

KEY THEMES IN ANCIENT HISTORY

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FOOD AND SOCIETY IN
CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY

PETER GARNSEY



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*In memory of Conant Brodrick
archaeologist, educationalist, raconteur*

CHAPTER 9

You are with whom you eat

PRELIMINARIES

Ceremonial eating and drinking are a conspicuous feature of ancient society. They brought together families and their guests, patrons and their dependants, politicians and their friends, aristocratic youth, members of occupational groups, social clubs, religious brotherhoods, the soldiery, the citizenry, the population of a town. Large or small, these displays of commensality or collective consumption carried significance well beyond the nutritional function of the meal that was consumed. In the domestic setting, they might demonstrate, as in the act of hospitality shown by Baucis and Philemon to two strangers (who happened to be gods) the moral integrity of the simple peasant household; or they might celebrate *rites de passage*, a funeral, or the acceptance of a neonate into the family, in classical Athens, the Amphidromia:

Ephippus says in *Geryones*: 'If that is so, then how is it that there is no wreath before the doors, no savour of cooking strikes the tip end of the projecting nose, though the feast of the Amphidromia is on? For then it is the custom to toast slices of cheese from the Chersonese, to boil a cabbage glistening in oil, to broil some fat lamb chops, to pluck the feathers from ringdoves, thrushes and finches withal, at the same time to devour cuttle-fish and squids, to pound with care many wriggling polyps, and drink many a cup not too diluted.' (Athen. 370c-d)¹

Outside the home, commensality demonstrated and confirmed the membership and solidarity of the group, paraded the status of the group vis-à-vis outsiders, and set out the hierarchies that existed both in the society at large and within the group itself. The settings were diverse -- from a grandiloquent display of opulence by an emperor posing as a god to a showy feast staged by a freedman *arriviste* (as caricatured in the

¹ Ovid, *Met.* 8. 646ff. (Baucis and Philemon). For the Amphidromia, see Hamilton (1984); Garland (1990), 93-6. The subject of this chapter is well covered in recent literature, especially in the work of Oswyn Murray and Pauline Schmitt, to both of whom I readily acknowledge my debt.



9. Symposium scenes. Tomba del Tuffatore, Paestum. Greek, late sixth century BC.

Satyricon of Petronius) to the common meal of a religious group (Jesus and his disciples, Basil of Caesarea and his monks) or a Celtic version of potlatch in the account of Posidonius.²

SYMPOSIUM AND DEIPNON

The symposium is, properly, the post-eating stage of a banquet during which drinking for pleasure took place, accompanied by entertainment, in the form of recitation, music, dancing, conversation, sex (Fig. 9). In its heyday in early Greece, the symposium had social and political as well as cultural significance, so that it can be called by its historian, Oswyn Murray, 'the organizing principle of Greek life'. The symposium of the archaic period was a private club, in that its membership was restricted and met in private premises, in the household. It belonged to the public, or better, political, sphere, in the sense that the people who came

² For the banquet of the emperor Domitian, see Suet. *Dom.* 8.5: 'In the course of one of his shows in celebration of the feast of the Seven Hills, he gave a plentiful banquet, distributed large baskets of victuals to the senators and equestrians and smaller ones to the commons; and he himself was the first to begin to eat.' For Celtic 'potlatch', see Athen. 152d-e, with Feuvrier-Prévotat (1978). In potlatch, as practised among the Indian tribes of the north-west coast of America, a tribal leader gave a great feast or succession of feasts, lasting one full phase of the moon, at which guests, who included members of other tribes, were stuffed with food and drink and showered with gifts. This was not the end of the story, because chieftains of rival tribes were shamed into replying in kind. Potlatch was competitive feasting which served to exchange and redistribute resources within tribal society. See Clutesi (1969); briefly, Fieldhouse (1986), 86-9.

symp.
cd. be
opulent +
aristocratic
or more
common

public aspect [together in this way were precisely the citizens of the early *polis* and the men who formed its political and, in the Homeric period at least, its military leadership.³

tension between symposium & democratic values [As the aristocracy lost its grip on the *polis*, the symposium also declined in significance. In Athens the democratic reformer Cleisthenes relegated to the political wilderness the symposium and the aristocratic friendship group (*hetaireia*) that was rooted in the symposium. Under the Athenian democracy these 'clubs' had mainly nuisance value. In 415 a particularly lively symposium spilled over into the street late at night. In the aftermath it was discovered that religious statues, the Hermai, had been systematically mutilated.⁴ When naval disasters befell the democracy, in 413 in Sicily, and in 405 at Aegospotami, oligarchs based on the clubs crawled out of the woodwork and staged *coups d'état* (in 411 and 404). Democracy in due course came back and things returned to normal, which meant that the clubs were again marginalised and indeed made illegal. It is in this period of the restored democracy that the banquet was born as a literary genre, in the *Symposium* of Plato. In Plato's hands the symposium became a form of sociability in which a company of friends discuss a theme, in this case the nature of love, in the form of a dialogue.⁵ Xenophon's *Symposium*, Plutarch's *Dinner-Table Conversations*, Athenaeus' *Deipnosophists* and Methodius' *Banquet of the Ten Virgins* are among the ancient works that follow his model, and the genre has a long history in later literature.

[In Sparta, though it was an oligarchy, there was no room at all for the symposium. Instead of a drinking club of the *jeunesse dorée*, optional and private, where conversation was free, open and often antipathetic to the prevailing values of the state, the Spartans established dining groups or messes (*syssitia*) which were compulsory, an arm of the state and designed to inculcate and perpetuate its ideology. Furthermore, whereas the traditional symposium had promoted equality among members of a single age and social group, at Sparta the equality of the Equals (*Homoioi*) was tempered by hierarchy, both in terms of age and social/economic status. Elders dominated a group in which no single age-group was exclusively represented, and the wealthier members used the occasion to show their superiority in acts of food redistribution – for this is the function of the desserts (*epaikla*).⁶

In fourth-century Greece as a whole, the symposium was finished as

³ Schmitt-Pantel (1990), 25–6.

⁴ Murray (1990a).

⁵ For Plato's attitude to the symposium as an institution, see Teçusan (1990).

⁶ For the Spartan mess, see Fisher (1989); Figueira (1984).

a civic or political institution. The collapse of Greek freedom at the hands of the Macedonians was simply the last nail in its coffin. The symposium survived or even thrived in the Hellenistic age at the courts of the Ptolemies and Antigonids as a cultural institution. As such, its golden days may have been far in the past, in the archaic age again, when the aristocracy of leisure patronised painters and poets of class, but the new setting was conducive to the production and performance of poetry, especially epigram.⁷

Hellenistic [The case for decline in the second and first centuries BC and the early Roman period is stronger. Or, if we are chary of the word 'decline', then we can speak of cultural change. The role of symposium no longer provides a stimulus and context for the creation of performance of poetry. Instead, learned conversation, already an ingredient in the late classical and Hellenistic symposium, takes over and dominates the occasion. Moreover, one might gain the impression from Athenaeus that the symposium has been swallowed up by the dinner (*deipnon* or *cena*).⁸ It is a *deipnon* that Athenaeus himself stages. True, there is a superficial division in the work between a *deipnon* and, right at the end, a *symposion*. But the conversation extends over the whole, it closely follows the order of the banquet, and it takes its cues from the food that is served at each stage. And the work is named *Deipnosophistae*, *Professors of the Dinner-Table*. Athenaeus' work (I suggest) bears witness to changes in the tradition of sympotic literature, but not necessarily to the demise of the symposium as a social and cultural event in which well-off friends came together for wine, song, conversation and, no doubt, 'aphrodisia'.

Convers-
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THE CIVIC BANQUET

If there is a characteristic Greek or Roman party, one that stands out above the rest – as potlatch does among the Native Americans of the north-west coast – it is the civic banquet arranged by the political authorities. This typically follows a public sacrifice, and uses the sacrificial food as the ingredients for the meal. However, as the historian of the civic banquet, Pauline Schmitt, has stressed, it is not the association with religion in itself that marks off this kind of banquet from

⁷ Cameron (1995), 71–103 (who argues persuasively against decline in the Hellenistic period); Murray (1996).

⁸ Athenaeus is a source of dubious worth for the symposium. In his usage, *symposion* is a synonym for or variant of *deipnon*, and his preoccupation is with feasting and luxury.

others.⁹ All commensality in antiquity has a religious element. It varies in prominence and intensity, but it is always there. At one end of the spectrum there are the Arval Brothers, a high-status brotherhood in the city of Rome, who are shown in the epigraphic record making sacrificial offering to Dea Diva and subsequently feasting themselves and their retainers, to the accompaniment of a most elaborate religious ritual.¹⁰ At the other end is a feast such as that depicted in the *Deipnosophists*, where libations are poured to the gods – and that is all the ‘active’ religion in the work. In between these extremes lie a great variety of public ceremonial occasions revolving around a dinner, where the meal follows a sacrifice and consists of sacrificial food in the first instance. The ‘sacrificial banquet’ is the quintessential ‘civic banquet’. As a public event integrated into the life of the city, and involving more members of the community than any other, it has a special significance. For present purposes my main concern is to explore the implications of the banquet for the relationship between the participants as consumers.

The sacrificial banquet is the last act, or one of the last acts, of the ritual of blood sacrifice (animal sacrifice being the classic form of sacrifice). The meat is divided out equally. This is crucial. As Nicole Loraux wrote: ‘To eat equal shares is to produce and reproduce civic equality.’¹¹ Equality among whom? Among the citizens, who might represent only a fragment of the population (of adult males), as in the archaic Greek *polis*. Equality survives as the principle of distribution in later periods of Greek history, but its implications for the size of the feast differ, according to the character of the regime.

The feasts put on by the Athenian *polis* for its citizens under the radical democracy were immense in scale, as befitted a democracy that was also a rich empire. As Michael Jameson puts it: ‘In Athens the democracy through the mechanism of the state provided the many with the style of life of the few.’¹² In 410/9, when Athens was losing the war against Sparta, 5,114 drachmas, perhaps a day’s wages for the same number of men, was spent on 100 cows for the Great Panathenaic Festival (only a four-yearly event, to be sure), and the meat was shared out among the participating demesmen. The number of cattle sacrificed in the year 334/3 was between 1,400 and 1,700. The Old Oligarch, a cranky reactionary who wrote a tract against the democracy in perhaps the 430s, complained:

⁹ Schmitt-Pantel (1990), 24.

¹⁰ Scheid (1990).

¹¹ Loraux (1981), 620.

¹² Jameson (1988), 96.

The Athenian populace realises that it is impossible for each of the poor to offer sacrifices, to give lavish feasts, to set up shrines, and to manage a city which will be beautiful and great, and yet the populace has discovered how to have sacrifices, shrines, banquets and temples. The city sacrifices at public expense many victims, but it is the people who enjoy the feasts and to whom the victims are allotted. (Ps.-Xen. *Ath. Pol.* 2.9)

What did the experience do for the Athenian citizenry, apart from fill their stomachs, and make a change from the usual, boring menu? It helped to bind together the community of citizen-consumers.¹³ Of course, even under the Athenian democracy, citizens were a privileged class, and the adult males who assembled for a feast were highly conscious of their separateness and superiority. That said, the democracy did transform the public sacrificial banquet simply by greatly swelling the number of citizens. Democratic Athens took a predemocratic institution, controlled by the aristocracy and favouring the few, and made of it a democratic institution benefiting the many.

Meanwhile, the democracy devised its own, characteristically democratic, system of eating, and put up its own building for it as well (c. 480–460), the Tholos in the agora. Here on every day of the year could be found the prytaneis, the standing committee of the council, eating their dinners. This was not a fixed and stable group of people. Far from it – the democracy made it its business to ensure that its membership rotated. The eating party consisted of the 50 councillors who belonged to whichever tribe happened to be ‘prytanising’, that is, forming the standing committee of the council. This was the tribe which had been chosen by lot from the ten tribes to control the business of the *polis* for a prytany, that is, for 36 or 37 days. They ate what they bought with their pay, which amounted to 1 obol a day, and was intended to cover their food expenses. It was their choice how they were to spend it.

It is not the case that the Athenian democracy paid no consideration at all to status in the public allocation and distribution of food.¹⁴ The democracy preserved, more or less untouched, a practice which was carried over from the aristocratic period. This was the offering of free dining rights, *sitesis*, in the town-hall, or prytaneum, not in the Tholos. There were two kinds of *sitesis*: the first was one-off, for foreign guests or citizen honorands; the other was for life, awarded to a few, such as the

¹³ For this message, see Xen. *Hell.* 2.4.20, set in 404/3, a period of intense civil strife in Athens: ‘... Fellow citizens ... we have shared with you the most solemn rites and sacrifices and the most splendid festivals ...’

¹⁴ For eating in the Tholos and the prytaneum, see Schmitt-Pantel (1992).

priests of Eleusis, the male descendants of the tyrannicides, a soothsayer chosen by Apollo, and winners at major games. This sounds like a fairly innocent list, but its existence grated with the democrats, because it involved *ad hominem* privileges. Socrates annoyed the jury at his trial by suggesting that they should be rewarding him with dinners for life in the prytaneum instead of offering him hemlock (Plato, *Ap.* 36d–e). Still, despite their disapproval, the democrats kept the custom going without any change. A sign that democracy was a spent force from the end of the fourth century is the swelling of the *sitesis* list through the addition of foreign benefactors.

When we proceed out of the classical into the Hellenistic era we find that public banquets were popular and thrown for large numbers; they were preceded, as ever, by sacrifice; and they were financed by the elite, the euergetists, or public benefactors, whether by 'private' munificence or formal liturgies. The number of feasts appear to be on the increase. The celebration of the standard religious festivals proceeds, as usual, but in addition, euergetists are going outside the religious calendar, creating feasts out of nothing. Quite often a feast is provided for the people by an incoming official. Moschion of Priene offered the whole population a collation, on the first day of his tenure of the office of *stephanephoros*. Why did Moschion and the other euergetists do it? For the same reason as they performed other benefactions: for their self-esteem, for their survival as a social group, to reaffirm their legitimacy. The crowds who joined in, by their very presence, sanctioned the domination of the elite over society and politics.¹⁵

Already in the Hellenistic era, the social hierarchy was beginning to be reflected in the form of restricted access to sacrificial meals. This tendency is confirmed and extended under the Romans, that is, the Romans of Rome. Division of the meat after the sacrifice continues, but participation is limited to those at the top of the social hierarchy. 'Dining rights' (the *ius epulandi publice*) is a privilege for priests, magistrates and senators in general, perhaps equestrians (lesser aristocrats). Other citizens benefited from sacrifices only in so far as they could purchase the portion of the sacrificial meat released on the market; or, if they were admitted to the banquet, they sat apart from their social and political superiors, and ate less.¹⁶ Where large numbers of citizens *did* sit down to dinner in Rome, conservative senators did not approve. I have alluded

¹⁵ For euergetism, see above, p. 33. For Moschion, see *Inscr. Priene* 108, lines 253–5.

¹⁶ Scheid (1988).

already to their hostility to gratuitous acts of euergetism. A magistrate acting *ex officio* could just about get away with it. Games organised by the aedile (a junior magistrate), were regularly accompanied by banquets. When Murena, a friend of Cicero, in his canvass for the consulship in 63 BC threw a meal for the people, he was courting prosecution.¹⁷

So hierarchy ruled in the division of food after the sacrifice. Another example from Rome concerns the Arval Brothers (referred to above). Exclusive priesthoods and brotherhoods held their own sacrifices for public causes, and feasted on the sacrificial meat. This is another form of discrimination in favour of the elite, because only the highest aristocracy could be members of these organisations. Within the Arval Brothers, the president ate first after the god and the ordinary members followed. At a certain point on the second day of the three-day feast of Dea Diva, the slaves and freedmen of the brotherhood participated in the banquet, but were given white bread decorated by laurel rather than meat.

A similar principle operated in the municipalities. In sizeable numbers of Italian and provincial towns, public meals were laid on by benefactors, occasionally for the plebs, but more often for the city councillors, or decurions, or for the decurions and the College of (six) Augustales, a select group of wealthy freedmen responsible for the cult of the emperors; or for all three orders, in which case they were not fed equally. The decurions received a proper meal, the plebs a snack.¹⁸

In the plebeian dining and funeral clubs of Italian towns, too, differentials were observed. The dining customs of the college of Diana and Antinous at Lanuvium, a town in Latium not far from Rome, are known from a long inscription. The presiding officers (*magistri cenarum*) had to ensure that each man got a loaf of bread worth 2 asses, 4 sardines, and an amphora of wine (a substantial quantity, and later on we read that there were fines for unruly behaviour). An internal hierarchy existed, so that the Board of Five (*quinquennales*) received a double portion in all distributions (and were protected from insults by the threat of a fine of 20 sesterces), while the scribe and the messenger got one and a half times the ordinary share. A more complex vertical ordering is reflected in seating arrangements. Members were threatened with a fine

¹⁷ Cic. *Pro Mur.* 72–7; 67; cf. *De Off.* 2.56–7; Sall. *Iug.* 4.3.

¹⁸ There are numerous variations, but the principle is the same. Status differences are reflected in the quantity and quality of the food served, just as in money hand-outs (*sportulae*) which often accompany the feasts, and are in general attested more often than meals in the municipal inscriptions. See Duncan-Jones (1982); Mrozec (1987).

division/
sacrifice

of four sesterces if they tried to change their seat. The quantity (at least) of the food they received does not seem to have been affected by their place at the table.

CONVIVIUM

Cicero, Seneca, Tacitus and Pliny the younger, among others, show that daily dining with friends was an established social and cultural institution at Rome, part of the normal routine of life. This was a formal meal at a set time, dividing the Roman day between 'business' and 'leisure' (negotium/otium). In a letter to Paetus, Cicero talks of the convivium as the ideal setting in which Romans can live together (con-vivere, Cic. Ad Familiares 9.24.3). It was the obvious place for interaction, conversation and relaxation, the place and the occasion where friendship was strengthened and cultural attainment displayed. This picture is confirmed by the importance of the dining-room (or dining-rooms), triclinium, in the aristocratic house.

Cicero represents the convivium as the same institution as the symposium – just a change of name was involved. The Roman name, he claims, is simply better. Murray says the Roman convivium was different in three ways: it was sexually mixed, it covered a wide social range and equality was not always the order of the day.¹⁹ He identifies the inclusion of women as diners (not performers or waitresses) as the main element taken over from the Etruscans. There is unfortunately no account of Etruscan dining practice that even approaches objectivity. So Theopompus, the fourth-century BC historian from Chios, contributed a scurrilous passage about these 'barbarians of the West'. It was the liberty that they allegedly allowed their women that particularly grated with him (Athen. 517–8a). Livy was dealing in stereotypes when he contrasted an Etruscan banquet at which wives of princes made merry, with a male-only dinner of Roman princes where they discussed the virtues of their wives while the exemplary virtuous wife, Lucretia, sat at home and spun (Livy 1.57ff.). Cornelius Nepos, addressing Atticus in the preface of his *Lives of Famous Men*, suggests that the appearance of wives of Romans at banquets was not considered at all scandalous, whereas in the Greek world they came only if the diners were related to them (pref. 6–7). However, there is little supporting evidence for this assertion in other sources, Cicero included. The exclusion of women from banquets

¹⁹ Murray (1983a), 51.

may be a case of a rule or custom inherited from earlier tradition (Greek, Roman, Etruscan) which, though not formally abandoned, was applied only in a patchy way in Roman households.

Similarly, the banquet as a gathering of friends treated as equals survived as an ideal, but often did not correspond to practice. In this respect, there were banquets – and banquets. I distinguish three kinds, on which there were many variations.

First, the client dinner. Here social inferiors are entertained. On the surface, social barriers are ostentatiously lowered and normal social conventions relaxed. But there is tension. Can the patron keep up the pretence of social equality? We can be sure that he did not always succeed in doing so, supposing he had made an attempt in the first place. Many did not, placing and feeding their guests according to status. The client in question would never rise in the social scale, or at least his prospects of doing so were very limited. Horace tells a story of a distinguished senator who was once impressed by a simple artisan. He invited him to dinner and eventually settled him on a peasant plot in the countryside. That was it. The more familiar lower-class client, familiar for example from the epigrams of Martial, is the importunate client, desperate to gain access to his patron's table.

Second, the protégé dinner. A prospective recruit into the governing class is brought as a dinner-guest, perhaps by a fellow townsman who has made good, in order to meet important people, as a way of aiding his chances of being co-opted into the aristocracy, and acclimatising him to its mode de vie (e.g. Pliny, Ep. 9.24.4). This was a regular practice in a socially mobile society such as Rome was. The Rome-based aristocracy, in order to survive, had to be, and constantly was, engaged in promoting new members. It did so by exploiting existing links of friendship (amicitia) between established aristocrats.

Third, the peer-group dinner. This dinner brought together social equals. It is the kind of dinner that Cicero was urging his friend Paetus, who had dropped out, to rejoin. This could be or seem to be purely social, but in the heady world of late Republican Rome was likely to be a highly political occasion. Here political plans were laid, alliances confirmed, allegiances sought.

The wheel has come full circle. The peer-group dinner, paradoxical though it may sound, bears comparison with the archaic Greek symposium in one important respect. Neither was a private event, both were political, in the sense that we are dealing in each case with the assembling of a slice of the aristocracy that was already dominant in the

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[*polis*/state. For that matter, almost everything a prominent politician in Rome did – and certainly all the social relationships in which he engaged – had public or political significance, not excluding his entertainment to dinner of protégés and clients. It was by such means that the governing class of Rome perpetuated itself and maintained its hold on society.

Conclusion: choice and necessity

Why do people eat what they eat?¹ There are four main factors. The first is physiological. People eat to live and be healthy. This explains why they need food, but not why they choose to eat a particular food or combination of foods. On the whole people have chosen well, and the human race has survived. Errors have been made in ignorance: in antiquity a poison, lead, was ingested through the making of *sapa* (must), and colostrum in certain social circles was routinely withheld from babies. (These days, nutritionally undesirable choices are sometimes made knowingly, or out of avoidable ignorance.) In general, humans like other animals have selected food that is good for them, and this without any knowledge of nutritional science. Galen, following the Hippocratic tradition, thought that good health depended on the proper blending of the four qualities, hot, cold, dry, wet, corresponding to the four essential humours of the body, blood, black bile, yellow bile, phlegm. Thus precise knowledge of the qualities of the various foods was essential. These are primitive ideas, but the surprising thing is how often Galen was on the right lines. Just as the ancient farmer was not rendered helpless by his ignorance of plant biology, so the crude limitations of Galen's dietetics did not often lead him into absurdity, let alone into giving health-undermining advice.

The second factor is taste. Some foods simply appeal more than others. Humans can survive or flourish on a wide variety of foods. They have more choice than animals have. Some animals are mainly or entirely carnivores or herbivores. Others are not only limited in this way, but are also extremely selective. Koalas will eat only eucalyptus leaves from a few of the many varieties of eucalyptus tree, and the new leaves at that. The beetle *Caryedes brasiliensis* eats only the seeds of the liane (*Dioclea megacarpa*), and the moth *Seiractica echo* only the leaves of the

¹ Yuckin (1978a) asked himself a similar question, and I have been influenced by his answer.

cycad (*Cycas circinnalis*). Man is successful as an animal because he can eat more or less everything. The line will be drawn only at cannibalism, which offends against standard sacrificial principles: cannibalism-taboo has its roots in the central religious act. Galen's story of covert cannibalism at inns and his (non-) reaction to it suggest that this was a weak barrier, that standards were relaxed at the verges of civilised society. Galen was probably insouciant on this point because he felt he was describing a world that was not his. It was the rustic poor who approached closest to omnivorousness, but under constraint rather than through deliberate choice. Here we can set the peasants of ancient Asia Minor alongside those of modern Provence, as portrayed by Galen and Marcel Pagnol, respectively. Pagnol's rustic, François, smacks his lips at the thought of lizard, badger, and especially hedgehog, preferring them to snake, fox and squirrel, respectively, and has a ready answer for the stunned city-dweller:

I could hardly believe that he followed such a peculiar diet, and asked: 'Have you really eaten all those animals?' 'Certainly.' He turned towards Lili. 'City people are shocked that we eat hedgehogs. But they happily gobble up sea-urchins.' After this triumphant riposte, he seemed to think a moment, and suddenly added: 'And there are even apparently sons of bitches who eat frogs'.²

Galen's catalogue of edible and eaten land-animals (see above, p. 83), I suspect, owes much to his observations of country people *à table*, topped up by practices of the urban poor. In contrast, the urban elite employed a high level of refinement in the choice of foods and their preparation. Their *haute cuisine* provided another sphere in which they could express their superiority as a group over 'others', whether barbarians, nomads, mountain-dwellers, countrymen, or, for that matter, the urban poor.

The third factor is availability. Choice may be limited for a number of reasons. 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. Contact with the outside world brings an increase in the range of foods that are at hand. The growth of cities stimulated trade and other forms of exchange. In antiquity there is the phenomenon of a huge metropolis, Rome, at the hub of a command economy, able to draw to itself products from a wide range of climates and natural economies throughout the Mediterranean basin and beyond. In an earlier era, classical Athens,

² M. Pagnol, *Le Temps des secrets: souvenirs d'enfance* (1988), 11–13. François's remark about frogs is a reminder that the French are expert at transforming marginal or famine foods into gourmet dishes through culinary genius. Snails are another example.

at the centre of a more modest empire, received products from far afield, partly because it had political and military power, and partly because its demographic size made it a profitable destination for merchants. But even the thousands of ordinary cities in the Graeco-Roman world had some capacity to draw products from outside.

In introducing cities, we have brought into play economic and political alongside environmental and ecological factors. In the economic model, the market pull of cities can overcome the limitations of their natural environment and increase the range of choice for the consumer. Political authority too is concentrated in the city, which can exploit its control of the legal and military apparatus to extract the surplus from the territory under its jurisdiction.

Access to the goods that flow into the city will not be equal. The haves can acquire what the havenots cannot. In addition, the haves, by misusing their coercive power and control of the movement and distribution of foodstuffs, may aggravate the position of the havenots, expose them to periodic food crises and, in combination with epidemic disease, increase their vulnerability to long-term malnutrition. The haves, typically, will rub salt into the wound by indulging in conspicuous consumption – typically but not invariably, and not always without restraint. We note first that opposition to extreme self-indulgence and extravagance was expressed, especially among the Romans, in politics and in literature – as attested, for example, by the various sumptuary laws, and by the idealised reconstruction of the life-style and system of values of the archaic community of Rome by comparison with the corrupt present. The effect of this critique cannot be accurately gauged and should certainly not be overestimated, but it can be believed that it acted as a restraining force in some quarters. A second qualification is that adduced by Pierre Bourdieu.³ Economic power characteristically asserts itself in the destruction of riches, that is, in conspicuous consumption. However, those with greater buying power and greater potential choice of foods do not invariably squander their resources in luxurious living. Religious scruples, bourgeois principles, or taste may get in the way. The cultural component in food choice comes into the reckoning.

The fourth factor, then, is culture. Diet is profoundly influenced by the traditional practices and norms of the particular society – and not just diet, what we eat, but also how the food is obtained, who prepares it, where, when and with whom it is eaten. Some anthropologists, of whom

³ Bourdieu (1979), 197–222.

an early representative was Audrey Richards in *Hunger and Work in a Savage Tribe* (1932), have argued that the cultural system is and always has been the main influence on food habits. The role of culture may be illustrated with reference to two Ethiopian tribes, as studied by the anthropologist William Shack. These are the Amhara and Tigrinya peoples of the northern highlands, and the Gurage of the midlands of south-west Ethiopia.⁴

The Amhara and Tigrinya inhabit a fertile land capable of producing cereals in abundance, and a variety of other foods. However, this is an Orthodox Christian people who have bound themselves to an elaborate regime of fasting: 165 fast days in the year for an ordinary Christian, 250 fast days for the truly devout. For the latter, the rich food resources of the region are enjoyed for less than one-third of the year. For the mass of the population, those economically disadvantaged, and especially for the more vulnerable groups, namely children and women, the consequence is severe nutritional hardship. The other tribe, the Gurage, are wedded to a plant, *Ensete ventricosum*, which happens to be very poor nutritionally, being low in protein and short of key vitamins. This plant, also called the 'false banana plant' (false because it bears no edible fruit), the main staple of their diet, is also 'the actual and symbolic core of Gurage social and cultural life', having a range of non-food uses. Moreover, the Gurage practise an ethic of frugality. They eat sparingly. Their hunger is rarely sated. While there is little on their plates, the pits in their gardens are filled with ensete pulp in the process of fermenting for later use in ceremonials and feasts.

In both these cases, social and cultural traditions are the primary factor governing food choice and consumption habits. These Ethiopian tribes do not make full use of the potentiality of their lands, and both of them adopt strategies that are injurious to their health. Harsh reality is against the dietary choices that they have made, but this counts for less with them than the weight of religious belief and inherited custom.

The general point, that cultural and social norms can govern dietary choice, might be made with reference to much more mundane examples from ancient and other societies. A few ascetic Christians apart, no one in antiquity fasted like the Ethiopians, and no ancient Mediterranean people, as far as I know, was unwise enough to fix on a staple as unnutritious as the false banana plant. There are some notable, if less extreme, instances from ancient societies of groups of consumers

⁴ Shack (1978).

restricting their intake of food in quantity and in kind, in response to philosophical, religious and ethnic regulations: the Jewish nation, Pythagoreans, ascetics in a variety of traditions, Christians who abstained from sacrificial meat. They provide the most vivid illustrations of the function that food and eating can perform of defining the identity of a group with reference to excluded others. They are vivid but they are also few, and they create a partial and distorted picture of the way in which food divided people in antiquity. They turn the spotlight away from social, economic, political, legal and gender divisions, which are also flagged by divergent patterns of food consumption, and might be held to have a higher claim to be regarded as a defining feature of Graeco-Roman society than racial, religious or philosophical differences. In any case, for a fuller picture of diversity in ancient societies, it is necessary to admit the role of food not only in excluding others, but also in including one's own. Christians shunned the meat left over from pagan sacrifices (Pythagoreans happen to have done the same), but also made their central ritual the Eucharistic meal of bread and wine which represent the body and blood of their founder.