



Empires of Food: Feast, Famine, and the Rise and Fall of Civilizations

Evan D.G. Fraser, Andrew Rimas

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We are what we eat: this aphorism contains a profound truth about civilization, one that has played out on the world historical stage over many millennia of human endeavor. Using the colorful diaries of a sixteenth-century merchant as a narrative guide, *Empires of Food* vividly chronicles the fate of people and societies for the past twelve thousand years through the foods they grew, hunted, traded, and ate—and gives us fascinating, and devastating, insights into what to expect in years to come. In energetic prose, agricultural expert Evan D. G. Fraser and journalist Andrew Rimas tell gripping stories that capture the flavor of places as disparate as ancient Mesopotamia and imperial Britain, taking us from the first city in the once-thriving Fertile Crescent to today's overworked breadbaskets and rice bowls in the United States and China, showing just what food has meant to humanity. Cities, culture, art, government, and religion are founded on the creation and exchange of food surpluses, complex societies built by shipping corn and wheat and rice up rivers and into the stewpots of history's generations. But eventually, inevitably, the crops fail, the fields erode, or the temperature drops, and the center of power shifts. Cultures descend into dark ages of poverty, famine, and war. It happened at the end of the Roman Empire, when slave plantations overworked Europe's and Egypt's soil and drained its vigor. It happened to the Mayans, who abandoned their great cities during centuries of drought. It happened in the fourteenth century, when medieval societies crashed in famine and plague, and again in the nineteenth century, when catastrophic colonial schemes plunged half the world into a poverty from which it has never recovered. And today, even though we live in an age of astounding agricultural productivity and genetically modified crops, our food supplies are once again in peril. *Empires of Food* brilliantly recounts the history of cyclic consumption, but it is also the story of the future; of, for example, how a shrimp boat hauling up an empty net in the Mekong Delta could spark a riot in the Caribbean. It tells what happens when a culture or nation runs out of food—and shows us the face of the world turned hungry. The authors argue that neither local food movements nor free market economists will stave off the next crash, and they propose their own solutions. A fascinating, fresh history told through the prism of the dining table, *Empires of Food* offers a grand scope and a provocative analysis of the world today, indispensable in this time of global warming and food crises.

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