The Way We Used to Eat: Diet, Community, and History at Rome
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THE WAY WE USED TO EAT: DIET, COMMUNITY, AND HISTORY AT ROME

NICHOLAS PURCELL

Abstract. Changes in foodways were an object of literary reflection on the Roman past in the early empire. They offered a rich set of ingredients with which to characterize social, economic, and cultural change. Varro is prominent in attesting and shaping this tradition, but it is an older, and more broadly based means of narrating Roman social history. Varro developed this material in his treatise, On the Life of the Roman People, which adapted the Life of Greece of Dicaearchus of Sicilian Messene, written at the beginning of the Hellenistic period. This article argues that Roman ideas of cultural and social history already took an interest in changing foodways at this time. The production, preparation, and consumption of food raised ethical and economic questions common to the milieu of Dicaearchus and to Rome in the age of the first conquest of Italy.

INTRODUCTION

In the history of diet at Rome from the seventh century B.C.E. to the end of the Republic, there were no doubt major changes and discontinuities. The study of foodways, moreover, cannot be separated from the study of production, so that these dietary changes should track a rapidly changing agrosystem. This paper is not, however, primarily about these realities, but about mentalités as they are reflected in themes in Roman literature, and it attempts to show that texts about food are both less and more useful than they can appear to be in the standard modern accounts of Roman diet. Rather than what actually changed in Roman nutritional patterns, I want to trace the self-consciousness of Romans about nutrition and the way that diet, and implicitly agriculture, were made into a way of narrating historical change, especially at Rome. The object of the research was twofold. One target was Roman popular culture—those reactions and values that genuinely united Romans of different statuses—and the light that it might shed on that perennially
tricky issue, Roman-ness. The other was the development and uses of a sense of passing historical time in a society where historiography was for long even more rarefied a freak of high literature than it was in Greece.¹

Thus, when the antiquarian Verrius Flaccus, in the Augustan period, says to us through Pliny that the Roman people (populus Romanus) had lived on far (emmer, the husked wheat Triticum dicoccum) for their first 300 years, it is not the nature of the diet of Rome in the period 750–450 B.C.E. that primarily interests me, but the idea of a 300-year-long phase in social history, the perception that there was a change in 450 B.C.E., what Verrius and his Augustan readers imagined the change to be, and the attitude to the Roman past that seeing it through the bread-oven reveals.²

Attitudes to food had a history, too. This diachronic theme is often obscured by treatments that construct a synoptic picture of the social construction of food in Hellenic or Roman culture, or sometimes even across the whole continuum of both. We are inclined to expansive generalizations, as when we claim that the acorn was “linked by the Greeks and Romans with primitivism.” Well, yes: but which notions of primitivism, where were they first articulated, when and why did they become normative, how widely diffused were they? We can attest acorn-eating as a topos of primitivism, sure enough, in both Greek and Latin texts. But primitivism was a notion shaped and deployed in many different ways, and for which many different foodways were used as a symbol. The acorn is now understood better as a real foodstuff, thanks to detailed study of its nutritional potential (Mason 1995). Its image and associations will likewise benefit from a more finely subdivided analysis of those “links with primitivism.”

There is a problem, too, with the phrase that opened the last paragraph: “attitudes to food.” The tangled threads between real people in real Roman streets and complex literary representations take a great deal of unpicking.³ I am very keen to find common ground, or at least bridges and crossovers, between the world of élite literature and actual mentalités, and not just the mentalités of the literary milieu itself. In the passage of Verrius already cited, what precisely did he—or Pliny in quoting him—understand by populus Romanus?

¹ For some preliminary thoughts on the latter problem, Purcell 2003.
³ For a splendid example, the excursus on garlic starting from Horace’s Third Epode, Gowers 1993, 289–310.
But this investigation of the place of food in the history of Roman historical consciousness has wider implications. Historical consciousness is one strand in a wider social cognition, and through it we may hope to discern some of the characteristics of another elusive subject, the changing nature of Roman culture. Food has a reasonably normal place in studies of Roman culture, but all too often in the rather unilluminating *Alltagsgeschichte* or "Daily Life" studies of the Friedländer/Carcopino model. By interposing history in the process, and looking at the place of thinking about time through thinking about food, we may be able to tie the collection of information about foodways to somewhat larger themes in cultural history. We may be encouraged in doing this by the fact that a historical understanding of foodways appears to have played an important part in the formation at the end of the fourth century B.C.E. of the first generalizations about these matters that we find in antiquity in the thought of Dicaearchus of Sicilian Messene.

This is a very large topic, and the treatment here cannot pretend to any sort of completeness of coverage. It is intended to open questions by presenting a selection of relevant material and to prepare the way for further work.

**COMESTIBLE HISTORIOGRAPHY**

In his great set-piece on the agricultural virtues of early Rome at the beginning of Book 18, the elder Pliny characteristically mixes together a rich palette of themes: piety, simplicity, and morality, but also fertility and economy. The low cost of food in early Rome gave a pleasantly Vespasianic touch to his picture: from Varro he quotes food prices of 250 B.C.E.: 1 as for 1 modius (8.62 litres) of emmer, 1 congius (a little over 3 litres) of wine, 30 lb. figs, 10 lb. oil, and 12 lb. meat (at about 323 g to the pound). Let us begin with a quartet of celebrated dietary simplicities from the

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4 Above all Friedländer 1921–23. Work of this kind in the first half of the twentieth century often provided a vehicle for unconcealed cultural preferences: Carcopino 1941, 262–74 (French first edition 1939), with Arab comparisons for Roman excess; Paoli 1963, 86–91 (Italian first edition 1942), with disgust at Roman diet illustrated from contemporary ethnology.

5 *HN* 18.6–24 at 17: "M. Varro auctor est, cum L. Metellus in triumpho plurimos duxit elefantos, assibus singulis farris modios fuisse, item vini congios ficique siccae pondo XXX, olei pondo X, carnis pondo XII." The prices were perhaps recorded as those for goods purchased by Metellus for distribution at his triumphal banquets.
Romans’ account of their happier early days, taking these prices as our cue.

A Modius of Emmer

There is, of course, no doubt either that a very considerable part of normal diet throughout the ancient Mediterranean was composed of cereals or that this was reflected in the centrality of cereal terminology to the semiotics of ancient food systems. In three ways, however, cereal orientation turns out to be more complex than one might at first suppose. First, cereals are so central that—perversely—the non-cereal complement (beans, or chestnuts, or wine, or whatever foodstuffs locally made up the bipartite Mediterranean diet) might take on a highly prominent role in social identification. Second, it was actually normal within most regions to make use of a large variety of cereal types, even when one was culturally dominant, to avoid the perils of dependence on a single crop, and to respond to micro-local environmental differences (Horden and Purcell 2000, chap. 6). Third, under the overarching sense of belonging, which defining yourself as a civilized cereal-eater offered, this variety of cereals encouraged the use of differing cereal species and culinary preparations of their produce as ways of articulating social separation. Fourth, it was not just the grain but the way in which you preferred to prepare it that might be the symbolically significant element.

All that said, cereals were a potent community identifier. There are many examples: the one that naturally concerns us most is the claim that we have already encountered that the early Romans had depended on emmer (far), not wheat or barley, and that this was consumed as porridge (puls). Pliny offers essentially etymological arguments:

Emmer was the first food of the ancient inhabitants of Latium, and the offerings of emmer . . . are a strong confirmation. That emmer porridge, rather than bread, was the staple of the Romans (vixisse Romanos) for a

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8 For *puls* in ritual, Festus 285 L.
long period is clear from the use still today of the term *pulmentaria* (condiments); and Ennius, a very early poet, in a description of the starvation during a siege, speaks of fathers snatching the *offa* from their crying children. Even today, traditional religious rites, including birthdays, are celebrated with *puls fitilla*. *Puls* appears, moreover, to be as unfamiliar in the Greek world as *polenta* is in Italy.\(^9\)

The phrase “staple of the Romans,” literally, “the Romans lived on” (*vixisse Romanos*), should not be taken for granted. It has become standard English: but to say that a people drew life from a comestible that was a principal staple is a hyperbolic metaphor and one of considerable significance for patterns of ancient thought.

*Far* was the Roman equivalent of barley in Greece, and its preparation, as *offa* or more normally as *puls*, was equally distinctive. It was the latter that gave the Romans their word for the dietary complement, *pulmentarium*, the thing you put with your *puls*, though no particular example of such an accompaniment became a classic element in the Roman food system. There was a clear sense, moreover, that some grains were better than others, and this is to some extent reflected in the actualities of selection, preference, and obsolescence as far as they can be gauged from the archaeological record: the key properties are ease in harvesting, threshing, grinding, and cooking, though this is not usually explicit in ancient texts. In being emmer-eaters, the early Romans were patently adhering to a less attractive diet as well as a distinctive one. Valerius Maximus offers, as so often, a classic statement: the early Romans were so much more interested in moderation that they consumed more *puls* than bread.\(^10\)

The historicizing perspective is very prominent in this account. The second-century B.C.E. historian Cassius Hemina, starting no doubt from the same sense of the antiquity of the use of emmer as was implied by its

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9 Pliny, *HN* 18.83–4: “[far] primus antiquis Latii cibus, magno argumento in adoriae donis, sicuti diximus. pulte autem, non pane, vixisse longo tempore Romanos manifestum, quoniam et pulmentaria hodieque dicuntur et Ennius, antiquissimus vates, obsidionis famem exprimens officam eripuisse plorantibus liberis patres commemorat. et hodie sacra prisca atque natalium pulte fitilla conficiuntur, videturque tam puls ignota Graeciae fuisse quam Italiae polenta.” This last, confusingly, is barley porridge, Greek *alphita*, and for all its unfamiliarity, Pliny refers to it by a *Latin* name. For Ennius’ context (the siege of Rome by Lars Porsenna) Skutsch 1985, 610–11. See also Ovid, *Fasti* 2.519–20; 6.180; Juvenal 14.171.

10 Valerius Maximus 2.5.5: “erant adeo continentiae adtenti ut frequentior apud eos pultis usus quam panis esset.”
use in religious rites, attributed the practice of parching the grains to King Numa, in a context that bound this basic act of food preparation both to the heart of Roman sacrificial practice and to the organization of the agrarian countryside. Numa was also said—in a more rationalistic version—to have prescribed parched emmer out of a concern for health. But the problem with such a historical account is that it makes essential an explanation of how and when things changed, and here the evidence was difficult to handle. Abundance of one kind of emmer, ador, was seen as the measure of every kind of excellence and the indicator of status and civic esteem in early Rome. This is a notable social historical argument, addressing a genuine problem about the workings of a distant society, and perhaps a rather good one, on the analogy of the pentakosio- medimnoi at Athens. Varro’s mid third-century price list still has a prominent place for far. For Pliny, Ennius’ account of the late sixth century, written around 180 B.C.E., has authority.

Verrius Flaccus, however, as we saw (n. 2), recorded a change in 450 B.C.E. or so. What did he have in mind? The answer must be that the Romans believed that, during the fifth century, they had needed to rely on purchases and gifts of cereals from Etruria, other parts of west-central Italy, especially from Campania, and eventually from Sicily; and these cereals will have been barley and above all wheat. For Pliny, “Italy” (and he means Magna Graecia) was already a wheatland in the second quarter of the fifth century B.C.E., and he translated a line of Sophocles’ Triptolemus (468 B.C.E., fr. 600 Radt) to prove it. In these beliefs, they were probably basically correct, even though the change in cereal-type is a matter of delicate and anxious cultural construction. Not only are these

11 Pliny, HN 18.7–8: “Numa instituit deos fruge colere et mola salsa supplicare atque, ut auctor est Hemina, far torrere, quoniam tostum cibo salubrius esset, id uno modo consecutus, statuendo non esse purum ad rem divinam nisi tostum. is et Fornacalia instituit farris torrendi ferias et acque religiosas Terminis agrorum.”

12 The dona adoriae: as etymology of gloria, and reward for generals: Horace, Odes 4.4.41; Festus 3 L; Pliny, HN 18.8.

13 The evidence is conveniently collected by Frederiksen 1984, 163–66, arguing strongly for the basic historicity of the change; see also Garnsey 1988, 167–81.

14 HN 18.65: “haec fuere sententiae Alexandro Magno regnante, cum clarissima fuit Graecia atque in toto orbe terrarum potentissima, ita tamen ut ante mortem eius annis fere CXLV Sophocles poeta in fabula Triptolemo frumentumItalicum ante cuncta laudaverit, ad verbum tralata sententia: et fortunatam Italiarm frumento serere candido. quae laus peculiaris hodieque Italico est; quo magis admiror posteros Graecorum nullam mentionem huius fecisse frumenti.”
places where the new grains grew not Roman; they were, or they came to be, proverbial for un-Roman indulgences of every kind. The Romans needed Demeter and her crops; they also got Dionysus and his. Over the years from 509 to 202 B.C.E., they took a great many cultural novelties from these same places—Etruria, Campania, Sicily—never without a sense of threat and loss. The latter two are the archetypes of Bad Influence on Rome before its exposure to the corruptions of the Hellenistic world. By the time of Plautus this had become, of course, a joke. Providing better evidence than Pliny for Roman popular culture, he shows us that puls is part of Roman self-consciousness already by the first quarter of the second century. Pulsi-eating is attributed to barbarians or made into a mock-grandiose Greek compound name, “Fitzporridgevore” (Pultiphagonides).\(^{15}\)

We are witnessing in the later reflections on Roman dietary history the emergence and mutation of a Roman sense of identity, in which a way of signifying the foodways of a single people is gradually changed into part of the Roman bid to have a cultural identity that is not just equivalent to Egyptian or Elymian or Thracian, but up there with “Hellenic” as a whole type of civilization. The elder Pliny’s vision is (as often) determinedly Roman. From his Greek sources he draws comparative cultural details, which underlie his comparison of grain varieties: he allows barley to be the ancient characteristic of Greece (Pliny, \textit{HN} 18.63–70, 72). Certain crops are made ethnographically specific, in what is implied to be an immemorial fashion, but the main use to which cereal classification is put is representing the difference between Hellenic and Roman (and we should observe that this is indeed construction on his part, choosing to describe these cultural affiliations in the way that others had described the customs of more circumscribed societies, much more reasonable subjects for this kind of taxonomy). Roman writers used cereals and cereal-products to delineate the highly fragmented cultural map of Italy before the Romans.\(^{16}\)

Something similar appears in the Roman account of the history of breadmaking at Rome. The early Romans made their own bread, a task for the women of the household: albeit (of course) with emmer (Braun 1995, 34–37). Inconveniently early attestations of the word “baker” were etymologized away: it was alleged that the word really meant “emmer-pounder.” Or, if it was thought implausible that the élite had made their

\(^{15}\) Plautus, \textit{Mostellaria} 828: “pultiphagus barbarus”; \textit{Poenulus} prol. 54: Pultiphagonides.

\(^{16}\) For instance, the Sabine \textit{lixulae} and \textit{similixulae}, Varro, \textit{Ling.} 5.107.
own bread, the answer was that bread could be made for them by cooks hired to order from the Macellum (they did not have slave-cooks of their own). Things changed for the worse in the mid second-century B.C.E. The contortions here (of a type to which we shall return) are all too evident: there was considerable evidence available, but it was hard to make fit the model that was required. Into the story, moreover, there now enters a character who will play a significant part: the Provision Market of Rome, a development of the third century B.C.E., probably on the model of the unsuitable economies of Campania or Sicily, from which the name may be derived. In Varro’s Menippean satire on changing customs, *Bimarcus*, the prospect of an outraged Jupiter’s smiting the central tholos of the Macellum with a thunderbolt was envisaged. Cereal economies in the Mediterranean are hard to keep bounded: they map identity, but they also track the interdependences that threaten it.

*A Congius of Wine*

Ethnic character for the Greeks and Romans was of course especially clearly revealed in the alcoholic beverage of choice, and that (as they knew well) is an economic datum and not a merely cultural one. The ancients were well aware of the significance of the *symposion*. Here more squirming by Roman cultural historians is on view. Romans wanted to be fully part of the civilized symposiastic world but resisted the libidinous associations of vinous excess. The cult of Dionysus, Liber Pater, posed acute problems for Roman systems of religious propriety and social order (Raaflaub 2000; Koortbojian 2002). The excellence of Italian wine had to be proclaimed, but this could hardly be squared with the visions of early Italic austerity. Wine is tremendously important but has

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17 Pliny *HN* 18.107–8: “pistores Romae non fuere ad Persicum usque bellumannis ab urbe condita super DLXXX. ipsi panem faciebant Quirites, mulierumque id opus maxime erat, sicut etiam nunc in plurimis gentium. artoptas iam Plautus appellat in fabula, quam Aululariam inscrispit, magna ob id concertatione eruditorum, an is versus poetae sit illius, certumque fit Atei Capitonis sententia cocos tum panem lautioribus coquere solitos, pistoresque tantum eos, qui far pisebant, nominatos. nec cocos vero habebant in servitiis, eosque ex macello conducebant.” See above all Ampolo 1986, especially on the significance of the *weight* of bread.


19 For some of these difficulties with wine, see Purcell 1994.
terrible effects, graphically described by Pliny in a remarkable set-piece (Pliny, HN 14.137–42). We observe that in this account, by contrast with that of cereals, the viticultural achievements of Magna Graecia and Sicily (on which Vandermersch 1994) count for nothing.

The health-giving contribution of wine to life (and again we should note the significance of the claim to making existence, living, possible) is part of the solution; so is historicizing the change, through the recent developments of Italian viticulture and the contribution to taste made by Julius Caesar’s triumph. Viticulture was not part of the early Roman agrosystem. Progress is thus evoked, uneasily, alongside a worrying sense of the problems of drunkenness: Pliny’s project is to observe “which were the best-known vintages in the year 600 since the foundation of Rome, around the time of the sacking of Carthage and Corinth, when Cato died, and how much life has moved on over the subsequent 230 years.” That turning point, the middle of the second century B.C.E., saw a complete transformation in Italian viticulture: “this renown is not immemorial, but the reputation dates only from the 600th year a.U.c.”

He does not give reasons for the change, which we, however, can easily relate to the commercialization of viticulture and the wine trade, as attested by the proliferation of new types of wine amphora, precisely from around 150 B.C.E. For writers of the first century, it is more likely that the synchronism with Cato’s De agricultura, itself another product of the commercial boom of the second century B.C.E., determined the date. However that may be, it is noteworthy that the historiography of the Roman diet identified as a significant event another intrusion into the economy of Rome of the networks of exchange of a wider world.

20 Pliny, HN 18.24: “apud Romanos multo serior vitium cultura esse coepit.”
21 Pliny, HN 14.45: “separatim toto tractatu sententia eius indicanda est, ut in omni genere noscamus quae fuerint celeberrima anno DC urbis, circa captas Carthaginem ac Corinthum, cum supremum in diem obiit [Cato], et quantum postea CCXXX annis vita profecerit.”
22 Pliny HN 14.87: “verum inter haec subit mentem, cum sint genera nobilia, quae proprie vini intellegi possint, LXXX fere in toto orbe, duas partes ex hoc numero Italiae esse, praeterea longe ante cunctas terras. et hinc deinde altius cura serpit, non a primordio hanc gratiam fuisse, auctoritatem post DC urbis annum coepisse.”
23 An anonymous reader points out to me that Polybius 34.11.1 provides the earliest reference both to the fine wine made “at Capua” and the distinctive tree-borne viticulture of Campania.
Thirty Pounds of Figs

Another familiar vignette of Roman ancestral simplicity is the turnip-toasting of the incorruptible M' Curius Dentatus.24 It is one of a trio of stories from the epoch of Rome’s newly won ascendance in Italy at the beginning of the third century B.C.E., with Pyrrhus’ ambassador Cineas being rebuffed by Fabricius and by Ap. Claudius. The turnip-story has Dentatus reject the bribes of the Samnite ambassadors in 290 B.C.E. while sitting by the fireside cooking turnips for his supper. We observe that the villa is, however, at Tusculum. “Our grandfathers and great-grandfathers were men of spirit, even if their words smelled of garlic and onions . . . ,” says Varro in a Menippean satire, with an interesting synaesthetic slide from language to diet (Varro (Nonius 201.1), Bimarcus 110 Riese).

Vegetables are a quite difficult sign: are they simple and commonplace or rare and luxuriantly delicious?25 Columella on vegetable gardening uses them in a rather different register from Curius’ turnips: “the cultivation of gardens, carried out without great energy or imagination by our forebears, is now extremely popular. There used to be a more general participation in formal dining on the part of the populace at large, given the abundance of milk, game and the meat of domestic animals; later, when the next epoch brought prices for feasting which matched its self-indulgence, the financial limitations of the populace debarred it from the more valuable foodstuffs and forced on it the more proletarian ones. That is the reason why horticulture now needs a fuller coverage from me than the traditional accounts—garden-produce is far more widely consumed.”26

In other words, early Rome knew an abundance of animal products, the fruits of hunting, itself a classic symbol of primitive simplicity, and the husbandry of the small holding—*domesticae pecudes* as opposed,

24 Cicero, *Sen.* 55, villa near Tusculum; Plutarch, *Apophth. M’. Curii 2; Cato Maior* 2.2 etc.

25 Gowers 1993, 96–100, discussing problems with vegetables in Plautus, *Pseudolus* 810–21, acutely explores some of these ambiguities, raising interesting questions about exoticism and flavour.

26 Columella 10,pr.1.1–3: “cultus hortorum segnis ac neglectus quondam veteribus agricolis nunc vel celeberrimus . . . largior . . . pauperibus fuit usus epularum, lactis copia ferinaque et domesticarum pecudum carne . . . mox cum sequens . . . aetas dapibus libidinosa pretia constituerit . . . plebeia paupertas submota a pretiosioribus cibis ad vulgares compellituir. quare cultus hortorum, quoniam fructus magis in usu est, diligentius nobis quam tradiderunt maiores praecipiendus est.”
carefully, to the products of commercialized herding. Because of this abundance, all these good things were cheap; Columella uses the same index and argument as Varro on 250 B.C.E. Far must be the other part of this dietary reconstruction; the animal products provided the complement, and there was little need to care for vegetables. In these days *epulae* were normal for Roman citizens: he must mean that the low prices made possible a far more regular communal eating regime, on the analogy of the Spartan *syssitia.*27 Carius’ turnips were, even by early Roman standards, then, the sign of a low priority for dining, the product of a thoroughly disinterested, unprofessional approach to agriculture. He also divides Roman history into a happy age and the *sequens aetas* when refinement of taste raised prices and banquets became exclusive, creating social stratification by wealth.

The most interesting of these points is, however, the economic history of plebeian supply. Every Roman had once had a *hortus:* it is not horticulture that is new (Purcell 1996). The *hortus* was indeed once the *macellum* of the plebs.28 Horticulture has latterly become a major growth area, come to resemble, indeed, much more closely, the world of the Macellum, because it supplies the huge demand for *vulgares cibi.* For Columella, a major change in Roman diet is to be attributed to the prevalence of *paupertas,* a poverty that is not the complete indigence of the desperate outsider, but a precarious dependence among the less well-off members of the community. This social change demands inclusion in an agricultural treatise because it has transformed opportunities for profitable production. The *populus Romanus* is at the centre of these changes, and the implication is that the interest in catering for the new market as well as the demand itself is a matter for plebeian interest. Once again, the history of diet revolves around strikingly economic issues.

*Twelve Pounds of Meat*

Columella’s quietly pastoral Romans and Varro’s plebeians of 250 B.C.E. all enjoyed the inexpensive meat in early Rome. We cannot but be reminded of the images of meat-eating heroes with which the Greeks pictured that earlier age of human existence and which have had such

27 It is noteworthy that Varro also compared the Roman tradition of not reclining to practice in Sparta and Crete, *De gente populi romani* fr. 21 Peter.
28 Pliny, *HN* 19.52: “ex horto plebei macellum, quanto innocentiore victu!”
bizarre effects on modern reconstructions of Dark Age diet. But it is vital
that (for all the realism with which the Greeks envisaged the Homeric
age) these are seriously historical carnivores, set in what purports to be a
historical Rome. The implication of Varro’s price list is clear: there was a
market in meat. Even in Ovid’s evocation of the early Roman festival
diet, where he imagines the deity as a visitor who has no taste for modern
Roman food and demands emmer and beans, cured pork is on the menu,
and Juvenal explicitly sets it alongside the flesh of a sacrifice (Ovid, Fasti
6.169–72; Juvenal 11.83–85). No question, then, that the Romans imag-ined meat as having been available only as a result of the sacrificial
economy.

The pork-economy of second-century Italy made a deep impres-sion on Polybius in much the same way as the Franks’ taste in pork was
to be used by observers in late antiquity. There is little doubt that the
Romans’ reconstruction is essentially correct: silvicultural swineherding
is extremely likely to have been an ancient Italic practice. But this, too,
was an anxious area for the Roman cultural historian, with many points
of contact with the problem of the history of Roman and Italian wine.
There was an awkward contrast with Greek dietary history, and meat-
eating was hard to reconcile with serious simplicity, especially given the
possibilities of moving meat-foodstuffs up the scale of profitability and
luxury. The unease is ultimately reflected in the complex attitudes to the
regulation of meat consumption in the metropolis of the late Republic
and early empire. Varro saw a natural progression—or decline—in meat-
cooking habits, from roast, through boiled, to cooking with sauces.

More specifically Roman and historical was the transmission that he
postulated for different charcuteries in the third century, when Roman
soldiers on campaign learned from their Lucanian or Faliscan enemies.
Once again, what the real Roman people actually did is interestingly
relevant to what their precursors might be imagined to have done. Cer-tainly the gamblers who used the marble gaming-board whose spaces

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29 For the Roman meat trade, see now Chioffi 1999. Varro, Res Rust. 2.5.11 clearly
distinguishes purchase for butchery from purchase for sacrifice.
30 Polybius 12.4.5–14, compare 2.15 on Cisalpina; Anthimus, De observatione, and
the Franks’ taste for lard.
31 Ling. 5.109: “hanc primo assam, secundo elixam, tertio e iure uti coepisse natura
docet.”
32 Ling. 5.111, the Lucanicum and the Faliscus venter.
33 Corbier 1989 is useful on meat eating. This is a huge topic that cannot be discussed
even in outline here.
proclaimed [H]ABEMVS IN CENA PVLLUM PISCEM PERNAM PAONEM (we have for dinner: chicken, fish, ham, peacock) were as aware of these allusions and resemblances as any spectator of Plautus' plays (Ferrua 1964, 34, n. 178).

Towards the Dietary History of Rome

Food for the Romans thus plays a notable role, perhaps even a surprising one, in the relationship of the present to various pasts. Consider, for instance, by contrast, the relatively small part in modern popular historical consciousness played by changes in foodways by comparison with, say, clothing or ethics. The picture so far is an intricate and contested one in which historical themes rich in nuance and allusion are playing a notably complex role. Lowell Edmunds was right to note (Edmunds 1980) that the semiotics of Roman food reposes—far more than in modern food-systems—in the ingredients. I argue that this reflects the far greater proximity of the consumer to the producer. But it follows that what can appear to be items on a list of very comparable raw materials—bread, wine, cheese, beans—should actually be differentiated very strongly because of the diverse economic and social processes that underlie each. This lack of differentiation is actually a product of the distancing of modern perceptions from the milieu of the producer, in that it is tempting to think of different foodstuffs as members of a simple series—in other words, what we see on the supermarket shelf—all homogenized for our convenience. The Roman could not think of the products of animal husbandry and of viticulture as so easily seriated. The significance of the raw materials was in consequence prone to ethical treatment, but it was also—and pari passu—the subject matter of history. The changes that we look for in the restaurant kitchen the Romans looked for on the land.

The most obvious historiographical element in Roman accounts of their diet is the elaboration of primitive Rome and the investigation of original, primeval, explanatory, and perhaps normative foodways. Note in passing that this way of thinking establishes the normality of change, which is not to be taken for granted in folk historicizing. As we have noticed, what Greece does with mythology, Rome does with early history (Scarpi 1989). It makes a big difference. For Greek thought, changes in food ways are primeval, part of the origins of humanity. The Romans conceived of the changes that had happened to them as existing within a notably different kind of time, within a real history. The implication for them was the one that we should also draw: whereas it was not possible
to revisit the days when kindly gods gave humans new food-plants and taught them new ways, the changes that Romans discussed might be revisited, repeated, or repealed. Instead of being part of the explanatory framework of everything, these ideas were part of a political narrative in which it was (more) possible to reverse either good or bad trends, decline or an increment in prosperity.

“That ancient progeny of Romulus and Numa,” says Columella, although he actually seems to be speaking of the age of Aemilianus, “thought it a matter of high importance that if the life of the villa were to be compared with that of the town, it should not fall short in any respect.”34 Columella, too, tells us that Mago’s treatise began with the ringing moral precept that the man who buys a country property should sell his townhouse.35 Here the *vita urbana* is clearly a tool of analysis, and there are problems for Roman interpreters. There is a cultural surprise, in so Roman a maxim coming from a Carthaginian, and in the town-country pattern having so high a profile in a Carthaginian work, when Carthage was seen by contrast to Rome as a great trading city, filled with the vices that derive from seaborne commerce. But there is also a problem with Rome’s own urban tradition. Theirs had been a great city already in the time of the Kings, as they rightly believed. *Vita villatica* was also very ancient. What had the balance of town and country originally been like, in that case? How had the town worked? The solution was to devise the myth of the harmless agrotown, a temporary abode for the rustic military heroes of the early Republic, such as Cincinnatus.

It was the life of this (more-or-less) sanitized metropolis that was perverted little by little through exposure during the fifth century, as the result of necessity, to the cereal economies of Etruria, Campania, and Sicily, and to the cultural traits that accompanied it. The taste for more expensive and recherché foodstuffs was one such trait; the agrarian sys-

34 Columella 8.16.2: “magni . . . aestimabat vetus illa Romuli et Numae rustica progenies, si urbanae vitae comparetur villatica, nulla parte copiarum defici.”

35 Columella 1.1.18: “maximeque reor hoc significantem Poenum Magonem, suorum scriptorum primordium talibus auspicatum sententiis: qui agrum paravit, domum vendat, ne malit urbanum quam rusticum larem colere. Cui magis cordi fuerit urbanum domicilium, rusticò praedio non erit opus. Quod ego praeceptum, si posset his temporibus observari, non immutarem” (“and in particular I think of Mago’s way of expressing this, making the appropriate opening to his whole oeuvre with sentiments like this: ‘the man who buys an estate should sell his town-house, to save him from preferring the worship of the town gods to those of the country. A man whose heart is in an urban address will not need a country estate.’ A maxim which I would not alter, if it could only be maintained in our times”).
tems and retail networks that provided them were another. Unease at both was encapsulated in the general opprobrium that attached to the third-century Macellum. If the periodization of this change seems slipshod, it is because the Romans themselves had great difficulties fitting the fact of cultural change into a very long span of time and in relating it to the available facts. Indeed, the Roman unwillingness to believe that much could have changed before the ancestral virtues were made patent by their resilience in the face of Hannibal has had serious effects on our understanding of the third century: the discovery of productive villas and networks of amphora distribution from before the Second Punic War should never have been such a surprise.

A sense of vulnerability to moral decline driven by economic change was already familiar at Rome by the late third century, when Fabius Pictor wrote of the Romans’ “first discovering the meaning of wealth” when they conquered the Sabines at the beginning of that century (Strabo 5.3.1). It is hardly surprising that it found expression in dietary terms. In what we know of the elder Cato, in the provisions of the long sequence of leges cibariae (as Cato called them), in fragments of historians such as Cassius Hemina, and in Lucilian satire, we can trace a gathering preoccupation with the growth of luxury and the decline in ethical standards that was explicitly tied to the expanding horizons of Roman power, continuing the process of eroding isolation and singularity.36 In all this, there is a characteristic interest in the experience of a certain collectivity, the Roman People, as the practitioners of dietary change, however that entity might be defined. The subject is clearly political, tensely related to debates on aristocratic lifestyle and on the distribution of wealth in society. There continues to be no agreement as to the turning points and stages of the cultural changes that are in progress. Diet-history is a subdivision of that much larger way of conceptualizing passing time, the history of moral decline and recovery; indeed, it is a way of indexing that history (Lintott 1972; Levick 1982).

**VARRO AND DICAEARCHUS**

Now, behind many of the texts that I have cited, we can see or infer the name of M. Terentius Varro. He was clearly the strongest of influences on

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first-century writers such as Columella and Pliny, and his ideas about food in Roman culture were also mediated to them indirectly through his successors in Augustan scholarship, Verrius Flaccus and Ateius Capito. The work in which he expressed most of them was intriguingly entitled De vita populi Romani, “On the Life of the Roman People.”37 This seems to suggest life as lifestyle, a way of living. But it is clear that he meant it also in the other, more basic sense of Life, lifetime, lifespan, life-history. Its contents are apparent from a fragment: “first on the household and its subdivisions; second on the earliest customs connected to food; third on the ancient disciplines which are needful for life.”38 His way into the quite complex concept of a Roman culture was to draw the analogy between the Roman people and an individual. Since way-of-life was relatively easily predicable of an individual and comprehensible as part of his character, this analogy offered a painless way of approaching the collectivity and generalizing about it. The more so since the pars pro toto in question was a familiar metonymy, and since there was an old and essentially political way of thinking in which the community was represented by its leading men, and the character of one, for good or bad, could be read back from the other.

A further discourse subtly intertwined here is medical. The vita way of thinking encouraged a history conceived as reflecting the health of communities. The theme of salus/salubritas is important also in the history of peoples in the sense of urban populations, and this theme still awaits exploration. Here it is through an essentially medical perception that time is being differentiated and the Roman experience historicized (compare Numa’s concern with toasting emmer, above n. 11). But the ancients did not get far from the body in analogies of this kind.39 Humanity had a stomach too as we see in the curious phraseology of Pliny on the social consequences of the stomach, “for the sake of which the greater part of humanity exists.”40 So did social communities. It was the

37 Fragments collected by Riposati 1939.
38 Varro, De vita populi Romani fr. 24 Riposati: “primum de re familiari ac partibus; secundo de victuis consuetudine primigenia; tertio de disciplinis priscis necessariis vitae.”
39 Menenius Agrippa’s famous fable at Livy 2, 32, belongs in this context too. For medical/philosophical attitudes to diet, see Gourevitch 1974.
40 Pliny, HN 26.43: Plurimum tamen homini negoti alvus exhibet, cuius causa maior pars mortalium vivit. alias enim cibos non transmittit, alias non continet, alias non capit, alias non conficit, coque mores venere, ut homo maxime cibo pereat. pessimum corporum vas instat ut creditor et saepius die appellat. huius gratia praecipue avaritia expetit, huic luxuria condit, huic navigatur ad Phasim, huic profundi vada exquiruntur; et nemo viliatem eius aestimat consumptionis foeditate. ergo numerosissima est circa hanc medicinae opera.
job under the emperors of the curator annonae to look after the Roman people’s stomach pessimum corporis vas though it be.41

The biological analogy also entailed a conception of infancy, maturity, climacteric, and senescence on the part of peoples as well as people. It is therefore of considerable significance for understanding the great interpretative structures of progress and decline with which ancient historians and philosophers operated. Food turns out to give us an entrée into some very large debates indeed.

Above all, Varro’s De vita, as it dimly emerges from the tradition which we have been sampling, was a historical account about a real Rome, however idealized the early generations were. In this it was presumably a very different work from De gente populi Romani.42 That work concerned itself with origins, as Varro himself says in his Res Rusticae (2.1.4). Varro appears to have taken the decision at that point that for Roman purposes, he would need to separate the period of origins from the theme of the De vita, even if it was to be many years before he published the latter.43

It therefore matters quite a lot at what date we think Varro wrote De vita populi Romani. Does he disclose a generally proto-Augustan attitude to dietary politics?44 Does he represent the distinctive intellectual mood of the strange years between the Colline Gate and Pharsalus? The intellectual transitions of the Roman Revolution still need more scholarly attention, and all the more so when we are dealing with figures like Varro, who almost lived to see Actium, and Atticus, to whom Varro dedicated the De vita (Rawson 1988, 100–104) and who lived to see Atticus’ daughter married to M. Agrippa. The Roman People constituted a powerful ideological theme, apt for appropriation, overt or unconscious. One would not write about them in the same way within two decades of Sulla as one would after Caesar had won his Dictatorship. And it is certain that the De vita is a work of 47 or later, and some would date it to after the De gente populi Romani of 43 (fr. 9 Peter). It belongs in a unique moment of Roman self-reflection: one at which the pious

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41 Seneca, de BV 18.5: “cum ventre tibi humano negotium est.”
42 For the nature of the De gente, see above all Taylor 1934.
43 When he did, it is not implausible to link the form it took (especially in being in four books rather than three) to the influence of the contemporary scholar Jason of Nysa, the uncle of the philosopher-historian Poseidonius of Apamea, just as De gente was indebted to the chronological work of Castor of Rhodes.
44 Baier 1997: the thesis that Varro was “einer der geistigen Wegbereiter der augusteischen Epoche.”
certainties propagated by a Cicero were clearly vain, and insecurity and anxiety called for the proclamation of certain Roman values; when the new relationship with Greece that succeeded the Social and Mithridatic wars was in full sway, but before these two tendencies had found their resolution and accommodation in the reinvention of Roman tradition and Roman self-definition in the optimus status of which Caesar Augustus was known as the auctor.

Another preoccupation of the De gente, which is inviting for the cultural historian, was what, and from which people, the Romans copied: “quid a quaque traxerint gente per imitationem” (fr. 21 Peter, Servius, ad Aen. 7.176). The theme recognizes hybridity as a form of self-consciousness: another fourth-century B.C.E. legacy to Rome. But at the same time such a prominent idea of complexity promotes a quite strong sense of the people as a whole: élites usually self-define as pure. Pliny has an odd exegetic category which may be related: the innovations shared by everyone (gentium consensus) but in all of which the Romans were late participants: alphabets, barbers, and clocks.45

We are fortunate to know something, though not nearly enough, about Varro’s inspiration for both the De gente and the De vita. Varro opens his Res Rusticae with a debate on the nature of the relationship between the pastoral and the arable and makes his Romans incline to the view that they are closely related though distinct. But he emphatically cites Dicaearchus as authority for the view that pastoralism came first: “the author of this view is that most learned of men Dicaearchus, who in his Life of Greece [Bios Hellados] showed us how it was from the beginning.”46 Dicaearchus of Messene in Sicily, measurer of mountains, geographer, and philosopher-historian, wrote a Bios Hellados in the second half of the fourth century.47 This is the work that Varro himself consciously imitated and adapted in composing his De vita populi Romani (Rawson 1988, 235). The prototype combined in a novel way characteris-


46 Varro, Res Rusticae 1.2.16: “auctore doctissimo homine Dicaearcho qui Graeciae vita qualis fuerit ab initio nobis ita ostendit.” He sets out Dicaearchus’ theory much more fully at 2.1.3–5. For Dicaearchus and Theophrastus and theories of decline, Dodds 1973, 16–17.

47 Fragments in Wehrli 1944, 47–66.
tics of universal history as well as the biographical analogy.\(^{48}\) It has been seen as wrestling with the invention of a theory of culture.\(^{49}\) But the idea that food formed part of a set of *nomoi* that might change and be reformed is already present in archaic Greece: *agogue* in the Spartan sense might be translated “culture,” for all its educational overtones. An early Athenian comic poet certainly remarked that cheese, barley-cakes, olives, and leeks were prepared for the Anakes in the Prytaneion at Athens in commemoration of the ancient *agogue* (Chionides fr. 7 K.–A.). It was Dicaearchus, nonetheless, who pioneered the way of thinking that has been so important to our analysis, the analogy of the experience through time of a people or culture to the biography of a human being, transposing the notion of *bios* or *vita* from the human person to the whole society.\(^{50}\)

Certainly Dicaearchus had a strong sense of change through time and traced human society, and with it human foodways, from the days of a life in close proximity to Nature in the *Urzeit*, through a pastoral phase, and into the age of fully diverse agriculture (see n. 46). Is this a contributor to the formation of the idea of discrepant meat eating in early Rome? Only one of the few fragments to survive deals with food, but that is a fascinating discussion of the origins of apportionment, *merismos*.\(^{51}\) As food shortages occurred, rules for sharing food became necessary to prevent the starvation of the weak. Dicaearchus’ perspective is thus to an extent indeed a popular one, concerned at least on some level for the social justice on which community life must depend and realistic about the effects of unbridled and predatory competition. We have already noted the division made in the treatment of Rome between the historical and the mythical. In the description of Dicaearchus’ contents we also see the forerunner of Pliny’s interest in vanished and irrecoverable skills, and the theme *res familiaris* and its subdivisions (which we shall not have

\(^{48}\) On *bios*-history, see Leo 1901; and cf. Clarke 1999, 40–42.

\(^{49}\) Ax 2000, 349, on precursors, and especially the Palamedes-Komplex. For the differences between the Atthides and the “history of civilizations” of Dicaearchus, Jacoby 1949, 142–43. Perhaps overstated: Jacoby recognizes that Dicaearchus might have influenced Philochorus, and in attributing (133–34) to the Atthidographers an interest in the study of *nomoi* as a method for reaching back into prehistoric time, and as part of a philosophical modelling of history, he sets out some of what Dicaearchus himself might have thought he was trying to achieve in the *Bios Hellados*.

\(^{50}\) For the originality of Dicaearchus’ conception of change, see Momigliano 1972, 172–73.

\(^{51}\) Fr. 59 Wehrli 1944 = Zenobius, *Cent.* 5.23: “sharing stops choking” μερὶς οὐ πνίγει.
time to discuss at length, noting, however, that it is another vital setting for the discussion of food).

The comparison between the *De vita populi Romani* and the *Bios Hellados* has a number of interesting aspects. Trivially, a claim of some kind is no doubt represented by the fact that Varro’s work was in four books to Dicaearchus’ three. The Romans needed more exegesis. But they were also the *populus Romanus*, not an abstraction like Hellas. We cannot, unfortunately, see much of how Dicaearchus defined Hellas, between ethnography and geography; it must have been conceived as a social entity in order to lend itself to the biographical metaphor. But “the Greeks” were notoriously slippery as an ethnic category, and the apparent precision of “the Roman people” suggests another set of familiar claims to superiority. Varro must be distinguishing the *populus Romanus* from “Hellas,” but he is naturally also adding the majestic cultural and historical stature of the Greek world—Rome is a system on the same scale. At the same time, he is engaged in making claims about the central topic of Roman politics: what was the Roman People, and what was its role in the body politic?

Varro’s homage to Dicaearchus was in many ways entirely characteristic of the last years of the Republic.52 But this may not have been the first moment in Roman cultural history to which the Sicilian thinker is relevant. There may be something here of value for those who are interested in Roman historical consciousness in the Middle Republic, down to the generation of Cincius Alimentus and Fabius Pictor, and even more so of Ennius. It was not only in the generation that followed Livius’ Andronicus’ *Odyssey* that Rome began to adapt to these ways of thinking. Rome was closely linked to a wider Mediterranean cultural horizon much earlier than that. So, although it is possible that the ideas which Varro put into the *De vita* were completely new in Rome then, or that they only reached him by an indirect route, there are considerations that support a more direct tie than this.

There are many reasons for thinking that Dicaearchus’ milieu was not wholly alien to that of the contemporary Rome of Appius Claudius the Blind. It is perhaps unlikely that Dicaearchus mentioned Rome. But the non-Greek world was far from negligible to the Greeks of the fifth and fourth centuries. It is worth remembering the Samnite interlocutors

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52 For Cicero’s interest in Dicaearchus, see *Tusc. Disp.* 1.77, with the very cautious account of Smethurst 1952.
of the Italiote sages.\textsuperscript{53} The Peripatetics, we know, were aware of Rome and informed about some aspects of its government and society. And, if Dicaearchus was more of an opponent of the Peripatos than a disciple, it is at least clear that he was in dialogue with it. Dicaearchus himself was by birth a close neighbour of the city from which was to come the first important author to attempt to integrate fully the Romans into a history of the West—Timaeus of Tauromenium—though Timaeus was considerably younger. It is in Sicily and south Italy, of course, that we should look for the centre of gravity of the world in which both Rome and many parts of what we think of as Hellas found themselves. Dicaearchus, above all, has been seen to have important links with the revived Pythagorean thought of fourth-century Italy and with the Taras of Archytas and Aristoxenos in particular.\textsuperscript{54} Varro had Pythagorean leanings of his own (Pliny, \textit{HN} 35.160), but Dicaearchus’ sympathies will have found an audience at Rome far earlier. The interest of middle-republican Rome in Pythagoras is one of the few significant data of which we can be sure in this elusive period of cultural history (Mele 1981; Humm 1997).

Cultural stability was threatened from many angles in the late fourth and early third centuries. It was a propitious moment to model cultural change. Foodways were as vivid a sign of the vulnerability of traditional Greek culture as any other. Already for Theopompos, the sympotic customs of the Etruscan cities were a showpiece of exotic culpability (\textit{FGH} 115 F 204). Aristoxenus had lamented the confusion of sympotic habits, \textit{summeikta sumpotika}, of the cities that were exposed to the barbarization of Oscans, Romans, and Etruscans. A letter attributed to Plato warned of the squeezing out of Sicilian Greek culture between the Carthaginian and Oscan cultural threats (\textit{Ep.} 8, 353; Plut., \textit{Tim.} 1.3). And Dicaearchus’ own native city was indeed occupied and changed out of all recognition by the mercenary settlers who called themselves Mamertini after the Italic wargod, and it has been supposed that he saw the terminal cultural decline of his Sicily as a reason for shifting his interpretative attentions to the Peloponnese, where things continued as they always had.\textsuperscript{55} The Sicilian historians of the twentieth century, however, who saw this in Dicaearchus, were all too conscious of how it

\textsuperscript{53} Cavallaro 1971–72, 221–24, however, notes the “estraniarsi di Dicearco . . . dal Occidente”: Drachmann 1912; Wehrli 1944, fr. 31.

\textsuperscript{54} For the Letter of Dicaearchus to Aristoxenus, fr. 70 Wehrli 1944.

\textsuperscript{55} For the Mamertini, Frederiksen 1984, 221–25; for Italians in Sicily in general, a useful survey in Tusa Cutroni 1970.
foreshadowed the eighteenth-century eclipse of their island's culture, and Dicaearchus does not seem to have been a stranger to the impact that non-Hellenic influence had had on the Greeks of Sicily. He is the author, perhaps, in the *Bios Hellados* as well as in the life of Alkaios, for which it is specifically attested, of the fullest statement of the Sikel origin of that strange Greek sympotic diversion *kottabos*, the playing of which came to be general where *krateres* were filled and *skyphoi* dipped (Fr. 94–95 Wehrli). And it was he who preserved the interesting datum for the history of the West that the rhapsode Kleomenes read aloud the *Katharmoi* of Empedocles at the Olympic Festival (Fr. 87 Wehrli).

There is also reason to think that Dicaearchus played an important part in theorizing the historicity of the age of Cronos (Bodei Giglioni 1986). It seems likely that this was for him part of the account of the decline from original felicity. Euhemerus of Messene, on the other hand, at almost the same period, in his rationalizing *Hieros Logos*, developed the narrative of Cronos and Zeus as a quasi-historical narrative. Euhemerus is a Hellenistic thinker whose thought was rapidly assimilated at Rome in the period of the second Punic War: by the time of Ennius, the west, and Latium in particular, was made to play an important part in the Cronos-Zeus narrative. In fact, cultic and, no doubt, therefore exegetical interest in Cronos/Saturn and Zeus/Jupiter is much older. The Temple of Saturn at Rome is, after all, certainly an adjunct of the Capitoline cult and certainly a construction of the beginning of the fifth century; and the association may perhaps be traced back further to Olympia in the sixth century.\(^{56}\) Reflections on the primitive state of society and the nature of change are therefore inherent in Roman religion, both in this specific context and because they are inevitable by-products of a system that proclaims itself traditional and conservative. There is no reason to deny the participation of Rome in the age of Appius Claudius the Blind in the currents of thought that are represented for us by what we know of Euhemerus and Dicaearchus. The older style of argument that gave single authors determining roles in the development of culture is inherently implausible. A Heracleides Ponticus, a Dicaearchus, a Timaeus, or a Euhemerus tracks and traces cultural patterns skeined between Greek, Roman, Carthaginian, and Italic communities.\(^{57}\) Their oeuvres offer narrow windows on a vastly complex

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\(^{56}\) I hope to return to this theme in a future work on the history of the Capitoline cult.

\(^{57}\) For Timaeus and his milieu, Momigliano 1977b. Poseidonius is a later example of the way of thinking; see F 59, on the generalized austerity of Romans of the past (“even in
cultural world. Even if they were not so fragmentary, they would never give us the key to understanding the whole problem any more than Virgil or Horace can in themselves and taken singly offer the key to understanding Augustan Rome, a period whose cultural history is, all would agree, infinitely better known.

So it does not seem to me at all implausible to suppose that at least the Romans who fought and farmed in the Italian peninsula and its purlieus, persuaders and predators of their neighbours, in the last third of the fourth century, shared horizons and perceptions with the mentors and pupils of Dicaearchus and his congener. We may enumerate briskly what some of these may have been.

They will certainly have approved of the economic rather than social analysis, the admiration for the active rather than the contemplative life, both of which distinguish Dicaearchus from the school of Aristotle. There is no reason to think that Romans only began to construct themselves as *pragmatikoi andres* after the reception of Hellenistic literary culture. Dicaearchus’ notably philo-Laconian tendencies (his *Constitution of Sparta* was read publicly every year while the Spartan system lasted) are also an interesting strand in the reception of Sparta, which undoubtedly became important at some point in Roman cultural history. In particular, he seems to have been one of those who first recognized and praised the mixed constitution, yet another idea that the Romans were to make their own. As an admirer of Pythagoras, he appealed to earlier generations of Roman Pythagoreans than Varro’s. There are connections yet to be traced between Greek and Roman thought that will one day elucidate how number, measurement, and new conceptions of space developed as they did in the age of the first Roman roads and the first centuriated landscapes. Finally, as a traditionalist, a *laudator temporis acti*, an exponent of ethical and historical nostalgia, Dicaearchus is among the authors whose ideas resonate in Roman thinking already in the time of Fabius and Cincius, become prominent in Cato, and are never subsequently lost. He was relatively uninterested in the Hellenistic kingdoms, which the Romans also rapidly came to affect to despise. Dicaearchus also had the interesting notion that the first property

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our times well-off people make their sons drink mainly water and eat whatever is available”), and F 277b E–K, on ethnographic foodways.


had been animals, not land. Curiously, for the people whose law of property has been the foundation of all the forms of that dubious institution with which we are familiar, the Romans also had a prominent place, as is well known, for *pecus* in their narratives of early institutions.60 Like Plato, finally, and many later Roman writers, he was an advocate of the terrestrial world in contrast to the corruption to which the sea was prone.61

Dicaearchus’ conceptions, related as they are to universalizing history, united philosophical, historical, and geographical enquiry, and this can be observed both in the *Bios Hellados* and in the fragments of his geographical work (cf. Clarke 1999, 39–45). In the latter there is a noteworthy economic element, and it is indeed arguable that it was an essentially economic vision that underlay the development of geographical, as opposed to cosmographical, notions during the fifth and fourth centuries (Horden and Purcell 2000, chap. 1).62 In this area, too, Dicaearchus illuminates Rome with a double radiance: his work certainly shaped Varro’s influential presentation in the last years of the republic, but its ideas and preoccupations had been those of the Romans themselves, Varro’s subject, since the time when the *Bios Hellados* was composed.

**CONCLUSION**

The recognition that discussion of *tropoi* in human society is essentially economic underlies the modelling of dietary change as we have witnessed it in the few examples presented in this paper. Underlying all the bewildering variety of contrasts and comparisons between cultures and times, the basic issue at stake is this: commercialized or not?

The Romans came to think of themselves as locked into a special relationship with the economies of Magna Graecia, articulated ever more strongly after 338 by the Roman presence on the doorstep of Greek Italy, in Campania. The cities of the Greek West—and Sybaris in particu-

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60 As Bodei Giglioni 1986 notes, against the view of Fustel that has reinforced the general belief in the primacy of landed property.

61 On all these things, Bodei Giglioni 1986 is eloquent. For Roman antipathy to the sea, Purcell 1995; and on “the sea which teaches corruption,” Horden and Purcell 2000, chap. 1.

62 Dicaearchus was involved in a project sponsored by Lysimachus for measuring the heights of Peloponnesian mountains, which for Bodei Giglioni 1986, 631, is how he got first-hand information about primitive conditions.
lar—had a special place in the history of *truphe* and its antidotes, and Pythagoras is known as one of the strongest-minded philosophical dieticians of antiquity.\(^63\) The specialized science of eating was a largely western invention, as Athenaeus demonstrates to the full (Dalby 1995). And the Sicilian theme enables us, compels us, to recall the vital place in the cultural history of the western Mediterranean occupied by another only tangentially Greek state, Carthage. It is a striking fact that the great work on agriculture by Mago the Carthaginian, translated after 146 B.C.E., began with a moral precept that is totally at home in Roman thought. Mago’s work presupposes a debate about the relationship between urban and rural society, and between political and economic activities, production, and consumption, characteristic of the Hellenic tradition but clearly just as relevant to the Punic context of—at the latest—the early second century (since we know that cash-crop agriculture was prominent in the chora of Carthage as early as the time of Agathocles’ expedition at the end of the fourth century).\(^64\) The use of low prices to evoke a happier phase in ethical/economic history that we observed in the section “Comestible Historiography” (above) finds an eloquent parallel in the tradition in which Polybius used prices to illustrate prosperity in Cisalpine Gaul or in Lusitania (Polybius 2.15.1; 34.8.4).

Although the later Roman master-narrative was compelled to postpone serious moral decline to the second century, and although that age did indeed, with the conquest of the Mediterranean, bring altogether new challenges to Roman culture and society, the problem of *truphe* and its economic foundations was much older, and so was its accompaniment, real *aporia* about whether wide horizons and lively exchanges of peoples and things are good or bad, as we see it so painfully displayed in the elder Pliny. As we have already seen, he indicts *avaritia* as a major cause of human misery. His linking *avaritia* with trade and economic life does not quite take the positive shine off those things. But he has the impossible task of charting innovation and obsolescence: “for who does not think that the enhancing of global communications that results from the majesty of the Roman empire has been a good thing for human existence, with commercial exchange of goods, and the common society of a happy peace, and that everything that may have been hidden before has now


\(^64\) Diodorus 20.8; cf. 16.83.1–2, on the revival of commercial agriculture in Timoleon’s Sicily.
become commonly available everywhere?” This is one of his most ringing claims for the achievements of his own times. But this remains an age when the only skills fostered are those of avaritia: continuous cultural change, for which he wields some remarkable phrases, e.g., alii subiere ritus, “other modes of behaviour have emerged”; circa alia hominum mentes detinentur, “people’s minds have been distracted by other things.” This continuous change inevitably obliterated a millenium of good practices in agriculture, which is summed up as publicae causae mundi (the universal operation of change in society). Cultural history is annexed to the study of the world, nomos to physis, which is of course the central paradox of the naturalis historia, that oxymoronic genre. It was the vita-thinking of Dicaearchus and his successors that provided the model and the language for this treatment of cultural history, and that is why food and its production loom so large in both.

In this anxiety, a prominent and realistic theme is political. The theme of the populus Romanus, nicely foregrounded by Varro in his adaptation of Dicaearchus’ title, is not new in that period either. Indeed, the politics of popular maintenance and the management of community foodways are a central feature of the polis, already visible in the archaic period (Ampolo 1986). It is time that the annona were looked at from an ideological point of view as a food-system, since the debate about the annona must reflect perceptions of what the population of Rome could be eating and should be eating. Our subject matter is not quaintly antiquarian, but normative, in that it cannot fail to be used in defending or challenging public alimentary policy. For Gowers (1993, 17), the Roman meal (of the literary centre of gravity at which she works) itself recapitulates the history of Roman food, and though she sees this as essentially a

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65 Pliny, HN 14.2-4: illud satis miri non quo, interisse quarundam memoriam atque etiam nomen quae auctores prodidere notitiam. quis enim non communicato orb terrarum maiestate Romani imperii profecisse vitam putet commercio rerum ac societate festae pacis omniaque, etiam quae ante occulta fuerant, in promiscuo usu facta? at Hercule non repeririuntur qui norint multa ab antiquis prodicta. tanto priscorum cura fertilior aut industria felicior fuit, ante milia annorum inter principia litterarum Hesiodo praecepta agricolis pandere orso subsecutisque non paucis hanc curam eius, unde nobis crevit labor, quippe cum requirenda sint non solum postea inventa, verum etiam ea quae invenerant prisci, desidia rerum intersecione memoriae indicta. cuius vitii causas quis aliam quam publicas mundi invenerit? nimimum alii subiere ritus circaque alia mentes hominum detinentur et avaritiae tantum artes coluntur. antea inclusis gentium imperiis intra ipsas adeoque et ingenii, quadam sterilitate fortunae necesse est animi bona exercere, regesque innumeris honore artium colebantur et in ostentatione has praeferebant opes, inmortalitatem sibi per illas prorogari arbitrantes, qua re abundabant et praemia et opera vitae.
matter of a polarity between simplicity and luxury, the observation works well also for more complex narratives of nutritional change.

The eventual climax—which Pliny would have hated, though he could scarcely have been surprised by it—is Athenaeus’ ahistorical panorama in which books are people and the world, summed up in Rome, a library, which served to express the indiscriminate totality of all food practices anywhere, ever (Too 2000; Webb 2000). Rome, whose food-supply managers can now claim that their business is with “the human stomach,” has been dissolved into the cultural continuum of the whole world of letters, but there is still no more expressive way of displaying that continuum than in an encyclopaedic discussion of food.66

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