Food in the Ancient World

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Food in the Ancient World

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Blackwell
Publishing

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BLACKWELL PUBLISHING
350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA
9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK
550 Swanston Street, Carlton, Victoria 3053, Australia

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First published 2006 by Blackwell Publishing Ltd

1 2006

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Wilkins, John, 1954–
Food in the ancient world / John M. Wilkins and Shaun Hill.
p. cm. — (Ancient cultures)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN-13: 978-0-631-23550-7 (hardcover : alk. paper)
ISBN-10: 0-631-23550-7 (hardcover : alk. paper)
ISBN-13: 978-0-631-23551-4 (pbk. : alk. paper)
ISBN-10: 0-631-23551-5 (pbk. : alk. paper)
1. Food habits—History—To 1500. 2. Food—History. 3. Civilization, Ancient. I. Hill, Shaun, 1947– II. Title. III. Series: Ancient cultures (Malden, Mass.)
TX353.W535 2006
394.1′2093—dc22
2005013069

A catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

Set in 10/12.5pt Rotation
by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong
Printed and bound in the UK
by TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall

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Contents

John Wilkins is responsible for the chapters and Shaun Hill for the Introductions and recipes

Figures vii
Preface ix
Timeline xii
Map of the Mediterranean xiv

Introduction 1
1 An Overview of Food in Antiquity 4

Introduction 39
2 The Social Context of Eating 41

Introduction 79
3 Food and Ancient Religion 81

Introduction 110
4 Staple Foods: Cereals and Pulses 112

Introduction 140
5 Meat and Fish 142

Introduction 164
6 Wine and Drinking 166

Introduction 185
7 Food in Ancient Thought 187

Introduction 211
8 Medical Approaches to Food 213

Introduction 245
9 Food in Literature 247

Recipes 277
Bibliography 281
Index 290

Figures

Figures 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 2.2, 4.3, 4.4, 5.4, 7.2, 8.1 and 8.3 are taken from A Matthioli's edition of *Dioscorides*, which was produced in an expanded form in 1598 to take advantage of the plants recently discovered by Europeans in the Americas. Matthioli was thus able to put American peppers beside the Asian peppers long known to the Greeks and Romans. Matthioli's updating of the record continues a long Classical tradition of botanical and medical works that strove to keep up with the latest introductions to the Mediterranean world from Asia and Africa.

1.1 Citron 6
1.2 Chicken or domestic fowl 13
1.3 Rice 34
2.1 An ancient bar 53
2.2 Locust 56
2.3 Cooking utensils 65
2.4 The House of the Vetii at Pompeii 66
2.5 Ashurbanipal, the King of Assyria, feasts with his queen 69
2.6 Lower-class drinkers 70
3.1 Dismemberment of the animal in sacrifice 84
3.2 Parthenon frieze 95
4.1 Women pound the grain with pestles in a mortar 116
4.2 Model of figure preparing and cooking food 119
4.3 Seakale 134
4.4 Mallow 136
5.1 Camel 146
5.2 A hero, perhaps Herakles, reclines on a couch beside a table of meat 148

5.3 Tetradrachm 156
5.4 Cuttle-fish 157
6.1 The Drinking Contest of Dionysus and Heracles 167
6.2 The journey of Dionysus over the sea 171
6.3 Symposium showing three men playing cottabos with a female musician and servant 177
6.4 A wild follower of Dionysus, or satyr, attempts to balance a wine cup on his penis 180
7.1 Jersey cow 189
7.2 Pepper 196
8.1 Ginger 226
8.2 The human digestive tract 228
8.3 Wheat 240
9.1 Ulysses and the Sirens 248
9.2 The Exeter vase 264

Preface

The modern world has inherited many images of food and eating in antiquity. Among them might be the orgies of the Roman emperors, the plants distributed throughout the empire, the cookery book of Apicius, and the colourful use of foods in satirical and comic texts. In other respects, the food the ancient Greeks and Romans took for granted is often obscure to us. This book will try to restore the food itself and the contexts in which it was eaten: the dining rooms built beside Greek temples, for example; and the altars where animals were slaughtered.

This book will attempt to review the diet of the millions of ancient Greeks and Romans who did not belong to the pampered Roman elite of the pages of Suetonius. Comparisons will show a surprising degree of similarity between Greek and Roman practices.

In addition, this study will also deal with particular types of foods. Take meat, the food with the highest status. Meat is a natural product. Raising animals for meat is a comparatively inefficient form of farming since the plant energy in fodder (such as barley) can be only partially transferred to the human eater. Animals, therefore, were widely acknowledged as indicators of wealth. Rich citizens, not to mention the gods, expected to benefit from the flesh of animals. The Greeks marvelled at the wealthy Persians who cooked huge animals, such as camels and oxen, whole. The Homeric heroes feasted on beef. Large-scale sacrifice was a feature of life in the ancient city state as it continues to be at the Hajj at Mecca. The major role played by animals is reflected in myth and religion where they contribute to a sense of identity and of belonging to a group. We might compare some native American peoples who believed the buffalo herd was provided by the gods. Buffalo belonged to the plains and not to the corral, deep in excrement, that European immigrants brought to America. The social structure of the ancient world was patriarchal and for this reason men were likely to eat more meat than women, a situation paralleled to some extent in Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

For the Greeks and Romans, like the modern anthropologist, civilization was linked with agriculture and technology. In addition to meat, farming brought the cultivation of cereals. We are often told that the Greeks ate *maza* or barley porridge rather than bread. Porridge might seem an unattractive dietary staple, but this book will try to imagine what could be done with cereal products. Consider the variety of uses for rice (sweet and savoury dishes), wheat (bread, bulgar and pasta) and maize in the modern world. Cereals are hard seeds whose husk must normally be removed before they can be processed by the human digestive system. Such preparation and the grinding of the grain are hard and time consuming. In antiquity, owing to the patriarchal nature of the social structure, women were more likely to do this work than men, unless the family could afford to keep slaves or buy commercial bread products.

Cereals and many other animals and plants eaten by human beings were gradually introduced into the Mediterranean world over a period of millennia, if they were not native to the region. Wheat and barley arrived early; chickens before the fifth century BC; peaches and apricots later still; rice in the period of Arabic influence (after AD 700); maize after Columbus. In the ancient world, new arrivals made a continuing impact.

The Greeks and Romans had extensive contact with Asian and African peoples at all periods, and inherited much from their eastern neighbours in particular. Along with these borrowings from the Persians and Egyptians, for example, came unease. Plutarch makes this clear in his *Life of Alexander*. The young Macedonian warrior king whose campaign as far as India brought greater contact with lands that produced unusual animals, plants and spices also had, according to Plutarch, reservations about 'luxury'. This is a complex matter, as we discuss later. Plutarch tells us (22) that Alexander was a very temperate eater and avoided pressures from his mother to eat more cakes and to enjoy food prepared by bakers and cooks. The best cooks, declared Alexander, are a night march and a light breakfast. Alexander's moderation of his appetite fits the favourable presentation of the world conqueror that Plutarch tried hard to create out of a historical tradition bulging with stories of Alexander's excessive drinking and bodily passions. A word is needed on cakes, cooks and the control of the appetite.

Cakes in the ancient world might be small offerings of wheat and honey to the gods, homely products recommended by the austere Roman politician Cato the Elder, or the most significant part of the meal, according to the Persians in Herodotus 1.133. Cakes had many forms and, as in the modern world, a variety of cultural significances. (Compare, for example, cattle cake, Christmas cake and the contents of a French patisserie.) In ancient kitchens, bakers and cooks were often humble personnel, but they were linked with high-level eating. Livy links them with new luxuries arriving in Rome in the second century BC, Plato with imported luxuries into fourth-century Athens. Cooks were also used by generals on campaign, most notably the Persians in 480 BC (Herodotus 9.82). These practical artisans of the kitchen were at the same time hired hands working in a hot, smoky environment, and purveyors of luxury.

Ancient sources are frequently dominated by the dangers of luxury which expand uncontrollably out of the basic human needs for housing, clothing and food. Plato has been a particularly powerful influence on this aspect of western thought. One of his legacies to later philosophy and to Christianity is a dualist rather than holistic approach to the individual. For the dualist, the body must be strictly controlled so that the mind and spirit may concentrate on matters of great importance rather than on the fleeting excitement of food and sexual pleasure. Plato himself recognized the role of food and wine in social and religious practice – witness his *Symposium* and *Laws*. In the *Timaeus* he presented a model of the body and of the cosmos that was a landmark for later medical scientists such as Galen.

Medicine has an important role to play in this book, both ancient theories of nutrition and theories about the impact of medicine on culture. Medical thought will contribute to the claim that food had a cultural importance for the ancients comparable perhaps to its role in Chinese culture. This large claim is distinct from claims to gastronomy and a ‘cuisine’, such as that seen in France during the past two centuries. The main ancient authors we use for the study of food across Greek and Roman cultures are Galen, Pliny and Athenaeus. Each might in a sense be termed ‘encyclopaedic’ in range and approach. We have frequently consulted a rather different form of modern encyclopaedia, in particular Harold McGee *On Food and Cooking*, *Larousse gastronomique* and *The Oxford Companion to Food*.

Timeline

Periods

Bronze Age	3500–1100
Archaic Period	600–480
Classical Period	480–323
Hellenistic Period	323–31 BC
Roman Empire	27 BC–AD 330

Dates

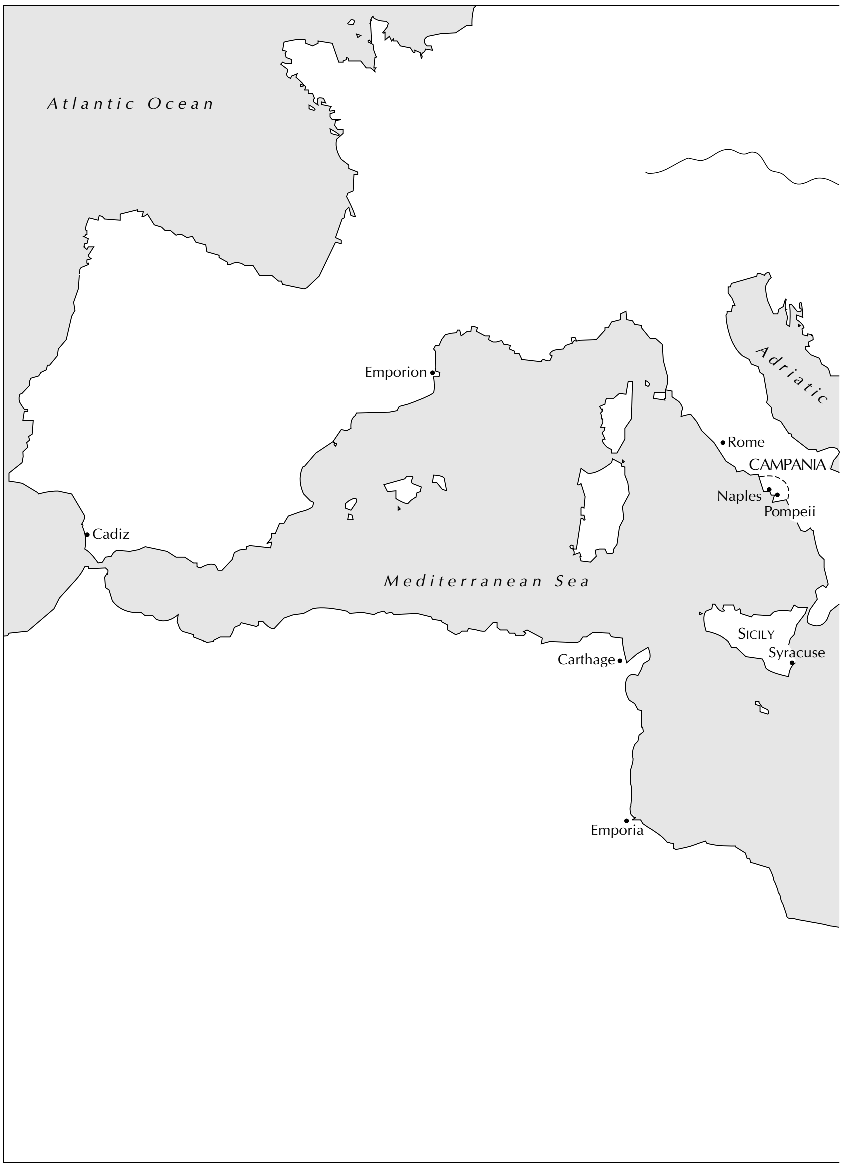
BC

753	Traditional date for foundation of Rome
750–700	Traditional date for the final stages of composition of the Homeric poems
Late 7th century	Ashurbanipal king of Assyrians
550	Cyrus defeats Medes and establishes Persian power
490–480	Persian invasions of Greece; battles of Marathon, Thermopylae and Salamis
454–404	Athenian Empire
?429–347	Lifetime of Plato
384–322	Lifetime of Aristotle
336	Alexander becomes king of Macedon
334–323	Alexander's campaign against Persia
167	Roman defeat of Macedon
146	Destruction of Corinth and Carthage by the Romans

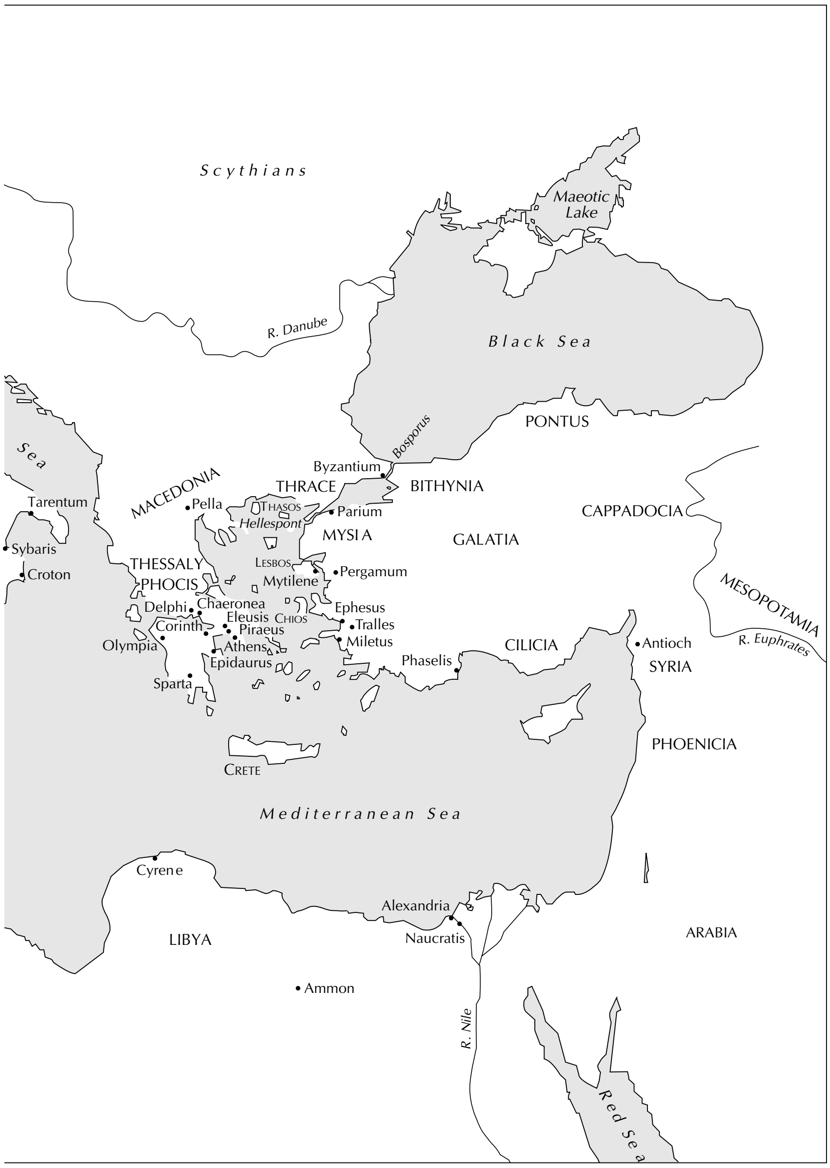
133	Pergamum bequeathed to Romans
31	Octavian defeats Mark Anthony and Egyptian forces
27	Octavian named Augustus (first Roman Emperor)

AD

23–79	Lifetime of Pliny the Elder
?50–?120	Lifetime of Plutarch
129–?216	Lifetime of Galen
161–80	Marcus Aurelius emperor
?200	Athenaeus composes *Deipnosophistae*


Atlantic Ocean
Emporion
Cadiz
Mediterranean Sea
Adriatic
Rome
CAMPANIA
Naples
Pompeii
SICILY
Syracuse
Carthage
Emporia

MAP 1 Map of the Mediterranean


Scythians
Maeotic Lake
R. Danube
Black Sea
Sea
Bosporus
PONTUS
Byzantium
MACEDONIA
THRACE
BITHYNIA
Tarentum
Pella
THASOS
Parium
CAPPADOCIA
Hellespont
MYSIA
GALATIA
Sybaris
Croton
THESSALY
LESBOS
Pergamum
MESOPOTAMIA
PHOCIS
Mytilene
Delphi
Chaeronea
Ephesus
Corinth
Eleusis
CHIOS
Tralles
Olympia
Piraeus
Athens
Miletus
CILICIA
Antioch
R. Euphrates
Epidaurus
Phaselis
SYRIA
Sparta
PHOENICIA
CRETE
Mediterranean Sea
Cyrene
Alexandria
LIBYA
Naucratis
ARABIA
Ammon
R. Nile
Red Sea

1

Introduction

The food of previous eras is intriguing. The experience of eating and smelling the same dishes and aromas which would have been part of life at another stage of history may be the nearest one can come to understanding the pattern and texture of everyday life, the reality of being there rather than an academic exercise in recalling the ups and downs of political and battleground life.

This is not a matter of cooking up possible recipes and re-creating dishes from well-documented feasts. Rather it is a question of exploring the tastes and preferences of the time, the preconceptions and misconceptions held about food and eating, and their impact then, as now, on what was served both to the wealthy and to the poor, for grand occasions and for everyday eating.

There is little advantage to be gained in exploring the diets of people who lived near the brink of famine. They ate what they could and used whatever was edible and grew or lived around them. More interesting are the choices made by those with the ability to pander to preferences.

In theory these preferences should be fairly straightforward and unchanging through the centuries. In practice they are complex and respond to many social and perceived medical pressures, and these do change. Contemporary ideas regarding the dangers of a fatty diet and the desire to be thin are in stark contrast to post-war notions when a well-fed baby would be regarded as bonny, a cause for joy rather than a worry concerning future obesity.

We choose from what is available to us, so a brief scan of what may have been obtainable will throw up major differences between now and then. Not least because seasonality was a much greater influence on meat as well as fruit and vegetables, storage techniques were more restrictive and more likely to alter the nature of whatever was being stored through salting and curing, and of course a deep hole in the ground was the nearest cooling device to the chiller cabinet.

The greatest barriers to understanding what may have been on offer are preconceptions regarding the 'Mediterranean diet' which have firmly lodged in the consciousness. Fish and cereals are fine but much of what we think of as part of the term is post-Columbus. So of course, amongst other things, no tomatoes, peppers, maize for polenta, or chillies. Wheat came in various guises, all of which were too expensive for the poorer classes who had millet and barley as staples. Lesser strains of wheat like emmer and spelt could be made into flat unleavened sheets like pasta, and finer strains like durum, which makes the best bread, were at a premium and, during Roman times, grown and imported in quantity from across the Empire.

The time span of our work is large, Homeric times until Early Christian, so some account must be taken of changes not just in availability but in religious sentiments, relative prosperity and even fashion during this period. The sources for our work have also to be considered and evaluated for reliability in this context. Writers like second-century AD Athenaeus, who gave great insight into food-writing now completely lost to us, were products of their time, with all the prejudices and preconceptions then current. Any analysis and comment on food and eating before then will have filtered through these. References, for example, to the gastronome and writer Archestratus, who wrote and lived in the fourth century BC, are touched with ridicule as his stern views on food and cooking, along with the metre in which he wrote, were no longer smart to hold. Think of a book on Elizabethan or Jacobean food and attitudes written from today's perspectives and the time gap becomes clear.

Actual recipes can be conjured out of some texts but not many. Cooks were unlikely to be avid readers and collectors of cookbooks, if they could read at all. There are some usable recipes, of course, a good explanation of the pastry 'tracta' by Pliny, for example, and some interesting recipes from Cato in his 'de agricultura', a treatise on farming written around 160 BC, one for a pudding made with flour, cheese, egg and honey. Mostly though, we have to work on descriptions of the food by those who ate it rather than anyone who expected us to cook it.

A dilemma arises. If we prepare the dish exactly as it was made over two thousand years ago, the unfamiliarity of the tastes and textures may overpower our ability to judge nuances of flavour that would have been apparent to anyone of the period, like giving a curry to somebody who had never experienced Indian food and expecting them to notice subtle variations in the spicing rather than just be hit by the chilli. If we re-create the dishes exactly we will have to re-create the palate and expectations of the time also.

Alternatively, if we lower the intensity of the spicing and flavouring so that the general character of the food comes across, have we weakened the authenticity of our efforts? We are now fairly familiar with Thai and Vietnamese cookery and many of the ingredients used are comparable to those in the Mediterranean in the period we address. The universal dipping sauce, garum, was made in much the same way as Nam Pla, by fermenting small fish, and it's interesting to note that the results are quite delicate, not the stinker that the idea of rotting fish conjures up at all.

What emerges is the fondness for rank flavours in foods like garum or cheese combined and contrasted with sweet flavours such as honey and dried fruit. Not significantly different, in fact, from the use of fruit sauces with game, or sweet biscuits and port with blue cheese. Stronger spices like asafoetida and more astringent herbs like hyssop that would seem medicinal now were in use, presumably to sharpen up the cereal porridges which would have otherwise made for a dull eating experience.

Restaurants did not exist as such. There were inns to feed and lodge travellers, of course, but serious dining was the preserve of private houses with cooks and servants, staff meals the mainstay of agricultural labourers and street food the preserve of the urban poor.

Within these diverse groups, there were similarities of flavour objectives and shared cultural ideas on food and diet. Snobbery and pretension went with wealthy dining then as now, and the ignorance and superstition on food matters that seem laughable now point uncomfortably towards the amusement that our current ideas may hold for future diners.

1

An Overview of Food in Antiquity

This introductory chapter is in four parts. First we set out the broad historical framework. Next we present the evidence and how we propose to interpret it. We then summarize the main elements of the diet. A final section shows how food and eating were incorporated into Greco-Roman culture to a striking degree.

The Historical Framework

This book covers a broad period, roughly from 750 BC to AD 200, and focuses on the cultures of Greece and Rome. In that period Greece developed into a large number of city states ruled by oligarchic governments and sent out colonial settlements throughout the Mediterranean. The city states had varied constitutions, including a few democracies, and remained largely independent until the rise of Macedon in the fourth century BC. Alexander the Great and his successors then dominated the Greek world (now including Asia Minor, Syria and Egypt, along with southern Italy) in a series of dynasties, all of them eventually taken over by the end of the first century BC by the Romans. In the same period, the Romans had been developing their strength as an Italic people, coming to terms with the Greek cities of Sicily and southern Italy, with the Carthaginians, and with all the influences these neighbours exerted on them. By the time of the first Emperor, Augustus, the Romans had a world empire many of whose inhabitants in the East spoke Greek and Latin. There was much cultural exchange between these two systems. This book draws in particular on three authors who tried to make sense of this cultural fusion as far as food was concerned.

These are Plutarch of Chaeronea (in particular his *Sympotica* or *Table-Talk*), Athenaeus of Naucratis (his *Deipnosophistae*) and Galen of Pergamum (in particular his treatise *On the Powers of Foods*). All three were Greek authors writing under the power of Rome in the second or early third centuries AD. Their commentary on food, eating, medicine, religion and regional diversity is rich and stimulating.

This book does not confine itself to the homelands of 'the Greeks' and 'the Romans'. It takes into account a vast area, from the Black Sea and Syria to Spain, from the steppes of Russia to the sea and deserts of North Africa. The seaboard will be the main focus, but many people in the region did not live by the sea. There were mountain dwellers, farmers and many who did not travel. The Romans, indeed, constructed themselves as originally a people of small farmers who had nothing to do with influences from outside. Thus Ovid in his *Fasti*, for example, describes the goddess Carna as one who dislikes travel by sea, and exotic birds and fish, preferring instead traditional Roman beans, bacon and emmer wheat (6.169–86). But in many ways, trade and travel were vital to the history of eating in antiquity. Foods and perhaps technologies tended to move westwards. Furthermore, the Greeks and Romans were influenced by other cultures. A particularly striking example was the Assyrian practice of reclining at a meal, which the Greeks, Etruscans and Romans seem to have imported from the seventh and sixth centuries BC onwards. This major development is discussed further in Chapter 2.

The movement of people, too, was crucial. Foods and other goods were traded extensively, to meet local shortages, to meet the demands of local elites for distinctive goods, and for other purposes. Travel came to have a close relation with food. We can see this first in Homer, where Homer's Odysseus travels round the Mediterranean meeting people who do not eat the grain and olives and drink the wine that he does. Later, in the 'sympotic' literature attached to the symposium or drinking session, wines and other products imported from many different places were listed and celebrated. In Rome, the impact of expansion produced strong political and literary reaction, from the time of Cato the Elder onwards (late third/early second century BC). Cato and others voiced concern over the influence of imports, the richness and attractiveness of foreign foods and goods, and the perceived neglect of Roman traditions. We shall explore the latter in particular in Chapters 7 and 9. This Roman tradition, however, only serves to highlight the impact and importance of foreign foods. Cato's fears in

FIGURE 1.1 An Indian plant, the citron was the member of the citrus family that was certainly known to the Greeks and Romans. At first glance less appetising than the lemon, this huge and pithy fruit has a fragrant juice. Galen says people ate it with vinegar and fish sauce. He also noted its complex pharmacological properties. It was also believed to be an antidote to certain poisons. See Dalby (2003). Reproduced by permission of the Dean and Chapter of Exeter Cathedral

the second century may have reflected new pressures, but the interest in foreign imports, both material and intellectual, as his own writings display, was substantial and had been so for decades.

Evidence and Interpretation

Archaeology is able to make a large contribution to our understanding of these developments. Analysis of plant, animal and fish remains has revealed much about the distribution and kinds of animals and plants that were eaten, and some idea of the distribution by trade of plants and cereals, fish and all the equipment of the table (Renfrew 1973, Luce 2000). Much too is revealed of food technology (Curtis 2001) and means of preparing and storing a wide range of foods (Sparkes 1962, Forbes & Foxhall 1995). So too vessels for dining, in particular silverware and painted pottery (Vickers & Gill 1994); and the architecture of the dining room, including buildings, wall-coverings and flooring. Mosaics are particularly well preserved (Dunbabin 1999 and 2003).

A further class of evidence is provided by the analysis of human bones and of residues in cooking and eating vessels (Garnsey 1999). An example may be found in recent studies on evidence from Minoan Crete which reveal the diet in the late Minoan III period (fourteenth century BC) of a population of over 350 adults and children buried in the cemetery at Armenoi, south of Rethymnon (Tzedakis and Martlew 2002). There is no evidence for seafood (even though contemporary pottery has plentiful marine imagery), though the remains do suggest a ‘fair amount of animal protein’ (whether milk or meat) and plant protein. Furthermore, the researchers found little differentiation between the diets of the rich and the poor, as expressed in chemical deposits in the bones; but there is evidence that men ate more animal protein than women. Infectious diseases found include osteomyelitis, brucellosis (transferred to humans from infected goat’s milk), tuberculosis (transferred from infected cow’s milk), and nutritional diseases such as osteoporosis, scurvy, rickets and iron-deficiency anaemia. A smaller sample of bone tissues from Grave Circle A at Mycenae revealed some eating of seafood, with men eating more than women. However, there was little or no marine protein in the chemical analysis of bones from Grave Circle B at Mycenae. As far as alcoholic beverages were concerned, both wine and beer appear to have been drunk. These findings confirm some evidence already considered by Garnsey (1999), and are also suggestive in other areas. It was possible, it seems, for Greeks to drink milk and beer, even though many texts link such beverages with foreign peoples. I shall return to this evidence.

Archaeological evidence is supplemented in abundance by literary and technical sources. The written text is a feature of Greek and Roman culture which is not found in many other food cultures until the modern period, if then. Food plays a major role in many different kinds of text, from Homer and Herodotus onwards. The Greeks were the first people in Europe to produce cookery books (in the fourth century BC). And Greeks and Romans produced texts which had a particular focus on eating and drinking. Comedy and satire are the best examples (Gowers 1993 for Rome, Wilkins 2000 for Greece).

There is a considerable mismatch between many of the literary sources and the vast majority of the population. The nature of the literary sources is explored further in Chapter 9. Even where literature does turn its attention to poorer members of society, they are likely to be idealized in a discourse that reflects more on criticism of the city than on the poor for their own sake. Simylus in the poem *The Moretum* (*The Ploughman's Lunch* in Kenney's 1984 translation) and the poor huntsmen in the Euboean Oration (7) of Dio Chrysostom exemplify the idealized literary peasant.

A more accurate picture of food in the rural economy (though not of peasants) is given by the agricultural writers. Cato writes for rich investors, but sets much practical detail beside this focus. Varro writes for his wife, with apparently a broader focus than Cato. Columella combines much practical detail with standard moral concerns of the period. All of these writers have a broad geographical overview. Cato focuses on Campania but has much Greek material in mind; Varro and Columella are concerned with much of Italy and beyond. All this contrasts with the *Works and Days* of Hesiod, an early Greek hexameter poet, who wrote within a tradition of wisdom literature on the agricultural year. For all its detail, the moral framework of thrift, hard work and focus on the locality, in contrast to foreign trade, is at the heart of the poem. Varro and Columella also reflect the moral tradition, but to a smaller extent. Thus on imported birds for fattening, Varro says of the peacock (3.6.6), 'Quintus Hortensius is said to have been the first to serve these at his inaugural dinner as aedile. The fact was praised more by men given to luxury than by the severe and upright.'

There were also technical texts in many other areas related to food, on medicine from the fifth century BC, and from Aristotle and

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