

Sobre medicina e alimentação antigas: uma entrevista com John Wilkins*

*On ancient medicine and food: an interview with
John Wilkins*

John Wilkins

Interviewee

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Interviewer

John Wilkins é Professor Emérito de Estudos Clássicos na University of Exeter, Reino Unido. É especialista em História da Alimentação e da Medicina no Mundo Greco-Romano e membro do comitê científico da revista *Food and History* publicada pelo European Institute of Food History and Cultures.

1. Margarida Maria de Carvalho e Nathalia Monseff Junqueira: Where did you find your inspiration to study medicine and food in Antiquity?

A.: Inspiration came first of all from my grandmother and my mother. My mother had 5 children and always cooked fresh food for us, with much concern for nutritious and healthy food. My grandmother had been a professional cook before she was married and was very proud of her roast chicken (a special meal in those days) and Christmas pies. To this I would add a BBC radio programme, The Food Programme, which began in the 1980s to explore the history of food in the UK and across the world. When I moved to Exeter in 1989 I proposed a special subject for 3rd year students on Food in Antiquity, and to my amazement my colleagues agreed. Numerous publications arose from this and associated conferences. I tied in my research to embrace food studies and this led to books on the three best ancient sources for food: comedy, medicine and Athenaeus of Naucratis, who quotes many comic and other texts on the topic.

*Entrevista concedida a Margarida Maria de Carvalho e Nathalia Monseff Junqueira em 18/07/2024

2. *What's the current theme of your research? What are the ancient sources about food, medicine and health you have been working on lately?*

A.: I am currently producing a translation of Galen's treatise *Simple Medicines (de simplicium medicinum temperaments ac facultatibus)*, the first translation into a modern language. The first five books explain how drugs work and how drugs differ from foods. Foods maintain the body in its natural state, while drugs alter it in order to restore its natural balance. I am translating these theoretical books and not the last six books of the treatise which catalogue the plants, minerals and animal parts that were the basis of ancient drugs. This treatise is referred to frequently in Galen's work on nutrition, *On the Powers of Foods (de alimentorum facultatibus)*, which I edited in 2013 as *Galien: sur les Facultés des Aliments*. I have gone back to study drugs because they are often derived from the same plants and animals as are foods. When Galen discusses theoretical examples he chooses substances such as olive oil, vinegar and honey, which the modern world would normally identify as foods. This is the place to look therefore for Galen's understanding of how food works and how drugs work in the body. Furthermore, it is closely linked into ancient life. Most olive oil, for example, was used for massage in Greco-Roman bath complexes rather than for internal use. Galen sees massage as a non-invasive treatment to keep the body in balance on a daily basis, along with a balanced diet and sensible exercise. This is discussed extensively in the treatise *On Health (de sanitate tuenda)*.

3. *In your point of view, do you believe Oribasius is merely a compiler of Galen?*

A.: Oribasius is much more than a compiler. He has selected sections of work to include and has excluded others. That is important evidence for how Galen might be read in the fourth century AD. Equally important are the other authors that Oribasius selects, which show that alternatives to Galen were still considered valuable. We can see similar choices in later centuries in Aetius of Amida and Paul of Aegina: who do they select? Do they quote directly or summarise? What is the supposed audience? Similar processes of compiling and quoting were evident in earlier centuries, not least in Galen himself and in Athenaeus of Naucratis who built the fifteen books of his *Deipnosophistae* on quotations from medical authors among many others, all on the subject of food broadly defined, as covered in your question 5. Galen himself describes his own scholarly practices in *On Avoiding Grief (peri alupias)*.

4. *In your scholarly opinion, what do you think led the works of ancient physicians such as Hippocrates, Galen and Oribarius to influence medieval and modern medical thought?*

A.: These authors were considered worthy of preservation in ancient libraries in cities such as Byzantium and Alexandria. The texts were valued, and they were thought of great practical importance also, especially in abbreviated and selected forms. The Alexandrian books were widely translated and used by scholars of Syriac and Arabic. Medical books thus survived along with Aristotle and other technical works alongside a Greek tradition and a more limited Latin tradition. These traditions can be traced through the mediaeval period, where again abbreviating authors were more often used than Galen himself. Galen and Hippocrates were not widely known in the original texts in Italy and the West, until Greek and Arabic texts came from Byzantium and the Islamic world from the twelfth century onwards. This influenced expanded greatly with full printed editions (Galen in Latin in 1490 and in Greek in 1525) and enabled Galen in particular to be used widely and challenged, often using his own methods. Hippocrates had an Early Modern revival as a more convincing account than Galen's totalising system.

5. *Besides bodily nutrition and the insurance of survival, which aspects are related to the practice of eating in Antiquity?*

A.: The most important are sacrifice and commensality. Offering plants and animals to gods was thought to promote agriculture and survival, and was a key engagement with the natural world. The Greco-Roman gods were powerful forces behind nature. In honouring them, human beings identified themselves in a median position between gods and animals. Similarly, eating together at festivals brought people together as citizens, often in gendered ways, within the city state. In the later imperial period, patronage was significant as wealthy people picked up from the Hellenistic states the practice of giving meals, food or drink to poorer citizens and thus demonstrating their own power and influence. On a smaller scale, people ate in family groups, in networks such as at symposia and in working guilds and at local festivals.

6. *Do you conceive food as a means of building identities and as a factor of sociability?*

A.: Food was extensively used to build identity. Communities had particular eating practices linked to their gods. They often had stories about traditional identities, such as the simple foods of early Athens or the traditional preserved pork, emmer wheat and

beans of Republican Rome. The Spartans had distinctive military messes and strictly defined foods until the fourth century BC. Greeks distinguished themselves from their wealthier Eastern neighbours and from the Egyptians by stressing a simple and basic diet that could be linked to their anti-monarchical political ideologies. Writers such as Plato saw food as a dangerous influence as luxuries could lead to tyranny, as seen in the Greek cities of Sicily. Fears of luxury were also expressed by Roman authors particularly after Rome extended its political influence into the Greek East and imported many new foods. There is an interesting contrast between this lasting ideological opposition to foreign influences and all the new foods and agricultural techniques taken up by the Romans from the late Republic onwards. These factors all interacted with the social structures outlined above. For example, meat-eating was seen as desirable (partly because it was limited in the earlier periods) as it was largely based on agriculture and sacrifice, whereas fish-eating was seen as luxurious by Plato and Roman traditionalists. Fish must appear at luxurious meals. Large and expensive fish that is, rather than shoaling and salted fish that were available to many.

7. What are your perspectives on the future studies in medicine, food and health's fields in Antiquity?

A.: The modern world is much more alert to the importance of food, diet and exercise than it was in the decades after the Second World War. At that time, it was thought that industrialised production could resolve food shortages across the world and make luxuries available to all at moderate prices. Most dangerously meat in vast quantities. This has proved damaging to the natural environment (in Brasil as elsewhere of course) as have other aspects of agricultural production. Ultra-processed food is also a great concern. These developments have brought food and the environment to the centre of world politics and made many people more receptive to ideas a healthy diet and healthy lifestyle. Galen's Hippocratic proposal that people live a balanced life thus has considerable contemporary resonance. Where ancient food used to be thought of as a matter of grain supplies to Rome and a fear of luxury it is now concerned with the issues that you have raised in your questions. The most promising areas for study and for bringing our modern concerns to the ancient evidence are probably to be found in medical texts and in archaeology, where food remains are routinely identified now and linked with ceramics and other remains. DNA sequencing allows ancient plants and bones to be accurately identified.