation of real soy sauce). In spite of the notoriety of the smell (Seneca calls *liquamen* the '*pretiosa malorum piscium sanies*') she found that the best quality sauces did not smell bad — the breakdown of the fish is due to enzyme action rather than bacteria. She describes the taste as *umami* — the fifth flavour recently identified alongside sweet, sour, salt and bitter.<sup>4</sup>

However, there are some places where I would differ from their conclusions. G and G quite reasonably propose that the work attributed to Apicius is, in fact, a collection of recipes used by working cooks, that was given the name of a real Roman gourmet of the second century CE. In their discussion of Apicius the man, they suggest that there were two works attributed to him in antiquity, the collection of recipes and another 'work of culinary theory'. They base their claim on a statement by Athenaeus that there was a book called *The Luxury of Apicius*, written by a grammarian called Apion in the first century CE, and on the statement in the *Historia Augusta* (Aelius 5.9) that Aelius Verus had by his bedside 'things about Apicius reported by others', as well as Ovid's *Amores* and Martial's Epigrams: *Atque idem Apicii ab aliis relata in lecto[s]semper habuisse*. From this G and G deduce that the *Luxury of Apicius* must have been a book of 'culinary theory'. I do not think this is very convincing. Apion as a grammarian might just as well have produced an annotated list of culinary terms as a work of culinary theory, while the *Historia Augusta* may well have been making one of its customary jokes: what member of the Roman

<sup>4</sup> On umami, see H. McGee, *On food and cooking: the science and lore of the kitchen* (1984; rev. 2004), 342.



aristocracy would want to read a cookery book in bed? The evidence for a book of culinary theory seems weak.

In the glossary G and G discuss *tracta* and *lagana* at some length, now concluding that they were not, as some (including Grainger herself) have suggested in the past, an early form of pasta. While it may seem churlish to disagree, given that they quote my own paper on this subject, I still think that *tracta*, at least as found in the Talmudic literature (Jerusalem Talmud Hallah i, 4 57d, where they are identified with *sufganin*) represent some form of proto-pasta, as well as unleavened bread.<sup>5</sup>

There are also a few lapses in editing, one of which I found personally disappointing. The *Apicius* collection has a recipe 4.2.12 *patina de abua sine abua* — which G and G reasonably translate as ‘*patina* of small fry without small fry’. (A *patina* was a type of dish, which gave its name to the food prepared in it, like our modern casserole.) The recipe in their translation is as follows:

Flake the flesh of fish either grilled or boiled in sufficient quantity to fill the dish you choose. Pound pepper and a little rue, pour on sufficient *liquamen* and a little oil, and stir the fish together in the dish with raw eggs so that a smooth emulsion is produced. Gently place *sea-anemones* on top so that they do not mix in with the egg mixture. Place on a gentle rising heat so they do not sink in to the mixture. At the table no-one will know what they are eating.

This recipe demonstrates beautifully some of the characteristics of ancient cookery: the lack of quantities, the use of *liquamen/garum*, the fact that it was clearly desirable that ‘no-one will know what they are eating’. But did they really use sea-anemones? The latter are apparently edible: Alan Davidson’s, *Mediterranean Seafood*<sup>3</sup> (2002) has a recipe for sea-anemone fritters, complete with instructions for detaching these animals from the rocks. The Latin text has *urticas marinas*, which Lewis and Short translate ‘sea-nettles’, saying these are a kind of zoophyte. Flower and Rosenbaum have ‘jellyfish’, which would have had to be treated first with vinegar or something else to remove its sting, but would indeed have created the problem of melting and mixing with the eggs indicated by the recipe.<sup>6</sup> I had hoped that G and G would have given us the definitive answer, but sadly they still leave us guessing: their text has sea-anemones, but in their footnote to this recipe they refer to sea-urchins!

Grainger has also produced a new collection of her own interpretations of Apician recipes: *Cooking Apicius*, which nicely complements her critical text, and adds more practical details for those who wish to try their hand at reconstructing Roman food. It makes delightful bedtime reading, but for the purposes of writing this review I felt obliged to actually cook and eat these foods, not just read the instructions. I tried three vegetarian recipes. I can report that the instructions are clear and well-thought out, and the balance between authenticity and adaptation nicely preserved. But my family just could not stomach them. Cumin, they said, is for falafel, not for ‘*patina* of pears in red wine’. *De gustibus non est disputandum*.

Tel Aviv University

5 S. Weingarten, ‘The debate about ancient *tracta*: evidence from the Talmud’, *Food and History* 2 (2004), 21-39

6 Kaufman (n. 1 above) takes it as jellyfish and suggests substituting raw white of egg.