

Feasts and Famine: Modern Misconceptions of the Ancient Roman Diet

Introduction

Ancient sources, modern scholarship, and modern popular media have misled audiences about the truth of the typical diet of the Roman lower strata. Modern movies and books, as well as ancient satire, a popular cultural medium of its time, put forth a stereotype of the lifestyle of rich citizens of Imperial Rome as contrasted with the poor Romans' humble fare. Modern media, influenced by ancient satire, plays into stereotypes of the Imperial Romans stuffing themselves on dormice and grapes while their servants go hungry. The misconception in modern media may be created by a misreading of ancient satire, which is critical in nature. When the critical aspect of satire is misinterpreted, the elaborate and excessive meals are taken at face value rather than read as symbolic. In ancient satires, the depictions of both simple meals and fantastic banquets are exaggerated and must be interpreted as symbolic of the character serving or eating the meal.

Modern representations of the ancient Romans' diet, inaccurately influenced by ancient literature such as the satirical writings of Horace, Juvenal, and Petronius, differ from recent findings of archaeologists in Herculaneum and Pompeii. The modern misrepresentation seems to come from a mistake in equating the food symbolic of the Roman upper strata with high nutritional value as well as equating the food symbolic of the lower strata to low nutritional value. An analysis of the food

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depictions in ancient literature and recent archaeological findings suggest that poor Romans ate a healthier and more varied diet than is commonly believed.

The Poor, Defined

The poor may be defined as the *plebs* or *populus*, the populace which Juvenal disregarded as wanting only “bread and circuses.”¹ Based on this separation between the Roman elite and the undifferentiated mass termed the *populus*, it may be thought that the masses were “destitute and dependent on the corn dole,” but this dichotomy is based on politics rather than archaeological evidence.² Although noting that economic and social homogeneity cannot be assumed for the mass of the Roman population, In reference to diet, Morley argues that “there were no significant differences in terms of quality or quantity across the mass of the population.”³ Morley would define the poor as “those who, in unknown numbers, failed to leave any significant mark in the historical record,” but this does not do well to describe their nutritional status.⁴ There existed in this historically insignificant population, however, “well fed, reasonably prosperous, and fairly secure” laborers such that they would be above those who lived closer to the subsistence level.⁵

The poor may be defined as those who qualified for the reduced price in the *annona*, the state controlled grain market.

¹ Juvenal, *The Satires*, translated by Niall Rudd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 10.77-81.

² Morley, Neville, “The poor in the city of Rome,” In *Poverty in the Roman World*, edited by Margaret Atkins and Robin Osborne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 27.

³ Morley, “The poor in the city of Rome,” 30.

⁴ Morley, “The poor in the city of Rome,” 31.

⁵ Morley, “The poor in the city of Rome,” 32.

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In Caesar's *recensus*, he reduced the number of recipients by about half and thus redefined the "poor" in the city of Rome.⁶ The heads of the *insula* apartments were employed in the census that determined the eligibility requirements for the corn dole in Rome as it was in these apartments that the poor Romans dwelled.⁷ In this paper, the poor will be defined as those who lived in small, cramped apartments such as the *insula*, those, such as farmers, who were required to engage in strenuous physical labor to maintain a level of subsistence, or those for whom most or all their buying power went towards food.

Modern Scholarship

The modern misconception of the nutritional dichotomy between the rich and poor laborers of Rome may stem from academic literature that misinterpreted ancient satire. It is commonly thought that poor Romans were restricted to a simple diet of bread, porridge, and sometimes wine, figs, and olives if they were fortunate. Until recently, most academic literature verifies this teaching. In her book *As the Romans Did*, Shelton compares the meals of the rich and the poor, stating: "the poorest Romans ate little other than wheat" while "the wealthy, of course, could afford a wide variety of meats, vegetables, cheeses, and fruits".⁸

Sippel proclaims in his book *Dietary Deficiency Among the Lower Classes of the Late Republican and Early Imperial Rome*:

Below the middle economic level, the variety and availability of nutritive food would have

⁶ Paul Erdkamp. *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Rome*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 38.

⁷ Erdkamp, *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Rome*, 265.

⁸ Jo-Ann Shelton, *As the Romans did: a sourcebook in Roman social history* (New-York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 79-80.

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*been considerably more restricted. The essential diet of the poor could have been little more than coarse bread washed down with water... and, perhaps, the rare addition of some pulses and wine of the roughest sort.*⁹

Peter Garnsey later agrees with this statement, saying, “[i]t may be that no more precise and informative statement on the subject of diet and health of ordinary, poor Romans can be made.”¹⁰

Archaeological Evidence

Recent archaeological evidence suggests that many popular beliefs about the diet of ordinary ancient Romans are false. The Herculaneum Project's case study of the Insula Orientalis II, an apartment block in Herculaneum, has shed some light on the diet of Herculaneum's inhabitants. The size of the apartments and the fact that they were placed above shops where the inhabitants likely worked reveals that they belonged to the poor.¹¹ The richer residents of Herculaneum lived in larger, stand-alone houses inside the city or in villas surrounding the city.

Below the Insula Orientalis II block, archaeologists found a sewer system, *Cardo V*, that acted more like a septic tank in that the waste remained under the block instead of being flushed away out of the city or into a waterway. The archaeological importance of this unusual sewer system derives

⁹Donald V. Sippel, *Dietary deficiency among the lower classes of the late Republican and early imperial Rome* (1988), 47-54, quoted in Peter Garnsey and Walter Scheidel, *Cities, Peasants and Food in Classical Antiquity: Essays in Social and Economic History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 230

¹⁰ Garnsey and Scheidel, *Cities, Peasants, and Food in Classical Antiquity*, 229.

¹¹ Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, *The Other Pompeii: Life & Death in Herculaneum*, Directed by Paul Elston (England: BBC, 2013). Video.

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from its limitation to this specific apartment block. Its waste is confined to Insula Orientalis II, meaning that it is the waste of only the ordinary shop-keepers and apartment inhabitants, not mixed with the waste of wealthier citizens. One can assume that the waste of the Cardo V sewer is limited to the workers and inhabitants of the apartment block because it is unlikely that customers of the shops would use these latrines due to the grab-and-go nature of these stores.¹² Sealed off by volcanic ash from eruption of Mt. Vesuvius, the sewage was carbonized. This resulted in the preservation of the organic material, which has been analyzed to determine the diet of those who inhabited this block.¹³

Disproving modern conceptions, archaeologists found a variety of foods, including fifty species of fish, eggs, and spices. This assortment reveals that even the poorer inhabitants of Herculaneum ate a varied diet of prepared foods. The foods found in the greatest abundance in the sewer were figs, olives, grains, grapes, and fish.¹⁴ Based on the sizes of the apartments and the organic waste below, it was determined that fresh or salted fish were consumed by residents of various financial capabilities. It can thus be inferred that "particular species of fish, usually the smaller types, were both inexpensive and habitually available for purchase in Herculaneum".¹⁵ Healthy fatty acids and an abundance of antioxidants make both figs and

¹² Emmanuel Botte and Victoria Leitch, *Fish & ships: production et commerce des salsamenta durant l'Antiquité: actes de l'atelier doctoral Rome* (Arles: Éditions Errance, 2014), 63.

¹³ John Wilkins and Robin Nadeau. *A Companion to Foods in the Ancient World* (New York, NY: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 107.

¹⁴ Wilkins and Nadeau, *Food in the Ancient World*, 110-11.

¹⁵ Botte and Leitch. *Fish & Ships*, 65.

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olives an important staple in the Romans' diet, but even poor Romans were not lacking in protein.

The protein and healthy fats that were assumed to be missing in the poor Roman's diet were obtained through fish. Fish also contain high amounts of iron, which is important in preventing iron deficiency anemia. Smooth fish bones, small bird bones, and similar bones preserved in human feces reveal that fish and small birds were eaten whole.¹⁶ A smoothed inner ear bone of a fish was found in the sewer, which suggests this bone underwent human digestion. Eating fish whole, including their heads, provided even more nutrition to the ancient Romans. Apart from fish, sea life found in the sewer included eels, sharks, rays, and sea urchins.¹⁷ This varied diet is far from the traditional belief that the poor could not afford meat and fish. The consumption of fish certainly would have been higher in coastal towns such as Herculaneum, but did penetrate inland. During the Republic, salted fish imported from the Mediterranean was "exceedingly cheap" while live fish, from freshwater rivers or cultivated in ponds was more expensive.¹⁸

Another idea undermined by the archaeological evidence is that these foods of the poor were bland and seldom prepared. The practice of having the latrine in or close to the kitchen was common to the Romans because it acted both as the cooking and feces waste disposal. Spices and other uncooked foods were found in the sewer. Inedible food waste, such as egg shells or mussel and scallop shells, were also found

¹⁶ Wilkins and Nadeau, *Food in the Ancient World*, 110-11.

¹⁷ Wilkins and Nadeau, *Food in the Ancient World*, 111.

¹⁸ Harold W. Johnston, *The Private Life of the Romans* (Honolulu, Hawaii: University Press of the Pacific, 2002), 187.

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in the sewer, along with charcoal from cooking.¹⁹ Because this waste came from food preparation, rather than digestion, it means that the food was prepared and cooked in the apartments. These small upstairs apartments did not have permanent kitchens, but tripods were placed over coals to cook. Even with the tripod, those without an oven were still forced to rely on the baker to make their bread.²⁰ Black pepper, all the way from India, was found in two separate locations in the apartment block's sewer.²¹ Two separate families, among the poorest living in Herculaneum, could afford this foreign spice. Not only could they afford to eat, but they could afford to flavor their meals with a more luxurious spice: "The inhabitants of Ins. Or. II were of middle to lower socioeconomic standing and yet had the desire and the financial means to purchase a wide variety of fish and fish sauce."²²

Collagen testing of the skeletons found in Herculaneum revealed a wide distribution of diets. Skeletons were not identifiable as of the rich or of the poor based solely on dietary differences. Instead, a range of diets was found, from those who ate mostly protein to those who were nearly vegetarian. The analysis of the mineral makeup of the skeletons determined that the diet of the people of Herculaneum was "diverse and nutritious," but lacking in nutrition from red meat, as indicated by high levels of zinc and strontium in the bones, which are indicators of a diet of fish, grains, and vegetables.²³ Erica Rowan asserts that "the role of fish consumption and fishing in the

¹⁹ Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, *Herculaneum: past and future* (London: Frances Lincoln, 2012), 284.

²⁰ Shelton, *As the Romans did*, 80.

²¹ Wilkins and Nadeau. *Food in the Ancient World*, 110-11.

²² Botte and Leitch. *Fish & Ships*, 70.

²³ Wilkins and Nadeau, *Food in the Ancient World*, 111-12.

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Roman world ... has, until recently, been underplayed. However, ... renewed scholarly interest ... has demonstrated the falsity of that view."²⁴ From a sample of 72 remains from Herculaneum, it was found through radiocarbon dating that the diet in Herculaneum consisted of less than 20% of terrestrial meat by weight and that plant foods made up 50-75% of the diet by weight.²⁵ A diet in Herculaneum that consisted of 20% terrestrial meat was supplemented by marine meat that contributed 10-50% of the total protein intake, whereas a diet that lacked protein from terrestrial meat resulted in 30-65% of the total protein intake coming from marine meats.²⁶ The less access that residents of Herculaneum had to terrestrial protein, the more they relied on the sea for their nourishment.

The skeletons which are evidenced to have belonged to laborers are "notably healthy."²⁷ Many of these skeletons show the signs of repeated, intense physical labor. The overdevelopment of specific muscle groups leaves a mark on the bones and is a result of years of repetition of the same movement, thus indicative of labor-intensive job held by the poor. The case study of an individual skeleton, *Erc. 28*, found in Herculaneum is not enough to prove that every industrial worker of Herculaneum had adequate nutrition, but highlights an example and the possibility that the poor and working Romans of Herculaneum possessed access to nutritious foods. *Erc. 28*

²⁴ Botte and Leitch, *Fish & Ships*, 61.

²⁵ Oliver Craig, Luca Bondioli, Luciano Fattore, Thomas Higham, and Robert Hedges, "Evaluating marine diets through radiocarbon dating and stable isotope analysis of victims of the AD79 eruption of Vesuvius," *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 152, no. 3 (2013): 345-52.

²⁶ Mary F. Pharr and Leisa A. Clark, *Of Bread, Blood and The Hunger Games* (McFarland, 2012), 69.

²⁷ Wallace-Hadrill, *Herculaneum: past and future*, 129.

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can be identified as an industrial worker due to signs of developed musculature, herniation, or intervertebral disk degeneration, in the lumbar vertebrae, and lesions in the teeth because of industrial use, such as to hold or tear cords or nets.²⁸ "Observations of modern fishermen show ... similar development of the upper body parts," so *Erc. 28* is thought to have been a fisherman in Herculaneum.²⁹ Although the teeth of *Erc. 28* did not show the hypoplastic lines suggestive of malnutrition, they did show unilateral wear of the incisors, the pointed teeth used for shearing and cutting.³⁰ This suggests industrial use of the teeth because the fisherman would habitually use the same side, depending on the dominant hand, to clench down on rope and eventually wear down his teeth unilaterally. The fisherman showed signs of overexertion, evidence that he was not wealthy, but "all the data and the general appearance of the bones suggest that this young man was healthy and well-nourished."³¹

The skeletons of Herculaneum have an average height greater than that of the population of Naples in the twentieth century, suggesting a healthier diet.³² In addition, because of a diet without added sugar and high levels of fluoride in their natural waters, their teeth have few cavities. Most of the skeletons found in Herculaneum had "much better teeth than modern Western people," exhibiting "perfect edge-bite occlusion and few lesions."³³

²⁸ Sarah Bisel, "Human Bones at Herculaneum," *Rivista di studi pompeiani* 1 (1987): 128.

²⁹ Bisel, "Human Bones at Herculaneum," 128.

³⁰ Bisel, "Human Bones at Herculaneum," 128.

³¹ Bisel, "Human Bones at Herculaneum," 128.

³² Wallace-Hadrill. *Herculaneum: past and future*, 129.

³³ Bisel, "Human Bones at Herculaneum," 124.

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Influence of Ancient Satire: Horace

Due to a lack of archaeological evidence before the 1980s, the modern understanding of the Roman diet is based on ancient literature. In *Satire 2.2*, Horace discusses the virtues of living in moderation, especially in respect to food. He claims that this is not his own teaching, but that he is reporting the teaching of the country farmer Ofellus.³⁴ In this satire, Ofellus was a farmer who lived modestly, but had his farm taken away.³⁵ Because he was happy living without many material goods or fine foods while he had his farm, he did not lose his source of happiness when his farm was taken from him. A main point of Horace's Epicurean teaching is that expensive and lavish foods should not provide more pleasure and do not provide better health than a simple diet. "Hunger is the best sauce," a phrase attributed to Socrates, predates and summarizes Ofellus's first teaching that "bread and salt will calm down your growling stomach perfectly well" and that people must "earn their sauce."³⁶ While hunger may make cheap food taste better, these lines are misleading in that they can suggest that poor Romans did not use sauce or cook and prepare their meals to taste.

Ofellus also sees no use in the presentation of food. In his view, food is meant only to sustain life, so he considers it a waste to buy exotic foods. As for wanting peacock, far more expensive than chicken or pork, Ofellus asks, "cooked, does it keep its beauty?"³⁷ Once prepared, the colorful feathers are plucked and the peacock provides no more nutrition than

³⁴ Frances Muecke, *Horace Satires II* (Warminster, England: Aris & Phillips, 1997), 25.

³⁵ Muecke, *Horace Satires II*, 33.

³⁶ Muecke, *Horace Satires II*, 25.

³⁷ Muecke, *Horace Satires II*, 27.

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chicken. Ofellus does allow for better food on occasions when the host is entertaining guests or there is a celebration. If the best food is enjoyed too often, expensive food will start to become bland and nothing will satisfy the over-indulged consumer: "the man whom excess has made bloated and pale will not be capable of enjoying oysters and parrotfish or the exotic ptarmigan."³⁸ The importance of moderation has always been taught, but Ofellus's insistence on simple fare may have been misinterpreted to suggest a diet with little to no enjoyment for all of those who share his socioeconomic standing.

According to Ofellus, mixing food categories, such as boiled with roasted or sweet with bitter, upsets the stomach.³⁹ This teaching against variation and experimentation within meals also goes against the archaeological evidence discussed later, but serves as another cause for the modern belief that poor Romans ate with little variation. Ofellus does not, however, want people to eat so poorly that it sacrifices their health as in the case of Avidienus, the "dog," who would eat his food once it had spoiled.⁴⁰ He teaches moderation in food, but not a fixation on food so that the consumer is able to focus on the aspects of life that bring prolonged happiness and pleasure.

The country mouse, depicted in Horace's *Satire* 2.6, is like Ofellus in that they both live in moderation. The country mouse has his rich friend, the city mouse, over for dinner and gives him his best, saving little for himself.⁴¹ Because the country mouse is used to a simple fare of grains, he is happy having his guest eat his small portion of fruit and bacon because

³⁸ Muecke, *Horace Satires II*, 25, 119.

³⁹ Muecke, *Horace Satires II*, 29.

⁴⁰ Muecke, *Horace Satires II*, 54-8.

⁴¹ Muecke, *Horace Satires II*, 79.

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it is the good company he seeks rather than the fine cuisine. In this act, the country mouse has disassociated himself from fruit and meat although it was in his possession. The city mouse, accustomed to feasts, held "disdain" for the meal set for him.⁴² Taken at face value, the fable in this satire may suggest that poor country men were left eating grains while the rich in the cities enjoyed lavish feasts and banquets. However, the foods depicted are the choices of the characters and so do more to represent their choices and lifestyles rather than their economic obligation and health.

Horace again addresses the diet of the wealthy in *Satire* 2.8. Nasidienus Rufus hosts a dinner party for his friends and a few prominent literary figures. This satire is significant for our modern conception of the Roman diet, as it describes a lavish banquet with exotic foods, such as Lucanian boar and loin of turbot, and various wines to appeal to every taste.⁴³ The depictions of the lavish banquet in this satire have contributed to the modern perception that most wealthy Romans regularly ate fine foods associated with exceptional nutrition.

Nasidienus can afford all these expensive foods and wines, yet he has trouble impressing his guests with his culinary creations.⁴⁴ As a *parvenu*, every part of his dinner party is created to impress his friends and the literary figures, such that he conceals his past and presents himself as one of them to increase his social standing.⁴⁵ So that none of the guests misses what he thought to be unique culinary creations, Nasidienus enlisted his friend Nomentanus to "point out anything that might

⁴² Muecke, *Horace Satires II*, 79.

⁴³ Muecke, *Horace Satires II*, 91-3.

⁴⁴ Muecke, *Horace Satires II*, 93, 97.

⁴⁵ Muecke, *Horace Satires II*, 227.

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happen to escape [his guests'] notice."⁴⁶ When his tapestries fell and covered their food with dust, Nasidienus broke down in tears "as though his son had died before reaching manhood."⁴⁷ His guests, however, could hardly contain their laughter and mockery.⁴⁸ Unfortunately for Nasidienus, this happened to be the most entertaining part of his own dinner party.

If good conversation is the principle dish of a dinner party, as Cicero suggests, then the guests of Nasidienus were left wanting more.⁴⁹ For those whom Nasidienus is doing his best to impress, the food itself is not their source of happiness and enjoyment, but rather good company as his guests were Maecenas and other notable poets.⁵⁰ This Epicurean sentiment suggests a better alternative of simpler foods and better conversation. Without conversation to pique their interest, the guests fled Nasidienus "after taking [their] revenge in such a way that [they] tasted nothing [of the last course] at all, as though Canidia, worse than African snakes, had breathed poison on them."⁵¹ The greatest insult they could do to Nasidienus was to refuse the food by which he attempted to define himself. By rejecting his fine fare, they reject Nasidienus's attempt to rise in status.

Conclusion

Modern academic literature, influenced by a misreading of ancient satire, is a potential source of the misinformation spread by popular media concerning Ancient Rome. Rather than used

⁴⁶ Muecke, *Horace Satires II*, 93.

⁴⁷ Muecke, *Horace Satires II*, 95.

⁴⁸ Muecke, *Horace Satires II*, 95.

⁴⁹ Cicero, *On Ends*, Translated by H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1914), 2.25.

⁵⁰ Muecke, *Horace Satires II*, 91.

⁵¹ Muecke, *Horace Satires II*, 97.

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as historical evidence, the food depicted in satirical pieces should be read as symbolic of the character serving or consuming it because food is one of the "the most effective means of expressing and communicating ... identity" in literature.⁵² The recent archaeological findings suggest that the working-class Romans inhabiting the Bay of Naples were in fact much healthier than is commonly believed. Further research may be necessary to conclude whether this can be said of the poor in the city of Rome. This endeavor will prove to be more difficult, however, as the most useful archaeological evidence in this research is a result of the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in 79 C.E.

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⁵² Pharr and Clark, *Of Bread, Blood and The Hunger Games*, 69.

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