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Research Paper

# Good food and bad: Nutritional and pleasurable eating in ancient Greece

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ABSTRACT

*Ethnopharmacological relevance:* This paper speaks to the theme of the boundaries of food and medicine as constructed in the Greek and Roman worlds. It examines how physicians developed innovative ways of thinking about the body that did not attribute health and sickness to the intervention of gods. Ancient physicians and natural historians conceived of new potencies for substances and described their impact on the body's physiology between the late fifth century BC and the early third century AD. The legacy of these ideas and practices had great traction in the Mediterranean world and survived into Early Modern Times, and until the rise of new forms of science.

*Materials and methods:* This article analyses texts transmitted from the ancient world and considers how substances were attributed nutritional and medical potency. The texts relevant to this analysis include medical and philosophical treatises as well as cookery books. The article highlights discussions about the nature of food and drugs and the herbs thought to cross the boundaries between them. It interrogates different contexts within which foods were thought good or bad for the body, and the social and moral connotations attached to those perceptions.

*Conclusion:* Much of the analysis is devoted to understanding the flavours that were a key marker in the nutritional potencies attributed to foodstuffs. However there are clear and influential moral boundaries set by Plato in the discourse around food and pleasure. While every physician should be a chef, and many wrote cookery books that have been lost, a chef's talent was located in increasing pleasure, and therefore a less valuable skill. However the different literary genres show overlapping terminology and concerns, particularly with the quality of ingredients. Poor taste was not only a culinary concern. With regard to the setting of boundaries between foods and medicines, the transition between one category and another is frequently determined by the preparation and strengthening of a food's potency.



## 1. Introduction

In the Greek medical tradition, 'rational' medical treatises were first written in the fifth century BC. They distinguished themselves from earlier, poetic accounts attributing the cause of disease to the gods, though they did not deny divine causation outright, instead building the gods within their scheme of nature. These treatises were written by a number of authors associated with Hippocrates and his thought over a period of more than 150 years. It is not possible to identify Hippocratic authorship of any of them with certainty. Among many shared features, the majority of the 60 treatises in the Hippocratic corpus identify key liquids in the body such as blood and phlegm as essential to life (the later canonical four humours appear only in the Hippocratic treatise *Nature of Man*). A second key feature is the activation of bodily processes by powers (*dunameis*) which are triggered either by the body or by what it encounters in foods, drinks, exercise, bathing and other external activities. The importance of this 'Hippocratic' medical system is that it constitutes a Western – and probably older, if Vivienne Lo is right – equivalent of Chinese and Ayurvedic medicine. Galen in his adaptation of the Hippocratic system in the second century AD sometimes identifies nutrition and drug therapy as two of the three branches of medicine (along with a perilous third, surgery). Powers identified in foods or in their stronger correlates drugs therefore constitute major causes of health and disease in ancient thought.

## 2. The effects of food

In the medical thought of the Hippocratic doctors, food was absorbed into the body with the aid of the body's heat to break it down into the nutritional substances needed to sustain the body.

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These foods contained the 'powers' or *dunameis*, which had the ability actively or potentially to nourish the body in a number of ways. In *Regimen II*, which dates to about 400 BC, the Hippocratic author writes as follows about these powers (39): 'the power of each food and drink must be identified according to their nature and their preparation as follows. The people who have undertaken to speak in general about sweet foods or fatty foods or salty foods or any power of such foods do not identify them correctly. For sweet things do not all have the same power as each other, nor do fatty foods or any other such foods. For many sweet foods are laxative, but some are constipating; some dry the body, others moisten it. And so it is with all the others.' The argument is that each food must be classified individually in order to assess its particular powers. The author then gives his own classification, beginning with barley and cereals and moving on to pulses, fruits, vegetables, meat and fish. This classification is placed in the broader context of the four books of *Regimen* which place diet beside exercise, lifestyle, sleep and dreams in an account of human health in the broadest cosmic context that places the human being within the elemental scheme of the universe.

1. Hippocratic doctors asserted that foods nourish and drugs produce change, drugs being frequently dried or strengthened forms of plant and animal products in the standard diet. The potency of a product thus depended on whether nutrition was the objective or a more powerful, drug-based, intervention was needed. As we shall see below, Galen greatly extended and refined the Hippocratic system in the second century AD. Born in 129 AD in Pergamum, he was physician to the Emperor Marcus Aurelius and his successors, dying probably in 215 AD. He wrote extensive treatises on nutrition, drug therapy and preventive medicine (in addition to many other medical specialisms), within which it becomes very clear that items of diet might have drug-based rather than strictly 'nutritional' outcomes and that poor peasants might in times of hunger eat foods more suited to the animal body than the human because they had been forced down the food chain. These foods, as the early and authoritative Hippocratic author of *Ancient Medicine* had observed (3), had raw powers that were too strong for normal human digestion.

**On the limits of pleasurable eating**

2. Inevitably rich people could eat better than poor people in antiquity (though they did not always achieve this, as we shall see). People wanted to eat what they found tasty and nutritious. As we saw in the Introduction, the powers of foods are linked with their taste, and the juices of plants and animals digested as food by the human body modified the juices or humours of the body as these powers exercised their effects. There was thus a close relation between the activities of the doctor/nutritionist and the activities of the cook. Indeed, since according to Galen nutrition comprised one third of the medical art, the study of food preoccupied many doctors, of whom Galen is the most prolific, if only because the best preserved. Many doctors in fact wrote cookery books in some form, including Galen (*On the Powers of Foods* 2.27) and, according to Athenaeus *Deipnosophistae* (*The Learned Banqueters*) 12.516, Diocles of Carystus, Erasistratus and Philistion (on these authors see Keyser and Irby-Massie, 2008). We do not know the character of these books, but it is possible to see fragments of a surviving Greek cookery book before returning to medical discussions of foods as potent substances.

In order to locate the cookery book, some orientation from Plato is needed. Plato's philosophy elevated care of the soul and intellect above care of the body, identifying the 'sophists' (or relativist philosophers) such as Gorgias as pedlars of lies. In the *Gorgias* of the fourth century BC, Plato puts food and medicine within the same category of care for the body: the doctor is more useful than the cook since the latter caters principally for pleasure, while the former aims at health. Throughout antiquity philosophers traced this difficult boundary between good-tasting and nutritional foods and how they mapped on to ancient society and thought.

Two writers in particular bring out the extremes of Plato's argument. Archestratus of Gela, author of Europe's earliest surviving cookery book, *The Life of Luxury* (*Hedypatheia*) (in verse) in the fourth century BC, promoted the pleasure of eating at all costs, encouraging immoral acts if necessary, in order to give maximum pleasure to the senses (see Wilkins and Hill (1994/2011) and Olson et al. (2000)). Most of the advice is on cooking fish, considered among the most luxurious foods in antiquity. Galen in contrast, writing extensive nutritional treatises in the Hippocratic tradition in Rome in the second century AD, advocated a balanced diet tailored to individual need. Archestratus is concerned mainly about fish in the fragments that survive, with an eye in particular to provenance, seasonality and quality, environmental changes as important to the Hippocratic doctor as the cookery writer (*Regimen II.* 37-8). On the sargue, Archestratus writes (fr. 36), 'whenever Orion is setting in the heavens and the mother of the wine-bearing grape clusters is casting away her long hair, then is the time to have a baked sargue' [November]. The Hippocratic author of *Regimen in Health* 1 observes, 'The layman ought to order his regimen as follows. In winter, eat as much as possible…' Archestratus offers recipes that in tone and structure resemble the drug recipes of the Hippocratic doctors. Compare Totelin (2009: 75) 'another: boil leeks in water, elderberry, anise, frankincense, myrrh, and wine; inject their juice' with Archestratus fr. 22, 'boil the head [of the sow-fish], adding no flavourings but putting only in water… Serve by it pounded hyssop…'. The difference lies in Archestratus' promoting pleasure over health. Archestratus chooses the finest fish in the most tasty preparations: in doing so, he shares with the author of *Regimen II* a concern for taste and texture. On the grey mullet (fragment 46 Olson & Sens), Archestratus advises, 'when you come to Miletus, try to buy the *kephalos* variety of grey mullet … for they are the best there, since that is the nature of the place. There are many other, fatter ones in famous Kalydon and in wealth-producing Ambrakia and in Lake Bolbe, but their belly-fat is not as fragrant or as pungent….[Italians and Syracusans ruin them by] 'cheesing' everything and sprinkling with moist vinegar and silphium pickle. They are the very best, however, at preparing some of the thrice-damned rockfish knowledgeably, and at a feast they are capable of cleverly devising many types of sticky little dishes full of seasonings and other nonsense' (trans. Olson & Sens, adapted). (Kalydon is a town just north of the Gulf of Corinth, Ambracia the area to the north-west of the Gulf of Corinth, and Lake Bolbe is in north-east Greece.) Archestratus chooses fat fish which are fragrant (*euodes*) and pungent (*drimus*) and are prepared with a salty brine of the herb silphium. Silphium was a key taste in ancient cooking and was the resin of a giant fennel growing in semi-cultivated land in Cyrene (in modern Libya). Fat, saltiness, along with sweetness, which Archestratus also favours, are tastes highlighted by the Hippocratic author above, while fragrance and stickiness (*glischrotes*) are as significant criteria for Archestratus as for a doctor concerned about the texture of the humours generated in the body by food. The recipe book of Archestratus thus offers the pleasurable route to food preparation, with good and bad options considered.

## 3. Pleasant tastes aid concoction

On the medical side of Plato's division is Galen, who aimed for health and utility, though he conceded that food that tastes good is also likely to be good (*On the Powers of Foods* 2.51). His many treatises elaborated, refined and shaped the Hippocratic tradition in Galen's own particular way. On nutrition, the most important