

BOOK REVIEW

Food and Drink in Antiquity: Readings from the Greco-Roman World, a Sourcebook. Edited by JOHN F. DONAHUE. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015. Pp. x + 299. Paper, \$33.95. ISBN 978-1-4411-3345-8.

Teachers of undergraduate courses in ancient civilization confront the same problem every semester: how to make students understand their common human connection with the Romans and Greeks and the continuing importance of both civilizations for our modern age. Students can have a hard time sympathizing with conquering generals and stirring orators—especially in our own age of unfortunately debased political discourse—but students may find the Romans and Greeks more relatable through a focus on daily life and social issues.

Here the common human need for food and drink, and the society with others that often accompanies such a need, is a good place to begin. Bloomsbury's Sources in Ancient History now includes a book of 340 translated passages on food and drink from Greek and Roman sources. The editor John Donahue makes clear in the introduction that he does not intend "to offer a comprehensive treatment of ancient food and drink" (1) but to gather representative extracts, place them in their proper context, and encourage student readers "to make their own syntheses and draw their own conclusions from the material assembled" (1–2).

The majority of the excerpts are from literature, but Donahue by no means neglects law codes, inscriptions, magical papyri, and other archaeological evidence. In addition, each chapter ends with a page or two of suggestions for further readings. All the authors whose excerpts are included in this work are listed with brief biographical entries at the back of the book, along with bibliographical information for the inscriptions and fragments, papyri, and legal sources cited. However, there is no comprehensive list of citations for each author and work.

The second chapter ("Eating, Drinking, and Reading: Food and Drink in Ancient Literature") serves as an introduction to the work as a whole and to the major authors that appear throughout it. Here Donahue organizes his extracts "around many of the traditional literary genres that the reader would expect to

find in works such as the *Cambridge History of Classical Literature* and in the more recent Oxford and Blackwell handbooks,” i.e. epic, lyric poetry, comedy, tragedy, satire, historiography, letter writing, fables and the novel, philosophy (“food for thought”), and specialized literature (farming manuals and cookbooks). Donahue is careful to keep a good balance between Roman and Greek authors in each section, e.g. Homer with Vergil, Aristophanes with Plautus, but he is also careful to emphasize that food and drink, despite their importance in ancient life, were not often considered worthy of sustained literary attention because of their ephemeral and common nature. This further justifies the need for his source-book and its collection of extracts.

The third chapter focuses on the “Mediterranean Triad”, i.e. grain, grapes, and olives, as well as the other major food groups that the ancients consumed, e.g. meat, fish, honey, etc. Even experienced Classicists will find much valuable information here, esp. with regard to grain: Donahue treats each major type of grain in turn—wheat, barley, emmer, millet, spelt, rye, and oats—with an emphasis on how their use varied according to social group. He provides much detail, but some pictures or diagrams of the different varieties would have been helpful: I cannot tell the difference between millet and wheat, but I am sure I am not alone among Classicists (or modern city-dwellers) in that. Again, Donahue presents excerpts from many different sources, but I was surprised to see no reference to the myth of Anius and his daughters the Oenotrophae—Spermo (Grain), Oeno (Wine), and Elais (Oil)—whose powers of foodstuff production Agamemnon coveted for Greek use at Troy.

The rest of the chapters deal in turn with food and drink in different aspects of ancient society. The fourth chapter covers their role in religious ceremonies, both public and private, and it also includes sections on Jews and Christians. The fifth chapter focuses on the social context of food and drink, especially the problem of luxury in ancient society and the pervasive cultural institution of the *symposion*. Apart from the usual entertaining passages about impossibly extravagant banquets held by dynasts and emperors, Donahue devotes sections to *parasitoi*, the presence (or absence) of women at feasts, and public houses among other matters. The chapter ends with a special section on Sparta and the special role of the *syssition* there.

The sixth chapter covers food and drink in the military and focuses for the most part on the soldier’s diet and the perils of luxury for the *disciplina militaris*. There are, however, interesting selections from Aeneas Tacticus on the use of foodstuffs to conceal arms and messages (225). The seventh chapter highlights

the importance of diet and food in ancient medicine; a third of it is devoted to ancient views on drunkenness and alcoholism.

Apart from a few scattered misspellings the book is generally free of errors. The famous passage on the importation of luxury into Rome (Livy 39.6.7–9) appears twice (30, 168). Also, Donahue attributes excerpt 6.14 (214) to the deeds of Caracalla, but it comes from *Life of Septimius Severus* 16 in the *Augustan History* and actually describes his father Severus' campaign against Parthia in 198 CE. Overall, given its low cost and the wide span of the excerpts Donahue makes, along with his running commentary, this book would be a useful addition to any undergraduate civilization course.

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