

BOOK REVIEW

Food, Identity and Cross-Cultural Exchange in the Ancient World. Edited by WIM BROEKAERT, ROBIN NADEAU, and JOHN WILKINS. Bruxelles: Éditions Latomus, 2016. Pp. 119. Paper. ISBN 978-90-429-3304-0.

If, as the saying goes, “you are what you eat,” then the cuisines of Greece and Rome led the way in shaping the cultural diversity of the ancient world. In antiquity just as today, producing and eating foreign foods shaped both self-perceptions and perceptions of others. The subjects of identity formation and cross-cultural exchange have generated enormous discussion over the last decades, and, as the editors of this slim collection persuasively argue, food should play an important role in these ongoing debates.

A brief introduction outlines the volume’s approach, situating itself squarely within current thinking. The editors, drawing partly on the work of Michel Espagne and Michael Werner,¹ focus on the role of foreign foods within societies that adopted them, especially re-interpretations of foreign customs and how such adoptions were justified. This orientation aligns the volume with much recent work that rejects concepts such as “Romanization” and the passive reception of foreign culture that this implies, in favor of restoring agency to societies that adopt and adapt exogenous cultural elements.² Similarly, starting from a now-standard approach that sees identity as a socially constructed and dynamic process, the editors argue that the incorporation of foreign foodstuffs into the diet was often used actively to construct or project social identities of many kinds.³ The editors thus sketch (and critique) some existing definitions and theories of identity and cross-cultural exchange and suggest how consideration of food can add to them. At only six pages, the introduction raises many interesting questions but does not fully pursue them.

¹ Michel Espagne and Michael Werner (eds.), *Transferts: Relations interculturelles dans l'espace franco-allemand (XVIII^e-XIX^e siècle)* (Paris 1988). The question of whether a theory developed to describe the modern world can be applied to antiquity is not addressed.

² E.g. Greg Woolf, *Becoming Roman* (Cambridge 1998); David J. Mattingly, *Imperialism, Power, and Identity* (Princeton 2012).

³ Surprisingly, the work of Jonathan Hall is missing.

The substantial promise of this topic continues to be delivered unevenly throughout the collection. The seven contributions (six English and one French) tackle these subjects from various angles: some focus on perceptions of identity and alterity, while others concentrate primarily on cultural exchange. Since lack of space prevents me from addressing each article in full, I will concentrate on four that exemplify the sorts of questions posed by the volume as well as its strengths and weaknesses.

Laure Passet's contribution stands out in confronting directly the questions posed in the introduction regarding the reception and re-interpretation of foreign food customs in a new cultural context. She traces a series of sumptuary laws that restricted foreign foods in Rome in the second century BCE, revealing a change in perceptions over that span: such laws began as a mode of establishing Roman identity, then regulated serving exotic foods as a prestige act, and finally judged imported vegetable (but not animal) products to be compatible with the norms of Roman life.

Robin Nadeau focuses on the perception of certain foods as foreign, arguing that the term "Persian bird," used especially by Aristophanes for the chicken, does not reflect its actual origin but rather serves as a cultural marker referencing perceived shared features between roosters and the Persian king, particularly visual appearance (the rooster's crest and the Persian royal headdress) and violent tendencies (cockfighting). The argument is interesting and persuasive. Particularly intriguing is the fact that all citations of the trope come from comedy; I would have welcomed further analysis of how this might affect his reading, as well as how the Persian comparison affected perceptions of actually consuming chicken.

By contrast, Scott Gallimore's interest is in external perceptions of identity: how Cretan wine exports in the imperial period shaped ideas about the island. Crete's distinctive amphorae were widely distributed and easily recognizable, but literary sources suggest that Cretan wine was considered mediocre; Gallimore suggests that the wine was used for medicinal purposes, thereby capitalizing on Crete's reputation as a medical center. His analysis does make me wonder to what extent Crete counts as "foreign" within the Roman Empire. A discussion of definitions would also help clarify how Gallimore's conception of identity differs from that of other contributors.

Finally, in one of the most successful articles, Wim Broekaert examines the consumption of fish sauces imported from the Mediterranean by soldiers stationed on the *limes* in Germany. Originally these soldiers retained a diet familiar from their Italian origins; later, troops recruited from Northern Europe continued

to eat the same diet (now foreign to their birth cultures). Broekaert attributes this to the development of a communal identity as Roman soldiers; a change of diet at enlistment articulated this new identity.

The collection as a whole succeeds in illustrating the complex intersection of foreign food and cultural identity. The editors suggest that “a Frenchman eating in an American fast-food chain in Paris is no less French than his neighbor eating his camembert; an American drinking coke is no more American than his neighbor drinking a bottle of Bordeaux” (9). Not all French or Americans would agree with this statement (surely the controversy over “freedom fries” is not forgotten), but it is a clear and salutary reminder of the continuing relevance of the volume’s theme. However, while the articles will be of interest to scholars specializing in these areas, many of them are too short to be very substantive. Further work, including a larger and fuller discussion of food, identity, and cross-cultural exchange, would be welcome.

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