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**John Wilkins, Shaun Hill (trans.), *Archestratus: Fragments from the Life of Luxury. Revised Edition (first published 1994)*. Totnes: Prospect Books, 2011. Pp. 104. ISBN 9781903018620. £12.00 (pb).**

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**Reviewed by Floris Overduin, Leiden University (f.overduin@hum.leidenuniv.nl)**

This is the revised edition of a volume by the same name from 1994, dealing with the Sicilian culinary poet Archestratus, whose work can be dated to around 330 BCE.<sup>1</sup> The reason for this revision, as explained by the authors, is the fact that quite some relevant research has appeared since 1994,<sup>2</sup> both on Archestratus and on Athenaeus of Naucratis, who is our only source for Archestratus' preserved fragments. In addition, according to the authors, the last decade has provided researchers of food and dining in antiquity with new insights, relevant to the interpretation of Archestratus. One of these insights is the realization that Archestratus' focus on luxurious food fits the historical pattern of an east-to-west development, from the Persian courts in the fifth century through Alexander and the Hellenistic courts in the fourth and third century, and progressing to Rome in Augustus' age. As to the research on the poet himself, the most important contribution in recent years has been made by Olson and Sens, whose edition with commentary appeared in 2000 and greatly facilitated the study of Archestratus and of his place in the tradition of Greek didactic poetry.<sup>3</sup>

Although some remarks are made about Archestratus' poetry from a literary point of view in the introduction (pp. 13-6), this book is of a decidedly different nature. This is best illustrated by the contribution to this book of co-author Shaun Hill, who is not a classical scholar but a chef. As such, this book does not aim at the study of Archestratus' Greek or his part in literary history, but at the real contents of his lines: the selection, obtainment, and preparation of fancy yet simple food. This amounts essentially to the bee's knees of the Greek palate: exclusive and highly prized fish. Hill's participation is an interesting one, as he does not comment on the merits of Archestratus' verses themselves, but on those of the dishes the poet presents, which, as the authors explain, are equivalent to the contemporary *nouvelle cuisine*. Here we learn that, unlike the heavy food described in that other cookery book from antiquity, Apicius' *De re coquinaria*, Archestratus' dishes are strikingly light and modern, an insight that probably would have less easily been gained by classicists whose focus is mainly on other dimensions of the text, such as metre, style, or poetic vocabulary.

The book starts with a general introduction to the *Life of Luxury*, which is the translation chosen for the poem's Greek title Ἡδυπάθεια (although it circulated under various other titles). The introduction deals briefly with the evidence for Archestratus, his (all but lost) predecessors, the fragmentary transmission of his verses, Archestratus' choice for verse and its relation to parody (cf. the *Attic Banquet* of Matro of Pitane) and comedy (cf. comic playwrights such as Anaxippus, Dionysius, and Eubulus), followed by sections on Greek dining habits, Athenaeus and Archestratus, and Archestratus and the Greek world. The revised edition contains an additional six page introduction in which older observations from the first edition are brought up to date through a survey of the relevant publications that have appeared since 1994, the merits of which are succinctly summarized. The most important aspect of this

second introduction, though, is the way in which modern scholarship has gained a better understanding of Athenaeus' methods, ideas and aims.

The two introductions are followed by the book's core: the remnants of the *Life of Luxury* themselves. Each of the 62 translated fragments is preceded by its *locus* in Athenaeus' *Deipnosophistae* and followed by a commentary, which deals with 'content', 'context', or both. Where Athenaeus provides us with a testimonium rather than a fragment of Archestratus the text is conveniently italicized. The category of 'content' is primarily concerned with the ingredients discussed: identification of certain kinds of fish, problematic and enigmatic names, geographical discussion of the areas mentioned, or practicalities of preparation, with parallels in classical authors and references to secondary literature. The 'context' category places the fragment within the *Deipnosophistae*, with an eye for criticism, facetiousness, or grandiloquent sarcasm on Athenaeus' part, who is somewhat ambivalent about Archestratus' over-fussiness. The commentary is generally quite informative, once you realise you are not going to get the kind of details found in a more literary commentary, such as Olson's & Sens'. All the same, the authors give the necessary parallels from a wide range of authors dealing with food (e.g. comic poets, Petronius) or biology (e.g. Aristotle, Aelian). Cicero's remarks about salt fish and cheese sauce, not so relevant for most studies of the Roman polymath, suddenly become valuable in assessing the development of antique taste. The fragments are interspersed with impressionistic drawings of cooking equipment, coins, plates and figurines, based on archeological finds. Elsewhere in the book similar figures are included to give an impression of Archestratus' time and the world of the Greek cities in Sicily and southern Italy from which he originated.

As an appendix the authors present us "Two recipes derived from Archestratus". This sounds slightly more promising than it is, but the authors succeed in conveying a key element of Archestratus' recipes: the beauty of their simplicity. It is also insightful to realise how little practical detail Archestratus actually gives his readers, and how little a modern reader can actually put to use when applying the poet's off-beat verse cookery book. As such Archestratus is probably not to be considered a chef himself, nor is his poetry meant to be a proper cookbook. His lines rather contain the inventory of a *gourmet's* palate, larded with interesting details and tender care.

The bibliography is divided into the original 1994 version, and a second listing for the second edition. I was surprised at the omission of J. Davidson's 1999 monograph *Courtesans and Fishcakes*,<sup>4</sup> which has a thing or two to say about Archestratus and certainly about Greek food in antiquity. The book concludes with an English index of classical authors, placenames and ingredients (mainly types of fish; meat is virtually absent from Archestratus' preserved fragments). The introduction, moreover, is conveniently preceded by two small numbered maps and a list of the 60 towns mentioned in the fragments, underlining just how much regional information Archestratus has gathered from all over the Greek world as it was known in the mid-fourth century BCE.

Although the introduction ventures on the slippery discussion of the poem's genre, the authors do not really have an answer to its problematic categorization. Their solution, considering the *Hedypatheia* as epic parody, is not an entirely convincing one. To regard it as belonging to the same genre as the *Battle of Frogs and Mice* is stretching the boundaries a bit too far. The parallel with Matro's *Deipnon Attikon* is more convincing due to their shared subject matter, but the problem remains that the *Hedypatheia* lacks an essential criterium for parody: it is not really funny or mocking, nor does it appear to be intended as such, despite its pleasant and

light tone. Moreover, apart from a few interesting but minor epic turns, Arcestratus' Greek is not particularly colourful (compared to e.g. that of Metro of Pitane), which makes it more difficult to see the *Hedypatheia* as a literary parody of Homer or Hesiod, unless the parody merely contrasts with the subject matter of early epic. The other parallels (Xenophanes, Hegemon of Thasos) are indeed closer to Arcestratus' topic but, as even the authors themselves admit, Arcestratus is different, as his instructions appear to be genuine (p. 14). Their conclusion that the poem was 'not a hands-on cookery book but a volume to be enjoyed at a rich man's banquet and symposium' (p. 13) seems to be a fair assessment, given the evidence, and Athenaeus, who calls Arcestratus the Hesiod or Theognis of epicures.

To whom is this little book of interest? Those whose concern in this poet is strictly philological are better served by Olson's and Sens' edition, as Wilkins and Hill do not aim at readers of Greek. Those who expect sparkling and imaginative poetry will be equally disappointed at Arcestratus' generally rather prosaic verses; points of interest in the Greek are easily lost in translation. Those, however, who take a keen interest in the ancient world of food will find insightful details with regard to the antique preference for fish of numerous kinds, where to get them, their particular qualities and, less prominently, their preparation. The authors' parallel with a modern 'good food guide' captures Arcestratus' essence quite aptly. From a wider perspective Arcestratus' fragments occasionally function as tiny windows of culture, providing images from daily life in antiquity, far from the world of epic or tragedy. Moreover, they show just how cosmopolitan a Greek Arcestratus was, who got his information from all over the Greek world, tracing the finest local produce. But also for the literary minded Wilkins' & Hill's edition is of some interest, if only because many of the places and people discussed ring bells from contexts better known.

As an introduction to Arcestratus this is a sympathetic, inexpensive book, and Wilkins and Hill have done this poet, elsewhere mainly available in costly scholarly editions (Olson and Sens) or scattered through several volumes of Athenaeus, a favour by presenting the translated fragments of the *Life of Luxury* to a wider audience again. I should note, however, that apart from the added introduction to the revised edition (with a supplement to the original bibliography) and a few cosmetic changes (improved typesetting), the text is exactly the same as the original 1994 edition; there is little need to replace one's old copy here.

The book is produced nicely, although I noticed a few glitches in typography, all of which are ostensibly due to poor OCR conversion, as they are not in the original 1994 print (an apostrophe instead of a comma on p. 41, ill-corresponding brackets on p. 45, an inadvertently inverted apostrophe on p. 60, [tenthel instead of [tenthes] on p. 73). There are also some omissions in the bibliography: Hammond is referred to on p. 52 but for some reason not included in the bibliography, as are Trendall (p. 34) and A. Mair (p. 44). The bibliographical item of Yan-Kit So, *Classic Food of China* is placed in the wrong alphabetical order.

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## Notes:

- [1.](#) J. Wilkins & S. Hill, *Arcestratus. The Life of Luxury. Europe's oldest cookery book. Translated with introduction and commentary*, Totnes: Prospect Books, 1994. 112 pp.
- [2.](#) Not least by Wilkins himself. Cf. J. Wilkins, *The Boastful Chef*, Oxford 2001 ([2001.10.33](#)); J. Wilkins and S. Hill, *Food in the Ancient World*, Oxford 2006; J. Wilkins, D. Harvey and M. Dobson (eds.), *Food in Antiquity*, Exeter 1995; D. Braund and J. Wilkins

(eds.), *Athenaeus and his World*, Exeter 2000.

[3.](#) D.S. Olson and A. Sens, *Archestratos of Gela. Greek Culture and Cuisine in the Fourth Century BC*, Oxford 2000.

[4.](#) J.N. Davidson, *Courtesans and Fishcakes. The Consuming Passions of Classical Athens*, London 1999.

