

## Classical Food and Literature from Archaic Greece to the Early Roman Empire

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### Introduction

This chapter will consider the themes of hospitality, conviviality and the impact of unsociability which recur as tropes throughout key ancient texts, from Greek Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* through to Roman Virgil's *Aeneid*, and on to Petronius's *Satyricon*, a range of over nine centuries (from 800 BCE to 200 CE). While it is common today to consider any text from the ancient world as 'literature' so rare and treasured are they as artefacts, the focus herein will be upon those written in what have become considered conventional literary modes. Falling within this range come writers of epics, drama (both comedies and tragedies) and a wide range of poets and satirists, including Hesiod, Plato, Aristophanes, Ovid, Catullus and Athenaeus, but excluding non-fiction writers, historians and politicians such as Julius Caesar, Cicero and Tacitus, as a matter of necessity, in containing the time frame and range of sources. This chapter will first consider Greek literature and its discussion, and key representations, of food, and then proceed to consider food in Roman literature. Key themes of hospitality or commensality and contrasting extremes of inhospitality will become evident, alongside the elements of conviviality, which derive from ritual or worship, in these texts.

Ancient Greek history is usually considered in three chronological periods: the Archaic, 100-500 BCE; the Classical 500–300 BCE; and, the Hellenistic 300 BCE–100 CE, which crosses over in timing with the rising power of Rome as an empire. Most of what is known about food in Ancient Greece is from the few fragments of literature and the pottery shards and pieces of wall art that remain. Fortunately, the Greeks were among the first civilisations to keep records and to discourse upon the events of their own civilisation through histories,

scientific theories, anthologies, literary theory and criticism. For example, in the introduction to the translated version of Aristotle's *Ethics*, Thomson writes that Aristotle

caused his pupils [at the Lyceum] to excerpt from the Athenian archives the records kept there of all the dramas that had been performed at Athens – and there were hundreds of them – the dates of their performance, their titles and their authors. In this way he defined the science which we now call the history of literature. (1973, 20)

To begin a definition, and selection, of such literature, it is appropriate to refer to Aristotle's *Poetics*, wherein he claims that all literature derives from poetry, as the word *poesis* means 'to make'. Therefore, he considers tragedy, comedy, mime, dialogues and prose in his treatise, *Poetics*, which is still the basis of understanding classical narrative today (Butcher, transl., *Poetics*, Part I, Part II, 1, 2). For the purposes of this discussion, only poetry, drama, dialogue or fictional or speculative prose will be considered as 'literature', while histories, scientific writing and philosophical works will not be included. All texts will also be quoted and discussed in translation and dated, using the conventions of BCE (Before the Common Era, 1000–0), and CE (the Common Era, 0–the present day). Although the recording of history began with these and other Mediterranean and Asian civilisations, this was still a very rudimentary art and the idiosyncrasies of the writers tend to dominate the kinds of details that were recorded. A case in point is *The History of the Peloponnesian War* (Warner 1982) by Thucydides, who, as an Athenian general, is not exactly an objective outsider.

The selection for Greek and Roman literature to be discussed is arranged chronologically in order of each author's life or works, which also connect thematically with the main concerns of food as fable, ritual, feast and fast in the Archaic and Classical periods. In the later periods, the Classical and Hellenistic, food imagery occurs in the conventions of love poetry, and this was taken up with alacrity by the Renaissance poets and other writers, almost a millennium later. Food as provisioning, and even nurture, occurs in some non-fiction

writing, as in the Greek writer Hesiod who recorded the *Works and Days* of life in the countryside. Later, the Roman Virgil's *Georgics* also gives advice about the countryside and farming in particular beekeeping (Grant 1958, 179).

### **The Archaic period: food in the earliest Greek literature**

In *the Greek Experience* (1972), Bowra notes:

Greece is a land of contrasts, but not of extremes. Olive oil takes the place of butter, preservatives and cooking fats. Fruit and vegetables can be grown in only a few fertile plains or in terraces ... fish is not nearly so common or various as in northern seas; meat is rare and more likely to be kid than beef or mutton. Yet the Greek larder has its compensations. Wine is abundant; in a land of many flowers honey provides an ample supply of sugar; the goat gives milk and cheese; the mountains have their hares and wild birds, the sea its mullets, lobsters and squids. (15)

The earliest references to food in Greek literature come from Hesiod and Homer, who were writing in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Hesiod's *Works and Days* is centrally concerned with the relation between justice and the ordering of agricultural life; acknowledging that the struggle for food is what determines life, and famine is a reality. However, "[w]hen the artichoke flowers and the chirruping cicada sitting on a tree, fills the air with the piercing song from under his wings...that's when the goats are fattest and the wine at its best" (Wender, transl. *Hesiod* 1973, 77). Hesiod's *Theogony*, literally 'birth of the gods', is a less practical work, dealing with the interface between myth and history, and from which most of our first understanding of the Titans, Olympians and even earlier Greek deities derives. Here we find some of the first references to food as ritual, or the stories which form the source of rituals. Here, too we are presented with the most abject act of consumption, when Cronos devours his

children, in order to ensure that none of them will rise up against him, as he had done against his own father, Uranos (38).

Garnsey argues '[i]n Greek myth food plays a role in defining a hierarchy of being: there is food for gods, food for men, and food for animals' (1999, 6). For the Greeks, and subsequently the Romans, there were two great gods of earth to whom sacrifices were to be made and prayers offered, Demeter the goddess of the corn or harvest (in Latin, Ceres) and Dionysus (in Latin, Bacchus), the god of the vine. Demeter is celebrated in some of the earliest poetry, for example in the second Homeric Hymn of the 8C BCE. These poems are a series of hymns attributed to the time of Homer rather than the writer himself and perhaps form a collection or compilation of songs and chants by a variety of anonymous writers and composers (Hamilton 1992, 47). This hymn might have been sung at the threshing floor once the harvest was gathered: "May it be mine, beside Demeter's altar, to dig the great winnowing fan through the heaps of corn while she stands smiling by with sheaves and poppies in her hand" (Hamilton 1992, 48).

The worship of Demeter centred upon harvest festivals, probably involving the baking and eating of the first bread made from the new grain (Hamilton 1992, 48). But this evolved into a more secret worship culminating at Eleusis, where Demeter had taken shelter as she cast about the earth looking for her daughter Persephone, sometimes called 'Kore' or 'the maiden', who had been abducted by her uncle, Hades, the god of the underworld. Demeter was heartbroken to lose her daughter and searched for her for a year, neglecting her role as goddess of the harvest and sending a "year of barrenness upon the earth" (Grant 1962, 127, quoting from the *Homeric Hymn of Demeter*). In disguise as an ordinary human, she came to Eleusis and was taken in by the king and queen who gave her shelter and work and treated her well, but as a lowly person, by appointing her as nursemaid to their son. Here is one of the first instances of the need for hosts to care for their guests as they could be gods or

goddesses in disguise; a theme which is developed fully by Homer. She refused food except for a mixture of barley-meal, water and mint, which she drank “as a sacrament” (Grant 1962, 128) while, neglecting her role as goddess of the harvest, she refused to let fruit to grow or any other foodstuffs to pierce the ground until she had seen her daughter again. Zeus intervened and sent Hermes (or Mercury) to bring the girl to Eleusis and to be reunited with her mother. However, Persephone had eaten pomegranate seed (in Ovid, seven seeds; Innes, transl. Ovid 1974, 128), the sacred fruit of the underworld, and so was bound to return to Hades. Eventually it was agreed that Persephone would come back for half of each year to be with her mother and at that time the earth would welcome her back with waving ears of corn and the awakening of new growth in spring. When she prepared to return to Hades, the earth would grieve and autumn would cause the leaves to fall or weep (Grant 1962, 130). This story is the explanation for the progression of seasons in Greek mythology and the basis for a mystery cult, which grew originally from Eleusis, worshipping the goddesses who had encountered and negotiated with death (Hamilton 1992, 50).

A very different deity, Dionysus, was also worshipped at Eleusis. As god of the vine he has an affinity with the goddess of bread, as bread in the form of pancakes or flat bread was eaten at every meal, as was (for the wealthy) watered down wine (Dalby 2003, 11). Wine makes people merry and Dionysus was worshipped with appropriate toasts and joy, but it also causes destruction and unreasonable behaviours, and in earliest instances his followers, called Maenads or Bacchantes were women

frenzied with wine. They rushed through the woods waving pinecone tipped wands, swept away in a fierce ecstasy. Nothing could stop them. They would tear to pieces any wild creature they met and devour the ‘bloody shreds of flesh’. (Hamilton 1992: 56-7)

In some instances, the 'wild' beasts they shredded and devoured were human, as is captured in Euripides' *The Bacchae*, in the killing of Pentheus of Thebes (Hamilton 1992, 59).

However, the most significant worship of Dionysus in which most of the Greek world became involved, happened at the end of the harvest, beginning at first with the singing and dancing of thanksgiving on the threshing floor, which evolved into local competitions in song and dance, then grew into the vast Festival of Dionysus, or Dionysia, a national festival of worship through theatre. The worship or ceremony sacred to Dionysus became the performance of plays over two festivals – one in winter and another in spring, both lasting several days (McLeish 1972, 3). Aristotle deftly united these concepts of worship and release in his treatise *Poetics* by stressing the importance of 'catharsis' in the audience, of releasing or purging fear, awe and irrational influences through the observation of the great tragedies (Butcher, trans. *Poetics* 4).

### **Food in Homer's Epics**

Homer is the most significant early writer of Ancient Greece. The two epics which are attributed to him (there has been considerable debate about authorship) and which are set around the events of the Trojan War, form the basis of stories, plays, poems, novels and today day, films and television programs, both in content and in structure. Homer uses references to food for moral and narrative effect, especially in *The Odyssey*, where, apart from details about sacrificing beasts on altars, or in trenches to draw forth the shades of dead souls, there are many instances of feasting. *The Iliad*, so titled after the ancient name for Troy, Ilium, refers to incidents that happen chronologically earlier than those of *The Odyssey*, at the siege of Troy, whether it was written earlier or not. Although the content is largely about war and battle from the Greeks' perspective around the siege of Troy, which they conducted for ten years, the long poem focuses upon Achilles the warrior, and the flaws and obsessions which

made him a legend. However, there is food in ritual and feasting in this story, too. In fact, both epics feature themes of hospitality and conventions, even rituals of hosting and being hosted which drive the narrative; conventions which distinguish civilised characters from savages. The epics endorse the importance of guest- and host-friendship or *Xenia* in a heroic society.

There are two rules of *Xenia* (Little 1979, 19). Paramount is the responsibility of the host to the guest; to be hospitable, to provide him or her with food, drink and water for cleansing or bathing, even gifts when they depart. The guest also has responsibilities to the host; to be courteous and respectful, to accept food and drink when offered, and to provide gifts, if that is possible. It was not considered polite for the host to ask personal questions of the guest until after they had offered them hospitality. *Xenia* was considered particularly important in ancient times when people thought gods mingled among them, such as in the story of Demeter. There was the risk of incurring the wrath of a god disguised as the stranger, if one offered poor hospitality. In fact, the Trojan War of Homer's epics can be traced to a breach of *Xenia* committed by Paris, the young Prince of Troy. He not only fell in love with his host's wife, when he visited King Menelaus and Queen Helen of Sparta, he seduced her then ran away with her to Troy. When her husband Menelaus called up an army with his brother Agamemnon to follow her to Troy and punish Paris, she became the "face that launched a thousand ships" (Marlowe *Faustus* XIII, 1, 83).

*The Iliad* portrays men who, although in battle, nonetheless observe the niceties of hospitality, or are implicitly judged for not doing so. In Book 9, after Agamemnon has stolen his favourite slave girl, Briseis, Achilles refuses to fight in the siege of Troy in protest. Agamemnon, realising that Achilles is vital to the Greeks' success, sends Odysseus as his envoy to negotiate with Achilles who, acting as the host, invites his guest to his temporary home and requests that his cousin Patroklos mix them the strongest wine. He also provides

meat for them to eat, in recognition of their high status (Wilkins and Nadeau 2015, 8). The men talk and exchange pleasantries before Odysseus gets to the business of representing Agamemnon's offer to Achilles to resolve their conflict. In Book 24, the final book of *The Iliad*, Achilles allows King Priam of Troy to mourn over the body of his son, Hector (whom Achilles had slain), while still in the Greek camp and then insists that they share a meal in honour of the dead warrior. Achilles kills a white sheep which his men skin, cut up and roast over a spit and serve to Priam with bread and wine. Once Priam has retrieved the body back into the walled city of Troy, the nine-day funeral celebrations end with a civic feast. Nearly a millennium later, the writer Plutarch criticized Achilles for not being better prepared in his kitchen and having to butcher beasts for his guests after they had arrived (Plutarch, VII-703, qtd. by Fass 2003, 125).

Garnsey notes that “[i]n Graeco–Roman society, food was a marker of ethnic and cultural difference” (1999, 6) a point which is particularly evident in the writing of Homer, where “Greeks were differentiated from barbarians, urban dweller from rustics, farmers from nomad and so on in terms of the food they ate, amongst other things” (6). One further aspect of life around the table in ancient times is the fact of slavery, with many of the feasts and banquets prepared in a domestic setting by unpaid servants (Haynes 2012, 32). In addition to offering services as cooks, servers and cup-bearers, these servants also reflect the characters in each tale in positive or negative lights, as commentators or recipients of the manners and personalities of their masters. Although “literature’s first women are those in Homer’s epic poems” (Haynes 2012, 44), in *the Iliad*, women are represented as either the causes of discord, as the characters of Helen and Briseis, or victims of war, as the wives of Priam and Hector. However, few women are more variously depicted in any ancient texts than in *The Odyssey*. This story of Achilles’ fellow Greek warrior, Odysseus, his wanderings and return to his family after the events of the Trojan War, has many more episodes of hospitality and



food to add to the picture of the ancient table. In this epic, in particular, can be seen the further effects of *Xenia* in generating the narrative and informing character. After the nearly two decades since her husband left her and their island Ithaca for the Trojan War in support of his fellow Greek chieftains, Menelaus and Agamemnon, hopeful suitors have besieged Penelope, Odysseus's wife, each seeking to marry the supposedly widowed queen. Manners have dictated that she offer them all hospitality. In Book 1, the goddess Athena visits Ithaca in disguise as Mentos, a warrior, and sees Penelope besieged by the suitors, who "were eating in front of the door, seated on hides of oxen they themselves had slaughtered, and playing draughts, while their squires were bringing in wine and water" (Rieu transl. 1972, 28). Telemachus, Penelope and Odysseus' son, who has not seen his father since he was a baby, appears to be the only person to see the visitor. He immediately welcomes her/him, displaying not only his politeness and respect for conventions of guest friendship to strangers, but perhaps, too, because Homer wishes to indicate that he is the only person worthy of seeing a goddess in the first place. Later in the narrative, and in a parallel sequence and time frame to that of his father's travels, Telemachus is so disgusted at the way his mother is made to feed and entertain the suitors, that he sets off on an odyssey of his own in search of his father. He goes first to visit King Nestor, and then on to Sparta, to visit the originator of the Trojan War according to this myth, King Menelaus and his now repentant wife, Helen. They greet him, serve him food and, once he has been fed and bathed, recount their knowledge of his father's adventures. Almost every household in *the Odyssey* "is seen alongside *Xenia*" (Little 1977, 23).

The best example of correct host-friendship occurs in *the Odyssey* when Odysseus escapes from the paradise of captivity, an over-indulgence of guest-friendship he has enjoyed in a dalliance with the sea nymph Calypso, and washes ashore on the island of King Alcinous and his daughter Nausicaa. The princess had been enjoying a picnic and washing garments by

the riverside with her friends and servants when they were surprised by the sight of a stranger, emerging naked from the bushes. She takes the stranger to her home, a palace, and he is greeted, bathed, and offered food and drink and a banquet and only then do the hosts invite him to tell his story (Rieu 1972, 136). This post-prandial monologue becomes the flashback sequence that is the heart of the epic's narrative, where Odysseus recounts several gastronomic adventures, many demonstrating the nature of his heroism; impetuous, wily and courageous.

The first is with the Cicones (Book 8) where Odysseus and his men show their barbarism by raiding and looting, then “stayed there drinking much wine and killing great numbers of sheep and oxen on the sea shore” (Rieu 1972, 140) before the survivors called for reinforcements and fought the Greeks off. Next, they arrived at the land of the Lotus Eaters, whose fruit sedated and caused amnesia in its eaters (Book 9). The third and most famous episode reveals Odysseus' and crew's disgust at the appalling manners of their host, a one-eyed monster who offers them no hospitality at all but proceeds to eat the men one at a time. Odysseus recounts how he “had hopes of some friendly gifts” (145), however the Cyclops rejects this notion and violates the ritual of courtesy extended to strangers – the guests become the feast (153). Then they arrive at the island of Aeolus, where once again the men are seduced by the hospitality offered to them, as “All day long the atmosphere of the house is loaded with the savour of roasting meats till it groans again” (156). They depart from this feasting only to arrive in the land of the Laestragonians, where it eventually becomes apparent that their hosts are cannibals;

ogres, not men. They threw vast rocks at us from the cliffs as though they had been mere stones, and I heard the horrid sound of the ships crunching up against one another, and the death cries of my men, as the Laestrygonians speared them like fishes and took them home to eat them (Butler, trans. *The Odyssey*, Book 10).

From here, the ever-diminishing Greek crew makes it to the island dominated by the sorceress, Circe, whose wine turned men into swine. Odysseus cannot resist her charms without the intervention of Hermes (Mercury), who gives him a herb, Moly, to use as a talisman against the witch's spell (Book 10). Odysseus recounted all of these adventures, after Alcinous and Nausicaa and the court of Phaacia had treated him with courtesy and hospitality, in an act of true *Xenia*.

*Xenia* is also invoked in the final sections of the epic, when Odysseus takes his revenge on over-stayers, the suitors who have been besieging his wife in his 19-year absence, by eating her 'out of house and home' while she, dutifully following custom, has been too polite to get rid of them. Odysseus and their son slaughter the over stayers in the dining hall of the palace at Ithaca with no qualms, because of this strong code of social behaviour. They had not upheld their side of the code of *Xenia* and had exploited their hostess. This exchange of guest-friendship and host obligations in hospitality becomes a theme that resonates through several successive writers and finds its greatest expression in the Greek *symposium* and Roman banquet or *convivium*.

### **The Classical period**

As if the works of the two seminal writers, Hesiod and Homer, were not sufficient to develop an entire cosmology and give insights into ancient Greek society, the next phase of writers in the Classical period develop even more intellectual and psychological insights into the ancient world and, in particular, their habits and concerns in the area of food. In a story still popularly recounted, Aesop's *The Town Mouse and the Country Mouse* (transl. Vernon Jones 1994, 113), for example, two mice invite each other to stay at their respective homes. The town mouse visited the country mouse first and was appalled at the humble food of "barleycorns and roots" (113) offered by his bucolic friend, and so invited him to come to the

town, where he showed him a “larder containing flour and oatmeal, and figs and honey and dates” (113). But no sooner had they sat down to enjoy these than they were interrupted by someone coming into the larder, and this happened so often that the country mouse took fright, and returned to his simpler but much safer home. This fable is one of the best known of all antique stories about food and hospitality, having been retold in many versions and media. Aesop, like Hesiod, or even the later Brothers Grimm, was probably an anthologist rather than a creator of the fables he collected and wrote (Chesterton, in Vernon Jones 1994, 3), while living in Greece around the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Despite its brevity, this story, one of the few of Aesop’s fables which does refer to food, contains some of the critical themes of food in literature in the ancient texts, touching upon provisioning, hospitality and guest friendship and, finally, the context of conviviality, here with the threat of external influence.

Two areas of literature dominate our understanding of the ancient world in the Classical Age; philosophy, especially the writing of Plato, and theatre, over which Aeschylus, Sophocles and later Euripides preside, as their plays were performed through the middle of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, achieving many accolades and success in the annual Festivals of Dionysus. While Aeschylus died mid-century, his successors and rivals lived until nearly the end of that time, with Sophocles dying in 406 BCE. With themes of family loyalty, betrayal and characters exhibiting hubris or overbearing pride, the tragedies of this time contain few references to food other than as sacrifice or ritual frenzy as in the Euripides’ *Bacchae*.

A large period of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE was dominated by the events of the Peloponnesian War, one of territorial aggression and protection between the two city-states of Athens and Sparta, and chronicled by Thucydides. The war also features in the comedies of Aristophanes, as he refers to politicians and warriors of contemporary and ancient times. His plays are known as Attic Old Comedies as they arose out of his home of Athens or Attica. The Old refers to the ‘old’ elements they contain in reference to the ritual and fertility rites

that theatre arose from, in the worship of Dionysus as a god of revels and fertility, featuring costumes with graphic human organs – phalluses, breasts and distended stomachs, grotesque masks – as well as anarchic references to contemporary political and literary or mythological figures (Barrett 1983, 11). Aristophanes, despite being prosecuted for his criticism of local Athenian politicians in *The Babylonians* when he was only 20, had a long life as a comic writer and is still read today, as eleven of his comedies are still intact (Barrett 1983, 12). An early play, *The Wasps* (422 BCE), has a young man trying to get his stubborn, retired soldier father to relax and settle at dinner parties, as a fashionable way to behave, instead of being obsessed with serving on juries. “I’ll show you how to behave at a fashionable drinking party” (Barrett 1983, 83), he states. However, the plan backfires when: “[o]nce he’d got a bit of good food and drink into him, he started leaping about like a young ass after a feed of barley: jumping up and down, laughing and farting ... and he went on ... insulting them all” (86). A later play, *The Frogs*, was produced in 405 BCE just as Athens was suffering the final months in the Peloponnesian War, and it depicts one of the few pieces of literary insight into the worshippers of Dionysus and Demeter at Eleusis, although they are parodied, dancing around the countryside in torn clothes (121). The cook depicted here becomes a stock character of comedy and continues to be a popular figure in contemporary times, even up to the Swedish cook of *The Muppet Show*. In *the Frogs*, the ‘cook from Hell’ (or Hades) raves at Dionysus disguised as Heracles, who has already been characterised as a glutton, and then proceeds to have him whipped, in a scene of high slapstick, proclaiming: here’s that scoundrel who came to our inn once and ate up sixteen loaves ... and twenty portions of roast lamb ... and all those onions ... and the cheeses. Wolfed the lot he did, baskets and all!” (177).

When Athens lost the war to Sparta in 404 BCE, a new form of comedy emerged, identified by Levi as a “comedy of manners” (Levi, in Boardman et al. 1988, 165), in which the ritual elements of fertility symbols, anarchic plots and choreographed dancing and singing

were gradually erased as more domestic, simple and predictable plot structures were preferred by audiences. Of all the literary forms at this time, Comedy revels in descriptions of food. The comic *mageiros*, a cook who also supplies and, if necessary butchers the ingredients, is not a slave employed by an elite household, but (usually) a free man of relatively low status available for hire (Kavroulaki 2009). There are many instances of similar stock characterisations collected in a significant work by one of the first writers exclusively writing about food, Athenaeus, whose manuscript, *The Deipnosophistae*, which literally means ‘Dinner Time Professors’, was collated and published towards the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE. This is one of the only sources of information about many classical and Hellenistic texts that no longer exist. This text will be considered later, however it is worth noting here that he identifies several important Athenian cooks who are already specialists in seafood or baking or butchery, and male (Wilkins and Nadeau 2015).

### **The Symposium**

Literature and art are our main conduits for understanding the social life and history of the ancient world. Unfortunately, much of the literature, being recorded on fragile parchment and papyrus is fragmented, incomplete or lost, but there is enough to give us insight into the role that food and in particular, social eating played in Ancient Greece and Rome. In addition to the poems, plays, stories and prose writings, Greek vases also depict mythological stories and scenes from daily life. The vase was a vessel that served as a container, server, dish, cup or jug. Large vases were used for long-term storage, to transport oil, wine and water, strapped onto boats or wagons or to the sides of donkeys. Certain vases were only used for serving food, such as amphorae for storage, krater for mixing wine and water at a *symposium*, wide brimmed cups for drinking and jugs for pouring. The connection between food and

storytelling is well depicted in these, for example, the image of Dionysus might appear at the base of a cup as the wine is drunk; or of fish on a platter as the food is served and eaten.

The main meal for the Greeks, the *deipnos*, was at lunch-time. It was common to invite wealthy, male citizens to a meal, followed by a *symposion* or drinking party. Plato famously recorded one such in which Socrates and several well-known Athenians such as Alcibiades and Aristophanes attended, drank watched dancing girls and flute players, flirted with boys and talked about the meaning of life (Plato, *The Symposium*, transl. Gill 2003). While food involves commensality, that is, sharing a table with companions or sharers of bread, a *symposium* was a particular kind of feast, which is itself a popular subject of vase painting where Greek painters represent

the pastimes and indulgences of young men. They have their convivial relaxations ...

The young men rush to the mixing bowl and fill their cups. They play on flutes to each other or to girls, who dance for them. In the end it is too much for them and they pay for it by vomiting, while fatherly elders or decorous girls look after them (Bowra 1972, 116).

Both Plato and Xenophon give detailed accounts of *symposia* and both stress two main features; one of order, especially that of a speaking order, on a particular theme, by a succession of guests, despite the drinking and high spirited games which also often occurred. The other feature is sexuality, especially homosexuality, and love, which is given pre-eminence in this male space, away from the duties of family and civic life. In Plato's *Symposium* we are given a sense of what occurred after the main meal had been eaten and the drinking and talking could begin in earnest; in this case, a discussion on the nature of love.

It took place in a small room called the "men's room" the *andrōn*, often specifically designed with the door off centre to accommodate the couches on which the participants lay, two to a couch, propped on their left arm. Before them were light

snacks on low tables ... The participants drank most often out of fine painted pottery which was an Athenian speciality and followed complex social customs in their behaviour, under the direction of a leader (Boardman et al. 1988, 218, 219).

A Symposium has come to refer to a gathering which has discussion and sharing of ideas at its heart – often based on a particular theme, or for a particular group of specialists. While the food and particularly the wine are sadly of lesser consideration, and urn coffee and biscuits are no substitute for the wine and licentiousness of its predecessor, much of the formality, in the ordering of speakers and discussion of a topic chosen by the leader has remained. As a form of planned discussion, the original Symposium was a planned extension of *Xenia*, a chance for a host to display the best wine, and entertainments to chosen guests.

### **The Hellenistic Period**

The Hellenistic Period falls between the empires of Alexander the Great and Augustus, the first emperor of Rome. As both empires featured expansion and colonisation, a diversity of culture and communities was a feature of both Greek and Roman settlements, colonies and cities, with a consequent transfer of culinary arts and consumables. The period, for example, saw the introduction of eastern spices and Egyptian sauces into Greece, while chickpeas and better wheat were added to the Egyptian store (Lane Fox, in Boardman et al. 1988, 338).

Although little has survived from the literature of this age, and only remaining fragments of theatre, in terms of philosophy and poetry, the Greeks of the Hellenistic period are noteworthy. One philosopher who must be mentioned in a discussion about food in literature is, of course, Epicurus whose name has been synonymous with gorging and indulgence almost since his own lifetime. As Barnes and Haynes both observe, he was indeed devoted to pleasure, “but his embracing of hedonism has led to the mistaken conviction that he was...in thrall to the sensual pleasures of eating and drinking. In fact ... [t]he Epicurean ideal was a



life of *ataraxia* – tranquillity. To be free from pain” (Haynes 2012, 85). This life of tranquillity was to be achieved by sober reasoning, “For it is not possible to live pleurably without living sensibly and nobly and justly” (Barnes, in Boardman et al. 1988, 366). Epicurus’ physical teachings were further taken up by the Latin writer, Lucretius in his lengthy philosophical poem, *In the nature of Thing*, in particular a discussion of atoms and the senses.

In poetry, the most popular form at this time seemed to be the epigram, a short, witty poem, often including puns or *doubles entendres*. There was a tradition of poets from Alexandria in particular whose writings “convince us of their self-awareness and their life among wine and women, *symposia* and fickle boys” (Lane Fox, in Boardman et al. 1988, 347). Theocritus and several women poets including Anyte, Erinna, Moiro and Nossi, all celebrate life and love in their verses (Jay 1987), but the most important poet of his time was Callimachos, “the master of the epigram and epitaph” (Lane Fox, in Boardman et al. 1988, 348). In many of his poems mingle sensual imagery – wine and love, nature and body –and we see the source of many later commonplaces of love poetry:

Lucky the cup,  
more fortunate  
still, Meleager,  
my lip to thy lip  
with a swig at my love  
downed  
Like a flask of retsina!

Or, the same poet:

I was thirsty.  
It was hot.

I kissed the boy  
with girl-soft skin.

My thirst was quenched (Meleager, transl. Peter Whigham, in Jay 1987, 135).

Later, Philodemus writes of the joys of the summer

Here it's rose time again, chickpeas in season,

Cabbages ... first heads of the year,

Fillets of smelt, fresh-salted cheese,

tender and furred up lettuce leaves (transl. William Moebius, in Jay 1987, 177),

while Apollonides' verse indicates a theme taken up by Roman poets and poets in the Renaissance,

The cup clinks out my friend

Wine! Here is wine. No water add,

But drink till your knees sag.

Soon, too soon, will come the day

When we no more shall drink

Together (transl. Peter Whigham (in Jay 1987, 209)

Not all poems were, however, elegiac and complimentary, even about food. Automedon complains:

Having dined yesterday on a goat's foot

And a ten-day-old yellowish cabbage-stalk

The texture of hemp, I refrain

From naming my host, out of fear

That such a sharp-tempered fellow

Might just invite me back (in Jay 1987, 229).

Theocritus has already been mentioned as an epigrammist, however his longer collection of poems, *the Idylls*, is his greatest contribution to literature, as it is the precursor to a tradition of pastoral elegiac writing, and greatly influenced the Roman writer, Virgil, and later Milton, Shelley and Arnold (Lane Fox, in Boardman et al. 1988, 352). These brief fragments of poetry offer a glimpse into the world of educated Greeks and the way that food and drink featured in their lives.

### **Roman Literature of the early empire and Augustan period**

This survey has been biased towards the earlier end of the time spectrum largely because the roots of many enduring and meaningful symbols, forms and themes of literature which follow originate in these texts. For example, the drinking party, whose context is the basis of all Platonic dialogues and was a feature of upper middle class Athenian male culture, blending philosophical debate with flirtatious even licentious behaviour, became a dominant way of cultured life in the Roman world. The banquet, symposium or *Convivium* continued to be a major source of literary inspiration, both as a site for performance and reading aloud, and also as an occasion to satirise, show off wealth or fashion, flirt and fall in love.

Roman literature follows many of the patterns and genres discussed in the previous sections; the Romans continued to write philosophy, history, theatre – comedy and tragedy – poetry and speculative or fictional prose. It can indeed be claimed that “[t]he Greeks invented almost every literary form; tragedy, comedy, lyric poetry, history, philosophical dialogue, biography. In contrast, the Romans only invented one literary form; satire” (Haynes 2012, 187). One of the most important writers in the earliest centuries of this new era, Catullus, was appreciated in his own time as a master of the epigram, which he used to fullest extent in his impassioned and personalised love poetry. Only 116 of his poems are extant and, of these,

only a few show the conventions of the dinner table, but those that do survive reveal a satirical eye:

You will dine well with me, my Fabullus, in a few days,  
if the gods favour you, if you bring with you a good and large dinner,  
not without a dazzling girl and wine and wit and all your loud laughter.  
If you bring these things, I say, our charming one,  
you will eat well; for the wallet of your Catullus is full of cobwebs. (Catullus, Poem 13)

Horace, a former soldier and son of a freed slave writes that: “A stomach that is seldom empty despises common food” (Horace *Satires*. II. 2, 38).

Virgil and Ovid, whose lives intersect both with each other and those of the previous two writers, also feature significantly in writing about food or use food as image, metaphor, benchmark for character or instructions for life. Virgil was the son of a Mantuan farmer who, after being educated, moved to Rome. There he was gathered into a network of poets and writers close to the emperor Augustus and sponsored by a wealthy friend of the emperor, Maecneas, whose regular banquets and drinking parties became the centre of literary Roman life. Virgil’s earlier work, the *Georgics*, is divided into four books on fields, crops, trees animals and bees but his greatest work, which he died before completing, was *The Aeneid*. From his deathbed, he ordered the manuscript to be destroyed, but Augustus overrode this request and had it copied and promoted (Grant 1958, 185). Perpetuating the epic form established by Homer, *The Aeneid* unites the structure of Homer’s two very different books onto one long poem – where the first section features the wanderings of a hero and the second section focuses on the bellicose establishment of the foundations of Rome at the end of the Trojan War (Grant 1958, 179).

Virgil also continues the theme of guest friendship. In Book I of the *Aeneid* (1973), Prince Aeneas and his men, all Trojan survivors of the Sack of Troy, land on the north coast

of Africa after a long period of wandering. Demonstrating his leadership, Aeneas slays seven stags to feed his men as they camp and recover from hardships. They discover they are near the city of Carthage and make contact with the citizens whose Queen, Dido sends them “20 bulls 100 pigs and 100 lambs and their mothers” (Lewis, transl. *Aeneid* Book I, 15) as an act of hospitality. Dido then hosts a banquet for the Trojans, however, while much is made of the sumptuousness of their surroundings, Virgil is not specific about what they ate and how it was cooked. After this feast, Aeneas tells Dido and the court of the tragic fall of Troy, through the Greek’s device of the wooden horse (Book 2) and of the subsequent adventures of the Trojans. This section draws directly from *The Odyssey* and the corresponding guest-friendship hospitality and after-banquet accounts of Odysseus’s journeys. Despite the intensity of the love affair which springs up between the two royal figures, Aeneas is recalled by the gods to his true mission, which is to found a new Troy (which will become Rome) and leaves Dido, who kills herself in despair. He then is taken by fate, sea currents and weather to the north-west coast of Italy, to make peaceful ties with Latinus, the local king. Here, too, feasting and guest friendship are offered at first (Book 7), but eventually discord is sown between the refugees and the locals and, not until they have fought, made peace again and united through marriage, does the possibility of a new Trojan/Latin empire in Latium arrive.

The Romans had many collective even public occasions for food and feasting beyond the male only and class-based banquets. Many are noted in Ovid’s *The Fasti* or *Feasts*, a poetic almanac in twelve books of feast days of the Roman year, which, by month, describes the religious festivals honouring the many deities still worshipped within the empire until it was Christianised by Constantine. Ironically Ovid’s most patriotic work, this was completed after he was exiled for “a poem and a mistake” (Grant 1958, 210), the poem being the excessively tongue-in-cheek *Ars Amatoria* and the mistake still a mystery. His most popular work, *Metamorphoses*, is an innovative long poem in 15 parts which is not an epic, but which

tells, and has many narrators tell, over 200 stories of transformations, most of which come from Greek mythology but which are given Latinised names. For the most part, as in his retelling of the Persephone (or in Latin, Proserpine) myth discussed above, the mention of food in these stories is as sacrifice, libation or to fête heroes such as Perseus (Innes, transl. 1974, 114) or Theseus (194).

Two episodes concerning food, however, stand out. In the first, Jupiter and Mercury visit earth disguised as mortals and, tiring, “went to a thousand homes, looking for somewhere to rest” and found “a thousand homes barred against them” (196). They are finally taken in by a humble elderly couple, Baucis and her husband Philemon, who were poor and had no servants, but painstakingly showed the visitors their meagre hospitality, by gathering wood, making fire, gathering food, cooking it and making polite conversation to cover the delay in preparation. When they came to eat with their guests they were dismayed to find that the meagre store of wine in their flagon never diminished, but kept replenishing, and so they realised they were entertaining gods and were afraid. Jupiter reassured them that as they had shown great kindness the same would be shown to them. They were escorted up a high mountain then watched their neighbours and countryside devoured by a flood, leaving only their home standing (197). Such were the rewards of guest friendship. A second episode, in complete contrast, reveals Ovid’s appeal as a vivid writer, in the personification of Hunger. Ceres (Roman name for Demeter) instructed one of the mountain spirits to seek the creature out, in order to punish King Erysichthon for his blasphemies and godlessness. Hunger is found “in a stony field, tearing up a few scant grasses with her nails and teeth. The creature’s face was colourless, hollow-eyed, her hair uncared for, her lips bleached and cracked” (201). This description of the ghastly creature continues in gory detail down the body to her feet, and she is instructed and agrees to ‘insinuate herself’ into the body of the errant king who becomes insatiable in his need for food and drink. At last, having spent all his wealth on

feeding himself and having sold his daughter for food, “the wretch began to bite and gnaw at his own limbs and fed his body by eating it away” (202).

Extravagance of the opposite kind occurs in a surviving section of Petronius’s *Satyricon*, where a nouveau riche braggart called Trimalchio hosts a feast full of artifice and contrivances. The cook is prized for his skill in creating dishes that are not what they appear; a wood pigeon is made out of bacon, prunes are stuck with thorns to look like sea urchins, an entire pig appears not to have been gutted, but when opened is stuffed full of sausages and black puddings. The host is constantly ordering his slaves to change the dishes, wine and entertainment and, after the main courses, as if his vulgarity were not already assured, Trimalchio calls for his wife, Fortunata, to appear and dance for the gathering. Towards the end of the evening, Trimalchio has himself bathed anointed and lain in a coffin, to listen to his friends and slaves give eulogies. He finally has a slave read out his will, before the dessert of a Priapus pastry figure is served, with “all kinds of fruit and grapes in his lap. When we reached out our hands ... all the fruit and cakes began to squirt saffron” (quoted by Fass 2003, 82).

The two most significant writers of what could be termed ‘symposiast’ literature were Athenaeus and Plutarch, who both come at the end of the span of this survey, at the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE Plutarch wrote (in Greek) a dialogue called *The Symptotic Questions*, which has also been translated as *Table Talk* (König 2012), in which he identifies the essential benefits of a symposium as confirming the value of relaxation and conviviality, enhancing the language of friendship as well as developing knowledge and skills in debate and conversation.

The pleasures derived from things eaten and drunk bring with them memories which are sensible and, besides that, evanescent, like a stale smell or a lingering odour of cooking whereas the topics of problem solving and philosophical conversation give

pleasure to those who remember them, remaining always fresh and pleasant.

(*Symposiacs*, Book 1)

Athenaeus wrote or collated “an encyclopaedia of quotations” (Murray in Wilkins and Nadeau 2015, 43), The *Deipnosophistes*, or *Dinner time Professors (or Philosophers)*, which cites nearly 800 writers and 2,500 separate works which all feature dinner parties or symposia, most from the Classical or Hellenistic periods and most of which would be lost to knowledge without this work. Structured as a dialogue between two friends, Athenaeus and Timocrates, giving an account of the discussion at a banquet for over twenty people held at the house of Larentius, a wealthy book-collector and patron of the arts, this work is in written the manner of Plato, but with a great deal more social and historical detail included than philosophy. The collection shows how common the stock character of the boastful cook was in early comedy, the varieties of entertainment, games, dancers, flute player, acrobats, jugglers and courtesans prevalent at the drinking parties, and the importance of the feast to establish status, even while cautioning against excess. For example, Athenaeus quotes a fragment from Hipponax about the perils of self-indulgence, which recalls the earlier excerpt from Ovid: “One of them dined every day at his leisure, without stint on tuna and thick sauces ... and ate up his inheritance. Now he has to dig at the rocks on his hillside, chewing on grass and barley bread; stomach filling for slaves” (Athenaeus, fragment 26, quoted by Murray, in Wilkins and Nadeau 2015, 30).

## **Conclusion**

König (2012) notes that the *convivium* or *symposium* was also a feature of early Christianity, which emerged in the first century of the Roman empire as a cult to be taken seriously. This gives a new focus to understandings of the Last Supper, which would probably have been enjoyed by Jesus and disciples while reclining, rather than as depicted by later painters, such



as da Vinci, as upright and seated (14). From Plato's *Symposium* – where a dinner or supper party always forms the basis of conversation, through myth, satire, epigram and on to the many food miracles of Jesus – food as ritual, as symbol, social benchmark and even as miracle infuses our culture through literature. Under Christianity, the rite of the Last Supper unites many of the original themes and strands of food in relation to literature and life for the Greeks and Romans. Food as rite, as worship and as transforming act (in the notion of transubstantiation) had become secularised by the time of the last writers mentioned. However, the theme of commensality remains an enduring element throughout the literature, from its beginnings as documenting sacrifice to gods who proved the essentials of life, it proceeds as host friendship to strangers, and ends as a rite of hospitality and demonstration of personal wealth and power for an elite class. Food and feasting influence the development of literature in the ancient world and, as well as the culinary practices, provide contemporary audiences and readers insight into the society, religion and home life.

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