



Review Article

Food and culture: stories of the past

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ROBYN E. CUTRIGHT. 2021. *The story of food in the human past: how what we ate made us who we are*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press; 978-0-8173-5985-0 paperback \$34.95.

LAURA M. BANDUCCI. 2021. *Foodways in Roman Republican Italy*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press; 978-0-472-13230-0 hardback \$85.

The archaeology of food has increasingly attracted scholarly attention, encompassing a diverse set of data and approaches with immense potential to speak of the collective—often untold—stories of everyday choices, sustaining not only the physical, but also the social individual through time. While the two books under review are both part of this ever-expanding field, investigating food and foodways of the past, they are quite distinct in their scope.

The first volume, *The story of food in the human past* by Robyn Cutright, is a rather brief review comprising a little over 200 pages (accompanied by a substantial section of endnotes that add detail to the text), that seeks to investigate “what humans ate in the past” and “how archaeologists have used food to understand what it meant to be human in different times, places and social positions” (p. 5). Cutright begins with a well-written introductory chapter that sparks the interest of the initiate in the archaeology of food. She then divides her book into two parts. The first part (Chapters 1–3) reports on the role of food in human evolution, beginning with the modern concept of palaeodiet and going back in time to explore who our earliest ancestors were and the extent to which food influenced some of the evolutionary changes in hominins. Cutright discusses a number of key themes, such as the use of fire, going through the different theories that explain the ensuing changes in relation to food foraging and processing behaviours (Chapter 2), and the differences between *Homo sapiens* and other recent hominins (Neandertals and Denisovans), with an emphasis on diet and related behaviours (Chapter 3).

The second part of the book (encompassing Chapters 4–8) reviews the role of food in past societies thematically, although still beginning with the origins of agriculture (Chapter 4). Themes included in this part are feasting and special meals (Chapter 5), high-class cuisine and power (Chapter 6), food in rituals and sacred foods (Chapter 7), and everyday, domestic meals as proxies to investigate issues of gender and cultural identity (Chapter 8). Although the intended focus is on the ‘prehistory of food’ (the subtitle of Part II), references and selected case studies of historic examples are also available (see, for example, plantation diets in Chapter 6 and Viking burial rituals in Chapter 7). Each chapter provides a map indicating where the key sites mentioned in the text are located, which works well in orienting the reader. As a rather slim volume it is (necessarily) selective of the areas and approaches covered, but what perhaps limits its scope more is the lack of the author’s explicit personal approach and

position running through its pages. We read of Cutright's own stance against cultural ecological approaches only in the conclusion, and the reader is left with a feeling that this is a missed opportunity to turn all this compilation of information to a more personal theoretical take on the field.

Nevertheless, although not intellectually challenging to the professional, *The story of food in the human past* does include some of the best-known case studies and basic information of the field. As such, it can serve as a companion to enthusiasts and students new to the archaeology of food, who will still enjoy discovering how archaeologists use food to understand cultural identities in the past.

The second volume under review, *Foodways in Roman Republican Italy*, is based on Laura Banducci's PhD dissertation, providing primary data and reporting new research. Banducci takes us to north-central Italy of the third century BC to early first century AD to investigate foodways at three Etruscan sites, from their initial political conquest by Rome to their incorporation into the Roman state. The story is told through examination of ceramic and, to a lesser extent, zooarchaeological and archaeobotanical evidence. In so doing, Banducci masterfully manages to illustrate the diversity of attitudes and strategies of Etruscans under the new political reality, demonstrating the power of this approach to unravel history in all its complexity and heterogeneity. The book is divided into three parts, in reality following a standard scientific research division: research background (1); methods and results (2); and discussion and conclusions (3).

The first part begins with an introduction to the scholarly theoretical background that underpins the study of cultural identity, and includes reflections on the concept of 'romanization' and the complications of the dichotomy between the domestic/private and the public sphere (Chapter 1). This is followed by a description of the three case studies: Musarna, Populonia and Cetamura del Chianti (Chapter 2). Information on the location, history and excavation of each site is provided, together with a brief but reflective discussion on the contexts and the ceramic material included in this study, which also considers potential biases in the data. Stratigraphic drawings to illustrate contexts and layers are provided for only one of the sites (Cetamura del Chianti), while the site plans of Musarna and Populonia are basic and lack clear indications of the rooms or features examined; these are, nevertheless, adequately discussed in the text.

In the second part of the book Banducci explains clearly and critically her adopted methodology (Chapter 3), which in the case of ceramics goes beyond standard typological analyses to include use-wear. She also includes a cursory review of the methods and potential biases involved in the study of archaeobotanical and zooarchaeological material. The results on ceramics used for cooking (Chapter 4) and food preparation and serving (Chapter 5), and on the 'environmental' evidence (Chapter 6) are beautifully written to hold the interest of the reader. Chapters 4 and 5 also include concise discussion sections for each class of ceramic material at each site, which synthesise these data and provide an opportunity to reflect on their interpretation. While relating the results, Banducci provides alternative hypotheses that could explain the patterns observed and, with her engaging style, urges the reader to keep turning the pages to find out which of these are more plausible after combining the next data set. She demonstrates an excellent understanding of her material (ceramics) and handles the faunal and botanical data well and with a critical eye, although some very minor lapses in relation to

the latter can be observed by the specialist (e.g. emmer and barley are referred to as “glume wheats” [p. 192], when, in fact, barley is a cereal, not a wheat). In this second part of the book, the author avoids the standard—often boring—descriptions, and instead gradually builds upon, and skilfully weaves together all her data, while drawing interesting parallels from relevant ethnographic work and a range of evidence from other parts of the Empire.

Part 3 brings together all of the data from each of the three case studies by phase, investigating the particularities in the foodways of each site and taking into account their location, history, affiliations and standing within the Roman state, according to all available evidence (Chapter 7). The different trajectories of Musarna, Populonia and Cetamura del Chianti—delineated through their food history—are discussed to showcase the multiple factors, from accessibility to economic interests, that blended together to position each of them uniquely in the local historical landscape. In the final chapter of part 3 (Chapter 8), Banducci explores what she calls ‘macro-scale influences’—that is the broader historical context of changes in the study area (Second Punic War, Gracchan reforms, demography)—and ‘micro-scale’, which is an exploration of the social context of cooking, from cooking technologies to the gender of the cooks and the role of slaves, to dining practices, drawing heavily on ethnography. Although Banducci could have used her discussion in Chapter 8 to present more explicit hypotheses or explanations of her data, she chooses not to offer ‘solutions’, but instead a thought-provoking exploration of what could instigate changes in food practices. Although perhaps a less orthodox approach, it is to be respected, as it offers new lines of ideas to be considered and digested by the reader without stretching the credibility of the data nor falling into assumptions. Banducci closes her book with a pertinent conclusion that highlights the main patterns observed and elaborates on the significance of her contribution to the field. Appendices are provided, with details on the statistics, calculations and experiments involved in the study.

Foodways in Roman Republican Italy is not only a book of high-quality research, but also one that promotes transparency, providing a link to the raw data (p. 24, footnote 79), facilitating accessibility and making this research reproducible for the next generation of researchers. It is a valuable and insightful contribution to Roman studies that showcases how mundane meals can become powerful tools in understanding past human choices and cultural identities.