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You Are What You Eat: Food as Morality in Late Republican and Early Imperial Roman Writing

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Abstract

The scholarship on food consumption by the Roman elites has largely focused on what they ate and how it was prepared. An important but largely unexplored aspect of this topic is the way the Roman aristocracy moralized their consumption of certain foods. These foods often included mullet, tuna, and other types of seafood due to their status as luxury items, and certain foods that were thought to be detrimental to physical and mental health when combined together. This paper explores the relationship between food consumption and morality in Horace, Seneca, Juvenal, Petronius, and Pliny the Younger and compares their approaches, as well as archeological evidence regarding Roman diets and sustainable practices. This paper argues that these Latin aristocratic authors feared that the overconsumption of luxurious foods would lead to stagnation, decadence, physical deterioration, and the rejection of the old Roman Republican values of self-discipline, simplicity, and self-sufficiency.

1. Introduction

“Learn, I say, not amid the tables’ shining dishes, when the eye is dazed by senseless splendour, and the mind, turning to vanities, rejects the better part” (Horace *Sat*. 2.2.4-6, Fairclough trans.). Horace, like many Roman authors, believed that food and morality were intrinsically linked. The overconsumption of food, especially seafood,

as immoral is a shared theme in the writings of 1st century BCE to 2nd century CE satirical and epistolary authors, reflecting a persistent societal fear of the decline of Roman aristocratic values.

Scholarship on the Roman's moralization of food is extremely limited. *The Loaded Table* by Dr. Emily Gowers looks at the culture of the Roman elite through representations of food in Latin literature. Dr. Gowers examines the comedies of Plautus, Roman satire, dinner invitations in epistolary literature, and Horace's *Epode 3* in order to better understand the Roman upper class' relationship with food in writing. Dr. Gowers discusses food's connection to morality as a literary device (Gowers 4) but does not delve into how this reflects the Roman aristocracy's moralization of food itself. In the chapter "Decadence in Ancient Rome" by Dr. Jerry Toner from *Decadence in Literature*, Dr. Toner examines luxury in Roman society, explaining what items were given luxury status and why and how this led to luxury being viewed as a moral issue. He also examines the contradiction in the minds of the Roman elites, who reveled in luxury while fearing it would corrupt them (Toner 17). "Decadence in Ancient Rome" provides a helpful overview of how luxury was connected to morality and moral decline; however, it only briefly mentions the significance of food to this topic.

2. Background Information

The moralization of certain foods and how they affect the mental and physical health of their consumers is a recurring subject in ancient thought and was especially prevalent in the late Roman Republic and early Empire. This paper focuses on writings from five authors from this time period: Horace's *Satire* 2.2, Seneca's *Epistle* 95, Juvenal's *Satire* 11, Petronius's *Satyricon* 31-40, and Pliny the Younger's *Epistle* 15. The first three, Horace, Seneca, and Juvenal, approach the topic through personal diatribes against the popularity of luxury foods, the health risks those luxury foods pose, and promoting the idea of plain living. Petronius and Pliny, on the other hand, have a more subtle take on the topic. The *Satyricon* is a comedic novel and section 31-40 describes the menu of an extravagant dinner party and its *nouveau riche* host. *Epistle* 15 is a letter from Pliny the Younger describing his own dinner compared to one that his friend attended, using foods described by the previous authors to imply that the other dinner is inherently bad and his was, by extension, good. Through these sources, the types of food that were considered morally right or wrong and the reasoning behind these categorizations can be seen.

Two of the sources in this paper, Seneca's *Epistle* 95 and Pliny the Younger's *Epistle* 15, are part of the epistolary tradition. *Epistulae,* literally translated as letters, are a composition in the form of a letter to a person or group. The *Epistulae* by Pliny the Younger, for example, opens with a dedicatory letter to Septicius Clarus, saying that he had previously urged Pliny to collect and publish his letters, and now he is doing so (*Ep*. 1.1, Radice trans.). Seneca's *Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium* was originally written to be published to a wider audience than their named recipient Lucilius (Setaioli 194). Aldo Setaioli says of the epistolary style: "the very impossibility of offering ready advice makes the letter the ideal vehicle for imparting universal moral instruction valid for everyone, including posterity, as well as for the individual addressee" (195). The

medium of letters was used as a way to impart the author's personal opinion on general issues through the framing device of being sent to a specific person.

3. Seafood

A specific throughline of food moralization worth noting is the emphasis on seafood being particularly bad. Fish consumption seems to have been used as a shorthand for gross overconsumption and extravagance, and Juvenal's *Satire* 4 takes this to the extreme. *Satire* 4 is a mock epic describing a giant turbot brought to Emperor Domitian and the group who decides what to do with it. The fish is a metaphor for the extravagance and luxury of Domitian's court, and other seafood is used in the satire to the same effect on a smaller scale. Juvenal mentions a man named Montanus – possibly referring to Curtius Montanus, a senator during the reign of Domitian – who Juvenal said had the best skill at eating, and could "detect at first bite whether oysters came from Circeii or near the Lucrine lagoon or were produced from the Rutupian seabed. At a glance he would state the native shore of a sea urchin" (*Sat*. 4.139-43 Braund trans.). Juvenal uses bottom-feeding shellfish to turn an otherwise neutral-sounding statement into a negative remark on Montanus' character. There are two possible explanations for this specific distaste for seafood in Latin literature: seafood and seafood products are inherently gross, and seafood is a luxury and a waste of money.

The strongest evidence for the first comes from Seneca and Marcus Manilius. According to Seneca in *Epistle* 95, oysters are "a sluggish food fattened on slime" (*Ep*. 95.25 Gummere trans.) and weigh the consumer down with mud. Pliny the Younger, in *Epistle* 15, also lists oysters as a negative food. *Garum*, a fermented fish sauce that was extremely common in Roman cuisine, is also negatively described by many authors. In book 5 of the *Astronomica* by Marcus Manilius, he describes how *garum* and other fermented fish sauces are made. Manilius uses violent language to describe the fishermen, saying they "slaughter" the sea and "wound" the fish (*Astronomica* 5.658-59, Goold trans.). He details the entire *garum-making* process, from when the fish are killed and the sea is dyed red with their blood (*Astronomica* 5.666), to when the dead fish are mixed with salt and "blended together and merge their shapes until every distinguishing feature has been lost" (*Astronomica* 5.673-75, Goold trans.). Manilius' wording reveals his negative opinion of the process and the sauce itself. Evidence for the second explanation comes best from Horace's *Satire* 2.2 and Juvenal's *Satire* 11. Horace specifies that a simple meal would never include fish from town (*Sat.* 2.2.120, Fairclough trans.). Juvenal uses fish as a metaphor for living within one's means, saying that someone with a budget for gudgeon should not buy mullet (*Sat.* 11.36-8, Braund trans.). Mullet was an especially expensive fish (Plin. *HN* 31.67, Rackham trans.) and is used by multiple authors to denote an unnecessary expenditure.

Because of the negativity regarding seafood consumption, it is tempting to assume that Romans abstained from eating fish as often as possible; this is not the case. Fish were a common source of food for Romans, and some were considered status symbols (Nicholson et al.). Dr. Annalisa Marzano in her article "Fish and Fishing in the Roman World" examines the social implications of eating fresh versus preserved

fish in the Roman world. She argues that preserved – primarily salted – fish was available to all classes because it was able to be transported from the coast or lakes inexpensively (441), whereas fresh fish was more desirable and seen as a mark of luxury, and was therefore eaten mostly by the upper class (438-439). The fish trade was an important part of the economy of Ancient Rome, so much so that depictions of fish and fish salting were included on coins even in inland cities (Natale 2831). However, for Romans in inland areas to have fresh fish, it needed to be imported quickly from coastal areas, which would have been expensive, and therefore a luxury afforded only by the upper class. This could be why preserved fish are not included in the morally bad menus since they were not considered a luxury in the same way

The way these Roman authors viewed food can provide a unique look at their views on sustainability. Though the concept of sustainability is a modern one, the old Roman values of self-sufficiency, moderation, and living off the land could certainly be labeled as sustainable, and these values are part of why seafood was seen as morally inferior. The seafood industry's reliance on both fishermen and people to transport the fish goes directly against the idea of self-sufficiency. Moderation is emphasized by the negative portrayal of overconsumption in the *Satyricon* and Seneca's distaste for the number of people needed to feed a single person (*Ep*. 95.24, Gummere trans). Horace and Juvenal both romanticize the idea of living off the land in their morally superior menus, specifically noting how everything in them came from the garden or farm of the host (Hor. *Sat.* 2.2.120, Fairclough trans., Juv. *Sat.* 11.64, Braund trans). Fresh fish could not easily come from a local inland farm, and so cannot be morally good. This emphasis on self-sustainability can also be applied to why other types of foods were considered morally bad. Snow, for example, also had to be imported from remote areas, and very quickly to avoid melting. Any food that could only be acquired through trade, and therefore in a non-sustainable way, would have been morally bad.

4. Horace

"What and how great, my friends, is the virtue of frugal living" (Hor. *Sat.* 2.2.1, Fairclough trans.). This is how Horace opens his second satire and is ostensibly the subject. In order to extol the virtues of a plain life, Horace focuses on the vices of extravagance and overconsumption. Horace frames the satire through the teachings of Ofellus, an uneducated but wise farmer who was his neighbor. He begins by criticizing culinary trends and explains how certain foods can be detrimental to physical and mental health, then he argues that there are more important things to spend money on, and finally describes the ideal, simple life he is arguing for and details the types of food that go with it.

He discusses how certain luxury foods, for instance, peacocks, are only sought after because of how they look and are otherwise no better than any other bird. Horace admonishes against trends in food, saying that turbot used to be a luxury food and now is not, even though there is no reason for this change. He says that if roasted gulls were in fashion, the Roman youth would immediately agree, calling them "quick to learn ill ways" (*Sat.*2.2.52, Fairclough trans). Horace also warns against going too far in the other direction; living a simple life is not the same as being overly stingy (*Sat.* 2.2.53-69, Fairclough trans). Next, Horace brings up the idea that having a variety of foods causes

health problems, which in turn leads to mental decline. Horace praises the “early world” when delicacies were saved for special occasions, old age, or guests, and wishes he had been born “among heroes such as those” (*Sat.* 2.2.82-93, Fairclough trans).

Horace then presents an argument for the type of extravagant life he has been describing: if a person is rich enough to afford luxuries, then it should be fine for them to buy them. Horace counters this by saying there are better things to spend money on: “Is there no better object on which you can spend your surplus?... Why, shameless man, do you not measure out something from that great heap for your dear country?” (*Sat.* 2.2.101-5, Fairclough trans). To Horace, it is immoral for even a wealthy person to spend their money on frivolous or luxury foods since there are more important things in which they could be investing their money.

Finally, Horace describes the simple life he’s been praising, through the words of Ofellus. He says that Ofellus used to have a good amount of money, but later lost it, and no longer owns his farm. However, because Ofellus lived simply when he had money, he is still able to have a good life. Ofellus would only ever eat very simple meals – greens and a slice of smoked ham – except on special occasions, where he would serve pullet or a kid with wine, and raisins, nuts, and figs for dessert (*Sat.* 2.2.118-25, Fairclough trans).

Horace’s *Satire 2.2* epitomizes the Roman elite’s view of overconsumption and their fear for the Roman values of the past. Horace’s primary argument to back up his distaste for conspicuous consumption is the idea that luxury foods are no better than simple foods and that spending money on these luxury foods is wasteful. He demonstrates this most clearly through his discussion of the irrationality of food trends and admonishing the Roman youth’s adherence to them –pointing to a larger concern for the morality of the younger generation. Horace contrasts pikes and mullets to illustrate this point, saying that a three-pound mullet is preferable to a long pike simply because mullets are naturally smaller, and the fact that they have less meat leads to them being considered a delicacy (*Sat.* 2.2.30-38, Fairclough trans).

5. Seneca

Seneca the Younger, in *Epistles 95.13-29*, discusses how contemporary food consumption practices have led to physical and mental problems. Seneca extols the virtues of earlier Romans and laments their absence in his own time, naming this absence as the cause of the overconsumption he despises. He first compares contemporary Roman habits to earlier Republican ones, lists the diseases that come from not adhering to these earlier practices, and finally describes the types of luxury foods that cause these diseases.

Seneca begins by saying that, in older times, medicine was simpler and there were fewer diseases. He explains this by arguing that luxury has weakened the Roman people, specifically luxury foods and the consumption of food for pleasure instead of nourishment. He argues that “Men used to be free from such ills, because they had not yet slackened their strength by indulgence, because they had control over themselves” (*Ep.* 95.18, Gummere trans). Seneca says that men used to work hard to the point where plain foods could satisfy them because they were so hungry. He then implies that

contemporary Romans did not have the same level of self-control. He lists many different maladies that occur because of this lack of self-control, though he claims that they are countless.

Seneca also discusses how women specifically are affected by contemporary food practices. He references Hippocrates' claim that women do not go bald or get gout, but in Seneca's time, they do. Seneca asserts that this is because women now behave like men, and that by "rivalling male indulgences, they have also rivalled the ills to which men are heirs" (*Ep.* 95.21, Gummere trans). Seneca says that women stay up late, drink alcohol, wrestle, and generally act like men, so they now experience the same diseases as them.

Seneca goes on to list some of the perceived causes of these diseases. One is dishes composed of multiple types of foods mixed together, which he calls unnatural. Some others are mushrooms, snow, oysters, and garum. He also describes a mixed seafood dish that epitomizes the type of food Seneca believes to be unhealthy. He says that people are "ashamed of separate foods" and that soon, cooks will be chewing the food for people as well (*Ep.* 95.27, Gummere trans).

Seneca juxtaposes the old Roman values with the contemporary vices he observed: hard work versus leisure, plain living versus luxury, and good health versus disease. Through these comparisons, he implies that the illnesses he describes are punishment for the immorality of contemporary Romans. There is a direct cause and effect between the absence of Roman values and the many horrible ailments that Seneca lists. This is best illustrated by his discussion of women in regard to his general argument. Women are behaving unnaturally and immorally – not like they used to – and the consequence is that they are subject to diseases and disorders that they were not before.

In both this segment of Seneca's letter and Horace's *Satire 2.2*, the health issues that arise from certain types of food are discussed. Like Seneca, Horace says having a varied diet and eating dishes that are a mix of different types of food are bad for physical health: "For how harmful to a man a variety of dishes is… But as soon as you mix boiled and roast, shell-fish and thrushes, the sweet will turn to bile, and the thick phlegm will cause intestine feud" (Hor. *Sat.* 2.2.71-6, Fairclough trans.). This is in line with Seneca *Ep*. 95.19 and 27, where he says that "diseases which result from ill-assorted food are variable and manifold" and describes a dish that mixes multiple types of seafood together on the same plate. The idea that eating different types of food in one dish is unhealthy is described by Horace as a *cena dubia* or variety dinner. In Latin, the word *dubius,* which can also be translated as doubtful or uncertain, gives the phrase a particularly negative connotation. If Horace had meant for a neutral or positive tilt, he could have used a different word for variety that did not have an additional negative meaning, such as *varietas*.

6. Juvenal

Juvenal's *Satire 11* examines and compares two ways of living. The first is an extravagant and unsustainable lifestyle that leads to debt and bankruptcy (Juv. *Sat.* 11.1-55, Braund trans.), and the second is a simple, rustic life in line with old Roman

Republican values. Similarly to Horace, he criticizes the way people buy things just because they cost more, “If you look closely, they get more pleasure from the more expensive purchases!” (*Sat.* 11.15-16, Braund trans.). In contrast, his simple meal is composed exclusively of things from his farm.

Juvenal begins *Satire* 11 by calling attention to the way wealth affects people’s reactions to exorbitant spending. He uses his own contemporaries as stand-ins for the concept of the wealthy and the poor, emphasizing that the poor and impoverished should not spend what little money they have on luxury food: “If Atticus dines lavishly, he’s considered elegant. If Rutilus does so, he’s considered crazy” (*Sat.* 11.1-2, Braund trans.). Tiberius Claudius Atticus Herodes was an extremely wealthy contemporary of Juvenal rumored to have owned one hundred million sesterces (Day 242). It is unclear who exactly the Rutilus mentioned is, but he could be Gaius Rutilius Gallicus who Juvenal briefly references in *Satire* 13 (*Sat.* 13.157, Braund trans.). Juvenal stresses the importance of recognizing one’s place and living within one's means. Juvenal then transitions into an epistolary style, as though he is inviting a friend, Persicus, to a real dinner party, and describing the meal to him. “Now listen to my courses, ungarnished by products from the market” (*Sat.* 11.64, Braund trans.). Juvenal opens the description of his menu by emphasizing that the ingredients were not purchased, which immediately places him in a higher moral standing over the type of people he describes in the first half of the satire. Juvenal’s meal consists of a young kid, asparagus, eggs, wine, and pears (Braund 11.64-74). He says that this would have been considered a luxurious meal during the republic, but now even a slave would not want it (*Sat.* 77-81, Braund trans.).

Juvenal in *Satire* 11 and Horace in *Satire* 2..2 both structure their arguments by comparing the general immorality they see in their contemporaries to a specific hypothetical meal of their own design. However, where Horace says that even those who have enough money to use it on luxury goods should instead use it on bettering Rome, Juvenal seems to think that the only issue with purchasing expensive items is the people who do not have the money to reasonably do so but buy them anyway. He implies that if one has enough money, it is not morally wrong to buy luxurious things.

7. Petronius

The Satyricon is a comedic novel written in the 1st century CE and most commonly attributed to Petronius. It is a mix of prose and poetry, and follows the narrator, Encolpius, and his friend, Ascyltos, on a series of misadventures. Chapters 26-78 concern a dinner party hosted by Trimalchio, a freedman – a class of former slaves – known for his love of spectacle and ostentatiousness. After meeting him in the baths and helping one of his slaves avoid punishment, Enclopius describes the actual food served, which is grotesquely luxurious and extravagant. The narrative never directly insults Trimalchio or his food habits, but the tone of the novel and the way things are described heavily implies it; Trimalchio behaves poorly, having “in the new fashion the highest place” reserved for him (Petron. *Sat.* 31.9, Schmeling trans.), when traditionally the host would have sat lower. He also arrives late, telling his guests how

much of an inconvenience it is for him to be there, and playing a game at the dinner table, swearing the entire time (*Sat*. 32.1-33.3, Schmeling trans.).

The dinner Trimalchio serves consists of four courses, all increasingly more bizarre. The hors d'oeuvres are white and black olives held by a donkey made of Corinthian bronze. Above this, honeyed dormice with poppy seeds on two silver trays connected by bridges, and below sausages on a silver grill, with damson plums and pomegranate seeds underneath to look like the fire (*Sat*. 31.9-11, Schmeling trans.). From this first description, Trimalchio's penchant for spectacle and dramatic presentation is highlighted. The extravagance continues with the second course, which is composed of a wooden hen sitting on eggs, which Trimalchio claims are close to hatching. Inside the eggs, which are made of a fine flour, there is a fat fig-pecker in a peppered yolk sauce (*Sat.* 33.3-8, Schmeling trans.). The third course is designed around the zodiac.

> "Over Aries he had set chickpeas fashioned into rams' heads; over Taurus a piece of beef; over Gemini testicles and kidneys; over Cancer a crown; over Leo an African fig; over Virgo a barren sow's womb; over Libra a scale on one arm of which was a cheese cake and on the other a honey cheese cake; over Scorpio a lobster; over Sagittarius a bird that aims at the eye; over Capricorn a boar fish and horned fish; over Aquarius a goose; over Pisces two mullets. In the middle of the tray a piece of turf, hewn out with its blades of grass, supported a honeycomb." (*Sat.* 35.3-6, Schmeling trans.)

Underneath these is another dish of birds, sow's belly, and a hare designed to look like Pegasus, and in each corner there is a depiction of Marsyas pouring garum over fish so that they look like they are swimming (*Sat.* 36.3-4, Schmeling trans.).

The fourth and final course has the most over-the-top presentation. It is a boar wearing a freedmen's cap on a platter with baskets of Syrian and Egyptian dates on its tusks and surrounded by piglets made of cake, dragged in by a group of Spartan dogs. The boar is cut open, and it is revealed that it is filled with live thrushes (*Sat.* 40.3-7, Schmeling trans.).

Trimalchio's status as a freedman is highlighted throughout his section of the *Satyricon*. When he arrives at the dinner, he is wearing imitations of multiple status symbols – a purple stripe that indicates senatorial rank and a gold ring typically worn by *equites* – that have been slightly changed to avoid repercussion – the purple stripe is on a napkin, and the gold ring has iron stars embedded in it. Trimalchio is the embodiment of new money, and his extravagance only adds to this impression. In "Decadence in Ancient Rome", Toner highlights how incredibly hierarchical Roman society was, saying that expensive luxury items were an easy way to display a person's status (Toner 16). Trimalchio's dinner party is an example of this practice. His clothing, the colors of his home, the way he treats his slaves, and of course the food served are all meant to elevate Trimalchio's status. However, Petronius combines his descriptions of these status symbols with Trimalchio's boorish and uncouth behavior to connect the two. By doing this, he conveys that Trimalchio's status-seeking behavior is a bad thing.

Trimalchio's dinner is by far the most over-the-top menu of the sources used in this paper. The dramatic presentations and mixed foods could certainly be described as

a *cena dubia*, and it is not hard to imagine what Horace would have thought of the meal. Not only are there many different types of foods mixed together, but Trimalchio spends exorbitant amounts of money and resources on the dinner party. The same could be said for Seneca. Juvenal's reaction, however, posits more of a challenge. He is only concerned with over-the-top spending when the buyer does not have the means to do so. Trimalchio is clearly able to afford his extravagant lifestyle without the threat of going bankrupt. However, Juvenal also emphasizes the importance of knowing one's place, which Trimalchio clearly does not.

8. Pliny the Younger

The final text of this paper is letter 15 from Pliny the Younger to Septicius Clarus, in which Pliny reproaches Septicius for not attending Pliny's dinner. Pliny describes and contrasts two menus – his own and the one Septicius chose instead – as well as the entertainment at each. Pliny also requests payment for the meal he prepared for Septicius since it went to waste.

Pliny's meal consists of lettuce, olives, beets, gourds, and onions, as well as snails, eggs, wheat cakes, and wine with snow-chilled honey (Plin. *Ep.* 15.2, Radice trans.). Though Pliny's dinner is mostly in line with the ideal simple meals, he is not as parsimonious as Seneca, including a luxury item like snow and noting its high price. Though some scholars have taken its inclusion as Pliny being ignorant of what an actually simple meal would look like, Gowers suggests that the addition of a luxury good was Pliny's way of showing that even a simple meal should not be entirely without luxury (276). The other meal consists completely of luxurious and morally inferior foods described in the texts mentioned above: oysters, sow's belly, and sea urchins (*Ep.* 15.3, Radice trans.). Pliny adds to the differences between the two meals with the entertainment that would have accompanied them. At his dinner, there would have been intellectual and high-brow pursuits, such as reading or comic plays, whereas the meal Septicius chose had *gaditanae*, Spanish dancers known for their sexual and provocative style of dance.

Like Petronius, Pliny does not directly call out the moral ties to the foods he describes. However, by comparing the two menus as he does, Pliny implies that one is better in some way than the other. The texts mentioned above have established that foods like oysters and sea urchins were considered morally bad foods, and the foods in Pliny's dinner match those described as morally good by Horace and Juvenal. Despite not clearly stating his point, it can be inferred that, because this letter was meant to be published, Pliny intended to make a larger statement than just chastising Septicius Clarus. The other dinner is described with far fewer details than Pliny's own, leading to the conclusion that it is not the main point of the letter. Pliny is using the letter to make a statement about his own morality and adherence to old Roman Republican values. In *The Loaded Table*, Dr. Emily Gowers suggests that Pliny is using the literary trope of comparing luxury and simple foods as a way to define himself as a man of taste (Gowers 273).

While Pliny's letter seems to be in line with the authors mentioned above, it actually disproves some of their claims through one fact: The meal is expensive. The

letter not only aims to chastise Septicius for standing him up but also to demand he pay for the ingredients he wasted, which Pliny describes as “no small sum” (*Ep.* 15.2, Radice trans.). The meal’s description resembles the one in Juvenal’s Satire 11, which Juvenal specifies includes no market goods (Juv. *Sat.* 11.64, Braund trans.), implying that he spent no extra money on the meal and that it came entirely from his garden or farm. But Pliny’s letter shows the reality of implementing this type of idealized, pastoral fantasy in an urban space. Pliny’s letter also contradicts another of Juvenal’s points. Juvenal says that, in his day, even slaves would turn away the kind of meal he, and by extension Pliny, describes; however, since he and Pliny were contemporaries, it is clear that this was not always the case.

9. Conclusion

The moralization of food and its consumption in writings of late Republican and early Imperial Roman authors is a recurring theme. Horace, Seneca, Juvenal, Petronius, and Pliny the Younger all touch on this subject in varying mediums and tones, but they come to similar conclusions; plain, simple, and sustainable meals that reflect an idyllic version of the early Republic are morally good, and luxurious, trendy, and over expensive meals are morally bad. However, the reality of the morally ideal meals is unlikely to have been possible for upper class Romans without spending money. The underlying, though often unstated, reason for the moral categorization of food by these Roman aristocratic authors is often a reverence for the old Roman values of the early Republic and a fear of their decline.

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