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## **Women, Children and Food**

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### **Introduction**

Asking about women, children and food in the Roman world means tackling an enormous research question. Indeed in most cultures, age and gender seem to have been key concepts to understand quite diverse issues concerning eating and drinking. Access to food (and consequently possible undernourishment, malnutrition or bad health) immediately comes to mind. Especially in the case of women and children such access often relates to ideas about upbringing and education, to religious and/or social taboos, to ethnicity, to social class, or to the urban or rural environment in which people lived. Indeed, food entitlement and deprivation are much more determined by socio-cultural factors than by mere economic categories.<sup>1</sup>

Taking into account that the Roman Empire was a multi-cultural empire *par excellence* with a population of approximately sixty million people at its height spread over a territory going from present day Britain to Iraq, and considering the important shift towards monotheism this empire witnessed from the fourth century on, it is clear that a comprehensive survey on food, women and children is an impossible task in the framework of one chapter. I will thus necessarily confine myself to painting with broad strokes, dealing with issues which must have been vital and relevant to most of the women and children in this vast area over a period of roughly five centuries.

I will first highlight the material conditions which made food a major concern for most of the population - a worry of the *longue durée*. After that, the nuclear family unit will be described as the place where and through which food was both acquired and distributed. This often required choices for which age categories and gender came in. Closely connected to this question is the socialising role of food and eating habits in the family: who was supposed to eat together with whom and from what age onwards? How were family members expected to behave at table, and in relation to visitors? Specific age or gender related food will be treated in the following section, dealing with topics such as milk, weaning and the feeding of babies, but also with the consumption of alcohol and topoi on children's preferences for sweets and cakes. The last section deals with the role of the state in taking care of children in need for food. Though in this chapter I will fully integrate the results of archaeological, osteological and demographic research, my focus will be on literary authors who may be expected to broadly reflect attitudes of the Graeco-Roman elite, and who were read and commented upon over centuries. Comparative and cross-cultural evidence from Jewish, Christian and Islamic sources will be adduced now and then, though other chapters in this volume will serve these more specific aims.

As a final introductory remark, it should be said that the standard surveys on women, children and youth in the Roman Empire only briefly mention the issue of regime and food. It is therefore to be hoped that this contribution will contribute to further research into a topic which is vital in more than one way.

### **A History of Shortage and Struggling for Daily Bread**

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus goes deeply into the issue of worry about material provisions. He tells his followers not to be anxious about food, but to rely on God. Even the birds, who are worth far less than people, are fully provided for.

See the birds of the sky, that they don't sow, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns. Your heavenly Father feeds them. Aren't you of much more value than they?

(Matthew 6: 26; transl. World English Bible)

This verse has been much debated, but the overall meaning seems clear. Birds do not have the ability to do farming, to store food, or to plan for the future. Despite the greater burden they have, they are not anxious about the future.<sup>2</sup> By emphasising the sorrows about having enough to eat and securing access to food, Jesus undoubtedly struck a familiar chord with much of his audience, for whom this search was indeed a daily burden and struggle (cf. "give us our daily bread" in the Lord's Prayer). Also in the Old Testament, plenty of references are found to the daily trouble of securing food and income for the family.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast to Jesus, most Graeco-Roman elite writers were not at all concerned about the matter, though tellingly Galen acknowledges the enormous gap between eating habits of the persons mostly addressed in medical treatises, and the common people who were forced to eat almost anything available out of bare necessity.<sup>4</sup> Much more than literary snapshots, comparative historical evidence makes clear what such need for food could actually mean.

Earlier research had a tendency to offer a pessimistic view of the matter for much of the pre-industrial population. According to some estimates, before the French Revolution, about 20% of the French population were unable to work full days, due to the lack of sufficient proteins and calories.<sup>5</sup> There is, however, debate about these issues. While we may reject Geoffrey

Kron's views on the ancient population as being the most well-nourished of all pre-modern societies as too optimistic, the historic truth probably lies somewhere between the two extremes. In particular Kristina Killgrove has offered a more balanced view and warned against the methodological shortcomings that distort the outcome of part of earlier research.<sup>6</sup> Still, the circumstances causing at least a part of the male adult population and the ever impending danger of shortage of food are basic facts to be taken into account when dealing with the ancient world.

Osteological finds throughout the Empire again and again testify to scurvy and rickets, the former caused by vitamin C deficiency, the latter by vitamin D deficiency. Porotic hyperostosis and cribra orbitalia might be linked to iron deficiency and consequent anemia. Also hypoplasia of the teeth occurs. These pathologies are found with both adults and children, and often go back to malnutrition in early childhood years. Soranus of Ephesus already remarked the high frequency of malformation of the bones with children in the City of Rome (*Gyn.* 2.16 - possibly referring to rickets). Though his explanation (Roman mothers cared less for their children than their Greek counterparts) is remarkable to say the least, his observation remains interesting, as it probably refers to vitamin C deficient feeding habits in urban milieus and the consequences for children. And yet these women and children were often forced to take part in the labour process, since many adult men simply could only participate in an insufficient way.<sup>7</sup>

Early modern figures on consumption patterns in European cities indicate that about half to three-quarters of the income of the common people were spent on costs for daily sustenance.<sup>8</sup> Again, we can imagine urban families in Antiquity depending on income to secure their

livelihood and engaging both women and children to somehow secure their uncertain existence.

Also evidence from present day World Health Organisation statistics on bodily appearance and the Body Mass Index may add to the picture. One can safely assume that the ancient world came closer to countries such as India, Pakistan and Ethiopia (with over 30 % of underweight males, that is  $\leq 18.5$  BMI; and about 15 % of moderate and severe thinness, namely  $\leq 17$  BM for females and 13 % for males for the first two countries) than to Western societies. In comparison, the underweight category for the United States only amounts to 2.4 %.<sup>9</sup> It is thus safe to assume that, with present-day western standards in mind, the presence of thin or even extremely thin women and children was an every-day occurrence in the ancient world. The somewhat corpulent and fleshy little children we find in art from the Hellenistic period onwards might point to opulence and a certain wealth, but they surely were not representations of everyday reality for the majority of the population.<sup>10</sup>

Admittedly, representing the Roman Empire as an environment with a considerable proportion of undernourished women and children, who were at the same time involved in the labour process, might strike the connoisseur of classic literature as odd or somewhat exaggerated. But nineteenth-century doctors, who for the first time performed state regulated medical examinations in primary schools in the countryside or with children belonging to the labourers' class in France or other countries in western Europe discovered very much the same pattern.<sup>11</sup> And surely, all this does not imply a simplified dichotomy of rich versus poor in Roman society, not least because new analysis suggest a broader distribution of wealth across Roman society and therefore supports the hypothesis of the existence of 'middling' classes and of 'the poor', the latter constituting perhaps half of the population.<sup>12</sup> By modern standards, most people indeed lived a life of risk and survival, vexed by uncertainties such as famine

caused by bad harvest or decreased income; this was very much the common fate of many women and children. Moreover, the situation could affect them more than others. The birth of yet another hungry mouth to feed could lead parents to the act of exposure or infanticide, perhaps even more so in the case of girls for whom a dowry had to be paid in the case of marriage. Due to the perils of giving birth frequently, combined with marriage at an early age and the pressure of performing corporal labour, women could indeed well turn out to be the weaker sex. In a way, the stereotypical image of the ancient medical writers became self-fulfilling.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Family Unit as the Place to Get Food**

For families of certain affluence, it was the wife in charge and/or the slave personnel who provided the family with the basic fare on a daily basis. For special occasions, a professional cook - usually a slave or a freedman - could be hired.<sup>14</sup> Theoretical works by Roman authors on the management of large country estates (*latifundia*) and legal sources testify to a role pattern which ascribes the tasks of preparing and administering food to women and children. Their remarks also apply to large households in the towns. Boys before the age of puberty are mentioned as the ideal kitchen help for women. Women and children belonged to the *instrumentum instrumenti*: staff responsible for the feeding, clothing and accommodation of the farmworkers and labour slaves who belonged to the *instrumentum*. Their typical tasks were bread baking and maintenance of the *villa*; typical professions that of kitchen maid, female weaver and cook.<sup>15</sup> In such large *familiae* there was no daily concern about having enough to eat – except perhaps for the slaves. Cato the Censor put his slaves on a special ration when they were ill, and it belonged to the power of the master to punish slaves with famine.<sup>16</sup>

For the largest part of the population, the daily search for food happened in the context of the family.

Due to the scarcity of the sources, we often tend to regard the peasantry in the Roman Empire as a uniform and undifferentiated class. The opposite was true: there were prosperous farmers who had close social ties with their poorer neighbours, who in turn could assist them whenever needed. Most of the peasants lived in family units. Anthropologically, in agricultural environments the responsibility of preparing the food and household chores has been a task for women and children in most cultures.<sup>17</sup> The few literary sources we have depict the countryside as a rustic idyll and confirm this role pattern. Thus, the famous poor farmer in pseudo-Virgil's *Moretum* lived together with his black African servant in a dwelling with a heap of grain on the floor. She is said to be his "solitary housekeeper", as he summons her to lay upon the hearth some logs to feed the fire, and to boil some chilly water on the flame, while he continues to transfer the copious meal from the hearth into a sieve and shakes it. Pliny the Elder claims that since there were no bakers in Rome before the year 174 BC, women took care of baking the bread, "as it still is nowadays with many people". A similar idealised picture turns up with Juvenal, who reflects on the golden days of the Roman agrarian past. He describes a farmer going to work on the land and returning home in the evening, together with his elder sons. He is awaited by his wife, who took care of the household tasks and of the food, and by four children who are glad to join him at the table.<sup>18</sup> The most telling evidence comes from the story of the simple hunters in the wilds of Euboea, a discourse by Dio Chrysostom -- a typical rhetorical piece of art proving the preferability of sober poverty above decadent wealth. Here, Dio describes the lives of two farmers, each one married to a sister of the other (*Or.* 7.10). Their fathers had been hired herdsmen, tending the

cattle of a wealthy man. When the latter fell in disgrace, his stock was butchered and his land left alone. The herdsmen decided to stay in the place, and made their living by cultivating the land on the plots around their huts, and by hunting. They married their sons to wives, each giving his own daughter. Both men had died in old age, keeping their strong and vigorous bodies till the end (*Or.* 7.11-20). Now, both sons had children, sons and daughters. They lived in two pretty huts, and had a third one where the grain and the pelt were kept. There they surely managed to live in reasonable conditions: among their possessions were four deer pelts, smoked sides of bacon and venison, portions of wheat and barley. They maintained twenty-two vines producing fine-quality wine. Among their cattle were eight she-goats, and a cow with a calf. Also, they possessed some utensils (*Or.* 7.43-47). One daughter was married to a rich man living in a village, who got game, fruit and vegetables from them, while he in return helped them by borrowing wheat for seed (*Or.* 7.68). This is very much the kind of reciprocity by which peasants have been known to secure their lives in many cultures. When they received guests, a daughter of marriageable age served the food and poured the wine, and the boys prepared the meat and passed it around. Another youth already seems to be a good hunter, since he brought in a hare (*Or.* 7.67).

One wonders whether a similar role pattern existed with families of modest means in the cities. Archaeologists have recognised kitchens in various places throughout the Roman Empire, but they all belong to houses which show some affluence. Most inhabitants of apartments (*insulae*) would eat their meals cooked on braziers set up in the *medianum*, a corridor hall facing out onto a street or courtyard. Surely the cramped living space of the majority of the city population did not allow for any kitchen space. For a hot meal, standing at one of the many open bars with hearth was the only option – not really a closed familial occasion.<sup>19</sup> Again, Dio Chrysostom hits the nail on the head when saying that contrary to the

countryside in the city everything had to be paid for, except for the water in the basins (*Or.* 7.105-106). Surely, very few families would have the luxury of possessing a small city garden where they could raise some crop.<sup>20</sup> As an alternative, families might go out fishing when the city was situated next to a river. However, due to the presence of sewers, waste and excrements, fishes from the streams of bigger cities were notoriously inferior in quality.<sup>21</sup> We can also imagine mothers doing their utmost to secure some food or income for their family, as did the fathers who went out working. When grain was distributed, it was most likely women who went to the big bakery ovens to have it made into bread, as implied by Pliny the Elder (see footnote 18). Attending the market could have been a typical female business. At the Roman fruit and vegetable market, the Forum Olitorium, there was a column called *columna lactaria* where infants could be fed with milk. Should we imagine this as a place where exposed little babies were picked up by passers-by? Or was it rather a market where mothers went to in order to secure their families fruit and vegetables, as well as fresh milk for their little babies?<sup>22</sup>

However, crisis and hunger were an impending danger for most of the urban population. Poor harvest due to bad weather conditions might be an immediate reason for peasants to seek food and assistance in the towns. Of course, populous cities were themselves very dependent on food supply from the countryside and were subject to fluctuating prices of food. Ancient authors, surely but not exclusively in late Antiquity, have gone to great lengths to describe the horrors of famine and pestilence (which were of course closely related). In their gruesome depictions, the fate of women and children turns up again and again.<sup>23</sup> In telling detail, Ammianus Marcellinus reports on the anxiety of the prefect Tertullus and the population of Rome in the year 359, when the ships transporting grain could not reach the harbour due to bad weather. In ultimate despair, Tertullus showed his little children to the angry crowd,

suggesting that they sacrifice them if they thought that would resolve the situation. Ultimately, the crowd was deeply touched by his gesture, and decided to wait calmly for whatever the future would bring. When the winds finally lay down and the ships arrived, a crisis was overturned.<sup>24</sup> Other evidence comes to mind. A father had to decide which of his children to sell in order to secure some food for the others. Honourable ladies went into public markets to beg, constrained by want to throw away all shame and evidence of their formal liberal education. Some were eventually driven to suicide, like the father who leaped into the Tiber while his five hungry children witnessed his death.<sup>25</sup>

Peasant families could of course decide to stay in the countryside, but they were not always better off. Sheer necessity forced men in closed communities to put women and children to work on tasks which were normally meant to be performed by them. Established socio-cultural values and role patterns could be trampled on in such communities.<sup>26</sup> In the *Anthologia Palatina*, we read about an impoverished elderly lady called Nico who, together with her daughters, was forced to glean corn-ears in order to escape starvation. The heat was unbearable. She died in the baking sun and was subsequently cremated on a pyre. This is as far as the empathy of ancient authors for countrywomen goes: they were seen to be poor, to age quickly and not to be able to cope with the heat of the sun.<sup>27</sup>

### **Dining Habits and Socialisation of Women and Children**

It would be hard to deny the socialising effects of dining. The ancient writers were also very much aware that meals were occasions *par excellence* to focus on domesticity and family values. Needless to say, their remarks on it very much relate to the higher class, as we know so little about the ways a 'proper' meal was held in the cramped spaces of the urban

environment of the average city dweller, or in rural huts and houses. But also for the upper-class, one should be aware that the dinners and feasts mentioned in the texts were primarily public affairs. Just eating together with the family was not socially meaningful at all, and the rules and habits for it are thus not mentioned in the sources. In any case, Roman aristocrats limiting themselves to dinners within their own families would isolate themselves as much as those preferring the solitary meal or *cena solitaria*.<sup>28</sup>

That meals should be sober and frugal is an ideal much cherished by the Epicureans. One will remember Epicurus' insistence on the simple pleasure of having bread and water, at best combined with a piece of cheese. The ideal family dinner should be similar. Hence the Stoic philosopher Posidonius pictures fathers or mothers asking their son which fruit he would like to have for dinner. After his meal consisting of fruit and water, the satisfied boy would go to sleep.<sup>29</sup>

Dinners also served to distinguish Roman habits from other customs. Cornelius Nepos was very much aware of this:

There are numerous actions decent by our standards which are thought base by them (the Greeks). For what Roman is ashamed to take his wife to a dinner party? (...) This is all very different in Greece: she is only invited to dinners of the family.

Cornelius Nepos, praef. 7 (transl. K. Vössing)

Also, Roman society distinguished itself from Etruscan culture, which unabashedly permitted men and women to recline together on dinner couches, even when they were not a married couple.<sup>30</sup> So, Roman women were presented at dinner parties, be it invited or at their own homes. But they usually sat on chairs, and surely did not lie on the same couch with their husbands, although Scintilla and Fortunata famously did so in Petronius' *Satyricon* (67.5).

This of course testifies to the lack of class and manners of wealthy freedmen. Supposedly, reclining was seen as an unseemly position for women, though remarks by Valerius Maximus suggest that the custom had already changed in the first century AD.<sup>31</sup>

Also children were supposed to sit during dinner. Most probably, they were not meant to serve up dishes.<sup>32</sup> In the old fashion, children would sit beside their father on the lowest couch. In the first century, children and adolescents were seated at their own tables, where they had a banquet in which the rules were the same as those observed by the adult upper class.<sup>33</sup> There surely was an age of reclining, from which boys were allowed to fully participate and lie down at the banquets, but it is impossible to fix a precise age limit for this.<sup>34</sup> As to the presence of slave children hanging around the tables, serving and entertaining the guests with sometimes deliberately naughty behaviour, they added to the display of wealth and luxury that made the master and his guests happy. In this, a component of sexual entertainment was part of the picture, as was the animalisation of the slave boys concerned. After all, the citizens of luxurious Sybaris took delight only in Maltese puppy dogs, surely a worthy alternative.<sup>35</sup>

### **The Appropriate Food for the Right Gender and Age**

It was firmly rooted in ancient medical thought that the same food products were not fit for every single body. Humoural theory came in. Since babies were considered to be moist and hot, their food should be drying and cooling. Hot and dry young people should preferably receive cooling and moisturizing substances. And surely young women should get substances which refrained their sexual desire. Needless to say, these alimentary measures only applied to those who could afford the luxury of sticking to them.<sup>36</sup>

Both symbolically and in actual practice, milk was very much related to infants. According to medical writings, little children who were in need of strengthening were given a portion of ass' milk each day. Tepid milk with poppy juice was administered to little children before they went to bed. In Rome, offerings for infants were done next to the Ruminal fig tree. For such occasions, milk was used instead of wine to pour over the offerings.<sup>37</sup> For babies, mother's milk was in any case preferred. One wonders what happened on the occasion that an infant was not able to suck milk from the breast, a case reported by Caelius Aurelianus. In the life of Saint Theodorus, there is the remarkable instance of the father Erythrius who, after the death of the mother, fed the baby with wheat and barley porridge, by means of a feeding bottle made out of glass and having the shape of a female breast. Since the mother had died, he did not want to take the risk of hiring a nurse who by means of her milk could pass her pagan creeds and customs into the little child.<sup>38</sup> *There has been little research on artificial milk feeding in Antiquity, though both the archaeological and the iconographical record amply testify of this possibility.*<sup>39</sup> Surely in the Mediterranean regions, goat milk was much preferred over cow's milk. Due to storage issues in hot climates, yoghurt or cheese consumption prevailed over simple milk. Bioarchaeologists have linked porotic hyperostosis in children's and adults' bones in Greece with goat milk's anemia.<sup>40</sup>

There can be no doubt that the middle classes and the well-to-do preferred breastfeeding by a wet-nurse.<sup>41</sup> The insistence of some writers that it is much better to feed your child yourself actually proves that the opposite was common practice with their audience. Both the medical authors and the dossier of wet-nursing contracts preserved on papyri point to a rather extended period of breastfeeding, that is up to two or three years of age. Since prolonged breastfeeding is known to have contraceptive effects, there might be an important

demographic consequence of this. Women from the higher classes possibly got pregnant more often, since they mostly abstained from the practice of breastfeeding.<sup>42</sup>

An inquiry of 113 non-industrial populations has observed the age of 5-6 months as the most common age for weaning. First supplementary foods invariably took the form of cereal-based gruels or porridge. Weaning is a gradual process, and the cessation of breastfeeding occurred between two and five years of age. Quite unsurprisingly, ancient medical authors confirm the pattern. Galen proposed the eruption of the first teeth as the appropriate time for introducing first solid food, Soranus mentions a bodily firmness that could scarcely be achieved before the age of six months and proposes a gradually taking off from the breast from approximately two years of age on.<sup>43</sup> Regional variation must have been an important factor throughout the Roman Empire. Stable isotope analysis has been applied to some bioarchaeological investigations of sites from the Roman period. While Isola Sacra (first-third century) reveals weaning taking place over a short period and commencing at an age of ca. 1.5 years, contemporary evidence from the city of Rome shows subadults being still nursed into their second and third year. Sites from London and Queenford Farm show weaning occurring gradually over an extended period, with a complete cessation of breastfeeding at an age of circa three-four years. The same extended breastfeeding period appears in the Byzantine evidence.<sup>44</sup>

As for water, people were very much aware of the severe risks of pollution. The search for clean water is a constant concern up to early medieval hagiography.<sup>45</sup> In such situations, it does not come as a surprise that even little children were fed small quantities of wine. Galen was opposed to the administering of wine to children, but his mentioning of the practice seems to suggest that it was actually quite common. According to Aristotle, a two-year old child should be given lots of milk and little wine. Perhaps he referred to just a little drop of

wine, just to prevent contamination?<sup>46</sup> In the Iliad, centuries of generations of (young) readers encountered the significant detail that as a little kid Achilles, sitting on Phoenix's knees, used to spit the wine he was offered on the chiton of his educator (Il. 9.488-491). Also note in the same context that, in mediaeval times, children were given beer, because water was often polluted. It is very difficult to find evidence for this in Antiquity, though one papyrus text may refer to beer being bought for "the children".<sup>47</sup> Also, the low average height of Roman bars gave children the opportunity of attending them. Perhaps it was here that they gradually got accustomed to the do's and don'ts of consuming alcohol.<sup>48</sup>

Consumption of alcohol brings in other age and gender-related questions. While ancient writers, especially moralists, were keen to condemn excessive drinking as damaging to the social order (surely in the case of rulers lacking self-restraint), ancient society undoubtedly condoned inebriation on certain occasions, such as the Saturnalia, *convivia*, or victories. For the upper-classes, drinking was very much a matter of etiquette and social decorum. It was also learned behaviour that teenagers would acquire in their peer group of *iuvenes*. Among the lower classes, too, there seems to be sufficient source evidence for heavy drinking and the outrageous conduct caused by it.<sup>49</sup>

As regards women and wine, it was only conservative writers who stressed the golden age when decent *matronae* were not even allowed to drink, and a violation of the rules on sobriety (often connected with adultery) might even lead to their being put to death by their husbands.<sup>50</sup> Drunken women were a favourite theme for satirists (famously Juvenal, Sat. 6.300-301) and Hellenistic sculptors. However, the grave inscription of a man actually praising his deceased wife for the fact that she liked to have fun and drink wine tells another

story, as does all the information on the availability of wine and the possibility for women to enjoy it.<sup>51</sup>

Stereotypically, children were linked to cakes, sweets and sugary fruit. Cornelius Fronto mentions how his little grandson was absolutely fond of grapes, and he recalls himself as a child enjoying the same delights. The child with grapes is a favourite motive in Hellenistic art, and the image lasts till the fifth century depiction of Theodoret as a little child sitting on the knee of Peter the Galatian and enjoying bread and grapes.<sup>52</sup> Bioarchaeological investigations on teeth, however, do not demonstrate an overexposure of children to sweet substances and the consequences of it.<sup>53</sup>

Medical writers found that unmarried girls at the onset of menstruation were experiencing a troublesome period. They sometimes prescribed a strict regimen of diet. Rufus of Ephesus advised girls in puberty to moderate their intake of food, to avoid wine, and to spurn meat and other excessively nourishing food altogether.<sup>54</sup> Whether the emphasis on restraint in food and the cultural belief that young women must be given just what they needed led to ignoring the real nutritional needs of young women is a question not easily to be answered.<sup>55</sup>

In general, puberty was considered a crucial period for food for both males and females. After puberty some boys and girls who were previously thin put on weight and become healthier. By the discharge of sperm or menses, that which had been impeding their health and nutrition had been removed.<sup>56</sup>

Finally, the phase of youth needed special precautions. Overconsumption of seasonal fruit lead to severe liver problems for Galen at the age of nineteen years. At his father's advice, he

then decided to consume grapes and figs only in moderation and to abandon all other fruit. Though this text belongs to the tradition of the stubborn son first not listening to the father's advice but finally yielding, it informs us again of special food precautions related to age. At least Galen believed that others were helped by the same diet.<sup>57</sup>

### **Did the State Take Care of Hungry Children?**

After the quite worrying details on hungry children and the impending dangers of malnutrition, it may come as a relief to read that the Roman Empire actually had alimentation schemes for children (see Holleran in this volume). The Emperor's evergetism is proudly presented in inscriptions. At least 49 towns in Italy, with a heavy concentration on central Italy, testify of *alimenta* for free citizen children: allowances in the form of cash distributions which were needed for securing food. Also private endowments schemes are attested. We may imagine the children congregating each month in the forum of the town, accompanied by their parents. In silver *denarii* they would then accept their allowance, which varied between ten and sixteen *sestertii* (1 *denarius* = 4 *sestertii*). A total of 192 *sestertii* per annum was quite a sum, enabling them to buy approximately 400 kg. of wheat, the minimum subsistence being estimated at approximately 250 kg. of wheat.<sup>58</sup> Some inscriptions also mention age limits: fourteen years for boys and an unreadable age for girls in Florence (*CIL* 11.1602), three to fifteen years for boys and three to thirteen years for girls in Sicca Veneria in Africa Proconsularis (*CIL* 8.1641), sixteen years for boys and fourteen for girls in Tarracina (*CIL* 10.6328). A legal regulation defines eighteen years of age as the upper limit for boys and fourteen for girls, at the same time stressing that this is an unusually high limit which nevertheless had been settled as such only "for the sake of piety" (*tamen pietatis intuitu*) and only in the case of the *alimenta* (*Dig.* 34.1.14.1). In Tarracina, 200 children, equally divided

between boys and girls, were helped by the measure. Estimating the population of Tarracina in imperial times is an impossible task, but 8,000 inhabitants would be a rough educated guess. Taking into consideration the comparative demographic models, 2640 of them would be below age fifteen. About 2000 would belong to the category of being freeborn Roman citizens. The 200 who are helped were only a small part. What is more, as the *alimenta* were by no means a charitable institution, the well-off also had their children profit from the institution, by which children of the municipal aristocracy might confirm their dependence and loyalty towards their 'father', the emperor. In all, these *alimenta* were more beneficial symbols of the caring role of the emperor towards his citizens, who were somehow 'infantilised'.<sup>59</sup>

It is safe to assume that for the matter of charity and food, Christianity was a turning point (see Raga in this volume). Eusebius' testimony on the Christians' zeal and piety during the famine and pestilence which struck Palestine in the years 312-313 is a remarkable source for this. Here we notice a real difference between non-Christian evergetism and religiously-inspired charity. As the pestilence struck on every house and family, Christians were there to help day and night, taking care of the burial of the dead and the distributing of bread to all.<sup>60</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Readers acquainted with studies on food in modern and recent history will be struck by the absence of ego-documents in this chapter. For Antiquity, there are no interviews of adults who as children survived a period of famine, or women who testify of a profound interiorisation of societally imposed tasks, like Valeria in twentieth-century Florence who severely criticises women who went out with their husbands and did not spend all their time

on the education of their children. She herself proudly testified that she spared the food out of her own mouth just to be able to feed her children in a better way.<sup>61</sup> Apart from some letters on papyri, we do not hear ancient women or children making remarks on food (see Clarysse in this volume).

What we do have invariably stems from the male perspective. This evidence, combined with the broad comparative perspective, suggests that for socio-cultural reasons women who are in fact the stronger sex from a biological point of view were reduced to become indeed the weaker gender. Compared to present day Europe, Japan or the United States, which by law and regulations secure an even access to food, income and health care for men and women, life expectancy of women in Antiquity would have been shorter.<sup>62</sup> For children, the situation could have been even harsher, since biology already makes them weaker. One wonders how the situation of being both female and a child could have aggravated the situation. Ancient authors are mostly silent on this, though a remark in Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* testifies of a young woman who had strictly interiorised societal rules. By her own mother, she was taught to strictly observe and control her appetites, and undoubtedly she would have given the same pattern to her daughters (Xenophon, *Oec.* 7.5). This is the closest one gets to Florentine Valentina who spared the food out of her own mouth.

However, this rather negative picture should by no means give way to a gruesome image of a society which did not care about its hungry or deficient women and children. Not only did the upper-classes and at least a part of the middling classes mostly manage quite well, when times were good, we may also imagine peasants, slaves and even poorer city folk getting along reasonably well, though danger was always imminent. It was the task of the family unit, and preferably of both parents, to secure food for their offspring (as it was in the Jewish tradition,

see Kraemer in this volume). At least ideologically, there existed the image of the caring Emperor or municipal benefactor, who took care as a father by supplying fellow citizen children with food. Also, eating and dining served as important means for socialising and educating children. At least the medical writers showed concern about which food was appropriate for which age and gender.

Early Islam is surely a different tradition, but it also rose in the late Mediterranean world. When asked what was the greatest sin, Sahih al-Bukhari (9th century AD) replied that it consisted in ascribing divinity to someone other than Allah. The next sin, however, was to kill your child out of fear that it will share your food. Another saying states that no one earns his food better than the one who worked with his hands.<sup>63</sup> These are surely statements stemming from an agricultural environment – the kind of wisdom which for Graeco-Roman literature is mainly found in monks' sayings from late ancient Egypt. But undoubtedly, the large silent majority of people in the Roman Empire would have recognised itself in the second two sayings. As such, both care and concern co-existed with socio-cultural and economic conditions which were unfavourable to the non-adult male part of the populace.

There is no need for moralising judgement on the subject of food, women and children. All the more, there is need for careful consideration for the many different aspects which shaped the lives of people in the past, and the present.

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- <sup>1</sup> Sen, 1981.
- <sup>2</sup> See also Luke 12:23. Johnson, 2010 reads Jesus' words as a challenge to the traditional role pattern for women.
- <sup>3</sup> E.g. Job 7: 1-7 on the dayworker always concerned about his income; Ps. 58:7 wishing for enemies that they would wander around the town and suffer famine like dogs.
- <sup>4</sup> Galen, *De aliment. fac.* 1.2 (6.488-489 Kühn).
- <sup>5</sup> E.g. Fogel, 2004 and Clark, 2007. See Saller, 2012, 72 for the example of the French population.
- <sup>6</sup> Kron, 2005 and Killgrove, 2010.
- <sup>7</sup> Fox, 2012 offers an excellent overview about undernourishment, labour and the bioarchaeological evidence.
- <sup>8</sup> Erdkamp, 2012, 67.
- <sup>9</sup> World Health Organisation, Global Database on Body Mass Index [<http://apps.who.int/bmi/index.jsp>] (seen 9th of September 2014).
- <sup>10</sup> Backe-Dahmen, 2006.
- <sup>11</sup> Rollet, 2001, 187-218.
- <sup>12</sup> Scheidel, 2006 on poverty and middling classes; Mayer, 2012 on urban middle classes.
- <sup>13</sup> Hin, 2012, 135-139 for an overview of the problem of female infanticide and women as the weaker sex.
- <sup>14</sup> Aristotle, *Pol.* 1323a4 (wife or personnel); Curtis, 2012 (cook).
- <sup>15</sup> Columella, *RR* 12.4.3 (boys in kitchen); *Dig.* 33.7.12.5 (*instrumentum instrumenti*); *Dig.* 33.7.12.6 (typical tasks). See Saller, 2003, 200-201 for implications on the status of slave women.
- <sup>16</sup> Cato, *De agricult.* 2; Lactantius, *De ira Dei* 5.12.
- <sup>17</sup> Whittaker, 2003, 104.
- <sup>18</sup> Virgil, *Mor.* 31-46; Pliny the Elder, *NH* 18.107; Juvenal, *Sat.* 14.166-171. Note that from Severan times, bread was distributed, which implied more regular distributions and did not involve women going to bakeries
- <sup>19</sup> Curtis, 2012, 124-130.
- <sup>20</sup> Laes, 2015, 96 and 101.
- <sup>21</sup> Galen, *De alimentarium facultatibus* 3.19 (6.702 Kühn); 3.25 (6.709 Kühn); 3.30 (6.722 Kühn).
- <sup>22</sup> Festus, s.v. Lactaria (p. 118 ed. Mueller). The suggestion of market place for fresh milk occurs in Baudrillart 1900: 886.
- <sup>23</sup> Erdkamp, 1998, 2002 and 2012, 68-74.
- <sup>24</sup> *Amm. Marc.* 19.10.
- <sup>25</sup> Basil, *Hom. in illud Lucae destruam* 4 (PG 29.268-269) (father's decision); Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 9.8.1-15 (on honourable ladies during the famine in Palestine of 312-313); Procopius, *Bell Goth.* 7.17 (Tiber suicide in Rome during the sieges of 545 and 546).
- <sup>26</sup> Scheidel, 1995, 210-213 on the (too) high costs of having house slaves and the reversed role pattern in isolated communities.
- <sup>27</sup> *Anth. Pal.* 9, 89.
- <sup>28</sup> Vössing, 2012, 143-144. One may note the amazement of the fourteenth century traveller Ibn-Battuta when encountering the Samira people in the city of Djanani, who never eat with anyone, nor let themselves be observed while eating. See *The travels of Ibn-Battuta A.D. 1325-1354. Translated by H.A.R. Gibb* (Cambridge, 1999) vol. 3, p. 597.
- <sup>29</sup> Diogenes Laertius, *Vita Phil.* 10.11; Seneca, *Epist.* 18.9 (Epicurus); Athenaeus, *Deipn.* 6.275a (Posidonius).
- <sup>30</sup> Athenaeus, *Deipn.* 12.517d-f (Etruscans).
- <sup>31</sup> Varro in Isidorus of Sevilla, *Et.* 20.11.9; Valerius Maximus 2.1.2.
- <sup>32</sup> As is implied by Varro in Nonius Marcellus, *De comp. doct.* (ed. Lindsay) 229.15 (ed. Lindsay): *sic in privatis domibus pueri liberi et liberae ministrabant* (he explains why *puer* means both servant and child in Latin). The custom of higher class boys serving at official banquets is sometimes attested for the Middle Ages and the Modern Period.
- <sup>33</sup> Suetonius, *Aug.* 64.3; Tacitus, *Ann.* 13.16.1 (prince Britannicus is not yet with his father Claudius at the same table).
- <sup>34</sup> Booth, 1991; Bradley, 1998; Sigismund Nielsen, 1998; Vössing, 2012, 138-143. Bradley, 1998, 46-47 has collected the few passages referring to children sitting at their own tables during banquets. Apart from the ones cited in footnote 31, these include Suetonius, *Claud.* 32 and Clement of Alexandria, *Protr.* 2.54.3.
- <sup>35</sup> Athenaeus, *Deipn.* 12.1519 on which see Vössing 2012: 141. On slave boys at banquets, see D'Arms, 1991, Pollini, 2003.
- <sup>36</sup> Nadeau, 2012, 149-151.
- <sup>37</sup> Pliny the Elder, *NH* 28.33 (ass milk); Ovid, *Fast.* 4.347; Plutarch, *Quaest. Rom.* 57 (Ruminal).
- <sup>38</sup> Caelius Aurelianus, *Morb. ac.* 3.105; Herter, 1964 (on Theodorus).
- <sup>39</sup> See Jaeggi 2018. Apart from the literary testimony on Theodorus, there also is Soranus, *Gyn.* 2.17 and Mustio, *Gyn.* 1.131.

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<sup>40</sup> Fox, 2012, 419.

<sup>41</sup> For Greek Antiquity, starting from the archaic period, a considerable number of literary sources point to breastfeeding by the mother herself. See Marshall 2017.

<sup>42</sup> Parkin, 2010, 113.

<sup>43</sup> Powell *et al.*, 2014: 103; Galen, *Hyg.* 1.10 (first teeth); Soranus, *Gyn.* 2.46 (scarcely before six months); *Gyn.* 2.47 (gradual taking over).

<sup>44</sup> Powell *et al.*, 2014: 103-105; Bourbou, Garvie-Lok, 2009.

<sup>45</sup> Urso, 1997, 10-11.

<sup>46</sup> Galen, *De san. tuenda* 1.10-11 and 5.5 (6.47-54, 6.334 Kühn); Aristotle, *Pol.* 1336 a 2-24. Diluted wine: Hippocrates, *Salubr.* 6 (6.80-82 Littré); Galen, *In Hipp. vict. rat. in morb. acut. comment.* 3.24 (6.181-182 Kühn). See Hummel, 1999, 119-121.

<sup>47</sup> On the Middle Ages, see Orme, 2001, 71-72. *Sel. Pap.* 1.186 mentions barley water (line 51) and beer (line 60). It is a shopping list, and shopping for children is included, but it does not explicitly state that the barley water and the beer should be bought for the children. See Clarysse in this volume.

<sup>48</sup> Laurence, 2017, 33-34.

<sup>49</sup> D'Arms, 1995, 304-308 (drunkenness and *decorum*); 308-312 (drinking and childhood); 312-314 (socio-economic aspects of drinking). Cf. Ammianus Marcellinus, 14.6.25 on "bibulous Rome".

<sup>50</sup> Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ant. Rom.* 2.25.4-7; Valerius Maximus 6.3.9

<sup>51</sup> Drunken women are famously satirised in Juvenal, *Sat.* 6.300-301. See *CIL VI* 19055 - second century CE) *Bacchoque madere*.

<sup>52</sup> Fronto, *Ad amicos* 1.12 (178.11 – 179.3 van den Hout); Theodoretus, *Hist. rel.* 9.4.

<sup>53</sup> Laurence, 2005.

<sup>54</sup> Laes, Strubbe, 2014, 144. Rufus is cited by Oribasius, *Lib. inc.* 18.10.

<sup>55</sup> Garnsey, 1991, 100-112 and Nadeau, 2012, 151.

<sup>56</sup> Laes, Strubbe, 2014, 69 on Aristotle, *Hist. anim.* 581a13-582a33.

<sup>57</sup> Laes, Strubbe, 2014, 66-67 on Galen, *De prob.* 1 (6.755-757 Kühn).

<sup>58</sup> Jongman, 2002, 63 and 74.

<sup>59</sup> Note that I fully agree with the tenor of Jongman, 2002 (who uses the term 'infantilisation' to describe the relationship between the Emperor as a father and his citizens as sons and daughters), though I am less optimistic about the amount of young people who might profit from *alimenta*.

<sup>60</sup> Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 9.8.1-15. See Erdkamp, 2012, 68-72.

<sup>61</sup> Counihan, 2004, 139-140.

<sup>62</sup> Sen, 2000.

<sup>63</sup> Sahih al-Bukhari, Book 86, Hadith 41, Chapter 20 : I said, "O Allah's Messenger! Which is the biggest sin?" He said, "To set up rivals to Allah by worshipping others though He alone has created you." I asked, "What is next?" He said, "To kill your child lest it should share your food." Sahih al-Bukhari, Book 34, Hadith 25, Chapter 15: The Prophet said, "Nobody has ever eaten a better meal than that which one has earned by working with one's own hands. The Prophet of Allah, David used to eat from the earnings of his manual labor.