“A continuall and dayly Table for Gentlemen of fashion”: Humanism, Food, and Authority at Jamestown, 1607–1609

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The story of Jamestown’s first years is often told as a tardy, frail, and fumbling beginning for English settlement in the New World. Undermined by its leaders’ stubborn and often brutal pursuit of unrealistic plans, Jamestown found salvation in the form of tobacco monoculture, which the Virginia Company neither intended nor fully embraced. The logic of tobacco cultivation led to an insatiable desire for land and labor that culminated in the violent expulsion of the Chesapeake’s native population and the establishment of African slavery. The turmoil and violence of Jamestown’s beginning, in this telling, were problems that prefigured their solution in the establishment of a regime of racial exclusion and exploitation.

Recent literature has put forward a substantially different interpretation by situateing Jamestown in a broad sixteenth-century context. For promoters of English settlement such as the Reverend Richard Hakluyt, the Virginia Company’s project was the culmination of a lifetime’s work collecting, translating, and publishing travel accounts. Hakluyt and others applied the lessons learned from Dutch, Portuguese, French, and especially Spanish efforts to the settlement at Jamestown, drawing also on English experiences in the Mediterranean, in Ireland, and elsewhere in the Atlantic world. From this perspective, what makes Jamestown important is not its singularity as the first permanent English settlement, but the links between the Virginia Company’s effort and those that came before it. Jamestown represents an especially well-planned and well-documented project that offers valuable insights into the political and social ideas that shaped the early English Atlantic world as a whole.1

This essay first took shape during my graduate studies at NYU, where the participants in Tom Bender’s dissertation seminar and the NYU Atlantic History Workshop offered valuable comments on my earliest efforts to link food and political culture. A fellowship at the John Carter Brown Library in 2002 further helped clarify the argument in its early stages. Later versions were presented as conference papers at the Association for the Study of Food and Society’s 20th Annual Conference in Victoria, B.C., and at the British Group for Early American History’s annual conference in Swansea, Wales, both in 2007. As a seminar paper, it benefited from comments I received at the NYU Department of Food Studies’ “Feast and Famine” colloquium and especially from the participants at the Atlantic History Seminar at Harvard University in August 2007. Many thanks to the AHR’s anonymous readers for their very helpful comments. Special thanks to Karen Ordahl Kupperman for her help with this article and with the larger project, both of which have benefited enormously from her astute comments and her very generous support.

1 Karen Ordahl Kupperman, The Jamestown Project (Cambridge, Mass., 2007); Peter C. Mancall, Hakluyt’s Promise: An Elizabethan’s Obsession for an English America (New Haven, Conn., 2007); Alison Games, The Web of Empire: English Cosmopolitans in an Age of Expansion, 1560–1660 (Oxford, 2008);
Another important theme of this literature is that the history of early Jamestown reflects a process of experimentation, of trial and error, in which English ideas about politics and society were adapted to suit the challenging circumstances of the Chesapeake. As events on the ground required it, the Virginia Company proved willing to improvise, and by 1618, as Karen Ordahl Kupperman has shown, they had found a solution that served as a model for all subsequent English efforts at settlement. Here again, Jamestown’s importance lies not in the distinction of being first, but in the fact that it was at Jamestown that English political culture was shaped into “the archetype of English colonizing.”

Food offers a new perspective on these questions in three distinct ways. First, in its early years, the Virginia Company struggled to raise funds for the massive expense of supplying the settlement. Chronically short of food, the settlers themselves struggled to secure supplies from neighboring Indian groups with mixed success. Jamestown’s supply problems culminated in the gruesome “starving time” of 1609–1610, when hunger reduced the settlement to the point of collapse and rumors of cannibalism suggested that the social fabric itself had disintegrated. In this context, supplies were not only a tremendous logistical problem but also a dense symbol of the social status and political authority of those who controlled them. Each of the leading figures at Jamestown knew that food was the only aspect of daily life that could convey such rich meanings, and they conducted themselves accordingly.

Second, the men sent by the Virginia Company to govern the settlement naturally sought to present themselves in their actions and written accounts as strong leaders whose authority was beyond question. Finding themselves in an unfamiliar context, Jamestown’s leaders did this by surrounding themselves with familiar symbols and acting out familiar roles, but in doing so they appealed to markedly different visions of a leader. George Percy and Edward Maria Wingfield based their claims to office on patriarchal assumptions, seeing political authority as rooted in social status and legitimated through demonstrations of a leader’s regard for the welfare of the ordinary sort. Captain John Smith had a very different basis for his own claim. Smith’s willingness to share the rations, conditions, and labor of ordinary settlers derived from the humanist image of a leader, whose claim to authority rested above all on his willingness to subordinate his own needs to the common good. Since neither patriarchalism nor humanism was the sole legitimate language of politics in England or in the Chesapeake, the two visions of authority were mutually permeable, to a point, and how a given man chose to present himself in person or in writing was in part a strategic decision. Jamestown’s first leaders are often presented in the secondary literature as riven by petty squabbles over precedence and personality conflicts. In light of the fact that they held quite different visions of the nature of political authority, these disagreements were far from trivial.

Finally, the Virginia Company wrongly believed that relying on the Indians for...
food carried with it no connotations of subordination or submission, as it would have in England. But Jamestown’s leaders soon realized that they had to confront a third vision of a leader’s authority, the vision of a paramount chief. Powhatan, or Wahunsenacawh, the leader of the Algonkian-speaking native groups of the Chesapeake, asserted his preeminence not only by supplying the settlement with maize (or withholding supplies), but also in the way he conducted his dealings with English emissaries. For their part, the English clearly understood the central meanings conveyed by this vision of status and authority. Captain Christopher Newport, in particular, struggled to respond in similar fashion, and yet the image of a paramount chief was impossible for the English to sustain without supplies adequate to ensure their survival.

Food was the only aspect of daily life that was at once a rich symbol and a biological necessity, and as a result it offers a unique perspective for historians. Food links the trials and errors of Jamestown’s first years to larger questions of political legitimacy and authority that shaped the early English Atlantic world as a whole. To the native groups of the Chesapeake and the English visitors to the region, foods conveyed complex meanings connected to social status, gender, and political authority. Some of these meanings were specific to one group or the other, but others were broadly shared, and given the formidable language barrier that divided them, food was often the most direct way to convey these meanings. But however much references to food permeated the rhetoric and symbolism of authority within the walls of Jamestown, however much it dominated cross-cultural negotiations on the larger stage of the Chesapeake, its ultimate importance lay in the human body’s biological need for nutrition. For this reason, food—even the lack of food—was a daily marker of the most basic of social relationships.

Historians of the period regularly stress the importance of food in what Michael Braddick calls early modern England’s patriarchal state. Patriarchalism proceeds from the assumption that social inequality derived from a divine ordering of the cosmos that assigned each person a place in the hierarchy based on gender and birth. Equally important, the relationships between men and women, rich and poor, young and old were understood to be rooted in reciprocity and interdependence, each unequal part vital to the success of the larger whole. When medieval landlords collected rents in grain from their tenants, they connected daily life and daily labor with the most fundamental social distinction: between those who produced their own food and those who were able to live without labor. The reciprocity that legitimated these demonstrations of inequality found its purest expression in the Dearth Orders, when the monarch placed control of food in the hands of elites during times of scarcity. Fulfilling the patriarchal expectations of reciprocity, elites guaranteed the survival of those who were dependent on them by directly distributing stored grain or, in the early modern period, regulating local grain markets. Hospitality was a more common opportunity to achieve many of the same ends, bringing ordinary people into the homes of local elites for a meal that plainly manifested both social separation and reciprocal bonds.  

3 Michael J. Braddick, “Civility and Authority,” in David Armitage and Michael Braddick, eds., The
Dearth Orders and rural hospitality offered elites public occasions on which to demonstrate that their wealth, social status, and political authority were legitimate. Such occasions were not simply a passive reflection of underlying political and social inequalities, but rather a theater of negotiation. When elites appeared in public to exercise the powers of their office, legitimacy was conferred or withheld by peers and subordinates according to elites’ ability to present “a self which confirmed the authority of their office.” Describing these occasions in such terms underscores their dynamic quality, best illustrated by the fact that even social status, which served as the primary qualification for office, was itself the outcome of negotiation. As Felicity Heal and Clive Holmes have pointed out, “the gentry were that body of men and women whose gentility was acknowledged by others.”

Of course, the stakes were not so high on every public occasion. As Andy Wood has argued, to claim that authority is always being negotiated to the same degree is to make the term so diffuse as to rob it of its value. But for a variety of reasons, authority had shallow roots in the early Atlantic settlements, and English office-holders often found themselves faced with the need to stake a claim to legitimacy. For one thing, landed elites were few, and because the middling men chosen to lead voyages and settlements did not have social status commensurate with their office, they often struggled with each other for preeminence. This was especially true at Jamestown, since the Virginia Company named a council of seven men to lead the settlement but ordered that those names be kept secret until after arrival. The members of the council would then be revealed, and they would elect a president from their number, all but guaranteeing competition among the very different men named by the Company as potential leaders. Making it harder for such men to present a sufficiently authoritative self, there were few material reflections of social status in the Americas. Houses and furnishings were rough, dependents often sickly and few, and hunger was a constant concern. In this fluid context, would-be leaders seized any opportunity to stake or challenge a claim to authority by, in effect, striking a pose calculated to confirm their claim to office.

There was more than one way to achieve this goal. In addition to patriarchal
assumptions, English leaders could employ a range of images and references rooted in civic humanism. From the study of classical authors, civic humanists concluded that every commonwealth faced the threat of corruption, which arose when the common good was sacrificed to private ambition. Corruption could be averted only by the cultivation and exercise of the fundamental humanist virtue: the *vita activa*, or devotion of one’s life to active service of the commonwealth. Humanism and patriarchalism were familiar to elites and ordinary settlers alike, and each supposed that on public occasions an officeholder would embody a recognizable set of virtues as a means of legitimating his claim to authority.6

Which model to choose was in part a strategic decision aimed at appealing to a specific audience. Leading figures tried to use their control of food (when they did control it) to their advantage, but the audience in Virginia was not the only one that mattered. In writing, Jamestown’s early leaders simultaneously waged a rhetorical contest for precedence before a metropolitan audience of investors and officials. One of the distinctive features of English colonial projects was their reliance on private investors, which meant that the rhetorical aspect of English leaders’ claim to authority was especially important. In appealing to each of these audiences, the goal was the same: to present a reassuring image of the leader conducting himself according to well-rehearsed norms, and here again food provided a set of symbols and cultural references connected to leadership.

Given the tremendous expense of supplying the settlement with provisions and men, the Virginia Company chose officials who they thought would ensure a stable and prosperous settlement as quickly as possible. These men held very different qualifications: navigational skill and experience traveling to the Americas; military service, especially as a commander, in the Low Countries and Ireland; and the more traditional qualifications of birth and family connections recommended some men for leading roles in the early years. But because there were no precisely analogous circumstances in the English experience, the members of the Virginia Company had no clear idea of what sort of man would be the best choice to lead. As the Company improvised solutions to the problems facing the settlement, what ultimately mattered was a man’s ability to convince its members that he understood what had gone wrong and how to fix it, that his personal qualities and experiences had given him more general knowledge, a claim to what Eric Ash has called “the authority conferred by the perception of expertise.”7

Edward Maria Wingfield made precisely this sort of claim, presenting himself as the right sort of man to lead the new settlement. Not only was he a member of the Virginia Company, but he was named in the 1606 royal patent that gave the Company the right to settle the Chesapeake. In addition, he came from a reasonably prominent family, had received some education at the Inns of Court, and had had a distin-

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guished career as a soldier in Ireland and the Low Countries, including experience with a colonizing project in Ireland. Along with Bartholomew Gosnold, Wingfield was instrumental in recruiting settlers for the voyage, and both men took the further step of traveling to Virginia. Upon their arrival, no one was surprised to find their names on the sealed list of councilors chosen by the Virginia Company to govern the settlement. Since Wingfield alone was a patentee, his election by the rest of the councilors to serve a one-year term as president was a formality.8

Wingfield was joined on the council by several men whose social standing was clearly beneath his, including Captain John Smith. By naming such different men to lead the settlement, the Virginia Company signaled that different forms of “expertise” might prove useful in the Americas, but these differences soon became disagreements. Although leaders on both sides of the ocean expected food and leadership to be closely associated on public occasions, Wingfield’s efforts in this vein were disastrous. After only four months ashore, the remaining councilors summoned Wingfield to appear before them. He was charged with a range of abuses, removed from office, and fined the enormous sum of £300.9

Wingfield returned to England at the first opportunity, eager to appeal his conviction and restore his reputation before his peers in London. Soon after his arrival in May 1608, he completed a written defense, known as the “Discourse,” and presented it to the Virginia Company. The “Discourse” clearly reflects Wingfield’s efforts to appeal to a specific audience. He intended it to circulate privately, in manuscript, among the members of the Company, in part to spare himself the embarrassment of airing the details of his dispute with his social inferiors. But further, in the written words of his text, Wingfield was personally present in a way the author of a printed work would not have been, demonstrating the existing bonds between the men of status who made up the Virginia Company and, he hoped, strengthening his appeal.10

In the way Wingfield described the charges and defended himself, the “Discourse” also reflects a clear strategic decision. According to the manuscript, the charges fell under two broad headings. The first was that Wingfield had “Combyned with the Spanniards to the distruction of the Collony.” This was a potentially serious charge: George Kendall, one of the original councilors, had been shot for his supposed participation in just such a plot. Nevertheless, the charge of treason was backed by slender evidence, and Wingfield treated it dismissively in the “Discourse.” Most of the text focused, in extensive detail, on the second set of charges: that Wingfield had “affected a Kin[g]dome” and hidden “the Comon provision in the ground.”11

The provisions in question were primarily naval stores, durable enough to survive the long, hot southerly route from London to the Chesapeake via the Azores and Caribbean islands: salted pork, dried peas, ship’s biscuit, oatmeal, and beer. This monotonous, gray, and salty diet was livened considerably by the foods brought by native peoples in the settlement’s first months, but since these were perishable and were offered in small quantities, they were likely eaten soon after the English received them and were therefore not at issue in Wingfield’s case. Wingfield was accused not of incompetence in supplying the settlement—he seems to have assumed that that was the responsibility of the Company—but of improperly and unjustly distributing the common stores, and most accounts agree that these were sufficiently well stocked that the settlement expected to survive from them.12

In A True Relation (1608), the first published account of Jamestown, Captain John Smith claimed that Wingfield had kept the stores (particularly “the Sack, Aquavitie, and other preservatives for our health”) for himself and those close to him. Wingfield expanded on Smith’s charge in his defense, reporting that John Ratcliff, elected president after he was deposed, claimed that Wingfield had “denyed him . . . a Chickyn, [and] a spoonfull of beere, and served him with foule Corne.” Wingfield also reported John Martin’s claims that he had neglected the colony to “tend [his] pott, spitt, and oven,” and that he had denied Martin’s son, who was sick and soon to die, “a spoonfull of beere” as well. In his defense, Wingfield wrote that he had not “carryed any favorite over with me, or intertayned any thear,” and that he “did alwayes give every man his allowance faithfully.” In short, he hoped to head off the charges against him by pointing out that he had “alwayes . . . equally devided [the stores] amongst the Collonye” according to the ration set by the same men who deposed him. Smith provided a possible explanation of this disagreement in The Generall Historie of Virginia (1624). He elaborated on the charges there, accusing Wingfield of “ingrossing to his private, Oatmeale, Sacke, Oyle, Aquavitae, Beefe, Egges, or what not,” but when it came to “the Kettell,” he admitted, “that indeed he [Wingfield] allowed equally to be distributed.” In short, Smith’s accusation was that Wingfield had stolen the choicest foods from the common stores to serve at his own table, leaving only meager rations in the common “Kettell.”13

Wingfield’s response was that these charges were more accurately aimed at his rivals, who, hoping for “some better allowance for themselves and some few [of] the


sick their privates,” had tried to enlist him in a scheme to increase their rations, with (he claimed) no success. Refusing to dignify with an explicit denial the accusation that he had stolen from the common stores, Wingfield presented the other councilors as guilty of favoritism in their efforts to secure an extra ration for “their privates.” Important as it was to be scrupulously evenhanded in distributing food, patriarchalism was predicated on a leader’s regard for the sick and needy, the reciprocal bonds that legitimated his position. Martin’s charge that Wingfield had denied his son a spoonful of beer before his death suggested another dimension to the criticism of Wingfield: not just favoritism but a callous lack of charity. Accordingly, the deposed president wrote in his defense that he had “caused half a pint of pease to be sodden, with a peese of porke of my owne provision for a poore old man, which in a sicknes (whereof he died) he much desired.” Wingfield intended this anecdote to demonstrate his understanding that “Curtesy and Civility became a governor”—in other words, that charity and liberality, qualities expected of a leader, had eased this man’s final moments and, equally important, had done so without depleting “the Comon pott,” as Wingfield’s rivals had attempted.14

The fact that Wingfield controlled private supplies was not held against him. He had brought along chickens to raise in Virginia, and each of the leading figures at Jamestown supplemented his rations from the common stores with private provisions: butter and cheese, distilled spirits, preserved beef, and other foods. Wingfield was expected to maintain private stores, in part because they gave him the ability to distribute food to the sick and needy without reducing others’ rations. But more broadly, a man of his status and office was expected to command supplies beyond the reach of ordinary settlers, in quality and quantity, simply because meals were an inescapable and daily marker of status and office. Jamestown’s president and a patentee of the Virginia Company could not be expected to eat like a servant any more than he could appear in public wearing a servant’s clothes. Wingfield therefore made two central claims in his “Discourse” that plainly rested on patriarchal assumptions: a claim to elite status by virtue of the foods he ate, and a claim to leadership by virtue of the way he distributed his supplies.

But no matter how Wingfield defended himself in writing, the fact remains that his actions at Jamestown failed to secure the loyalty of either elites or ordinary settlers. The roots of his difficulty can be glimpsed by examining the term “private,” which had very different meanings when he and Smith used it. When Smith accused Wingfield of “ingrossing to his private” the choicest foods, he claimed that Wingfield was improperly using the common stores to support his own claims to status. By sharing the best foods with, presumably, Jamestown’s most socially prominent men, Wingfield was guilty of corruption in Smith’s eyes. But when Wingfield defended himself, he took the word “private” to be synonymous with “favorite,” and stressed his impartiality. In his eyes, elites had exclusive claim to the choicest foods, a claim demonstrated by their patriarchal obligation to provide for those in need. Elites could never be considered a faction or “favorites,” because their social standing legitimated their claim to the rarest and choicest foods. Smith and Wingfield differed in the way they understood the term “private,” but they shared the understanding

that it connoted corruption. Wingfield’s assumption in this regard was that food was, in essence, a sumptuary item.\(^\text{15}\)

Wingfield was hardly alone in this assumption. George Percy, the most prominent man by birth among those on the original voyage, also made sure that his office and station were represented at his table. Percy’s exclusion from the council was due to his family’s recent history. Two of George’s brothers had participated in the Earl of Essex’s futile rebellion in 1601; more serious, a distant relative had joined in the Gunpowder Plot. For these family associations, George’s brother Henry, the ninth Earl of Northumberland, would be imprisoned in the Tower for sixteen years. In their efforts to secure a royal charter, the Virginia Company would naturally keep the Percy family name off both their documents and the governing council. But there may have been other, more personal reasons for Percy’s exclusion. Percy had been sickly as a child and may have suffered from epilepsy, which might have dissuaded some from placing him in a position of authority. When he did hold office, he could hardly be called an unqualified success, which might have made him, however prominent, at best a stopgap officer. His birth made his right to rule unquestioned, though his ability to rule was far less certain.\(^\text{16}\)

Although he was not named to the original council, Percy assumed a leading role as other men died or left. During his brief career at Jamestown, he spent a shocking amount on clothes and furnishings, displaying his status with a gilded sword, gold buttons and thread, gold trimmings for his hats, and a brass bed with featherbed. All of this was kept in a house built for him in Virginia by servants paid by his brother, who also supplied Percy regularly with biscuits, cheese, butter, and valuable trade goods. In 1608, the Northumberland accounts show a total expenditure of more than £58 for Percy’s supplies. That number only increased in 1610, to more than £58 in clothing alone, with nearly £77 in other expenses, including provisions. The magnitude of these sums is clear when one considers that £5–6 would pay for passage to the New World, in exchange for which servants would sign indentures agreeing to work for a term of five years and sometimes more. Nevertheless, Percy sent a letter to his brother in the summer of 1611 acknowledging that “this last yere hath not bin a little Chardgable unto your Honnor,” but hoping that his brother would “not think any thing prodigally by me wasted or spent which tendeth to my no little Advance-ment.” To advance in Jamestown required fine clothing and, equally important, ample private supply:

True it is the place which I hold in this Colonie (the store affording no other meanes then a pound of meale a day and a little Oatemeale) cannot be defraied with smale expence, it

\(^{15}\) Mary C. Fuller, “The First Southerners: Jamestown’s Colonists as Exemplary Figures,” in Richard Gray and Owen Robinson, eds., A Companion to the Literature and Culture of the American South (Malden, Mass., 2004), 31–33.

standing upon my reputation (being Governour of James Towne) to keep a continuall and
dayly Table for Gentlemen of fashion aboute me.17

Percy viewed a well-laid table as part of his office, just as a gilded sword was ap-
propriate for the son and brother of an earl, and his words suggest that his social
peers in the Chesapeake and in England understood his claims to status and office
to rest on this basis.18

Wingfield’s efforts to display and describe himself in the language of patriar-
chalism echoed Percy’s, though at considerably less expense, but there were im-
portant differences between the two. Acknowledging the difficult circumstances at
Jamestown, Wingfield tried to present himself according to the humanist vision of
a leader on occasion, and he blended humanist references into his manuscript as well.

One passage from the “Discourse” encapsulates his strategy more clearly than any
other: “It is further said I did much banquit, and Ryot: I never had but one Squirell
roasted, whereof I gave part to Mr Ratcliff then sick.”19

In Wingfield’s rich statement, the patriarchal and humanist visions of a leader
awkwardly converge on a meal of roast squirrel. Clearly not drawn from his private
store, this meal was intended to signal status and frugality, reciprocity and forbear-
ance. The same was true of Wingfield’s account of it. Assuming it was in fact a
squirrel that Wingfield was referring to (in other words, that he was not describing
another animal as thin and stringy), he was notably frugal in allowing himself only
one. Several sources claim that Virginia’s squirrels were very tasty, and he would
have been tempted to eat more than one for this reason alone. Wingfield’s point was
that he was not living luxuriously in the difficult conditions of early Jamestown. In-
stead, he had sacrificed along with the settlers he led, a claim to virtuous leadership
clearly phrased in the language of civic humanism.20

By giving “part” of the squirrel “to Mr Ratcliff then sick,” Wingfield presented
himself once again in a patriarchal idiom, just as he had when giving pork and peas
to a dying man (and then writing about it). In the latter case, his use of food was
intended to reflect social separation and reciprocity. But when he carved a haunch
or saddle of squirrel for John Ratcliffe, he delivered food from his own table, perhaps
even his own plate, to another member of the settlement’s elite, marking the very
different relationship between president and councilor.

Wingfield also tried to combine the humanist and patriarchal languages of lead-
ership in a negative sense when he described the actions of the president and council

17 George Percy to the Earl of Northumberland, August 17, 1611, quoted in John W. Shirley, “George
18 Ibid., 234–238. For Percy’s appointment as president, see John Ratcliffe to Lord Salisbury, October
4, 1609, in Barbour, The Jamestown Voyages, 2: 284. Emanuel van Meteren, Commentarien (1610), ibid.,
2: 278, suggests that although Percy was in charge at Jamestown, he was largely ignored.
19 Wingfield, “Discourse,” 223. For a different interpretation of these events, see Trudy Eden, The
Early American Table: Food and Society in the New World (DeKalb, Ill., 2008), 49–58.
20 Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed., s.v. “squirrel”: 1.c. “Applied to other animals or to persons,
usu. with contemptuous force.” For claims that squirrels were tasty, see William Bullock, Virginia Imp-
artially examined, and left to public view, to be considered by all Judicious and honest men (London, 1649),
4; Thomas Harriot, A Briefe and true report of the new found land of Virginia (1590; repr., New York,
1972), 19; William Strachey, The Historie of Travell into Virginia Britania (1612), ed. Louis B. Wright and
Virginia Freund (London, 1953), 124; “A Briefe Relation of the Voyage unto Maryland, by Father
Andrew White, 1634,” in Clayton Colman Hall, ed., Narratives of Early Maryland, 1633–1684 (New York,
1910), 44. See also Fuller, “The First Southerners,” 32.
that had deposed him, and here as well his focus was on food. According to Wingfield, the remaining councilors, Smith, Ratcliffe, and Martin, were of inferior social status and did not understand the need to demonstrate the fine nuances of hierarchy and reciprocity at meals, as he claimed to have. Instead, the hunger of this “triumvirate” was manifested as greed and gluttony, shading into tyranny. Wingfield wrote that the “Presidentes and the Councellors spittes haue night & daie bene endaungered to break their backes so laden with swanns, geese, duckes, &c,” and “many tymes their flesh pottes haue swelled.” His carefully chosen words here were vital to his meaning. The councilors were portrayed as gorging themselves on one of the quintessential status foods. By eating swans, they had clearly overstepped their social station, since swans were reserved for the very highest reaches of the social order. But more, Wingfield plainly referred to the seizure of power by Julius Caesar and the Triumvirate, which brought an end to the Roman Republic. Here again, humanist conceptions of the leader intersect with the distribution of food, though this time in a negative sense intended to denigrate Wingfield’s rivals. The Virginia Company expected food to reveal a leader’s capabilities or lack thereof, and the centrality of food in Wingfield’s self-justifications and condemnations shows that he shared these assumptions.

Even worse than these demonstrations of greed, gluttony, and social presumption, Wingfield continued, was the fact that “many hungry eies did behold [these feasts] to their great longing.” In this image, the audience to the councilors’ display of social standing and political authority was starving, making the council’s claims to legitimacy hollow, if not cruel. Wingfield recognized the weight of the charge against him and again in this passage turned the argument back on his accusers, suggesting that they were devoid of charity and virtue, that their meal constituted “riot” whereas his was marked by charity and moderation. Captain John Smith himself presented similar charges against Wingfield’s successors, claiming that John Ratcliffe, who was elected president in Wingfield’s place, had “riotously consumed the store.” The similarity in these accusations suggests that such accounts were a potent charge against a leader. Feasting oneself while the sick and weak starved was tyranny in its plainest form.

Both Smith and Wingfield condemned leaders for failing in their most basic responsibility, and in particular for the moral failure represented by squandering the stores. But the two spoke very differently about the political role and moral obligations of Jamestown’s lower orders. In Wingfield’s account, ordinary settlers appear only as passive “hungry eies” whose mute condemnation underscored the illegitimacy of his rivals. According to patriarchal assumptions, society’s proper functioning depended at bottom on leaders, who when they conducted themselves properly gave structure to what a later governor of Jamestown called the “wavering and insolent” lower orders. The political role of ordinary settlers, then, was to witness and affirm


22 Wingfield, “Discourse,” 223; Smith, The Generall Historie, 169. Making a similar point about his stewardship of the common store, Wingfield wrote that he had bred “above 37” chickens while in the Chesapeake but ate only one, when he himself was sick. Ratcliffe, on the other hand, had before then “tasted of 4 or 5.” Wingfield, “Discourse,” 231.
the claims of their leaders. Though they might be expected to grumble or mangle a bit, the patriarchal vision assumed that, when placed under proper “government,” the lower orders of society would become part of an orderly and productive whole. When this turned out not to be the case, writers did not usually point the finger at leaders. Instead, problems at early Jamestown, as in other English settlements, were often attributed to “idleness” on the part of ordinary settlers. Puritan minister and Virginia Company investor William Crashaw, for example, described the few Virginia settlers who had survived the early years as “the scumme and skouring of the streettes” that the Company had “raked up out of the kennels” of London to send overseas. Crashaw’s harsh language echoes that of the Elizabethan Books of Orders and Poor Laws, which distinguished the deserving from the idle poor. The former were unable to work through no fault of their own and were entitled to relief according to the patriarchal vision of society; the latter were viewed as criminals for their refusal to abide by their most basic social obligation. Again speaking in terms of moral culpability, Crashaw blamed ordinary settlers for Jamestown’s troubles, and Wingfield shared the basic assumption that their role was, essentially, to do as they were told.23

In Smith’s writings, Jamestown’s ordinary settlers play a far more central and active role, and although he also blamed disorder at Jamestown on “idleness,” he meant the term differently. In Smith’s usage, “idleness” was the opposite of the vita activa, an abandonment of the active pursuit of the common good, and it applied to Jamestown’s gentlemen, not its ordinary settlers. Smith’s relationship with Wingfield and many other leading figures at Jamestown was famously difficult: he was threatened with execution during the journey to Virginia for some sort of mutinous speech and arrived in the Chesapeake in chains. When his appointment to the Virginia council was revealed, Wingfield, Percy, and other leading figures found it difficult to accept him as a member of the council and a peer. Smith recognized that his own claims were supported only by Jamestown’s ordinary settlers, and his language reflects that fact, but claims to authority could not ultimately rest on that foundation. As Wingfield had, Smith appealed to the Virginia Company, the ultimate authority, in writing, and like Wingfield’s, Smith’s appeal ultimately rested on food: on how and from whom he supplied the settlement, how he distributed those supplies, and what he reserved for himself. The core of Smith’s rhetorical strategy was that he provided food when others could not, and that he distributed the common stores without Percy’s and Wingfield’s obsessive regard to status. He linked these claims to humanist assumptions that during times of scarcity, a leader must not only provide food but also share his subordinates’ hunger.24

In addition, Smith recognized that claims to authority could not be confined to Jamestown proper, as Percy and Wingfield thought. To provide the settlement with food required operating on a much larger stage, the Chesapeake as a whole, and Smith’s claim to authority rested on his ability to operate in this larger, cross-cultural


24 Barbour, The Three Worlds of Captain John Smith, 109–120.
context. In this regard, both he and Wingfield were working from the same script, although they read it in different ways. In its “Instructions given by way of advice,” the Virginia Company again drew lessons from past experiences, especially Roanoke, to guide Jamestown’s councilors. To “avoid the Danger of famine,” the council was instructed to “Endeavour to Store yourselves of the Country Corn,” which meant establishing peaceful trade relations with native groups. Here again, each of Jamestown’s leading figures interpreted the advice and instructions of the Virginia Company according to his understanding of a leader’s role. Wingfield, it seems, rarely left the confines of Jamestown during his stay in Virginia, reporting that “the Salvages brought to the Towne such Corne and flesh as they could spare” in the first months. He no doubt presented himself to maximum effect when emissaries arrived from Powhatan, grandly welcoming and rewarding them with small gifts in return for the foods they brought.25

For the year following Wingfield’s deposition, Smith served as Jamestown’s cape merchant, charged with “adventuring abroad to make them provision.” He took the “Instructions” to mean actively pursuing trade with the Indians for food; as Wingfield put it, after his removal from office “the Councillors (Master Smyth especially) traded up and downe the River with the Indyans for Corn, which releved the Collony well.” From September 1608 until he was forced to leave Jamestown roughly a year later, Smith served as president, but his focus remained on traveling the forests and waterways of the Chesapeake to secure food supplies.26

The Virginia Company’s “Instructions” suggested that securing supplies would be a simple matter of enticing the Indians with inexpensive beads, copper, metal tools, and other trade goods. Most of the early travel accounts seemed to support these assumptions, describing ample and apparently spontaneous offers of food on the part of individuals and groups the English encountered in the first weeks. These were uniformly interpreted as a sign of peaceful intentions and guileless goodwill, but the same accounts describe meals shared with native leaders very differently. Gabriel Archer’s account of the first voyage of exploration up the James, for example, recounts a meal the exploring party shared with the werowance of Arrohattoc. The Indian leader “satt upon a matt of Reedes, with his people about him,” and “caused [a mat] to be layd for Captain Newport,” a gesture that marked Captain Christopher Newport’s commensurate status among the English. Later, with two werowances present, Arrohattoc and Parahunt, the message was the same. The Indian leaders “satt by themselves aparte from all the rest . . . Many of his company satt on either syde: and the mattes for us were layde right over against the kynges.”27

These meals were especially important because the English believed that Parahunt, werowance of the village named Powhatan, was Powhatan himself. Although it was gratifying that Newport, the leader of the English party and a member


of the Virginia council, was recognized as a man of commensurate status, Newport understood that these meals had conferred an obligation. Among English men of elite status, a return invitation was expected, since only social inferiors were confined solely to the role of guest. Therefore Newport “caused two piecees of porke to be sodd a shore with pease; to which he invyted King Pawatah.” At this meal “King Pawatah . . . fedd familiarly, without sitting in his state as before.” Prominent men on both sides presented themselves as preeminent, and each in turn expected that his guests would accept a subordinate position along with the invitation, as Parahunt did by abandoning his former displays of “state.” Both sides were actively seeking common ground on these occasions, a message plainly understood despite the language barrier.28

As befitted the region’s paramount chief, Powhatan conveyed a very different message, one of dominance and English dependency. Every time the English appeared before him, he made these messages perfectly clear. On his first visit to Powhatan’s seat at Werowocomoco, Smith, at that time a captive, was given so much food that he feared he was being fattened for slaughter. When he was admitted into Powhatan’s presence, the sight, he wrote, “drave me into admiration to see such state in a naked Salvage.” Marked by liberal gifts of food and a magnificent display of “state,” Powhatan’s claim of preeminence was unmistakable.29

As Smith’s fears that he was being fattened indicate, not all messages were so clearly received. One vital element of food exchanges at early Jamestown that has become clear only recently is the unprecedented drought the region endured during these years, adding very real questions about Powhatan’s people’s survival to his calculations about whether to supply Jamestown with food and how much to offer. The English also uniformly misinterpreted markers of gender roles and gendered labor. When English elites hosted a meal, only women of very high status would expect to share the table. Instead, women cooked, served, and cleaned up, signaling the gender inequality that was a vital element of a properly ordered patriarchal household. Percy wrote of a formal meal that “the chiefest” of his Indian hosts “sate all in a rank” on mats, while “the meanest sort brought us such dainties as they had, & of their bread.” From other descriptions, it is clear that by “the meanest sort” Percy meant women, but the meanings of these occasions for Algonkians were likely quite different. According to Helen Rountree, the message for an Indian audience was that women had produced, prepared, and provided the food for the prominent men at such feasts. Their exclusion from the table, in this light, was less important.30

Although there were ample chances for misunderstanding, some meanings could not be denied. Powhatan was the paramount chief of the region, and as long as English leaders depended on him for food, it was impossible for them to avoid acknowledging that fact, although Percy and Wingfield tried as hard as they could. They

insisted on presenting themselves as magnificent, representing in their conduct and written accounts that because of the trade goods and weapons under the control of Jamestown’s president, Indians and English alike recognized him as paramount. In refusing to visit Powhatan, these men were refusing to play the part Smith had in his first meeting, the inferior role of guest. For the same reason, Powhatan never visited Jamestown. In the fall of 1608, Smith told Powhatan that gifts from King James awaited him at Jamestown. Powhatan responded, “If your king have sent me presents, I also am a king, and this is my land: eight dayes I will stay to receive them. Your father [Newport] is to come to me, not I to him, nor yet to your fort, neither will I bite at such a bait.” Powhatan knew as well as anyone that Jamestown’s president might present himself as preeminent inside the fort, but sooner or later someone would have to appear before the paramount chief to ask for food.31

Since Jamestown’s president would not visit Powhatan, the settlement needed an emissary, and two of the original councilors, Captains Newport and Smith, filled this role. Newport was Smith’s only rival on the larger stage of the Chesapeake, but his efforts to assert authority and secure food supplies were a failure. Although he could not claim Percy’s birth and wealth or Wingfield’s office, he proved just as attentive to his own status. Because Newport traveled regularly between the Chesapeake and England, his appeals to the Virginia Company were delivered in person, and he wrote no self-justifications of his conduct. Further, his naval rank entitled him (in his own mind and apparently the Virginia Company’s) to preeminence everywhere except at Jamestown itself, where he seems to have accepted a subordinate status to the settlement’s president. Therefore, as he had when requiting Parahunt’s invitation, Newport presented himself before Powhatan as an equal, echoing Powhatan’s claims to the status of paramount chief. But Powhatan knew that English dependency on the maize under his control made such displays empty, and he clearly signaled this to the English emissaries. At one meeting, he claimed that he regarded “a Basket of Corne [as] more precious then a Basket of Copper; saying he could eate his Corne, but not the Copper.” In other words, food is never simply a commodity: at bottom it is one of authority’s most basic ingredients. However the English might have tried to represent the value of the commodities they offered in exchange, Powhatan’s paramount status had its roots in his people’s fields of maize.32

According to Smith, on another occasion when Newport proposed to trade for food, Powhatan emphatically demonstrated that Newport’s efforts to echo the paramount chief’s claim to preeminence could not be reconciled with the English need for supply. Powhatan said, “it is not agreeable to my greatnesse, in this pedling manner to trade for trifles; and I esteeme you also a great Werowance. Therefore lay me downe all your commodities together; what I like I will take, and in recompence give you what I thinke fitting their value.” Powhatan suggested to Smith and Newport that a meeting between leaders was an opportunity to purchase respect and nothing else, that the Jamestown settlers “freely should give him, and he liberally would requite us.” Again according to Smith, the result of Newport’s efforts “to out brave this

31 Smith, The Generall Historie, 183.
32 Ibid., 194.
Salvage in ostentation of greatnesse” was to drive the price of corn so high that, Smith concluded, “I thinke it better cheape in Spaine.”

By insisting on the “ostentation of greatnesse” characteristic of a man who acknowledged no superiors, Newport, Percy, and Wingfield ignored the sweeping implications of their supply problems. Unlike elites in England, Jamestown’s leaders did not control supplies of food produced by their inferiors. This was the most basic reason why Newport’s efforts to present himself before Powhatan as an equal failed. In clear contrast to his rivals, Smith understood the limitations faced by Jamestown’s president, and as a result he never tried to present himself in the grandiose way his rivals had, even when he himself was president. When he appeared before Powhatan, Smith presented himself as subordinate to Newport, whom he referred to as his “father.” Taking advantage of Newport’s frequent absences, Smith claimed that he was unable to echo Powhatan’s largesse. Inside the fort as well, Smith realized that the circumstances required a different approach. He abandoned Wingfield’s and Percy’s patriarchal displays, since it was impossible for any of them to reciprocate loyalty with adequate provisions. Reflecting on the difficulties in compelling Virginia’s settlers to work, he wrote: “Many did urge I might have forced them to it, having authority that extended so farre as death: but I say, having neither meat, drinke, lodging, pay, nor hope of any thing, or preferment . . . I know not what punishment could be greater than that they indured.” Smith succeeded where his rivals had failed, securing both adequate provisions for Jamestown and the loyalty of ordinary settlers, who could only have viewed his return from each of his voyages, his barge loaded with food, as a deliverance from hunger.

The difference between Smith’s and Wingfield’s strategies is most clear in light of the way each man made use of his private supplies. In the spring of 1609, after rats had devoured the common stores and long before the Chesapeake Algonkians’ harvest would be ready, Jamestown’s hungry and fearful settlers were desperate, ready to trade all they had for food, when Smith announced, “all my English extraordinary provision that I have, you shall see me divide it amongst the sick.” For those well enough to work, “he that gathereth not every day as much as I doe,” Smith warned, would be banished from the settlement. Reserving nothing for himself, neither provisions nor the right to live from others’ labor, Smith was able to encourage the settlers to plant, gather, and preserve food. The circumstances demanded that he renounce any claim to a private store or an inner, select circle. Similarly, on one of the exploratory voyages Smith took up the Chesapeake, his men were afraid that their stores would run out and begged him to return. Smith continued the voyage by promising to share all their hardship: “for what is to come, of lodging, dyet, or whatsoever, I am contented you allot the worst part to my selfe.” The difference from Wingfield’s peas and salted pork or his haunch of squirrel, displays marked by an equal degree of ceremony and self-congratulation, could not be more stark. For Percy and Wingfield, private stores represented the ability to assert exclusivity and gentility, a social separation that gave Wingfield’s efforts at charity their meaning. Smith’s use of his private stores was exactly the reverse: he ostentatiously gave them

33 Ibid., 156.
away as a means of erasing the social distinctions between leaders and led to replace them with a different basis for his claim to authority.\textsuperscript{35}

In 1609, a supply mission arrived, proclaiming that a new charter had been granted the Virginia Company and a new leader had been sent to take command. But since this man, Sir Thomas Gates, had been wrecked on Bermuda, Smith remained as president of the council and leader of Jamestown under the terms of the original charter. Regardless, the new arrivals (who included some of Smith’s old adversaries) quickly moved to depose him. Recognizing that Smith’s authority within the fort had its roots in his relationships outside it—with Powhatan, his subordinate werowances, and other native leaders—his rivals tried to replace him at the head of Jamestown’s trading voyages. Smith understood their reasoning very well, writing of earlier disagreements that “some so envied his good successe, that they rather desired to hazzard a starving, then his paines should prove so much more effectuall then theirs.” Smith’s rivals tried to supplant him the way Newport had: by presenting themselves as Powhatan’s equals. According to Smith, these men (including Newport and Ratcliffe) “so much envied his estimation among the Salvages . . . that they wrought it into the Salvages understandings (by their great bounty in giving foure times more for their commodities then Smith appointed) that their greatnesse and authoritie as much exceeded his, as their bountie and liberalitie.”\textsuperscript{36}

In their written appeals to the Virginia Company, Smith’s rivals in 1609 made the same arguments that Wingfield had faced in 1607, namely that Smith’s distribution of the stores demonstrated the illegitimacy of his claims to office. Gabriel Archer, a principal rival of Smith’s, wrote that in order “to strengthen his authority, [Smith] accorded with the Mariners, and gave not any due respect to many worthy Gentlemen, that came in our Ships.” Percy described Smith’s methods in similar terms: “feareinge . . . thatt the seamen and thatt factyon mighte grewe too stronge and be a meanees to depose him of his govermentt,” Smith “Jugled with them by the way of feastingeinges Expense of mutche powder and other unnecessary Tryumphes.” In other words, Percy accused Smith of squandering the common stores in order “to Insinewate with his Reconcyled enemeyes and for his owne vayne glory for the which we all after suffred.” At the heart of this accusation lay two charges: Smith’s misuse of the stores and his appeal to the lower orders at Jamestown at the expense of the “worthy Gentlemen.” Word reached England that the disagreement stemmed from “dissention . . . about the distributing of the Vittles,” but to Archer and Percy, Smith’s crime was broader and more fundamental. Bypassing their claims to authority and their judgment of who was fit to rule, Smith successfully appealed to the settlement’s lower orders.\textsuperscript{37}

In Wingfield’s eyes, it was his peers who legitimated a claim to authority, not ordinary settlers, and in fact a true leader should learn, as he claimed to have, “to


\textsuperscript{36} Smith, \textit{The Generall Historie}, 186, 154.

dispise the popular verdict of the vulgar.” Defending himself from the charge that he “did much banquit, and Ryot,” Wingfield stressed in his “Discourse” that he had been evenhanded and moderate in distributing the stores, insisting that he had not feasted himself and his favorites while others went without. The accusation against Smith was at bottom the same: he had squandered the stores in an effort to support his claim to leadership. The difference in the accusations—between tyranny and demagogy—lay simply in who was invited to take part in the feasting.38

The conflicts among Jamestown’s leaders and would-be leaders were in part rooted in personalities, but they had deeper roots in the very different visions each man presented of a leader’s conduct. The Virginia Company’s choice of such different men to lead the settlement, and the ongoing process of experimentation that continued after 1609, suggest that no one had a clear idea of what sort of expertise would ensure peace, stability, and profit. Because supply problems presented political questions and not simply practical ones, the struggles and negotiations confronted by Jamestown’s leaders were echoed in later colonial ventures. In the unfamiliar, fluid, and often fatal Atlantic world, English leaders grasped for the familiar, presenting and describing themselves according to patriarchal and humanist visions of a leader.

Therefore, the connections between legitimacy, leadership, and food were not at all unique to Jamestown. Across the early Atlantic world, food and authority were intertwined because the labor required to procure food, the decisions about how it should be distributed, and the circumstances under which it was consumed each manifested a vision of society. Unlike other forms of symbolic communication, the pageantry of authority had to be accompanied in the case of food with something edible, and not just on rare and carefully staged occasions. Percy knew that his gilded sword, gold-laced hats, and brass bed were meaningless at best absent his ability to offer a “continuall and dayly” supply of the human body’s basic caloric needs.

Since neither the meanings of food nor the body’s need for nutrition can be suspended, food combines the symbolic with the quotidian. It is this combination that makes it such a valuable lens. It brings into focus the contingency and negotiation that characterized the political culture of the early modern English Atlantic world, but it also captures the roles of ordinary settlers and native groups in the legitimation of political authority on a formal level, a point that Smith understood better than anyone.

Just as food roots interpretations of symbolic communication in the everyday bodily needs of ordinary people, it similarly grounds interpretations of textual claims to authority. Because all English voyages and settlement projects needed to attract private investment and because backers expected to hear and read reports of leading figures conducting themselves according to familiar norms, the rhetorical struggle among Jamestown’s leaders was shared by many other settlement projects. The choice of how to present and describe oneself was, as Wingfield’s case makes clear, largely a strategic appeal to a chosen audience. As part of this strategy, English leaders might refer to different images of a leader or combine these images in various

ways. But food always lay at the center of textual claims to authority such as Wingfield’s, here again rooting the written claims that a would-be leader could make in the stores that nourished his subordinates.

Percy’s gilded sword and Wingfield’s roast squirrel are memorable examples of the ways English leaders claimed authority in the Chesapeake in their conduct and in writing, but it is fitting that Powhatan should have the last word on this question. His words—or, more precisely, his signs—to Smith and Newport are a caution to scholars quick to accept textual claims of dominion or to assume that European technology was always awe-inspiring. Of all the symbols of leadership that filled written accounts, only Powhatan’s corn could keep people alive. By reminding Smith and Newport of this, Powhatan made the point that no matter how well-dressed, well-fed, or well-born a leader might be, his claim to authority ultimately rested on the staff of life.

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