

TASTE OR TABOO
DIETARY CHOICES IN ANTIQUITY

To Anne

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MICHAEL BEER



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MICHAEL BEER, EXETER,
FEBRUARY 2010

INTRODUCTION

An influential and wealthy young man, whose prodigious physical appetites inevitably lead to weight gain, strives to keep excess flab at bay by repeated use of enemas and emetics. An elderly gentleman, also powerful and affluent and a close relative (in fact, the former's stepfather), has the disconcerting habit of having a feather put down his throat after his evening meal to induce vomiting, in a quest to purge his body of excess food and drink. Their wealth and status means they are afforded ample opportunity to indulge their every gastronomic fantasy. However, the former, with pretensions to an acting and singing career, knows that the public will not accept obesity in their idol (and it will be equally frowned upon by his peers), and that his over-indulgence is likely to ruin his voice and to impact upon his stamina to undertake arduous acting roles. The elderly man is merely greedy and wishes to make room in his stomach for his next debauch. In this rarefied world, where money is no object, go-betweens are able to procure whatever their employers require to satisfy their dietary (and other) peccadilloes. Meanwhile, the poorer sections of society (the majority) struggle to find even the most basic foodstuffs. The gap between the haves and have-nots is a yawning chasm.

I am, of course, not speaking of some rock star or scion of an old European banking family, nor am I referring to the food shortages that affect many parts of the world in the early years of the twenty-first century. The first man is Nero, ruler of the Roman empire between AD 54 and 68. The second is his stepfather and predecessor, the emperor Claudius. These anecdotes may seem to be derived from some Latin equivalent of the modern magazines which seek out and expose deviant celebrity behaviour, but are, in fact, culled from the pages of the imperial biographies of Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus, writing at the beginning of the second century AD, nearly a hundred years after their

reigns. Suetonius wrote of the rulers of the Roman world from Julius Caesar to Domitian. He particularly enjoyed discussing the personal foibles of his subjects, especially their sexual and dietary habits. Such emphasis may just have been to excite his public (although how many would actually read or hear this material?) which had a voracious appetite for scandal, but there may also have been serious intent. Plutarch, a Greek writing at about the same time, also embarked upon a series of biographies. His aim was to write parallel lives of prominent Greek and Roman statesmen of the recent and remote past, accentuating the similarities between their personalities and the paths of their careers. In the introduction to his paired biographies of Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar, he states his belief that small personal details about a man's life may reveal as much as the great deeds of his public career.¹ The way that a man conducts himself with his family or in his private business and the way that he acts in office are symbiotically linked. In our own time, politicians may be judged untrustworthy if they have an extra-marital affair or committed some misdemeanour in their youth. Their desire for the private and public spheres to be treated separately will get little support.

It is not a new phenomenon: the emperor Tiberius, ruler of the Roman world between AD 14 and 37, by all accounts (well, at least by the accounts of Tacitus and Suetonius) was a man who lacked the common touch. Without the benefit of an effective public relations office, this old soldier was seen as aloof and cold. He succeeded a charismatic ruler (Augustus) who had a gift for political spin (the situation is not unknown in modern politics: think of Wilson and Callaghan, Blair and Brown). His disdain for the wearisome business of public life led him to periodically take himself out of the public eye and into seclusion (on the islands of Rhodes, and Capri, in the Bay of Naples). Such isolation inevitably led to speculation about what he got up to (not helped by the widespread resentment against the ruthless and cruel policies implemented in his absence by his right-hand man, Sejanus). Suetonius accused Tiberius of setting up a hotbed of sadistic cruelty and paedophilic abuse on Capri. This may or may not have been true, but it was felt that this was the kind of thing that this dour and lecherous man would do. The reputed activities of Tiberius took on the air of Chinese whispers or urban legend, a phenomenon still common in the world of celebrity gossip.

Suetonius was not above the odd bit of scandal himself. Employed by the emperor Hadrian as imperial secretary in charge of correspondence, he was

(1) Plut. *Alex.* I.2–3.

abruptly dismissed in AD 122 for what a much later biography of Hadrian describes as over-familiarity with the empress Sabina.² This, of course, may be a euphemism for other sorts of naughtiness between scribe and empress; the evidence is not specific. The images of the emperors propagated by the likes of Suetonius – the homicidal Caligula, the paranoid Domitian, the tight-fisted Vespasian – have resonated down the centuries, spawning in turn a thriving industry to reassess the likes of Nero or Vitellius and, at least partially, to rehabilitate them in the eyes of the public. And yet, it is the image of Nero and Caligula painted by the ancient historians and biographers that live on in the popular imagination. It is this sort of tale of imperial excess that inspired the much later writer(s) of the *Augustan History* to relate the fantastical activities of emperors such as Elagabalus: if tales are to be believed, a Syrian youth who was a religious and culinary innovator, who liked to frighten his guests by releasing leopards while they were dining.³ The salacious and exotic inevitably triumph over the dull and worthy. Tales of decadence and sensuality beat administrative and religious reforms hands down.

Drawing parallels between the ancient and modern world is a perilous endeavour. It would be ludicrous to suggest that we resemble our Greek and Roman antecedents in every way. There are many aspects of the ancient world that we would find alien. However, considering their vast legacy of art, philosophy, politics and science, it would be equally obtuse to say that no valid comparisons can be made. For instance, in my opening paragraph, I playfully suggested the similarities in the decadent behaviour of the rich in both ancient and modern societies. I also pointed out the enduring appeal of celebrity gossip and tales of grotesque behaviour amongst the rich and famous. The excess of the aristocracy contrasted with the miseries of the peasants is a common theme in European history; for example, the oft-repeated (although perhaps untrue, and certainly misleading) anecdote about Marie-Antoinette and her attitude to the culinary conundrums of the French peasantry. My examples concerning the behaviour of Nero and Claudius were also in the area of food, specifically over-indulgence and its subsequent ramifications. Again, the history of food consumption, and the often outlandish extremes of the dietary habits of the élite, are well-worn themes. If you were to ask anyone what they knew about the Roman empire, fairly quickly after gladiators would come a mention of outlandish dishes and people vomiting after meals in order

(2) *SHA Hadr.* 11.3.

(3) *SHA Heliogab.* 25.1.

to consume more (the Latin term *vomitorium*, understood by many to mean the room where this act was supposed to have taken place, actually means an exit from an amphitheatre).

I make the comparisons because, even two thousand years later, while much has changed in the way of the types of food that are consumed and the methods of food production, food is the biological thread that continues to connect the whole of humanity. Yet many of us have a very confused relationship with it. We agonize over levels of sugar, salt and fat in our diet. We obsess over calories, yet stuff our faces, hurling ourselves into an obesity crisis. How did we come to this point where food may be viewed simultaneously as lover and mortal enemy? It is only food, you might think: the fuel that stops us from keeling over and expiring. This phenomenon is nothing new. In some ways, we follow similar patterns of behaviour in relation to the meaning and ideology of food as the ancients.

It is not the presence of food that is the subject of this book, but its absence: not the excess of consumption but its restriction and how such ideologies played out in the ancient world. In the modern West, food has become a battleground. It has transcended its role as nutrition. Of course, food has always been more than mere fuel. Chefs ancient and modern have striven to promote their culinary creations into the realm of art. And food's role as a marker of identity and its cohesive power for communities has been acknowledged by authors such as Peter Garnsey and Mary Douglas.⁴ Yet while many parts of the world live close to starvation, we in the West find ourselves in a paradoxical situation where wealth and status are characterized by extreme thinness, while the poor and the powerless are marked out by their obesity. Anorexics use caloric intake as a means of control in what they believe to be the chaotic maelstroms of their own lives, bulimics endure a continual cycle of binge and purge, wrecking their bodies, while millions of others, although not existing at these extreme peripheries, use calorie-controlled diets to fight against the physical reality of their appearance. I believe that some of these rather odd ideas about food can be traced back at least as far as the Greek and Roman world. Just as our landscape is littered with neo-classical buildings and the nomenclature of ancient government, so our mental landscape bears the remains of antique food ideologies.

In looking at some of the most powerful and strange instances of food avoidance in the ancient world, I hope to discover how such attitudes to food

(4) Douglas (1966)(1984)(1987); Garnsey (1988)(1998)(1999).

helped shape the psyche, and how they may have influenced in turn our own attitudes. Did the ancients possess the concept of size zero? Did they equate weight with self-worth? Did they grow up with an ancient version of the 1970s advertising slogan for cream cakes: 'naughty but nice'? This last question is of particular importance (I believe they did, and it seems to have had something to do with fish) as its joky association of certain foods with sin is just a modern update of the way the ancients often associated greed for food with morally reprehensible behaviour. It is no mere coincidence that in many ancient texts one of the hallmarks of the evil ruler is a penchant for dietary excess. Dietary and moral excess are often synonymous. The obese are punished (and punish themselves) for weakness. The image of the fat and jolly extrovert conceals a tortured interior. However, first things first: let us define our terms.

By 'dietary restriction' I mean the practice of adopting a dietary regime that excludes specific foods or groups of foods. This could be for a variety of reasons: medical, philosophical, religious or moral. These restrictions can be voluntary or involuntary although, at times, those categories may blur and overlap. The phrase 'involuntary dietary restriction' is meant to indicate a process that derives not from social or religious legislation, but from external factors. This is less clear-cut than may be first supposed, as there is some considerable duplication between what may be thought human constructs and those deemed external elements. A primary factor could be labelled environmental: the constraints placed upon individuals and communities by landscape, location and climate. This geophysical dimension dramatically affects the type and quantity of crops and livestock available. Economic factors will also have an important role to play here. They will dictate the types of crops that may be cultivated, stored or sold, and will determine food production and storage based upon strategies for survival. Some groups or individuals may lack access to a varied assortment of goods due to their financial impotence. They do not possess the resources to acquire foods from beyond their locality, as costs of transportation and storage add to the price of items.

Dietary restriction is also provoked by the customs and behavioural modes of human societies. In these cases, I call it voluntary restriction. Conscious food choices manifest themselves in many spheres: in moral censure, relating to religious or cultural transgressions (perhaps of explicit taboos or tacitly acknowledged social codes); the control and curbing of dietary intake for philosophical or ideological motives; special regimens prescribed by medical

practitioners for the prevention or cure of mental and physical ailments; special diets for certain professions or activities. It is arguable that some of these factors may be deemed to constitute instances of involuntary restriction: customs and cultural norms may exercise an overwhelming power over action. The weight of tradition or religious scruples may exercise an influence that overrides personal choice. In this instance, the line between voluntary and involuntary is obfuscated. Restriction could indicate the removal of certain foods from the diet, either temporarily or permanently, or indeed the complete absence of food altogether. Consideration of these matters will illuminate the critical role that food restriction played in the way certain ancient peoples constructed and maintained their sense of identity, both individual and communal.

It will also become evident that a dichotomy existed between the actual practice of dietary restriction and its ideological treatment in written texts. This is of course true in our own culture, where media obsession with thinness is in inverse proportion to public levels of obesity. Dietary restriction seems to provide a locus of concern for many Greek and Roman writers. The fact that these writers are themselves part of a wealthy male élite perhaps restricts the significance of their preoccupations. The female voice, so prominent in modern discussions of diet and body image, is absent from the ancient context. For those engaged in the daily struggle to obtain sufficient food to survive, such issues would surely have been entirely redundant. Wealth, however, brought both abundant food and the leisure in which to indulge in some ideological navel gazing. Greed, extravagance and alien foods become potent metaphors for the problems that were perceived to have arisen from social and economic transformation. Dietary restriction transcends its significance as a physical alimentary practice to become a useful way for the educated élite to voice concerns about racial, ethnic and religious identity and to criticize prevailing social norms. But such concerns could trickle down to the masses; the mocking of the powerful or the corrupt is often characterized in ancient Greek comedy by dietary greed. Nowadays, by contrast, the health and aesthetic issues surrounding food and bodily weight are a matter of discussion at all levels of society.

What prompts people to avoid food or impose limitations on their diet? In modern industrialized Western nations, the *raisons d'être* are diverse. One that springs to mind is the widespread preoccupation with body image, arguably

one of the principal methods by which modern Westerners achieve self-definition. Portentous government warnings about increasing levels of both juvenile and adult obesity (with the attendant health risks) coupled with the recurrent presentation in the mass media of aspirational images of youthful, aesthetically-pleasing and affluent 'celebrities' have served to focus attention upon diet. A simultaneous longing to lose weight for enhanced health and increased longevity, a desire to eradicate feelings of insecurity and inadequacy about one's physical appearance and a yearning to emulate these celebrities has increased the popularity of regimes that seek to achieve dramatic weight loss through dieting.

These diets do not appear to promote a gradual, stable weight loss over a prolonged period. To ensure that the results of the regimen are not transitory they must be coupled with a programme of regular physical exercise. Instead, they endeavour to obtain rapid results for an often uncritical consumer base addicted to a 'quick-fix solution'. They are marketed with aggressive techniques – they often require costly dietary supplements – and are targeted at people whose previous attempts at weight loss have failed. The consumer may lack the patience or necessary levels of self-denial to await the results of a long-term programme of weight loss.

Many people that embark on such diets express the desire to reap the benefits of improved health that purport to be the ultimate goal of the dietary regime, but often place greater emphasis on the cosmetic and superficial results of the eating plans. They desire tangible, noticeable and, above all, immediate proof of the results of their efforts, even if the effect on physical health is, in fact, detrimental. Some of the diets that exclude certain groups of foods, or which require the increased consumption of other items, may give rise to some alarming side-effects. These may range from the merely unpleasant or inconvenient (constipation, lethargy, headaches, bad breath or flatulence) to the potentially hazardous (low blood pressure, blackouts).

In these diets, certain foods are regarded as being injurious to the self or at least to the objectives of the diet (rapid weight loss). This is not to say that these foods are harmful *per se*. Many nutritionists would deny that any particular food is detrimental, unless it contains toxins. The damage to health is done when a food is taken into the body in excess. Often these foods are filled with processed sugars or fats that are usually high in calories, but offer little long-term sustenance. They also tend to cause fluctuations in blood sugar level, which affects the body's energy supply and its ability to judge levels of

hunger accurately. The foods are usually prohibited for the period of the diet, or, at the very least, rationed. Some nutritionists are sceptical as to the utility (or even safety) of these eating regimes, fearing that weight loss cannot be sustained (bodily weight may actually increase, owing to changes in the body's metabolic rates) when the specialist eating programme is abandoned.

There are, of course, many reasons why someone may wish to eschew certain foods. They may have, or believe themselves to have, extreme allergic reactions, which may imperil their health. Particular items may be prohibited if one subscribes to specified moral or religious codes such as those incumbent on Jews and Muslims; those who follow a vegetarian or vegan diet feel compelled to do so by a moral distaste for the killing of animals or for the methods of slaughter. Social and cultural mores often have a role to perform: some foods will be offensive to the community, or to elements within it. Peer pressure can preclude their inclusion in the diet. There are those who will think their position at the poorer end of the economic spectrum precludes them from purchasing some foods. Small incomes restrict choice. Occasionally, food scares impel sections of the population to exclude particular foods from their diet. Recent illustrations of this in the United Kingdom include concerns about salmonella in eggs in 1988, and the occurrence of BSE (Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy), so-called 'mad cow disease', in the food chain

I mentioned earlier that there is always an element of risk in drawing comparisons between ancient and modern societies: distance in time renders them deceptive or worthless. An instance is the correlation between modern diets that demand the exclusion of individual foods and the desire of substantial portions of the population to realize speedy weight loss: there is little definitive evidence in Graeco-Roman culture to support the existence of such a phenomenon within that society, at least in the sense of the perception of a negative body image and a desire to achieve a similar body shape to that of celebrated public figures, in the belief that attainment will somehow facilitate the assimilation of other desirable personality traits. But scholars such as Simon Goldhill disagree, believing that the physical perfection represented in classical art, particularly in Greek sculptures, will have had an inevitable effect upon those who viewed them.⁵ Such works of art may have fuelled concerns about body image or fostered an interest in diet, but this is certainly not evident from surviving texts. Latin writers, in fact, are rather scathing

(5) Goldhill (2004), 11–28.

about forms of physical narcissism and gymnasium culture. Statesmen, soldiers or philosophers may have been viewed as venerable figures, possessing qualities that were judged laudable or worthy of emulation. Those merits did not apparently include defined muscle tone or a six-pack. The relationship between dietary intake and moral buffness is a rather different matter (more of which later).

Some of the other reasons I sketched for limitations to a person's diet in the modern world may be more pertinent to the assessment of this factor in antiquity, in particular the issue of food production. Modern man has distanced himself from his agrarian roots and has come to rely increasingly on elaborate technology and the ability to purchase his foodstuffs on the open market. The public cares little how its food reaches the dinner table so long as it pays the lowest price possible. Economic and physical separation from the production of food gives rise to a further step, this time towards intellectual alienation, even revulsion, when faced with its realities. The rise in vegetarianism is a reaction to this new situation. This is a form of dietary restriction that allows the subject to define his identity by the foods rejected. A denial or refutation becomes an affirmative action rather than mere negation by default.

This book will look at a few of these areas of dietary restriction in antiquity and we shall see how ideas about restricted food intake and food taboos helped the ancients construct their own identities and the identities of others. I shall start by giving an outline of the general restrictions placed upon the diet of ordinary people in the Greek and Roman world. I shall then move on to some of the main types of food restriction and the way in which they manifested themselves. These include vegetarianism, taboos against the broad bean, fish, the Jewish food laws and control of wine. I shall also look at the way dietary excess was tackled by ancient lawmakers through sumptuary regulation. Finally, I shall examine the way in which the ancients often equated greed in culinary matters with moral depravity and, conversely, a sparse diet with virtue. We shall see examples of anorexia and bulimia. We shall see the corpulent and the emaciated, the deranged and the saintly. It is in these areas that food anxieties are at the forefront; it is here we shall see how anxiety over that sneaky extra fried dormouse or that third cup of wine impacted on the ancient psyche, and to see whether the dietary hang-ups of our Graeco-Roman antecedents have somehow shaped our society. Food restriction in antiquity taps into issues of gender, sexual and ethnic identity, religion and cultural envy.

I hope that this book brings (as it were) a fresh dish to the table. Welcome to the world of dietary restriction in antiquity.