

## The diet of the poor and involuntary dietary restriction.

In order to address the issue of voluntary and involuntary dietary restriction in classical antiquity, it will first be necessary to give at least some indication of the general nature of the ancient diet. If we are to agree with the position of Garnsey and Gallant (which I substantially do), then the very nature of ancient diet for the vast majority of people was one of substantial want. Food would have been scarce for much of the time, owing much to both economic and environmental factors.<sup>1</sup> Concerns about what could be successfully cultivated (and concomitant concerns about the dangers of disease or weather affecting livestock and crops) would have dictated the nature of diet for many people. Since such concerns would have overwhelmingly influenced the way most people would have eaten, it would be remiss not to examine the restricted quality of impoverished quotidian diet. Our concern with the ideology of abstinence in the literary texts must be counterbalanced by an examination of its incidence as an involuntary actual practice.

During the period of antiquity with which this thesis is concerned, one is able to trace the development of sizeable urban population centres, such as Rome, Athens and Alexandria. These vast sprawls acted as a natural magnet for immigration, attracting people both from within and without the geographical area of the Mediterranean. Smaller cities and settlements existed beyond these enormous conurbations. These could range from small individual farms to larger communities, perhaps like the *vicus* that was habitually attached to Roman military camps. Garnsey notes the blurring of the boundaries between *rus* and *urbs*:

The opposition of city and country can be too sharply drawn. Peasants did not lack access to the amenities of the city, especially if they were urban residents, as they sometimes were. Smaller cities were little more than overgrown villages, the centre of agricultural production for the area, and the seat of some or most of the farming population.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See pages 24-25.

<sup>2</sup> Garnsey (1988), 62.

Garnsey's analysis seems valid. It seems likely that there must have existed family or kinship ties between urban and rural dwellers, who may have had occasion to rely on these support networks during times of hardship:

Smallholders were shielded from economic adversity to a lesser or greater extent by relationships with members of their own or neighbouring communities and with men of superior wealth and influence. Exchange and storage are complimentary. Goods that are surplus to requirements are exchanged for others in which there is a deficiency.<sup>3</sup>

What may be said is that, in terms of foodstuffs, the 'town' was very much the consumer that sucked in most of the available resources to feed a ravenous and ever growing population. If the surrounding landscape was unable to cope with such a demand, then produce was required to be imported from abroad. This naturally gave rise to a greater choice of foodstuffs. The prices of these goods may have put them out of the reach of many people.

If prices were prohibitive, then people would have been forced to eat what they could afford to buy or what they were able to cultivate. It will be necessary to ascertain which foods could be grown with the expenditure of the minimum of resources (labour, time, monetary outlay) and with the smallest amount of risk (the probability of crop failure, the likelihood of the crop being sufficient to feed the members of the social group, the possibility that enough excess could be produced either to warrant storage for future use or to sell at a profit). A return to the factors cited by Garnsey will remind us of his third factor: the availability and accessibility of food. He maintains that there was an intimate correlation between what was eaten, and what could be produced or accumulated:

Members of simple or primitive societies have been, by and large, dependent on food grown at home or near by. Their range of choice is governed by the physical environment of the locality.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Garnsey (1988), 55. Compare this with similar modern stratagems; Douglas (1984).

<sup>4</sup> Garnsey (1999), 140.

Food production would have been structured around strategies of survival and risk limitation.<sup>5</sup>

The problem is exacerbated by the realisation that one is unable to speak of a truly homogenous Mediterranean diet. If the choice of crops to be grown was dependent upon the local climate and topography, then one may say that the range of crops across southern Europe and the eastern Mediterranean would have been extremely wide, owing to the varying regional variations in climate. This could contrast between countries, and even vary wildly within a single territory. A land may possess desert, wetland, mountain ranges and coastal plains, all of which may encompass entirely different climatic characteristics. We may refer to this phenomenon as microclimates.<sup>6</sup> These variations mean subtle or sometimes dramatic distinctions between the crops grown in various regions. It is also conspicuous that the same crop may thrive or fail under differing conditions in all manner of territories. The elder Pliny remarks upon this:

est fertilis frugum Thracia rigore, aestibus Africa et Aegyptus. in Chalcia Rhodiorum insula locus quidam est in tantum fecundus ut suo tempore satum demetant hordeum sublatoque protinus serant et cum aliis frugibus metant. glareosum oleis solum aptissimum in Venafrano, pinguissimum in Baetica. Pucina vina in saxo cocuntur, Caecubae vites in Pontinis pluribus madent.<sup>7</sup>

He implies that evidence for this state of affairs is founded upon empirical data and pithily concludes:

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<sup>5</sup> See Gallant (1991); Foxhall & Forbes (1995).

<sup>6</sup> This idea has been explored at length by Sallares (1991) and by Horden and Purcell (2000).

<sup>7</sup> Plin. *HN* XVII. iii. 31 : ‘Thrace is fertile in crops because of the cold, Africa and Egypt because of the heat. On the island of Chalcia belonging to Rhodes, there is a certain place that is so fertile that they gather barley sown at its right time and, having taken it straight away, they sow and reap crops again with the other harvest. In Venafrum there is gravelly soil most suitable for olive trees, in Baetica a very rich soil. The vines in Pucina are baked on stone, whereas the vines of Caecubum moisten themselves in the Pontine Marshes’.

tanta est argumentorum ac soli varietas ac differentia.<sup>8</sup>

It is difficult to talk of national cuisine, let alone an international one. The best thing that may be hoped for is to make some broad observations as to the types of crops and foods that may cut across regions and cultures, without delving in detail into the intricacies of local and provincial gastronomy.

It is important to stress the notion of λιμός; the widespread and endemic state of hunger that must have existed for much of the time in the greater part of the Greek and Roman world. It is a situation that supersedes (in many cases) the instances of choice. Man is frequently driven by the necessities of hunger to make food choices that are based upon issues of basic survival. This biological imperative must have driven the nutritional impulses of a substantial section of ancient populations. It was noted by Galen, and has been explored in some detail by Peter Garnsey.<sup>9</sup>

Garnsey is concerned with the biological, psychological and economic impact that food shortages have on the ancient population. He is careful to differentiate between shortage and famine, regarding the latter as an infrequent phenomenon.<sup>10</sup> In *de alimentorum facultatibus* (*On the Properties of Foodstuffs*), Galen gives numerous examples of foods that are eaten by the peasantry only in times of famine. For example, he talks of bitter vetch, a foodstuff normally only consumed by cattle, but eaten by humans in times of famine.<sup>11</sup> Garnsey notes their ubiquity as a famine food in antiquity.<sup>12</sup> He also notes that there seems to have been a hierarchy of foods, a spectrum of high- to low-status foods. Food shortages could force human diet to descend the hierarchy and consume foods that were normally regarded as unsuitable for humans. People begin to eat foods that were consumed ordinarily by animals. To avoid the necessity of eating such foodstuffs, storage strategies are employed to prolong the food supply.<sup>13</sup> Crops are chosen on the basis of the longevity of storage.

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<sup>8</sup> Plin. *HN* XVII. iii. 31: 'so much variety and range there is in the evidence of soil'.

<sup>9</sup> See Garnsey (1988), (1998), (1999).

<sup>10</sup> Garnsey (1999), 35.

<sup>11</sup> Gal. *De al. fac.* 6. 546-547 K

<sup>12</sup> Garnsey (1999), 38.

<sup>13</sup> Garnsey (1999), 40.

Galen's observations on peasant diet are significant both as a source of empirical data for the nutritional habits of poorer people in antiquity ( a group normally ignored by the surviving texts), but also as a useful framework for this current study. Galen's inventory of foods, and Garnsey's work on the wider implications of food shortage, offers a vision of ancient diet quite different from that offered by many of the texts. Much that is pronounced upon the subject of diet, or upon the merits (or otherwise) of dietary restriction emanates from a section of the population unfamiliar with even occasional food shortages.<sup>14</sup> They are people for whom diet will frequently contain elements of choice. The poor will, more often than not, have been denied such a choice. This study will often look to the way dietary restriction is often utilised as a metaphor for purity or virtue; a tool for self-improvement through self-discipline. Such concerns belong almost exclusively (in Graeco-Roman culture) to the educated and wealthy elite. It is they who have the wealth and leisure to choose what they do and do not wish to eat. Such pragmatic considerations should be borne in mind when considering the stance upon dietary restrictions adopted by many of the authors treated in this thesis. To this end, it will be necessary in this chapter to offer a brief survey of the principal constituents of general quotidian diet in this period, so that we may possess a suitable framework in which to place the more theoretical considerations concerning dietary restriction and identity.

One should also be aware that the same plants or foods may exist in different countries but be known by dissimilar appellations. A food may be substantially the same in a number of different countries with many subtle variations, perhaps bearing a comparable name. One example of this is hummus, which miscellaneous nations of the Middle East may claim as their own. Depending on whether you are in Israel, Greece, Turkey or Lebanon, the names may be diverse, as may the recipes for this dish, with varying amounts of chickpeas, garlic, lemon juice, salt and tahini, as well as different methods of preparation. Ancient authors were not oblivious to this predicament, realising the implications of regional etymological variations, and the potential

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<sup>14</sup> Galen himself was part of this elite: 'We should bear in mind that he was talking about a world relatively unfamiliar to him and his audience, who were prosperous urban dwellers. For all his interest in the dietary habits of peasants (and there is no extant source to match him in this), he had no personal experience of life on the 'famine food'/'non-famine food' boundary', Garnsey (1999), 40.

problems this may present when attempting to identify or classify a particular item. It will suffice here to cite two examples of this. The first comes from the *Natural History* of the elder Pliny. He is well aware that a word may possess a variety of meanings or usages depending upon the context. An illustration of this is his account of the way in which the term 'bread' (panis) may be utilised in different ways:

Panis ipsius varia genera persecui supervacuum videtur, alias ab opsonis apellati, ut ostrearii, alias a deliciis, ut artolagani, alias a festinatione, ut speustici, nec non a coquendi ratione, ut furnacei vel artopticii aut in clibanis cocti, non pridem etiam e Parthis invecto quem aquaticum vocant quoniam aqua trahitur ad tenuem et spongiosam inanitatem, alii Parthicum.<sup>15</sup>

Galen cites a similar example for the terminology of pastries:

What are called girdle-cakes [*tagenitai*] by the Athenians but griddle-cakes [*teganitai*] by us, the Asiatic Greeks, are prepared with olive oil alone.<sup>16</sup>

Confusion may develop unless there exists a measure of linguistic clarity and it is absolutely clear as to precisely what is under discussion. This uncertainty surfaces again when Galen begins to discuss types of wheat, such as einkorn [*tiphê*], emmer [*olyra*] and emmer [*zeia*].<sup>17</sup> He acknowledges that, in the past, there has been some misunderstanding as to the precise meaning of these terms and to which cereals they

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<sup>15</sup> Plin. *HN* XVIII. xxvii. 105 : 'It would be superfluous to consider the various types of bread. In some places, it is named after the accompanying meal, such as oyster bread, in others from its luxuriousness, such as cake bread, in others it is named from its hasty preparation, such as 'speusticus' bread. Other breads derive their name from the method of preparation, such as oven bread or bread made in a pan or clay vessel. Furthermore, some time ago, bread was imported from Parthia, which they called water bread, because it is drawn out by water into a thin, spongy, porous dough. Others just call it Parthian bread'. See also Cubberley (1995), 55-68.

<sup>16</sup> Gal. *De al. fac.* 6.490 K (trans. Powell).

<sup>17</sup> Gal. *De al. fac.* 6. 511-522 K (trans. Powell).

specifically refer.

A further caveat should be issued before this investigation may advance. Although the majority of people in the Graeco-Roman world would have been susceptible to the vagaries of external environmental and economic forces that placed restrictions upon what they could grow or buy, one must not forget the last of Garnsey's list of factors that may influence over man's diet: the element of cultural tradition. This may manifest itself either as a practice that is long standing within a particular community, and thus has an entrenched and established influence on the habits and behaviour of that group, or as a set of proscriptions, which may frown upon or prohibit certain foods or modes of eating. These taboos may exist within an enshrined legal code, or may simply operate as a collection of unwritten censures, which are tacitly acknowledged.

In the *Deipnosophistae* of Athenaeus, a quote is uttered from the fourth century B.C. comic poet Antiphanes:

...μεταλλάξαι διάφορα βρώματα  
 ἔσθ' ἠδύ,  
 φησὶν Ἀντιφάνης  
 καὶ τῶν πολλάκις θρυλουμένων  
 διάμεστον ὄντα τὸ παραγεύσασθαί τινος  
 καινοῦ παρέσχε διπλασίαν τὴν ἡδονήν.<sup>18</sup>

These are decidedly not the words of the common man, who would not have had the luxury of dietary choice. Not for him the search for exotic new taste sensations in order to stimulate a cynical and jaded palate. He would have been compelled to survive on a fairly limited number of basic staples. The evidence seems to suggest that the major component of this 'average' diet would have been cereals. The type of cereal would have differed from region to region. It would be imprudent to make generalisations, but, it seems to have been the case, on the whole, that, for the Greek territories, the principal

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<sup>18</sup> Fr. 240; Ath. *Deip.* 45a: "It is pleasant", says Antiphanes, "to change to a different food, and when one is filled full with what is in everyone's mouth, just the slight taste of something new means the pleasure is doubled".

cereal crop was barley, whereas there appears to have been a marked preference within Roman culture for wheat. These could be subdivided into a number of regional varieties. Beyond the einkorn and emmer discussed by Galen, other types of cereal included millet, rye, and oats and many other local cereals.<sup>19</sup> Authors seem to have regarded barley as an inferior cereal, and suitable only for use as animal fodder:

Panem ex hordo antiquis usitatum vita damnavit, quadripedumque fere  
cibus est.<sup>20</sup>

It seems it was also used as punishment for insubordination amongst the ranks of the Roman army.<sup>21</sup> Within Greek culture, barley was perfectly acceptable for making cakes and pastries.

Superficially, this division of preference between the barley eaters of the east and the wheat consumers of the west seems as if it were founded either upon taste, or on some putative Roman desire to dissociate itself from what it viewed as an inferior culture. It is as if boundaries of taste are somehow synonymous with linguistic borders. Jasny recognises the absurdity of such a position:

The statement that the Romans disliked barley is formally correct, but it is misleading, nevertheless, because it implies that there were nations which liked barley and that liking or disliking was the decisive reason why the Romans grew little barley for food.<sup>22</sup>

It seems rather more likely that the difference lay more in the prevailing environmental circumstances than in any cultural predilection. Barley was a crop that required little soil moisture in order to flourish and thus was able to prosper in the parched landscape of much of the Greek mainland and the islands:

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<sup>19</sup> Garnsey (1999), 15.

<sup>20</sup> Plin. *HN* XVIII. xv. 75: 'Barley bread, much used in olden days, was condemned through experience, and is only used as food for four-footed beasts'.

<sup>21</sup> Suet. *Aug.* XXIV; Polyb. VI. 38. 2-4; Dio Cass. XLIX. 38.4.

<sup>22</sup> Jasny (1942), 751.

Attica is one of the driest regions of Europe and the low average rainfall has an obvious impact on the modern agricultural system.<sup>23</sup>

Wheat is a cereal that is far less suited to such soil, as Pliny noted:

Tritici semine avidius nullum est nec quod plus alimenti trahat.<sup>24</sup>

As he noted, barley was a relatively cost-effective and efficient crop, in that it may be harvested sooner than wheat.<sup>25</sup> Such was the desiccated nature of the landscape of both Attica and many of the islands of the Cyclades and the Dodecanese that it was unable to support the food requirements of much of the populations; hence the need to import quantities of wheat. Jasny asserts that before they had been forced to import wheat, the Athenians had existed mainly on barley, and in fact had in all probability reverted to this state of affairs once the political hegemony of Athens was over.<sup>26</sup> The import costs would have added to the price of wheat and thus may have pushed it beyond the reach of many. Barley would have been the less costly alternative.

There has been some conjecture among scholars as to whether modern opinion of the status of barley in the Greek world is somewhat deceptive. Jasny asserts that

barley was the staple food of the Greek masses all during the classical period.<sup>27</sup>

He also points to its significance as a crop in the broader structure of the societies of the Mediterranean basin:

barley played a very important role in the grain production of the classical

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<sup>23</sup> Sallares (1991), 300.

<sup>24</sup> Plin. *HN* XVIII. xx. 85: 'No seed is more greedy or draws out more nourishment than wheat'.

<sup>25</sup> Plin. *HN* XVII. iii. 31.

<sup>26</sup> Jasny (1942), 755.

<sup>27</sup> Jasny (1942), 752.

world. It was undoubtedly by far the predominant crop in Greece, most Aegean islands and large parts of western Asia. Barley, furthermore, was very likely an important crop on the non-volcanic soils of Africa, Sicily, Sardinia, southern Italy, and in most of Spain. Finally, it occupied a substantial proportion of the grain acreage irrigated by flooding in Egypt and Babylonia.<sup>28</sup>

Sallares is substantially in agreement with this position, and acknowledges that the ancient sources cite the supremacy of barley in the Greek territories of the classical period.<sup>29</sup> He does, however, urge the scholar to proceed with some caution, as the picture may not be as clear cut as first supposed. For example, he cites the inscription IG II 1672

which suggests a wheat: barley total yield ratio across Attica circa 329B.C. of about 1:9.3.<sup>30</sup>

He suggests that this inscription may represent figures in which the amount of wheat harvested had been affected by certain climatic anomalies such as low rainfall. However he does not think that any problems raised by this inscription substantially alter his support for the assertion that barley was the main cereal of Attica in both the classical and archaic period.

What implications do the above hold for our investigations? Clearly there appears to be some divergence between the posturing of the literary sources and the statistical evidence. Latin authors seem anxious to construct an ideological fortress that separates them from the Greeks. The demonisation of barley appears to be one prop in this defence.<sup>31</sup> Even Pliny's contention that wheat was the dominant and the superior grain may be misleading.<sup>32</sup> His remarks may deceive those scholars who are not agricultural specialists:

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<sup>28</sup> Jasny (1942), 754.

<sup>29</sup> Sallares (1991), 315.

<sup>30</sup> Sallares (1991), 314. See also Garnsey (1988), 98; Braun (1995), 26.

<sup>31</sup> Galen makes a rather more dispassionate survey of both wheat and barley; *De al. fac.* 6. 480-524 K.

<sup>32</sup> Jasny (1942), 757.

Tritico nihil est fertilius-hoc ei Natura tribuit quondam eo maxime  
alebat hominem.<sup>33</sup>

However, a closer examination of the texts reveal inconsistencies in attitude and point to examples of self-contradiction. Even Pliny sees some positive attributes of barley:

hordeum ex omni frumento minime calamitosum, quia ante tollitur  
quam triticum occupet rubigo (itaque sapientes agricolae tritium cibariis  
tantum serunt, hordeum sacco seri dicunt).<sup>34</sup>

He also remarks on the fact that it has a long tradition of providing food for humans:

Antiquissimum in cibis hordeum, sicut Atheniensium ritu Menandro auctore  
apparet et gladiatorum cognomine qui hordearii vocebantur. polentam  
quoque Graeci non aliunde praeferunt.<sup>35</sup>

This is actually far from the denunciation it first appears to be. The reference to its being used as a food for gladiators does not necessarily indicate that it was viewed as somehow fit for those ‘subhumans’ who did not require proper nourishment. It is possible that it is meant to signify that it was a nutritious cereal for those engaged in strenuous physical activity. It may also be ill-advised to take it for granted that Pliny equates the longevity of the use of barley with a sense of ‘primitiveness’. After all, he later speaks of emmer wheat [*far*], describing it in glowing terms and referring to it as

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<sup>33</sup> Plin. *HN* XVIII. xxi. 94: ‘Nothing is more fertile than wheat-Nature assigned it this function because once it used to be the most nourishing food for man’.

<sup>34</sup> Plin. *HN* XVIII. xviii. 79: ‘Barley of all the grains is least liable to damage because it is harvested before wheat is attacked by mildew ( and so wise farmers only sow wheat for provisions, whereas barley is sown by the bag, so they say).

<sup>35</sup> Plin. *HN* XVIII. xviii. 79: ‘Barley is the most venerable of foods, as is evident from the Athenian ritual mentioned by Menander and by the name given to gladiators who were called eaters of barley. Also the Greeks prefer it over other grains for porridge’.

primus antiquo is Latio cibus.<sup>36</sup>

There is a suggestion that the longstanding usage of a cereal lends it a legitimate dignity. The Latin writers on agricultural matters such as the elder Cato, Varro and Columella often see agriculture as being intimately connected to Roman ethnic origins and harking back to a perceived golden age. Civilisation has, in their view, strayed from its agrarian roots and, in doing so, has descended into a state of dissolution and profligacy. The unadorned rustic cuisine to which Pliny refers is ennobled, not debased, by its antiquity.

Jasny's observations on the extensive occurrence of barley as a cultivated crop around the lands of the Mediterranean, the fact that the aforementioned writers spend some time in proffering advice on the optimal method for its cultivation (thus recognising that a sizeable portion of the theoretical readership of these works would actually be growing it) and Garnsey's work on ancient strategies of risk limitation in agriculture tends to lead to the inevitable conclusion that there could have been no clear separation of cereal cultivation into distinct territories. Barley would almost certainly have been grown in the Italian peninsula as a low-risk, high-yield crop. The strategy of adapting crops to soil conditions is noted by Varro:

Neque non haec discrimina pertinent ad fructus vehementer. Itaque periti in loco umidore far adorem potius serunt quam tritium, contra in ardore hordeum potius quam far, in mediocri utrumque.<sup>37</sup>

Columella makes the point that barley may, in fact, be preferable to poor wheat:

Proximus est his frumentis usus hordei, quod rustici hexastichum, quidam etiam cantherinum appellant, quoniam et omnia animalia, quae ruri sunt, melius quam tritium pascit et hominem salubrius quam malum tritium, nec aliud in egenis rebus magis inopiam

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<sup>36</sup> Plin. *HN* XVIII. xix.83: 'It was the first food of the Latium of antiquity'.

<sup>37</sup> Varro *Rust.* I. ix. 4-5: 'These divisions very much pertain to the crops: so skilful farmers plant spelt rather than wheat in damp places, and, vice-versa, barley rather than spelt on dry land. He plants either in intermediate ground'.

defendit.<sup>38</sup>

Opposition to barley often takes the form of a rhetorical stance; an ideological bulwark against external dietary influence. However, it is also judged by Galen to be nutritionally inferior to wheat.<sup>39</sup> It is a badge of Roman identity that clearly equates cultural superiority with a rejection of barley. The point may seem a minor one, but in fact, for this thesis, it represents a step forward. It shows a clear example of the divergence between what is proffered by literature and the actual state of affairs. It demonstrates how dietary denial may function as a way of establishing an identity, if only in the pages of literature.

A little more needs to be said on the subject of cereals. If it is possible to assert that the two main cereals were barley and wheat, there still exists some confusion as to what is meant by 'wheat'. It seems that there was a transition from the use of hulled grain to naked grain.<sup>40</sup> The former were more of use in the making of porridge, whilst the latter were of greater utility in the baking of bread. Garnsey contends that, as far as the Romans were concerned, bread supplanted porridge by the mid second century B.C.<sup>41</sup> Yet he goes on to say that bread was a luxury and that 'in the countryside bread was often not eaten at all'.<sup>42</sup>

Let us attempt to untangle what is going on here. Porridge [*puls*] clearly has some value for Roman writers as an ideological signifier of ancient autochthonous purity. Perhaps the value attached to this dish in the literary reinvention of the early Republic bore little resemblance to how it was regarded in reality. Galen was certainly not enamoured of it and relates a personal anecdote that it would not be useless to recount in full here:

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<sup>38</sup> Columella *Rust.* II. ix. 14: 'Nearest to these grains in effectiveness is barley, which rustics call *hexastichum*, whilst others call it *cantherinum* because it is better food than wheat for animals that live on farms. It is more beneficial for men than bad wheat, and in times of poverty, there is nothing better to ward off want'.

<sup>39</sup> Gal. *De al. fac.* 6.501-510 K.

<sup>40</sup> Garnsey (1999), 20.

<sup>41</sup> Garnsey (1999), 20.

<sup>42</sup> Garnsey (1999), 121.

If I had not eaten wheat boiled in this way, I should not have expected food from it to be of use to any one. Not even in famine would anybody come to this sort of use, for if wheat is in good supply one can make bread from it. At dinner people eat boiled and roasted chickpeas and other seeds for want of so called desserts, preparing them in the same fashion, but nobody eats boiled wheat in this way. This is why I should not have expected anyone to eat boiled wheat.

But once when walking in the country not far from the city, with two lads of my own age, I actually came upon some rustics who had had their meal and whose womenfolk were about to make bread (for they were short of it). One of them put the wheat into the pot all at once and boiled it. Then they seasoned it with a moderate amount of salt and asked us to eat it. Reasonably enough since we had been walking and we were famished, we set to it with a will. We ate it with gusto, and felt a heaviness in the stomach, as though clay seemed to be pressing upon it. Throughout the next day we had no appetite because of indigestion, so that we could eat nothing, were full of wind and suffered from headaches and blurred vision. For there was not even any bowel action, which is the only remedy for indigestion.<sup>43</sup>

If Galen's testimony of the after effects of consuming wheaten porridge is to be believed, why was it eaten at all? Two possible answers occur. This was the least complicated method of preparing the cereal. Grinding into flour the harvested cereal would have been an arduous and time consuming chore. It had to be carried out by oneself, or by the members of the family unit, including slaves or animals (the latter to turn the corn mills).<sup>44</sup> It seems likely that the resultant flour would have been of a far coarser quality than would be acceptable to many modern tastes. Athenaeus makes a

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<sup>43</sup> Gal. *De al. fac.* 6. 499 K (trans. Powell). There is some confusion here. Given the severe side-effects suffered by Galen, the cooked concoction to which he refers seems unlikely to have been the *puls* made from emmer that was so lauded by the Roman writers. It is unclear whether *puls* was normally cooked; see Braun (1995), 25-37.

<sup>44</sup> For the techniques and technology of ancient milling, see Moritz (2002).

reference to μᾶζαν ἡχυρωμένην (black barley cake, containing chaff) and μᾶζα κεχαρακωμένη ἀχύροις (barley cake bristling with chaff).<sup>45</sup> This would have combined with any sand, grit or other impurities to produce a flour that would have had a harsh abrasive effect upon the teeth.<sup>46</sup> The other reason that porridge may have been preferred over bread may have been that it provided a more efficient source of slow-release energy than bread, and thus, in spite of some of its alleged unpleasant side-effects, would have been found to be more sustaining for those engaged in arduous manual labour. It could be prepared and consumed rapidly and *in situ*. Some may have actively expressed an actual preference for it:

Porridge from emmer groats was, it seems, eaten by the early Romans because they liked it, and because it was simpler to prepare than bread.<sup>47</sup>

Garnsey's assertion that bread was not habitually consumed in rural areas, with the superior quality cereals suitable for milling into flour being sent for sale in urban areas, seems plausible, and appears to be confirmed by Galen.<sup>48</sup> The transformation of grain into bread or cake rendered it a food of improved status, although not always significantly so. The elder Cato supplies several recipes for breads and pastries, including *libum*, a combination of cheese, flour, water and eggs, and *placenta*, a similar dish but sweetened by the addition of honey.<sup>49</sup> Bread could range from gourmet loaves, baked with wheat flour, to coarse barley bread.

Barley and wheat seem to have acted as a bulk staple, the predominant source of carbohydrates, just as it does for many in the modern world. Pasta, rice and potatoes fulfil a modern analogous role. Poverty of resources may have meant that, for many, this would have been their principal foodstuff. However, these cereals were by no means the only food that may be thought of as a 'staple'. Legumes and pulses were widely available. Garnsey believes legumes would have occupied a central position in the

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<sup>45</sup> Poliochus fr. 2; Antiphanes fr. 225: Ath. *Deip.* 60b-c.

<sup>46</sup> Sen. *Ben.* 2.7.1; Hor. *Sat.* 1.5.91.

<sup>47</sup> Braun (1995), 36.

<sup>48</sup> Gal. *De al. fac.* K518; Garnsey (1999), 121.

<sup>49</sup> Cato *Agr.* LXXV-VI; Faas (1994), 183-184.

ancient Mediterranean diet:

Apart from cereals, dry legumes, in particular lentils, chickpeas and broad beans, were the main source of dietary protein as of calories in the Mediterranean basin as a whole.<sup>50</sup>

Beans, chickpeas and lentils were not the only examples:

Leguminum genera cum sint complura, maxime grata et in usu hominem videntur faba, lenticula, pisum, phaselus, cicer, cannabis, milium, panicum, sesama, lupinum, linum etiam et hordeum, quia ex eo tisana est'.<sup>51</sup>

The status of the legume was not unambiguous and, like bread, occupied a sort of half-way house between a low and a high status foodstuff. They could form part of the τραγήματα, the 'nibbles' that accompanied the drinking at a Greek συμπόσιον, or could constitute an inexpensive form of 'fast food' that could be sold on the street or in the taverns and bars of a Roman town.<sup>52</sup> For some, such as Ulpian, a guest in the *Deipnosophistae*, they were an indicator of poverty. Quoting Archestratus, he says:

τὰ δ' ἄλλα γ' ἐκεῖνα τραγήματα πάντα  
πέφυκε  
πτωχείας παράδειγμα κακῆς, ἐφθοί τ' ἐρέβινθοι  
καὶ κύαμοι καὶ μῆλα καὶ ἰσχάδες.<sup>53</sup>

Roman authors liked to use these basic foodstuffs as metaphors for the idealised historical past of the Roman people. These unadorned and unsophisticated foods were

<sup>50</sup> Garnsey (1998), 243. Also Flint-Hamilton (1999), 371-385.

<sup>51</sup> Columella *Rust.* II. vii. 1: 'There are several types of legumes, those considered to be the most agreeable and most useful to man are the bean, the lentil, the pea, the kidney bean, the chickpea, hemp, millet, lesser millet, sesame, lupin, also flax and barley, because from it (barley) barley-water is made'.

<sup>52</sup> Mart. *Epig.* 1. 103; Faas (1994), 42.

<sup>53</sup> Fr. 60 Olsen-Sens; Ath. *Deip* 101d: 'All the other desserts denote extreme destitution: boiled vetch, beans, apples, dried figs'.

used to symbolise the early Roman republic; an epoch represented as a period of autochthonous abstemiousness and purity with a concomitant rigid morality, untainted by foreign influences. Before looking at the way these Latin writers utilised these foods, it is worth noting the way a Greek writer presents such concepts. A typical literary definition of this identity is placed in the mouth of Larensis, the host of the philosophers' dinner:

πάτριος μὲν γὰρ ἦν αὐτοῖς ὡς φησι Ποσειδώνιος, καρτερία καὶ  
λιτὴ διαίτα καὶ τῶν ἄλλων τῶν ὑπὸ τὴν κτῆσιν ἀφελῆς καὶ  
ἀπερίεργος χρῆσις, ἔτι δὲ εὐσέβεια μὲν θαυμαστὴ περὶ τὸ  
δαιμόνιον, δικαιοσύνη δὲ καὶ πολλὴ τοῦ πλημμελεῖν εὐλάβεια  
πρὸς πάντας ἀνθρώπους μετὰ τῆς κατὰ γεωργίαν ἀσκήσεως.<sup>54</sup>

The elder Pliny attempts to prove etymologically the aristocratic lineage of agriculture by linking the names of a number of prominent patrician Roman families to those of various grains and pulses:

cognomina etiam prima inde: Pilumni qui pilum pistrinis invenerat,  
Pisonis a pisendo, iam Fabiorum, Lentulorum, Ciceronum, ut quisque  
aliquod optime genus sereret.<sup>55</sup>

It has been estimated that it is the lentil that was the most commonly cited legume in Greek and Latin literature.<sup>56</sup> This particular pulse was favoured in the near East.<sup>57</sup> In the *Deipnosophistae*, one of the guests, Cynulcus, remarks to a fellow diner:

<sup>54</sup> Ath. *Deip.* 274a: 'As Poseidonius says, their ancestral customs were forbearance, a plain diet, the plain and simple use of possessions, also wonderful piety towards the gods, justice and taking care to avoid erring towards all men. This was done by the means of the pursuit of agriculture'

<sup>55</sup> Plin. *HN* XVIII.iii. 10: 'The first surnames came [from agriculture]: 'Pilumnus' came from the person who invented the pestle for the mill, 'Piso' came from 'pounding', and 'Fabius', 'Lentulus', 'Cicero' came from whoever was the best grower of a certain crop'.

<sup>56</sup> Flint-Hamilton (1999), 375.

<sup>57</sup> Garnsey (1998), 243. He cites the discovery of tablets at Murecine in the Bay of Naples, which reveal

ἀλλ' ὑμεῖς γε, ἔφη, οἱ ἀπὸ τῆς καλῆς Ἀλεξανδρείας, ὧ Πλούταρχε,  
 σύντροφοί ἐστε τῷ φακίνῳ βρώματι καὶ πᾶσα ὑμῶν ἡ πόλις  
 πλήρης ἐστὶ φακίνων.<sup>58</sup>

Is this meant to be an observation on Alexandrian dietary patterns, or perhaps a calculated insult? Cynulcus may well be making reference to a common stereotype about Egyptian cuisine, rather than providing accurate data about gastronomic habits.

Chickpeas are another recurrently mentioned pulse. Pliny attempted to ennoble them with an illustrious ancestry, but in general other texts view them as

a food of the lower classes, grown where and in conditions under which  
 preferred crops would normally fail.<sup>59</sup>

Horace makes a reference to them as the food of the poorer members of society.<sup>60</sup>

It will be necessary also to make reference to beans, although they are a rather special case, and this thesis will examine attitudes to beans in much greater detail at a later stage.<sup>61</sup> At this point, it will suffice to say that they enjoyed a mixed reception in antiquity. Pliny regarded them as the best of the pulses.<sup>62</sup> They could be eaten in a number of ways: raw, boiled or roasted, and could be used in soups or as an accompaniment to bread.<sup>63</sup> Galen notes that

our gladiators eat a great deal of this food every day, making the condition  
 of their body fleshy.<sup>64</sup>

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the importation of Egyptian lentils and chickpeas as well as grain.

<sup>58</sup> Ath. *Deip.* 158d: 'But you, men of beautiful Alexandria, Plutarch, have been brought up with lentil food and your whole city is full of lentil dishes'.

<sup>59</sup> Flint-Hamilton (1999), 377.

<sup>60</sup> Hor. *Ars. P.* 249.

<sup>61</sup> See pages 114-141.

<sup>62</sup> Plin. *HN* XVIII. xxx. 117.

<sup>63</sup> Plin. *HN* XVIII. xxx. 117.

<sup>64</sup> Gal. *De al. fac.* 6. 529 K (trans. Powell).

However, there existed a certain amount of hostility and suspicion of the bean from a number of groups. The Egyptians would not eat them, and their priests refused to even look at them.<sup>65</sup> Beans were also taboo for both the followers of Pythagoras and those involved with the rituals and practices of Orphism and the Eleusinian mysteries.<sup>66</sup> It is the tensions that arise from this dichotomy (a popular and cheap food that was nonetheless subject to superstitious awe by some) that will provoke some intriguing speculation about the notion of identity.

The staples so far examined (cereals and legumes) enjoyed a bipartite standing within Graeco-Roman society. They belonged exclusively neither to the impoverished nor the affluent, instead straddling both sections of society. They transcended hierarchical boundaries, What separated the patrician from the plebeian was the way in which these foods were prepared and the context in which they were consumed. Nutton suggests that the fracturing is not along class or wealth lines, but is instead an opposition between town and country. Commenting on the Galenic disapproval of the urban diet, he writes:

Whether in Rome or Alexandria the result is the same-illness. In Alexandria, the food is bad: a diet of salt fish, beans, lentils and pulses, supplemented by the flesh of vipers, camels and donkeys; their wine is too thin and watery for the climate; their dates quickly go bad; their pistachio nuts have little nutritional value, however nice they might taste.<sup>67</sup>

It is best to exercise caution when looking at the dietary practices in large cities such as Rome or Alexandria. Their size and populations make them special cases that do not necessarily represent the dietary patterns of other cities.

Fruit and vegetables naturally formed a part of the common ancient diet, and as with cereals and legumes, they could be enjoyed by the peasant and by the wealthy. Some were regarded as being suitable for eating only in times of famine:

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<sup>65</sup> Hdt. 2.37.

<sup>66</sup> These taboos will be examined in detail in the chapter concerning the bean taboo; pages 114-141.

<sup>67</sup> Nutton (1995), 364.

It is reasonable that nobody uses it [the stinging nettle] as food, except under the pressure of very great hunger.<sup>68</sup>

Columella regarded the turnip as suitable for country people and as a fodder for animals.<sup>69</sup> Vegetables could be grown both in the country and in urban gardens.<sup>70</sup> Pliny thought that vegetables were becoming too gentrified, attracting high prices.<sup>71</sup> An analogous situation may be said to exist today, where vegetables may be bought cheaply in a supermarket from the frozen section, or they may be organically grown and be purchased at a farmers' market. Debates will ensue as to the superiority of one over the other in the areas of taste or 'green' credentials. Ultimately, it seems to be a matter of social prestige and hierarchical status: organic vegetables and fruit are more expensive to produce, and therefore to buy, and thus are linked to the social reputation and enhanced prestige of those who are able to afford them.

Fruits enjoyed a similar status, although Galen personally was wary of them. Nutton suggests the origin of this aversion had less to do with their perceived negative side effects (flatulence, the production of bad humours) and has more to do with the unfortunate psychosomatic consequences of a mental trauma that he had suffered.<sup>72</sup> Locally grown fruits enjoyed less prestige than the exotic produce that commanded exorbitant prices and was imported from afar. Simultaneously, the enjoyment of foreign fruits could be viewed as a sign of decadence and luxury, which was contrasted with the apparent unpretentious virtues of the plain and the home-grown, *la cuisine du terroir*. Today, there is a tendency to romanticise and eulogise peasant cookery, which some deem to embody a certain desirable style of living; the rejection of the impersonal rapidity of an industrialised modernity, and the embracing of a more sedate pace of life, with an emphasis on the enjoyment of food as a sensual experience, to be savoured at leisure, and in the company of family and friends. The increasing success of 'slow food' movements, particularly in Italy and France, may point to the popularity of such

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<sup>68</sup> Gal. *De al. fac.* 6. 639 K (trans. Powell).

<sup>69</sup> Columella *Rust.* II. x. 22.

<sup>70</sup> Linderski (2001), 305-308; Lawson (1950), 97-105.

<sup>71</sup> Plin. *HN* XIX. xix. 54.

<sup>72</sup> Nutton (1995), 366-367.

sentiments, but the luxury of spending several hours preparing, eating and digesting a large meal (perhaps in the middle of the day) seems to indicate that this is an activity that is largely confined to the prosperous, who may not be subject to the exigencies of the workplace. The ultra-wealthy among the ancients could have had their pick of whichever foods they desired, no matter how rare, and cost would have been no object.

Before leaving fruits and vegetables, attention should be drawn to the special role played by two fruits: the olive and the grape. Their nutritional value is important.<sup>73</sup> However, it is their symbolic worth that is of greatest interest. Olives were often eaten as an accompaniment to bread (perhaps mashed into a paste, in the manner of a modern *tapenade*) or eaten on their own.<sup>74</sup> They were also used in cooking, in preference to animal fats. The oil of the olive was used as fuel for lamps and it formed an essential part of the bathing process, acting as a form of soap. Its value as a commodity was immense, transcending its role in the kitchen. Unfortunately, the appearance of the fruit on the tree was a biennial event.<sup>75</sup> The tree required little tending, but the farmer required foresight to ensure that at least four years worth of oil was stored, in order to guard against the ever-present threat of crop failure or the destruction of trees through natural catastrophe or acts of war. It would be reasonable to surmise that olives, too, enjoyed a variable reputation among consumers. Today, the finest extra-virgin olive oil (from the first pressing) can command enormous prices from connoisseurs, and serious gastronomes would not dream of using the same grade oil for cooking as for pouring over a salad. It seems entirely plausible that ancient consumers would have enjoyed differing grades of olive oil depending upon their willingness and ability to pay. What seems less credible is that there was any form of restriction upon the use or consumption of oil that was not connected with economic or geographical factors. There is no evidence for the voluntary shunning of the olive or olive oil in antiquity. Any aversion would have been because of external factors.

The grape is a somewhat different matter. It is, of course, central to the production of wine.<sup>76</sup> The importance of wine to ancient Mediterranean culture cannot

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<sup>73</sup> Gal. *de al. fac.* 6. 609 K; 6. 574-581 K.

<sup>74</sup> Gal. *de al. fac.* 6. 609 K.

<sup>75</sup> Varro *Rust.* I. lv. 3-4.

<sup>76</sup> See pages 199-231.

be emphasised enough. Its multiplicity of purposes included hydration, social lubricant and its role in religious ritual.<sup>77</sup> It too could be an expensive possession of the moneyed clique at the summit of society or could constitute the default quotidian drink of the masses. A vintage wine savoured at an aristocratic banquet would have borne little resemblance to the vinegar-like concoction (*posca*) that would have toasted the successes and drowned the sorrows of Roman plebeians, soldiers or slaves. The principal difficulty was that wine was both hymned as an intoxicant, a necessary inspiration for both poetic and dramatic inspiration, and feared for its role in public and private disorder.<sup>78</sup> This thesis will examine the way both Greeks and Romans attempted to reconcile this dualism, and will look at the way some groups sought to control and restrict its ingestion.<sup>79</sup>

This thesis will also look to the role of dietary proteins, particularly meat and fish.<sup>80</sup> Both feature more prominently in the ancient texts than fruit and vegetables. Yet, it seems that they would have formed a relatively minor part of ancient diet. This is not necessarily because sizeable sections of the ancient population held strong objections to eating them, although vegetarianism (abstaining from meat or fish, or both) is an ideology that is of great interest to many ancient writers. This fact in itself is noteworthy, and it should be remembered that for a predominantly illiterate population (possessing perhaps only a very basic form of education, if indeed any at all), these esoteric literary debates would have been of negligible importance. It seems unlikely that objections to flesh eating would have been founded on moral principles (arguments

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<sup>77</sup> I use this term with a degree of caution. It may be suggested that the natural source of bodily hydration would have been water. However, if we posit a number of potential factors—the poor/non-taste of water, the possibility of disease carried from water sources, and a lack of knowledge concerning the diuretic properties of alcoholic beverages,—then wine may have been a natural choice to slake one’s thirst, especially if the wine/water ratio is weighted in favour of the water.

<sup>78</sup> Yet, as will be explored in the chapter upon alcohol restrictions, there was a surprising lack of legislation to prohibit or limit its usage.

<sup>79</sup> See pages 199-231. As will be seen, much of the controls upon alcohol consumption came from self-regulation; legislation is often strangely absent.

<sup>80</sup> The treatment of meat and fish in this chapter is meant only as a brief contextual introduction. For fuller discussions, see pages 74-113; 142-170.

for the welfare of animals).<sup>81</sup> After all, the potential ‘rights’ of animals may have held little sway in a society founded upon the wide scale and systematic exploitation and abuse of other humans, in the form of slavery. If opposition arose against the consumption of meat or fish, it seems more likely to have derived from religious or intellectual arguments. Ultimately, a premeditated choice not to eat flesh would probably have been a dietary choice only for those prosperous enough not to have to survive upon a subsistence diet.

The relative absence of meat and fish from the average diet in the Graeco-Roman world must have derived from economic reasons. Meat and fish may have been beyond the economic resources of many. It seems credible that even the lowliest farmer would have possessed at least a few domestic animals, most probably pigs. If meat was to be eaten, this would probably have been the main source.<sup>82</sup> The prominence of pork may best be explained by the fact that whilst other animals were useful when alive for providing wool or milk, pigs were only suitable as a source of meat. Pigs also could be fed almost all types of food, and they were particularly fertile and could provide large litters. Almost every part of the animal carcass could be utilised as food, and once the animal had been slaughtered, pickling, salting and drying could ensure that there was a supply of animal flesh for a considerable period of time afterwards.

The texts give a rather different view of meat eating. Here, the focus is often upon the symbolic value of animal sacrifice within the context of both cult and state religion.<sup>83</sup> It would be unwise to attempt to extrapolate from the texts statistical data about meat eating in the ancient world. For example, if one were to examine the dietetic details contained within the Homeric poems, the heroes of those works appear to have survived (indeed thrived) upon a rather eccentric diet which consisted of large quantities of meat, with no vegetables or fish.<sup>84</sup> This thesis will look at the way this and other texts use the consumption (or non-consumption) of these items to construct special lines of

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<sup>81</sup> By this I mean widespread opinion, rather than ideological arguments presented by writers such as Plutarch (see pages 106-107).

<sup>82</sup> Dalby (2003), 268-269: ‘In classical times pigs were probably the commonest source of meat in most people’s diet’. Also Wilkins and Hill (2006), 147-149.

<sup>83</sup> See pages 77-79.

<sup>84</sup> See pages 147-150.

identity demarcation, using patterns of consumption that may have borne little relation to dietary practice in the real world.

Meat would have been eaten rarely, and when it was, it would usually have been in the context of animal sacrifice as a central part of religious ritual (at least in the context of Greek culture). Animals would have been slaughtered and the meat distributed to the participants. A refusal to eat this meat may have been understood as an act of gross impiety, in effect signalling a withdrawal from a fully participatory role within the life of the community: a voluntary act of alienation. Thus the opportunity to eat meat (a rare treat) was fused with the performance of civic and religious duty. Those who renounced it were making an explicit cultural statement (or at least were perceived as doing so). Meat was an uncommon and probably much anticipated treat, as Antiphanes noted:

οὐδεὶς κρέως παρόντος ἐσθίει θύμον,  
οὐδ' οἱ δοκοῦντες πυθαγορίζειν.<sup>85</sup>

There has been some speculation that the flesh of animals may have appeared in the diet in a context beyond that of either small scale domestic slaughter or religious sacrifice. It has been suggested by Kyle that the flesh of animals slaughtered in the amphitheatres may have been distributed or sold to the public at large.<sup>86</sup> His argument is highly speculative but persuasive. In a society that prized meat, and to a culture where the conquering, taming and reducing to captivity of the wild and the exotic was synonymous with the triumph of Roman culture and military strength over the barbarian, it would be astonishing if the meat from the arena were merely discarded. The logistics of disposing of animal carcasses on such a large scale would have been alarming. The distribution of these remains appears to be a feasible option. There may have been some reluctance to

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<sup>85</sup> Antiphanes fr. 225; Ath. *Deip.* 60c-d: 'Nobody eats thyme when meat is available, not even those who appear to be Pythagoreans'.

<sup>86</sup> Kyle (1998), 189-194. Kyle offers no definitive archaeological or literary evidence to support his hypothesis, but instead appeals to a Garnseian scenario of widespread food shortages and 'comparative anthropology' (189). His modern comparison is with the disposal of bull carcasses after bullfights in Spain.

eating strange or unfamiliar animals. Galen suggests that people were used to consuming a wide range of animal species. Besides the flesh of sheep, cows and pigs, he mentions donkeys, camels, bears, leopards, lions, panthers and dogs. Not all these animals are given his approval, but he does say these animals are a regular part of the diet for many people.<sup>87</sup> They also ate many varied types of cuts, including hearts, lungs, brains and spinal cords. The squeamishness of the modern palate (at least the European one; the consumption of reptiles, insects and many other creatures is a commonplace in many other cultures) appears to have been largely absent from the ancient consciousness.

Once the animal had been slaughtered, it needed to be conserved rapidly, if the flesh was not to spoil. It is entirely possible that many people in antiquity preferred their food to be on the gamy side (or, at least, were accustomed to it). This may be because much flesh was not eaten when fresh, but when dried or salted. It could also be a matter of preference. There are numerous references to the use of the sauce that the Romans referred to as *garum* or *liquamen*, concocted from fish innards and salt, which was then left to ferment in the sun.<sup>88</sup> The flavour must have been somewhat akin to the fish sauce of modern south-east Asia.<sup>89</sup> It seems probable that the saltiness of such a relish would have overpowered many of the other ingredients of the dishes to which they were added.

This brings us to the role of fish. It may seem logical to conjecture that fish would have played a substantial part in the lives of people living around the Mediterranean. Those who lived in the coastal territories would have been able to use beach-based nets or boats to fish for themselves and their families. Surplus catch could be pickled and salted to transport to those who lived at a distance from the sea. The reality seems to have been a little more complicated. Scholars have contended that fish enjoyed a status that simultaneously rendered it both a dubious and untrustworthy food, and also an expensive and much sought-after commodity, greatly prized by affluent connoisseurs and gourmets.<sup>90</sup> Fish were strange creatures that bore no resemblance to man and existed in an environment that was deeply antipathetic to him. Man was able to

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<sup>87</sup> Gal. *De al. fac.* 6.664-665K.

<sup>88</sup> Plin. *HN XXXI.* xliii. 93-97; Gal. *de. al. fac.* 6. 640K.

<sup>89</sup> Dalby (2003), 156.

<sup>90</sup> For example, Purcell (1995), 32-49; Davidson (1995), 204-213; Davidson (1997b).

survive submerged in water only for a few minutes before he would expire. Fish were unable to survive beyond the confines of their aquatic biosphere. Immersion in each other's *milieu* meant inevitable death. Fish and shellfish were an alien species to man, and did not constitute part of the 'cultivable' *tableau* of livestock, items that marked man as a civilised being.<sup>91</sup> Fish and their fellow marine creatures needed to be hunted, not farmed (although this situation did change with the development of fish farming in the Italian peninsula during the period of the late Republic).<sup>92</sup> The lack of fish in the diet of the Homeric heroes attracted comment from Plato, who stated that fish were inappropriate for incorporation into a military diet.<sup>93</sup> Yet, within Classical and Hellenistic Greek literature, there are repeated references to the desirability of fish and shellfish as luxury items, able to command exorbitant prices, which placed these foodstuffs well beyond the means of many people.<sup>94</sup> Fish had become an esteemed symbol of status and prestige. Those who lacked access to it may have felt themselves to be inferior to those who had. And yet, surely, shellfish could be freely collected along the shore by the very poorest members of society? Alternatively, eating fish may have been viewed as an indication of decadent behaviour and self-gratification. The textual fragments are sometimes unclear as to whether fish eating *per se* was morally ambivalent, or whether abhorrence was only felt when appetite for seafood was indulged *in extremis*. A renunciation of fish could be viewed as a symbolic rejection of the moral laxity and dissipation that fish consumption could represent. This thesis will attempt to prove that *les fruits de mer* precipitated a schism in Graeco-Roman cultural identity that went beyond the gulf between the affluent and those with shallow pockets and went to the heart of the way in which man defined himself and his place in the universe.

This chapter has been only a *précis* of the most significant elements of ancient quotidian diet. This snapshot has attempted to sketch out the background to dietary restriction (by attempting to highlight the constraints already existing within the ancient diet) and to briefly point to a few of the problematic areas that this study hopes to

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<sup>91</sup> See pages 74-75.

<sup>92</sup> Columella *Rust.* XVIII. xvi-xvii; Cic. *Att.* I.20, I.19, II.9.

<sup>93</sup> Pl. *Resp.* 404c.

<sup>94</sup> Much of our information is derived from fragments of Athenian comedies preserved in the *Deipnosophistae* of Athenaeus; *Deip.* VII.

examine in greater detail. The picture is a narrowly focused one, concentrating predominantly on the lands around the Mediterranean. A broader survey, taking in the colder lands of western and northern Europe would have uncovered a dissimilar dietary portrait: one in which olive oil for cooking has been replaced by animal fats, wine has been supplanted by beer and there is a greater occurrence of meat. The geographical zone upon which this thesis will concentrate points to a largely vegetarian diet, consisting of a cereal base, supplemented with fruits and nuts and with the occasional addition of fish or meat.

My contention will be that this diet was one that would have been, in essence, similar for rich and for poor. The difference would have been in quality, quantity and availability. Cereals may have formed the bedrock of their diet, but the nature of the staple and the form in which it would have been consumed would have altered, depending on environmental and economic factors. It may seem crass to attempt to encapsulate this analysis in the epithet 'you are what you eat' (perhaps a more pertinent phrase for our purposes would be 'you are what you do not eat') but diet is intimately connected with both social status and identity. There was a disparity between the way in which the poor would have consumed their cereals and the manner of consumption of those who occupied a position further up the socio-economic ladder. The arid climate of the Near East would have meant that the variety of cereals that could have been cultivated was restricted; the more temperate zones of the Italian peninsula would have extended the range of cereals that could be grown. Rural populations, however, would have had little choice but to live off whatever they were able to grow. Those with greater monetary resources or those living in the larger cities would have had access to a more comprehensive selection of cereals that had been imported from foreign climes. Those afflicted by destitution in the cities may have been slightly more fortunate than their rustic counterparts in their access to food resources. The system of patronage, with its elaborate and intricate web of interdependent relationships between the affluent and the (relatively) impoverished may have ensured that, during periods of privation, the needy could gainfully exploit the affiliation between *patronus* and *cliens*, in order to ensure that a supply of food was forthcoming. This could mean the offering of financial assistance, perhaps an invitation to dine. Perhaps, less glamorously, the reality of the latter proposal may have been the offer of scraps and leftovers from the rich man's table.

Poverty, both fiscal and of resources, inevitably places limits upon choice. The

man who was wealthy may have eaten wheat bread made from a flour that was relatively free from impurities, and the rural dweller a bowl of barley broth, but the roots of their diets were essentially the same. The ability to access resources that were beyond the fundamentals required for survival was a technique that was used to signify both enhanced social status and the ability and willingness to spend large amounts of money upon consumables. The poorer members of society habitually were obliged by poverty or famine conditions to eat foods that were deemed worthy only of animals.<sup>95</sup> A state of famine could be instigated not just by penury or inclement meteorological conditions; wealthy landowners could regularly manipulate the markets in order to force the price of grain up or down, or they could trigger shortages by stockpiling supplies then shipping them to foreign ports in order to sell at a higher price than could be expected on the domestic market. As a reaction to this culture of *largesse* and extravagant consumer spending, there was present in antiquity an ascetic strain of thought (a subject to which this thesis will return) that regarded food as, at best, a necessary evil that was required to physically refuel the body in order to sustain life, and at worst, an insidious threat to man's moral fibre that needed to be closely monitored, regulated and rigorously controlled. In writers such as Cicero, Seneca, Plutarch and Porphyry, the notion is expressed that the concerns of the body impede potential spiritual and intellectual progress.<sup>96</sup>

Extravagant spending on food confirmed one's social identity within a group network that operated as a series of strictly demarcated social levels, through which one was expected to ascend. The Romans espoused a cultural system that rewarded and expected ambition. Lavish spending on dining was both an illustration of this *ambitio*, and a necessary tool for self-advancement. It was a culture that made no secret of its lionisation of wealth. Admittance to the equestrian and the senatorial ranks required vast amounts of wealth. Both carried levels of minimum property value: the former lay at four hundred thousand sesterces, the latter at a million. The Republican period saw an escalation in this conspicuous consumption and sumptuary laws were introduced to limit it; this study will examine how these laws were an example of the legal sanctions that

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<sup>95</sup> Galen provides a number of examples of such foods in *De al. fac.*; the colocynth (6.561K); the stems of turnips (6.622-623K).

<sup>96</sup> See page 98, 99,101 (note 104).

could be enforced to restrict diet.

Garnsey believes that food was a significant method of identifying and separating social groups during this period:

In Graeco-Roman society, food was a marker of ethnic and cultural difference...food reflected the vertical social and economic distinction between rich and poor. Greater purchasing power gave access to foods of superior quality and quantity, and of wider range. The conspicuous consumption of food by the elite advertised the social and economic distance between them and the mass of the population. *Nouveaux riches* aped the elite.<sup>97</sup>

Food marked out divisions within society, and also served to emphasise the gulf between locals and foreigners, Greeks and ‘barbarians’, Romans and Greeks. Yet food was, as Garnsey acknowledges, a means by which social groups cohered together, either through diet or through the manner in which food was prepared or consumed. The phenomenon of solitary eating is a relatively modern one.<sup>98</sup> Ancient peoples would have mostly eaten collectively, in small or large groups, and to be a component of such an assembly would have been one way of signifying membership of a clan, tribe or association:

Food assembles and binds together those linked by blood (family), class (the symposiasts of archaic and later Greece), religion (the Passover Seder, the Eucharist) and citizenship (the civic banquet).<sup>99</sup>

Garnsey’s argument is compelling. However, this thesis will argue that an equally powerful case may be made for dietary *restriction* as a tool for defining self and acting as a badge of ethnic identity. Groups and individuals may be equally defined by the food they refuse. In a context where food is either very scarce, or where the purchase of unlimited or costly food is lauded, food refusal may make a dramatic and often counter-

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<sup>97</sup> Garnsey (1999), 7.

<sup>98</sup> Although not exclusively so. See page 19, note 17.

<sup>99</sup> Garnsey (1999), 7.

cultural statement. Food denial may have dramatic repercussions; it may arouse intense hostility from others, sometimes even persecution. It may isolate groups within society, but simultaneously bind them tightly together. Be it the advocates of vegetarianism, those who refused to eat the bean, the abstainers from wine or the devout Jew in the Diaspora, all found in dietary restriction a focus for the ideological foundations of identity. The ancient texts use these notions to explore the tensions existing within their own societies, and such issues as ethnicity, religion, class, even what it meant to be human itself.