Food and Health in Problemata 21–22: Cooking (pepsis) in the Kitchen and “Cooking” (pepsis) in the Body

John Wilkins

Introduction: Nature and Culture

My main aim in this chapter is to understand Problems 21–22 in their intellectual context of the fourth century BC or later. At the end I consider briefly their counterpart in Plutarch’s Greco-Roman world of the first and second centuries AD and in culinary science in the twenty first century. In all three eras, the questions raised might be classified as applied science, that is natural questions arising from life lived within a cultural context, such as why bread rises when made with yeast, and what makes you feel full.

Pr. 21 addresses cereal grains, Pr. 22 fruits. The questions raised address mainly the preparation and consumption of foods, with a focus on physical and physiological processes. Questions that were essential in medicine from the Hippocratic corpus and Aristotle to Galen, such as what is natural and what is customary, recur here. I discuss these issues in detail below.

Pr. 21 and 22 share many characteristics with the rest of the collection, in particular the interest in medical topics established in Pr. 1. The treatment of cereal grasses and fruits in Pr. 21 and 22, as well as in 20, is often described as botanical, but in fact the emphasis is more on the processed plants—milled grains or ripened fruits on the table, and their effects on the digestive system—rather than the nature and growth of the plant as it might be addressed elsewhere in the Lyceum by Theophrastus. This emphasis on processed plants for human consumption brings us close to two important areas of thought in antiquity, the intersection of nature and culture, and the development of nutrition as a branch of medicine.

The first area of thought is the “civilised life,” the “milled grain-life” as it is called in Woman-Madness, a play by the comic poet Amphis, now lost but

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1 See e.g. Mayhew (2011, 2–3).
2 Fr. 9 Kassel-Austin.
somehow featuring a life distinguished from that of raw foods. There are two issues here: the farming and processing of foods; and the particular culture within which this production occurs, in other words, how we Greeks transform the raw products of nature into Greek dishes, an area of thought brilliantly discussed by Detienne and Vernant in a system of anthropology derived from Lévi-Strauss (Detienne and Vernant 1989, Detienne 1994). Detienne’s anthropological interpretation of nature and culture refers in part to rich material in Pr. 20 and others, which considers raw juices, wild and cultivated plants, the effect of raw juices on the body, and many related questions. The caper is a good example (20.12), for it tends not to flourish in cultivated ground, in this way resembling the famous giant fennel, silphium. Our author argues that just as the body produces “residues” of humours, so farming produces “more concocted” and “less concocted” land. Fruit ripens by “coction” (see below), but plants like the caper, which do not grow on farmed land, are corrupted by tending (literally “by education”). Botany and medicine are thus fitted into notions of nature and culture as much as are ethics and politics: plants are “cooked” as they ripen in agriculture, in a softening process related to cooking food on a fire and to “cooking” food in the heat of the body’s digestive system.

The second system of thought is related to the first, namely Hippocratic medicine, in which the raw materials of nature have to be softened by cooking or processing and “civilised” in order to make them easier to assimilate into the human body. The Hippocratic doctors had discussed this process in a number of works—On Ancient Medicine and Regimen 2 in particular—and it is given its most powerful form in Galen’s treatise On the Powers of Foods, which analyses the human diet under three categories: cereals and beans; fruits and vegetables; meat and fish. In Pr. 21 and 22 we have two of these categories, namely cereals and fruits.

Areas of cultural activity under consideration are therefore not the grain fields (which Galen for his part thought he should inspect in person) nor the

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3 See Kassel’s and Austin’s comments on this fragment (2.217).
4 Radishes are another; see below on Mnesitheus of Athens.
5 Dalby (2003, 303–304).
6 A ‘residue’ or *perittoma* is an inappropriate accumulation of a humour in the wrong place in the body, normally produced by incomplete digestion.
7 See further Tracy (1969) on the biological basis of Aristotle’s conception of what is ‘natural’.
8 A peach ripening against a sunny wall and carrots boiling in water would be modern examples. As for digestion, heat is no longer considered to be the main agent but chemical and enzyme solutions.
9 E.g. On the Powers of Foods 1.13 on primitive wheats. Throughout Book 1 Galen is interested in inferior cereals as peasants are forced down the food chain in famine; interested, too, in his father’s experiments on weeds in the corn crop (1.37).