

## Food, recipes and empire in Mid-Republican Rome- Enrica Sciarrino

Posts on Facebook and Instagram hit us with images of extravagant dishes and recipes of all sorts, all the time. Some include familiar foods, others feature exotic ingredients (SLIDE 1).

As in the past so too today, food is not just about nourishment, it is about identity, about who we are, what we believe and how we relate to others. In the ancient world things were not much different; the Greeks and the Romans had a very lively culinary culture, and just like today the choice of food sent strong political and cultural messages. This afternoon I will focus on the food culture of the Romans in the mid second century BCE, that is, when the Romans stopped relating to the Greeks as one of the many peoples that lived in Italy and began to encroach upon their world as conquerors.

At that time the Romans had already been enjoying a well- established culinary culture and for many centuries. What the archaeological record shows is that they shared with the other peoples that lived in Italy a similar table culture. The *convivium* (what could be translated as “banquet”) was pivotal to their life; it was so pivotal that the Latin word for “wisdom”, *sapientia* derives from the verb “*sapio*”, which is strongly associated with eating and means (primarily) to be tasty, salty. It is generally suggested that the Roman *convivium* was modelled on the Etruscan version of the Greek symposium. These Italian feasts, however, differed from their Greek counterpart in some important respects.

(SLIDE 2- Greek symposium )

(SLIDE 3-5 – Etruscan/Roman evidence)

From the late third century BCE great amounts of goodies started to flow into Rome as a consequence of its victories. This increased availability of resources had a huge impact on the social practices of the Roman aristocracy. Roman aristocrats were determined to assert their supremacy on every occasion, including at dinners; however, they did not all go about it in the same way. Some embarked on a quest for the exotic and indulged in new culinary possibilities to flaunt at their private banquets, others worked on fabricating Roman authenticity by presenting farm-produced food as the source of their superiority in politics and war. As food became a weapon of social differentiation and the banquet a battlefield for intra-elite competition, recipes written in various forms (poetry and prose) began to circulate possibly at banquets.

We are lucky enough to have a few lines from the *Hedyphagetica (Delicacies)* by Ennius (239-169 BCE) and a number of recipes included in *De Agricultura (On Agriculture)* by Cato the Elder (234-149 BCE). These materials offer us an amazing view on how the Romans constructed food socially, ethnically and geographically at a turning point of their history.

Ennius' *Delicacies* is a translation of a gastronomic poem written in Greek called *Hedypatheia (Life of Luxury)* by Archestratus of Gela (Sicily) in the first two-third of the fourth century BCE. Scholars have situated Archestratus' work in the context of a series of fragments 'gastronomically oriented' texts and the Sicilian culinary tradition. The Greek poem was written in hexameters (the traditional epic meter) and was organized in catalogue-form, describing various foodstuffs. The order of the catalogue appears to have followed the order in which dishes were served at

a typical banquet. Archestratus' work opened with an intention to present the results of his research on where to get the best food and drinks in the Mediterranean (fr. 1-3). From there, he went on by giving instructions to two addressees (Moschus and Cleandrus) about acquiring, cooking and serving the delicacies presented. Among these, particular attention is given to fish (fr.10-56).

Long days at sea and lack of refrigeration made fish an expensive item.

Moreover, fish was excluded from sacrifices; as such, it was consumed in private settings for conspicuous consumption without the restriction of religious ritual. Because of its special status, fish was a significant marker of social and economic status.

The 11 lines that survive from the Latin translation by Ennius read like a catalogue of fish and where it can be sourced. The correspondence of those few lines with what is left of Archestratus' text shows that Ennius modified the original in interesting ways:

Just as the sea-weasel at Clipea surpasses all others, mussels are most abundant at Ainus, rough-shelled oysters at Abydus. The scallop is found in Mytilene and in Ambracian Charadrius. The sargue is good in Brundisium; if it is big, buy it.

Be aware that the boar-fish is of the highest quality at Tarentum.

Be sure to buy the *elops* in Surrentum and the *glaukos* in Cumae.

Why have I passed over the parrot-wrasse, a veritable brain of Jupiter the Highest (it is big and good when caught in Nestor's homeland(Pylos), the blacktail, the rainbow wrasse, the blackbird-fish, and the maigre? At Corcyra there is octopus, fat bass heads, purple shellfish large and small, mussels, and sweet sea-urchins (Ennius, *Hedyphagethica* 1 = Apuleius, *Apologia* 39.2.)

[MAP of the places mentioned]

For example, in line 1 he refers to sea-weasels to be found at Clipea, a Greek colony founded in 310 BCE but occupied by the Romans during the first war against Carthage; Ainus is mentioned here for the mussels as in the Greek version and so is Abidus for the oysters. Note, however, that in 196 BCE Rome became involved in the area and Abidus became part of the Roman empire in 133 BCE. When mentioning scallops Ennius adds geographical information about Ambracia (today's Arta, in North-Western Greece), referring to Charadrius, a city within the gulf, that had been conquered in 189 BCE by Fulvius Nobilior during his Aetolian campaign. In this campaign Ennius himself went along as a client of the Roman general. Other places mentioned that were also Rome's recent conquests include: Brundisium (v.4) occupied in 266 BCE and Tarentum (v. 5), cited for its boar-fish and recaptured in 209 BCE. Cumae (v.6) is remembered here for *glaukos*; the city remained loyal to Rome in Hannibal's campaign; he talks about elops in Surrentum, although the original has Syracuse; like Cumae, so too Surrentum had remained loyal to Rome. As for Greece proper, Ennius refers to the octopus at Corcyra (v.10), the first Greek city in the mainland to come under Roman control. In Ennius we no longer have a catalogue of places to be scoured for rare fish and seafood for gastronomists like in Archestratus.

Atheneus 7.116 (late 2<sup>nd</sup> BCE, who preserves many of the fragments of Archestratus' poem in a later work on banqueting) said about the Greek gastronomic writer: "this Archestratus, out of a love of pleasure, made a careful circuit of the entire earth and sea because he wished to inquire painstakingly into everything associated with the belly." What we have in Ennius is, yes, the report of a "culinary trip" but also a list of sea spoils representing Rome's broader

control of the Mediterranean and the celebration of its elite's unrestricted access to exquisite food.

Born in Sabina, 15 miles south of Rome, Cato belonged to a local elite family but did not enjoy an ancestral history of achievements like many aristocrats in Rome. The most recognized way by which Cato negotiated his successful career was to draw on his Sabine origins.

In the opening of one of his speeches, he said: 'I spent all my boyhood in frugality, privation and hard work, reclaiming the Sabine rocks, digging and planting those flinty fields' (Cato, *Speeches* 128 Malcovati). On this dismal landscape Cato projected old-time Roman virtues like sturdiness and resilience. On a number of occasions he also spoke strongly against extravagant expenditure. So Polybius reports "Marcus Cato ...complained that one might be quite convinced of the decline of the commonwealth when pretty boys cost more than fields and jars of caviars more than ploughmen (Polybius 31.25.5). In the so called CARMEN DE MORIBUS, Cato says: [once upon a time] Horses costed more than cooks (*Carmen*, fr. 2 =Gell 11.2.5).

Cato also represented himself as the embodiment of former farmer-statesmen like Manlius Curius Dentatus (consul in 290, 284, 275, 274 BCE and censor in 272 BCE) and Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus (consul in 460 BCE and dictator in 458 BCE and 439 BCE). In the stories of these two champions of Roman virtue earth food and farming played a pivotal role. When the Samnites sent envoys to Dentatus with fine gifts in an attempt to influence him in their favour, they found him sitting by the fire roasting turnips. He rejected the gifts and declared that he preferred ruling those who have gold over possessing it himself. As for

Cincinnatus, he was appointed dictator at Rome in order to rescue the army surrounded by the Aequi on Mount Algidus. When delegates came from Rome to his farm to call him to duty he was found working in the field. He accepted the request and defeated the enemy in a single day. After celebrating his triumph – only 15 days after being appointed dictator – he resigned and went back to his farm.

*Cato's Agriculture* draws on these scenarios of sturdiness and incorruptibility. In the opening section he argues for the moral superiority of agriculture over usury and commerce, in the remainder we find a series of instructions that range from agricultural topics (planting, harvesting etc mainly olive trees and vines) to medical, dietary, legal, and religious prescriptions. The foods mentioned in the medical and dietary prescriptions are all products of the earth. Pivotal among them is cabbage. Here an extract of what Cato has to say about it:

It is the cabbage which surpasses all other vegetables. It may be eaten either cooked or raw; if you eat it raw, dip it into vinegar. It promotes digestion marvellously and is an excellent laxative, and the urine is wholesome for everything. If you wish to drink deep at a banquet and to enjoy your dinner, eat as much raw cabbage as you wish, seasoned with vinegar, before dinner, and likewise after dinner eat some half a dozen leaves; it will make you feel as if you had not dined, and you can drink as much as you please. (2) If you wish to clean out the upper digestive tract, take four pounds of very smooth cabbage leaves, make them into three equal bunches and tie them together. Set a pot of water on the fire, and when it begins to boil sink one bunch for a short time, which will stop the boiling; when it begins again sink the bunch briefly while you count five, and remove... (*On Agriculture*, 152.1-3, transl. Hooper and Ash)

Cato's instructional style and his attention to bodily functions is far from being uncouth and awkward. His promotion of self-sufficiency based on the cultivation of land and knowledge of its products obscures the total reliance of Roman aristocrats on slaves and various subordinates for the production and acquisition of food. Moreover, just like Ennius who constructs the Mediterranean Sea as a territory under Roman control so too Cato's farm environment in Sabina is constructed on a territory that had been acquired through conquest. To be sure, Cato's family had been granted Roman citizenship in 268 BCE along with the rest of the Sabines, that is, 30 or so years before his birth. What I mean with this is that in both Ennius and Cato we read about an aristocracy with very strong proprietorial attitudes. The difference is that Ennius' elite readers desired to indulge in the pleasures of having a world of exclusive delicacies at their table and to differentiate themselves on the basis of their ability to get their hands on them; Cato, on the other hand, trumpeted paradigms of self-reliance with the intention of limiting disproportionate differentiations within the elite based on the conspicuous consumption of wealth and to retain military and political achievements as primary criteria for social distinction.