To Our Parents: Nili and Uri, Bernadette and Edward

Ancient Ethnography

New Approaches

Edited by Eran Almagor and Joseph Skinner
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Preface

The origins of this volume can be traced back to the final leg of a lengthy journey from one conference to another, from Lampeter to Liverpool in June 2009. The idea to assemble a group of researchers employing new approaches to the study of ancient ethnography was subsequently realized in a panel at the 2010 Classical Association Conference in Cardiff. Its success and the interest it generated prompted us to expand the project by soliciting papers from scholars whose work we admired with a view to shedding new light upon a field of enquiry that was in danger of appearing moribund. The results are presented here. Many people made this wonderful and rewarding experience possible, and we would like to thank them all. Our warmest thanks are due to Deborah Blake, our original contact at Duckworth, who accompanied the volume from its inception to (almost) its final form only to be succeeded by the ever-helpful and incredibly patient Charlotte Loveridge at Bloomsbury Academic. Special thanks are also due to Thomas Harrison, our original panel chair, for invaluable help and advice throughout the duration of this project. We are grateful to the original participants of the panel, Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones and Katerina Oikonomopoulou, and to Anna Foka, for timely and vital assistance. We would also like to offer our warmest thanks to all those who agreed to submit chapters to the volume. Spread across four continents, their willingness to share their knowledge and ideas has made this an enlightening and wholly enjoyable experience. We are also grateful to our various friends and colleagues for their insightful comments. Eran would like to thank the British Academy (and the overseas fellowship scheme) for the opportunity to conduct research in the UK in the summer of 2009, whereby facilitating this collaboration. Heartfelt gratitude is also expressed to Christopher Pelling for sponsoring that research. We are deeply indebted to Emma Dench, both for her willingness to act as respondent to the volume and for the kind support and encouragement that she has provided throughout, and to the Trustees of the British Museum for permission to reproduce the jacket illustration.

Eran Almagor
Joseph Skinner
Ethnography and Authorial Voice in Athenaeus’ Deipnosophistae

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Athenaeus’ fourth book, or how to write an ethnography of dining

For the greatest part of the fourth book of his Deipnosophistae (128a–156a) Athenaeus offers us an extraordinary ethnographic account, which stands out in the history of ancient ethnographic writing, for several reasons.1 The first is its genre: Athenaeus constructs an ethnography of consumption, which describes and compares different communities (Greek and non-Greek) exclusively in terms of their dining and drinking customs. This is not to say that other standard foci of ancient ethnographic literature, such as dress, language, political and social organization, political and moral values, are completely absent from Athenaeus’ map of cultural difference. Their role, however, is merely peripheral to that of dining habits, the singular focus on which motivates and propels Athenaeus’ cross-cultural comparisons. Second, Athenaeus’ ethnography pushes the conventions of ancient ethnographic writing to their limits: far from making pretenses to originality, it openly flags its derivative character, by meticulously documenting the literary sources from which it has culled a wide range of testimonies on various peoples’ consumption habits.2 Third, even though the topic was a motif earlier, the comprehensiveness of Athenaeus’ ethnography of dining is unparalleled in the surviving corpus of Greek ethnographic writing. The diversity of its source-material (Greek poetic or prose texts, of genres that range from comedy to treatises on Constitutions), matching that of the communities it covers, imbues it with an encyclopedic breadth. Athenaeus, however, organizes his material on the basis of (often very unpredictable) associative transitions, and not according to logical criteria of arrangement (geographic, chronological etc.).

This chapter discusses what sort of map of culinary diversity Athenaeus’ vast pool of ethnographic material seeks to draw. More specifically, it explores how Athenaeus’ synthetic picture of dining practices across cultures would have interacted with his
audience's established perceptions of other nations (and of themselves in relation to those nations), as well as with their set expectations about the role and function of ethnographic representation itself. I show that it is a text which harbours historiographic ambitions, modelling itself on a Herodotean model of ethnography; and examines the ways in which, far from being a passive bricolage of information, it invites revisions of ethnocentric conceptualizations of the 'self' and 'other'. The aspect of authority is key to all this, and I seek to draw particular attention to the workings of voice and perspective in the text. In particular, I emphasize the element of narratorial control within the text, namely, that Athenaeus carefully steers his readers through the maze of his ethnographic quotations, and discuss the different ways in which Athenaeus' authorial interventions tease different voices out of his sources, and elicit different registers out of his material. Last but not least, I reflect on the role Athenaeus' imperial allegiance plays in shaping his ethnography.

New approaches to modern ethnographic writing draw attention to authorial voice as a key medium of ethnographic representation. Post-modern ethnographers especially have turned to Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogism in search of a new, polyphonic model of ethnographic writing – one that de-centres the ethnographer as an agent of 'objective' representation, and foregrounds the dialogue (between representative and the represented) that takes place in the writing of the ethnographic account.⁴ I wish to show that Athenaeus' ethnography presents us with its own model of polyphony. This is not underpinned by a master theory on Athenaeus' part about how ethnography should be written, but is a direct concomitant of Athenaeus' compulsory technique, which embeds different narrative registers and perspectives, and brings Athenaeus' voice into dialogue with the voices of his sources and with the voices that these sources cite. This interplay of voices often brings to the fore perspectives on the 'other' which stray from conventional schematizations of ethnographic representation, or question their validity.⁵

Finally, my discussion aligns with new groundbreaking studies of ancient Greco-Roman miscellanies and literature, which appraise such texts as intellectually rich projects of knowledge systematization, and, no less significantly, as artful creations, which endorse a distinctly imperial literary aesthetic (that of variatio).⁶ A key common feature of imperial miscellanies is their predilection for associative patterns of ordering for their contents.⁷ As we will observe, techniques of association have a key role to play in making Athenaeus' quick succession of ethnographic information readable, but also striking and memorable. This, in turn, serves to trigger various critical responses to his material.

The cosmos of *Deipnosophistae* 4, 128a–156a: Ethnography, identity and empire

At first sight the reader despair of finding coherence in Athenaeus' meandering sequence of information on dining customs. Table 8.1 below allows an overview of the various topics and communities treated.

<table>
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<th>Table 8.1</th>
<th>Topics and communities covered by Athenaeus</th>
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<td>Hippolochus' <em>Letter to Lycus</em>: a Macedonian banquet</td>
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<td>130e–131a</td>
<td>Two comic poets (Antiphanes and Aristophanes) on Greek banquets, compared with the Persian king's</td>
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<td>131a–138b</td>
<td>Attic banquets (with a digression on appetizers (133a–f))</td>
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<td>138b–143a</td>
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<td>153f–154c</td>
<td>Nations which fight duels at their symposia: Campanians, Romans, Etruscans, Celts</td>
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<td>154d–155e</td>
<td>Digression on duels and the art of war, with gradual return to the symposium (armour dancing and other sympotic games)</td>
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<td>155f–156a</td>
<td>Final conclusion; Plato on the Spartans' frugal dining habits</td>
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As we can see, Athenaeus has the characteristic propensity to stitch his ethnographic excerpts together with an associative thread, which means that his sequence of material is subject to very unpredictable shifts of focus, and repetitions of material. The table above marks some of its main digressions (on appetizers, the cost of expensive meals, duels and the art of war), but there are in fact many more, unevenly spread out across this section. Athenaeus' adherence to the aesthetic principle of *poikilia* (or *variatio*) is responsible for this narrative texture, as it dictates the avoidance of thematic uniformity at all costs.⁸

Nevertheless, it is possible to detect a rough division of the material into two main sub-sections: the first (128a–150d) discusses the dining customs of various historical Greek communities, and also draws comparisons between the meagerness of Greek (civic) feasting and the luxury of royal dining, as practised particularly in Macedonia and Persia. The second (150d–156a) is a list of the sympotic customs of various non-Greek peoples. This particular arrangement serves to flag the significance of the categories of 'Greek' and 'non-Greek' for the text, which constitute its conceptual skeleton (rather than geographical space, for example). In addition, it offers Athenaeus the opportunity to make extensive use of the technique of comparison (*συγκριτικό*) in
it allows for a sharp focus on stereotypical representations of the (Greek) 'self' and (barbarian) 'other' – and lays the ground open for their revision.

Greeks, barbarians and empires: The ethnographic universe of book four

Greek symptic habits occupy a lengthy segment of Atheneaus' ethnography of dining. From section 137e to 143f, and from 148f to 150b, Atheneaus brings long fragments from treatises on various Greek cities' Constitutions and other historical and philosophical works. These passages discuss different traditions of civic dining, both in the historic centres of Hellenism (Athens and Sparta) and also in more marginal areas (Crete, Arcadia, Naucratis). The testimonies collected are for the most part rather pedantic. Lexical details and etymologies abound, as does other grammatical information. The focus seems to fall on recording key elements of local sympotic practice as thoroughly as possible: the location and occasions of local feasting (festival, sacrifice, philosophical activity), the different names for communal feasts (e.g. the Spartan κοπιδες, αιδεα, and Ψυχεττα), the different kinds of foods prepared, and the way in which they were distributed and consumed. The inclusion of Naucratis, Atheneaus' home town, in the list (149d-150b) may in addition flag the key role local knowledge plays. Atheneaus' collection of the Greek cities' dining habits, then, comes suffused with the Second Sophistic's antiquarian spirit, obsessed with local lore, and turning its focus to the cultural backwaters of Hellenism. The trend, exemplified by Plutarch's Greek Questions, is underpinned by a conception of Greek identity as inherently fragmented and diffuse – and therefore reliant upon local knowledge and practice in order to be cultivated. Significantly though, the excerpts also stress the role civic dining played in consolidating communal ties within Greek cities, as shown in the participation of the entire community, consisting of rich and poor, young and old, men and women. These passages thus project an idealistic view of the diachronic role equality played in Greek social and political life.

In addition, Atheneaus collects a wealth of information on non-Greek nations' consumption habits (including those of Celts, Thracians, Parthians, Romans, Indians, Germans, Campanians and Etruscans). His material is filtered through Greek eyes, as it has been culled from a variety of Greek historical sources (Phylarchus, Posidonius and Xenophon, among others). This perhaps explains some stereotypical emphases on aspects markedly different from Greek dining tradition: the excessive quantities of meat and wine served, the observance of hierarchy and inequality in the arrangement of the guests and the distribution of food, and the often demeaning treatment of the guests, to whom the barbarian host throws morsels of food as if they were dogs or beggars. Other descriptions graphically evoke the stereotypical image of the barbarian as a brute, lacking self-restraint: thus the Celts, as Posidonius tells us, consume their food 'in a simple, yet lion-like way' (καθ'αμοισες μεν, λεοντοδες δέ, 152a), grabbing it with both hands and biting chunks off. Smaller barbarian peculiarities also emerge, such as the scarcity of oil in their diet (152a), their consumption
alents and denarii) in order to entertain their guests (146c–d). Cleopatra spent one alent (which is by itself a very large amount) just in order to strew the floor of her ining room with roses (148b). And yet this excess is moderated by the fact that uth dinners also offer the opportunity for the display of unparalleled magnanimity and generosity. For Athenaeus, then, imperial dining offers the space for reflecting on best of what the barbarians offered to the world. Furthermore, it is significant in e context of the Greeks' encounters with barbarians across history. For the Greeks' pedated contacts with empires brought enrichment to their culinary traditions, but so, more crucially, resulted in their more positive regard for pleasure and good fe. Imperial Greco-Roman sympotic literature (of which the Deipnosophistae is an ntral part), with its lively scenes of leisurely dining, vividly illustrates the change.

**Herodoteanism in the fourth book**

Athenaeus' ethnographic compilation aligns itself with the Herodotean paradigm 'ethnography.' This is not a matter of mere stylistic imitation (in tune nevertheless ith a wider penchant for Herodotean *mimesis* among Second Sophistic authors) as a gesture that flags Athenaeus' close engagement with a long tradition of Greek nographic and anthropological discourse decisively shaped by Herodotus. It is us notable that the ethnography of book four is strategically placed at the beginning a lengthy excursus, spanning three books, on what we might broadly term 'styles consumption.' These embrace nations, philosophical schools, kings and other omint individuals, and include information on key ingredients in the colourful cial mosaic of the ancient symposium (parasites, flatterers and slaves). Their ascent and scope show the features that make the *Deipnosophistae* something more n an exhaustive compilation of citations about dining and drinking: its anthropological value. Athenaeus is conscious of the fact that the information he has culled on a vast literary record yields a colourful map of human behavioural and cultural ration. Virtually his entire material affords opportunities for some kind of cultural, ilitical and moral evaluation, but clustering the anthropologically-significant inforation in this way (with ethnography at the head) is a key means of drawing attention this potential. This is reminiscent of Herodotus, whose ethnographic 'digressions' they tend to be called), especially in his masterful ethnographies of Egypt and ythia (books two and four, respectively) similarly flag the significance of anthropological insight for the *Histories.* They turn Herodotus' project into 'a collection of spiritual data that lets Herodotus and his (contemporary as well as future) audience umine both the variety and the constant traits of human behaviour.'

Moreover, Athenaeus seems to be casting himself in the mould of Herodotus the veller-ethnographer, who recounts the story of his adventurous enquiry into other tions' customs. In the course of Athenaeus' ethnography, the voice of its compiler thenaecus, in his role as the extra-diegetic narrator of his text) intrudes with much later regularity than is standard in the *Deipnosophistae.* For one thing, in the fourth ok, external narration occupies a much longer segment of the text's opening than al. It is only when we get to 134d that Athenaeus' voice recedes, handing the narrative over to the voice of one of his fictional characters, Plutarch of Alexandria: 'The parodist Matro describes an Attic dinner in a rather charming fashion. I would not be reluctant to recite it to you, my friends,' Plutarch said, 'because of its rarity.' This fact further underlines the centrality of the cross-cultural investigation of consumption to the *Deipnosophistae* as a whole. Equally remarkable is the fact that the compiler's interventions are frequent throughout the section, and instrumental in conceptualising framing the material and effecting transitions. This, however, enhances our impression that this is a carefully as much as a laboriously constructed narrative; its narrator is constantly at work attempting to spin a continuous narrative thread out of many heterogeneous testimonies. Thus, through the intrusion of his voice, Athenaeus draws attention to the intricate tapestry of his material and dissonant voices within it, warning his readers against easy, sweeping interpretations. Again, Herodotus the 'master raconteur' furnishes a key paradigm, as he too underscores his text's complexity through his frequent authorial interventions. These are aimed to offer a helping hand through the maze of the *Histories*' vast source material, but, equally frequently, they cast doubt on the validity or reliability of what is testified, urging the reader to form his or her own judgement.

Athenaeus' Herodotean self-fashioning acquires more substance if we also consider it as part of a wider set of 'Herodoteanizing' gestures, through which the *Deipnosophistae* signals its ambition to pose as a comprehensive historical record of sympotic consumption; it is a text written in the commemorative spirit of Herodotus' *Histories,* so that human acts may not be erased by time. They take the form of a persistent concern with the origins of the *deipnon-symposion* (which book one traces back to Homer), emulating Herodotus' tracing of the war between Greece and Persia back to Homer. They also involve the desire to chart sympotic practice within a wide temporal and spatial framework, following the example of Herodotus' embedding of different conceptualizations of space in his text. Furthermore, Athenaeus' interest in empires mirrors Herodotus' preoccupation with the fates of empires (Lybian, Egyptian, Persian) and the complexity of their relationships to the Greek world.

But Athenaeus' ethnographic persona in book four is also meant to prompt reflection on some key asymmetries in relation to Herodotus: the shift from Herodotus the first-person observer and eyewitness to Athenaeus the first-person scholar-compiler reflects the dramatic shift in the historical and intellectual conditions that set the two authors apart: Athenaeus, living and writing in the period of the Roman Empire (in the era of Septimius Severus) is the inheritor and manager of a vast archive of ethnographic knowledge, accumulated in the course of centuries of Greek writing about others. Like Herodotus, he too is a traveller, but of a different, virtual kind: a navigator, as Wilkins has aptly noted, in a vast sea of ethnographic quotations that he has culled from the library. Like Herodotus, he too is a first-hand witness to an extraordinary diversity of cross-cultural encounters – though not as a result of a journey to foreign lands, but merely as a concomitant of his living and writing in Rome, the city which all nations and all cities have made their home (Deipn. 1. Epit. 20h–c).

Athenaeus affirms his predominantly scholarly attitude to his ethnographic material when, twice in the ethnographic section of the fourth book, he justifies his
Greek poverty and barbarian luxury reconsidered

The contrast between luxury and poverty forms an important lens through which Athenaeus views and compares different nations' symposiac customs. This approach had a long pedigree: Greek cultural imagination tended to idealize Greek banqueting practice, which was thought to be underpinned by simplicity and frugality in the consumption of food and drink, and by civility, order and equality on the social level. Foreign nations' symposia provided were contrasted to this model, and were stereotypically thought of as lacking orderliness, self-restraint and equality. The contrast's defining moment came with Herodotus' *Histories*, whose account of the Persian Wars established Persia as the symbol of barbarian corruption par excellence. Not accidentally, he features centrally among the many historical authors that are cited in the main ethnographic section of book four. Athenaeus himself acknowledges the example Persia set in his twelfth book, where he says that 'The first among men to become notorious for their luxurious lifestyle [ταυτωρ] were the Persians' (513ε–δ). From its very beginning, the fourth book urges an alternative view of this stereotypical contrast's terms. The book begins with an epistle, written by the Macedonian Hippolochus and addressed to his friend Lyneus, a Samian comedian and acolyte of Theophrastus. The epistle, part of a series of 'dinner-party letters' (δευτερημονικα επιστολα, 128a) exchanged between the two men, describes the wedding feast of a Macedonian nobleman, Caranus, in which Hippolochus participated as a guest. The letter describes a banquet of dazzling abundance: exquisite food and drink is served, and valuable objects are offered to the guests as presents; and entertainment of all kinds beguiles the senses. The narrative is vivid, and invites the reader to imagine the full spectrum of pleasures enjoyed at the Macedonian dinner.

But the narrative also prompts the reader to reflect on the dangers of such material excess, by showing how the dinner destroys sociability: the excessively drunken guests, as we read, spend their evening trying to snatch as much of the wealth on offer as possible - but they leave the wedding feast sober, because of their fear for the wealth that they received (130δ). All the elements of a typical anti-banquet scene are thus in place. As Luciana Romeri has pointed out, the materialistic symposium, characterized by an exclusive emphasis on the enjoyment of food and drink, and the idealized symposium of words (λόγος), which privileges the intellectual aspect of symphonic interaction, stand at opposite ends in the spectrum of Greek symposiac values. For the reader, the materialism of Caranus' dinner-party is probably no surprise: the excesses of the Macedonian court were well known, exemplified by Alexander the Great's perverse behaviour at table. Yet Hippolochus' concluding apocalypse to his addressee redirects the reader to a positive appraisal of this luxury, by comparing it with the meagerness of Athenian lifestyle (130δ):

You however just stay in Athens (ταυτωρ εν Αθηναις μενεις) and call yourself happy ([ευς]υκελευτες) because you listen to Theophrastus' theses (τας θεοφραστου θεσεις ακουον), and eat thyme, rocket, and your fine twist-bread, and attend the festivals of Lenaia and Chythroi. We on the other hand, who were feasted on riches from Caranus' dinner, rather than upon portions of food ([ημεις οι] του καρανου δεπτων πλαυτον αντι μεγαλου ενουχων, are now looking to buy houses, land, or slaves (τευκτουεις οι μεν οικους, οι δε εργας, οι δε ενδυσαμην {αντραχων}]. This is a striking statement, although not unexpected of someone like Hippolochus. But Athenaeus' words which follow align with and reinforce Hippolochus' dismissive tone, by replicating its rhetorical format, comparative tone and register (scornful mockery) (130ε):

When you consider this, my friend Timocrates (τις τευκτης, ὁ ουτως Θεοφραστους σπουδαετης), with which Greek dinner could you compare the symposium just described (ταυτωρ εν Αθηναις δεπτων το προςεξομολογησαι εν χειρι);

This rhetorical question, then, triggers a string of quotations from poetic (mostly comic) texts, which ridicule Greek diet (130ε–f), and Athenian dining habits in particular (130f–134d). The choice of genre is strategic, given the centrality of the discourse on food in ancient comedy, and comedy's ambivalent stance on luxury and gluttony. The first comic fragment, from Antiphanes (fr. 170), compares the deficiency of the Greek diet with the abundance of meats at the Great King's dinners. The second, from Aristophanes (*Acharnians* 85–9), describes the response which the magnificence (μεγαλοτητη, 130f) of the Great Persian King's hospitality elicits from the Greek ambassadors: stupetaction and awe. Together, the citations introduce Persia, side-by-side with Macedonia, as a foil of the Greek paradigm of dining. By doing so, they also highlight the precariousness of Greek frugality as a lifestyle ideal, given the Greeks' exposure to alternative models of dining. The remaining fragments provide lists of the usual foodstuffs served at Athenian symposia (mostly breads and vegetables, or small fish and birds, thus confirming Hippolochus' dismissive summary). They stress, finally, that this is the kind of nutrition that leaves a guest hungry (132b), and which should be better thought of as a diet of starters (132ε, and 133α–f).

All in all, the comic quotations serve to further amplify the mocking tone of Athenaeus (and Hippolochus): their mocking register is underscored by the voice of the narrator, who introduces them with verbs such as δισευκειν (to ridicule) (131α) and δισευκειει (to playfully mock) (130ε, 131f). They also show that the Greek literary tradition itself does not speak with one voice on the matter of Greek
frugality; on the contrary, there is plenty to culm from sources questioning its cultural credentials.39

This alternative ‘reading’ of Greek poverty is effected through a synergy of techniques. The cumulative nature of Athenaeus’ text, which endows it with a polyphonic quality, allows for alternative interpretations (the Macedonian, the comic and registers (mocker, ridicule, scorn) to come to the fore. But Athenaeus’ own voice plays the most crucial part. Seen superficially, the mockery of Greek frugality appears to be an almost accidental concomitant of the extremely economical way Athenaeus has devised in order to prop his ethiographic narrative: his scholarly-composer’s voice is there in order to highlight (more or less subtly) a strand of thought, or a certain tone, in a given citation, which can then be explored exhaustively by accumulating more and more relevant material (in this instance, of comic provenance).40 But this is to underplay the element of (subjective) choice that underpins the process. By harmonizing his voice with that of Hippolochus, and by drawing attention to the derisive tone of his comic fragments, Athenaeus signals to his readers that he wants them to focus on the mockery – and to reflect, on the basis of what follows, whether, given the availability of such great culinary refinements elsewhere, Greek dietary meagreness does not indeed deserve scorn. This is why he completely sidesteps the anti-banquet elements of Hippolochus’ letter, an emphasis which would probably have led to a very different string of quotations, presumably stressing the advantages of Greek poverty.

Athenaeus reintroduces the comparison between Greek poverty and barbarian luxury towards the middle of the section. The comparison interrupts a thread of quotations on various Greek civic dining customs; and frames a set of quotations on the Persian king’s luxurious banquets. One would think of its placement as strategic, for the reader is meant to compare the Athenian, Spartan and Cretan traditions of communal feasting that have preceded (1357e–1430) and, pre-emptively, also the ones of Arcadia and Naukratis that will follow, with Persian royal banquets (144b–146a). This is the kind of comparison that is bound to prompt reflection not only on the differences of the respective culinary traditions, but – more importantly – also on the differences in social and cultural institution and organization that underpin them. And yet once again, the narrative redirects us to the mockery of Greek poverty, urging us, once again, to think ‘outside the box’ of stereotypical representation. This time the mockery bears Herodotus’ stamp of authority: ‘Herodotus, comparing [ἀναγκασθείς, 143f] the Greeks’ symposia with those of the Persians, says ...’ Athenaeus begins, and then goes on to cite Historiae 1.133, which describes Persian dining customs (feasts offered at birthdays, and the custom of deliberating on serious matters over wine).41 Crucially, Herodotus’ account also preserves the Persian perspective on Greek dining habits: ‘[The Persians say]42 that the Greeks stop their eating when they are still hungry [ὑπερμεσούς παύνοντας παύσασθαι], as nothing worthwhile is served to them after dinner [τοῦ οίμον από δεύτερου παραφρόεσται παύσασθαι οίμον άλογον]. But if anything worthwhile were indeed to be served [ἐὰν δέ τι παραφρόεστο], they would not stop eating [ἐστιν οὖν οὐ παύσασθαι]’ (144a).43 Herodotus’ use of the less probable future condition mockingly dispels any rosy idealizations of Greek poverty; the Greeks are only frugal by necessity!

After the quotations that follow draw for the reader a vivid picture of the luxury of Persian royal dinners,44 we have Herodotus again, glossing the earlier Herodotus: a summary of Histories 7.118–21 (146a–b) allows a substantiation of the comparison between Greek poverty and Persian luxury, with a set of economic facts: the Greek cities that entertained Xerxes suffered grave economic damage (Antipater of Thasos spent 400 talents of silver for the king’s meal); the preparations for the king’s meals were immense and included gold and silver objects; indeed, if Xerxes had had dinner twice [ἐὰν δὲ ἢμεσθεν τὸν οἴλετον] by taking breakfast as well, the cities would have been devastated [ἀνταποδέοιν εἰς εὐεργεσίαν αἰ ψῦκες]’ (146b).45 The scenario may be hyperbolic (as the unreal condition stresses), yet it is striking enough. Athenaeus here accurately capturing Herodotus’ message: no Greek city, however wealthy, could ever have the financial resources needed in order to organize banquets of the scale customary in the Persian court. Fine dining is (has always been, as the father of history reminds Athenaeus’ readers) an imperial affair.

Not only that, but, after a short digression on the nature and cost of expensive dining, and a description of Cleopatra’s feast for Antony,46 Athenaeus, through the figure of the banquetter Plutarch reasserts Herodotus’ message in his own words (just as he did in the case of Hippolochus’ letter): ‘When we consider these things [Εἰς ταύτα ... ἀποβλαπτοντας], which are beyond our own means [ἐὰν ὑπό ἡμέως], we may be content with Greek poverty [ἀγαπῶν τὴν Ἐλασηνήν πενήντα], taking into view [Ἀλμηκαίσαντος προ τῶν οἰκείων] also the Theban dinner parties which Cleitarchus describes in ...’ (148d). The verb σκέπτεσθαι (‘to be contented with, but also ‘to put up with, to tolerate’) stresses, once again, the relentless necessity of Greek poverty. ‘Plutarch’ is saying in effect that ‘We the Greeks will just have to accept Greek poverty, by looking in two directions (note the parallel expressions ἄποτεβλαπτοντας, Ἀλμηκαίσαντος προ τῶν οἰκείων); things that are beyond them (imperial dining), and things closer to home (the Theban story that follows, 148d–f). The core point of the Theban story is the Theban’s μυστηρία (‘meanness of spirit, pettiness’):47 they possessed wealth of 44 talents (Athenaeus has allowed us to gauge the value of the sum through his earlier references to the costs of elaborate dinners, 146a–e), and yet they used none of it in order to improve their lifestyle and poor diet, consisting of the kinds of nibbles that we have already seen in the case of Athens. With such food, the narrator comments, Attalus the son of Phrynavos feasted Mardonius and the other fifty Persians – this is the same one about whom Herodotus [9.16] claims that he made grand preparations. And I think that if they [i.e. the Persians] had already perished by such food [παραβλαπτόντας ἢν ὑπὸ τοιχῶν προφόρου] they [of course] could not have won [οὐκ ἢν πενεγεγνωπολεῖ] and that the Greeks would [probably] not even have needed [οὐκ ἢν εἴδοσε] to draw up their troops [against them] at Plataea (148c–f).48 In a striking conclusion to the theme of Greek poverty, the narrator again invokes Herodotus – only in order to disprove him.49 Attalus’ dinner for Mardonius prior to the Battle of Plataea may have been elaborate, but only to the extent that the oligarch’s Theban μυστηρία would have allowed; malnourished, the Persians could not have withstood the battle – indeed, they probably perished before it even began. With this strikingly absurd hypothesis expressed through unreal conditions, the narrator confirms his revisionist stance on Greek received wisdom about poverty
and luxury. His departure culminates with revision of Herodotus himself. Herodotus was right, Athenaeus tells us, about the role the Greeks’ austerity and frugality played in their victory at Plataea. But he got one crucial detail wrong: diet was important not because it benefited the Greeks, but, rather, because it harmed the Persians – who, on the night before, had been so badly fed on what was probably the worst of Greek food. With this provocative suggestion comes a more fundamental point: diet and symposiac customs matter not as cultural attributes, but, more significantly, because they could shape, or might indeed have shaped, history in a real and tangible way. By helping to illuminate their function in history, Athenaeus’ ethnography of dining yields fresh insights into the past, but also useful lessons for the present and future.

Yet more intriguingly, the comparative mood and polyphony of Athenaeus’ text serve to relativize poverty and luxury. For one thing, the diachronic ubiquity of poverty across the Greek world is problematized as the text shows that, in fact, Greek cities differed greatly in terms of their culinary refinement, and that the Greeks themselves were aware of such differences, and often commented on them. Thus, a parasite called Dromas claimed that symposia at the city of Chalkis far surpassed those of Athens – the latter served meals that are better characterized as ‘proems to the dinner’ (προοιμίαν ... δείην, 132c). The Thessalians too, we learn later, would never be satisfied with an Attic dinner, their food being much better at home (137d). Cooks explain that their guests’ palates differ, depending on the Greek culinary tradition that they represent (132d–f). A Sybarite attributed Spartan bravery to despair (who would want to live, being fed like that? 138d), his sentiment anticipating 148e–f about Greek bravery at Plataea.26 Barbarian luxury is also a matter of perspective, as we learn. The section on Spartan banqueting styles begins as mentioned with the Herodeotean story (9.82) on how the Spartan general Pausanias made Mardonius’ cooks prepare for him a meal typical of what they cooked for their master. He displayed this meal to the Greek generals, next to one his own Spartan cooks prepared, in order to show them the folly (παρρησίαν) of the Persian ruler, who, despite his rich lifestyle (tου τινν τολμάτων ομοιών), decided to attack them, even though they were in such a miserable state (οὗτοι τοιούτων ομοιών) (138b–d). Later in the text its mirror-story appears: an anecdote from the historian Lycaeus (Φυλάγες 613 F 4) describes how the Persian king Ochos sampled the kind of banquet typically prepared for the Egyptian king, and exclaimed: ‘may the gods bring you to a bad end. Egyptian, since you abandoned dinners of this kind [δείην τούτων καταλαίμων] and coveted cheaper meals [εστελεστέος ουσίς εστελεστέος]’ (150b–d). Even the great meals of the Persian king pale before those of his foe, the Egyptian king. Persian dining only appears extravagant when judged by people such as the Spartans, famous for their life of extreme deprivation. And yet, as Athenaeus informs us at the closure of his section on Sparta, the Spartans ended up changing their austere ways:

Later, the Spartans brought the harshness of such a lifestyle to an end [τὴν δὲ τῆς διατρυπῆς τῆς τουμάτων συμφοράς οὐσίας καταλαίμων, καί Λακώνας, καὶ διέθη λαξυσεως εἰς τροφήν] (141b).

Poverty and luxury have no stable referents, for the simple reason that nations tend to change their ways over time.27 The vast cumulative space of the Deipnosophistae allows documentation of this change, by assembling and collating testimonies from different times and mindsets. This function further affirms the historical dimension of Athenaeus’ ethnography, and its value for understanding human nature in all its intricate variety and diversity.

**Conclusion**

Athenaeus’ ethnography of the symposium is a landmark in the history of ancient culture’s diachronic interest in food as a marker of collective character. Athenaeus offers his readers an informative collage of ethnographic testimonies, culled from the vast archive of Greek literary tradition. These do not build a static picture of cultural difference seen through the lens of food consumption, however, nor do they blindly reproduce old ethnographic stereotypes. More dynamically, they reframe the terms of Greek ethnographic representation, departing from ethnocentric perceptions of the self and other, and offering revisions of some of its standard topos. The rich legacy of Greek ethnographic writing matters, Athenaeus says to his readers – but it has to be seen with fresh, imperial eyes.

Accordingly, in the Deipnosophistae, old schematic contrasts between Greek poverty and barbarian wealth, Greek moderation and barbarian excess, Greek equality and barbarian inequality are thought of as refresh, or signified in new ways. The underlying motives are clear: ethnocentric conceptions of Greekness are somewhat mitigated by Athenaeus’ cosmopolitan imperial context; and, further, material abundance, luxury and pleasure have positive connotations in his world, as markers of imperial prosperity. He and his peers, as Greek intellectuals enjoying the advantages of Roman patronage, personally benefited from such luxury and abundance, as guests at the symposia of their rich Roman patron, Larenos, the dedicatee of the Deipnosophistae (Deipn. 1 Epit. 1a–e).28

As we have seen, Athenaeus’ revisionist outlook materializes through specific literary techniques: comparison (παραλλαγος) and analogy, generic imitation, an extremely subtle manipulation of the effects of voice and perspective, and a clever control over order and placement. But above all, it is communicated through explicit commentary on the part of the narrator-compiler, Athenaeus himself in his role as extra-diegetic author, or the intra-diegetic character who takes up the narrative from Athenaeus, the grammarian Plutarch of Alexandria. These techniques merit systematic examination, as key tools through which Athenaeus actively converses with the ethnographic legacy that he is set ostensibly to be merely reproducing. By focusing on them, we are able to gauge not only his literary skill, but, more crucially, his intellectual ambitions and gravitas.

**Notes**

1 I would like to thank the audiences at the Universities of St Andrews and Lampeter, to whom an early version of this chapter was presented as a seminar paper.
Warm thanks should also go to Eran Almagor and Joseph Skinner, for their work as organizers of the panel Ancient Ethnography: New Approaches at the 2010 Classical Association Conference, where this chapter’s precursor was presented. All translations from the Deipnosophistae are my own (but Ol SEN’s translation was consulted throughout).

On this ‘bibliographical order’ that directs the Deipn. as a whole, see Jacob (2004). Cf. Dio, II, 1–5 (also derivative, but the material is integrated into a coherent narrative). On Dioscorus’ compulsory see, Ambagio (1995).

Topography was a standard means of organizing geographical and ethnographical material in the ancient world. See Thomas (2000: 75–101) on Herodotus; Clarke (1999: 77–128, 191–244) on Polybius and Strabo; Murphy (2004: 165–91) on Pline the Elder; Hutton (2007: 54–174) on Pausanias. Chronology would also have been possible to Athenaeus, given that his material spans texts from many different centuries of Greek ethnographic writing. Chronology would have enabled him to produce a ‘history of consumption across cultures and eras’. On time in ancient geographical and historiographic writing, see Clarke (1999: 245–93); de Jong and Nurul (2007: 115–81).


Scholarship has long stressed the conventional nature of ancient ethnographic representation. See Hartog (1988) on the inversions and symmetries on which Herodotus’ text relies. For objections to Hartog’s schematic approach, see Thomas (2000: 42–134). See also Sassin (2001: 182–139) and Murphy (2004: 77–128). See also the introduction, and Vlassopoulos, this volume.


As Pelling (2000: 171–5) has shown, association is far from random, but a carefully premeditated device, which carries its own sub-texts.

See pp. 7–8.

ΣΥΝΧΟΡΗΣ has been mainly studied in Plutarch. See Swain (1992); Duff (1999: 243–86); and Duff (2000).

On Athenaeus’ citations of works on constitutions, see Bollansie (2007).


Athenaeus is citing Hermeias’ On the Gymnastic Apollo, possibly indicating access to a non-mainstream, local source.

See Whitmarsh (2010) and Oikonomopoulou (forthcoming b).

The similarities are telling. The QG also (probably) relies on works on constitutions (see Halliday 1928: 14–15); and also cites ‘inside’ knowledge on Delphi and Bocotia (see, e.g. q. A 9, 12, 38). See Preston (2001) and Oikonomopoulou (forthcoming b). However, the work does not offer information on Greek dining customs.


Especially in the case of Spartans: 138k–141f.

Note especially Phylarchus’ and Xenophon’s descriptions of the dining customs of Celts and Thracians, respectively (150d–151e), and cf. the Parthians in 152ff.


21 This is related to the phenomenon of the ‘care of the self’; see Van Hoof (2010: 35–7, 211–54) on Plutarch’s Preconditions of Health Care.


25 On this, see also Braund (2000) and Wilkins (2008).


27 On Greek perceptions of the Macedonians, see Sourvinou-Inwood (2002).

Cf. 146a. Antipater spent 400 talents in order to entertain the Persian king—which is about the same amount, 146d ff. further helps to conceive of the figure’s magnitude, explaining that the usual cost of a large meal is one talent.


30 Cf. book twelve, which reasserts this focus.

On doubts about whether they are actually digressions, see Harrison (1998: 48–51).

On the centrality of foreign lands to Herodotus’ project, see Rood (2007: 290).


As we know, the alternation of external narration with internal dialogue is a key aspect of the Deipnosophistae’s experimentation with different narrative registers. See Guillon (2000: 250–4) and Mansonneau (2007), who chart this throughout the books. Both, however, show that Athenaeus’ voice usually only features at the beginning and closure of each book. In the former instances, its role is to offer an elegant (though brief) preamble to the internal dialogue of the deipnosophists. See also Jacob (2004: 150–8).

The remainder of the section is a monologue by Plutarch. Guillon (2000: 253) calls this transition ‘careless’. Cf. the letter of Hippodamus to Lycuncus, which begins as a narration by Athenaeus himself (128a), but soon (128d ff.) the narrative switches to Hippolocas.

A key parallel is provided by book 12, on luxury (wholly narrated by Athenaeus the extra-diegetic narrator. See Guillon (2000: 252) and Mansonneau (2007: 405–6).


On Herodotus’ unreliability as the narrator of his text, and the active response expected of his readers, see Baragwanath (2008: 6–34).


Wilkins (2008).

See Barker et al. (2010).


Wilkins (2008).

47 See Pelling (1997); Thomas (2000: 106–14); Flower (2007). See the Introduction to this volume.
48 On Athenaeus’ historical citations generally, see Zecchini (1989) and Lenfant (2007a).
50 On Lyceus, see Brill’s New Pauly s.v.; and Dalby (2000).
51 ‘Macedonian king’ according to Brill’s New Pauly, s.v. gastronomy.
53 See Plat. Alex. 50–1, 52–4, 70.1–2; cf. QC 1.6, and 9.1.376f–737a. See Oikonomopoulo (forthcoming a).
55 Note the adjectives μακροτρωπός, ‘small-tabled’, and φυλαλωτοφόρος, ‘leaf-eaters’, referring to the Greeks.
56 This will become especially poignant in the case of Sparta later. See 138d–e; 139b; 139f–140a; 140e.
57 The digestion on starters is thus assoe; because it helps to illustrate just how insufficient Athenian diet is: it withers the appetite, rather than satisfying it. Cf. Deipn. 1–3, where starters are treated at length (thus inviting the reader to make further comparisons).
58 The comic register also intrudes in the section on Spartan dining. See 138e–f; 139b; 139f–140a; 140e.
59 See Jacob (2001).
60 Cf. Plat. QC 7.8–9.
61 Athenaeus’ citation replicates the original of Herodotus’ report almost verbatim. On Athenaeus’ Herodotean citations, see Pelling (2000) and Lenfant (2007b).
62 Italics are mine, but following Olson (2006: Vol. 2, 189).
63 Cf. Deipn. 12.513c–515d, on the same topic.
64 In fact, he is rendering the condensed gist of two different stories in Herodotus about Greek cities which boasted Xerxes (Thasos and Abdera).
66 See LSJ s.v. Olson’s translation is ‘appreciate’, which I believe does not adequately render its compromising tone.
67 See LSJ s.v. Contrast the Persian king’s μυχαλωτοφόρος, in 130f, and the references to Macedonian and Persian generosity that have preceded.
68 The syntax is elliptical, hence the free translation (with suppositions of meaning). The dative απόδολολης seems to rely on an implied dative from παραδόλεθα (see LSJ, s.v.) Cf. Olson’s translation of the same passage, relying on the same presumption (2006: Vol. 2, 213).
69 Battle of Plataea in the IInd. 9.25–76.
70 A more elaborate version of the anecdote can be found in Deipn. 12.519c–e.
71 Cf. the Herodotean dipole of νύμφας–γυνικής, on which see Thomas (2000: 102–34).
72 See Brund (2000). This should come, once again, with a word of caution: we are reliant on the epoetē’s rendering of Athenaeus’ opening sections. Thus, we are unable to tell to what extent he fully aligned with the imperial perspective. Any potential ironic distancing in his voice is lost.

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