

Epic Appetites: Images of Food in Greece and Rome

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Although there exist many accounts (like that of Libanius which we have just heard*) describing food, its production, consumption and trade in the ancient Mediterranean world, there is nothing like a painting or sculpture or mosaic to bring these texts to life and flesh out our understanding of the role of food in past societies. From ancient Pompeii, for example, there remains not only the bakery (slide 1) with its lava flour grinding mills and brick ovens, but also a wall painting of the baker himself selling his bread (slide 2). Many ancient Roman sites preserve a *macellum* or market building (slide 3), complete with stalls and countertops, but we can also find the butcher hacking away at a joint of meat commemorated on this marble funerary relief (slide 4). Exquisite examples of silver table vessels (slide 5) have been uncovered in excavations all over the Roman empire, but only images like this tomb painting (slide 6) where they are set out on a table illustrate how they were used in antiquity. There also exist magnificent images of the food itself from simple painted still-lives of fruit (slide 7) to elaborate mosaics depicting the “catch of the day” (slide 8).

Tuning from Roman to ancient Greek imagery, we find that artists are more interested in the gods and heroes than in mundane everyday life—of which food (not drink) and its production seem to be a part. The Greek gods consumed not earthly fare, but a special heavenly diet of ambrosia and nectar. Also Greek heroes often had specially prepared foods; the least appetizing example is Achilles who was reputedly fed on the blood of still-living wild animals in order to transfer their strength to him. (In light of the fact that we are having dinner in a few hours I won't discuss today those Greeks like Kronos who consumed their own or others' children.) While the Romans left us extensive cookbooks like that of Apicius (3rd century AD) featuring such delicacies as Flamingo Stew and Rose Pie, the gastronomic writings of the ancient Greeks are mostly lost with the exception of some excerpts compiled by a 2nd century AD Egyptian writer named Athenaeus in a twenty-five volume work entitled *Deipnosophistai* (“The Philosophers at Dinner”). These excerpts resemble the fragments of dining debris depicted on a famous Hellenistic mosaic known as the “Unswept Floor” (slide 9), just left-over bones, shells, and crumbs from what was once a lavish banquet. There were once approximately twenty-five ancient Greek cookbooks but since Christianity little valued these texts, most were not copied by medieval scribes and so were doomed to oblivion. Hence we know little or nothing about the original context of these excerpted passages of Athenaeus and so could easily misinterpret their meaning.

There is also a conspicuous gender bias in our extant Greek images of food. Women are shown doing the heavy labor of producing food, such as grinding grain into flour (slide 10), while men are depicted reclining on banquet couches enjoying the fruits of the women's labor (slide 11). Every stage of the all-male symposium from the toasting at the beginning to the effects of overindulgence at the end is depicted in minute detail as on this *krater* or wine bowl made in Athens but found in Sicily (slide 12), but respectable citizen wives and daughters (as opposed to *hetairai* or courtesans) are rarely shown eating food or drinking wine. An amusing example is this woman who is secretly tipping back a slug of wine while only her servant girl looks on (slide 13).

Men or male slaves are the hunters and gatherers of the raw material rather than the processors or cooks of most food in the Greek diet. They are often depicted in the manly activity of hunting game such as hare or wild boar (slide 14). They catch fish with a line and pole (slide 15) and are occasionally show filleting their big catch (slide 16). Unique in the repertoire of Greek art is this image of plowing and sowing (slide 17), but in fact this scene on one side of a cup may be a religious ritual associated with the goddess of grain Demeter who is shown enthroned on the other side. On another unique Athenian vase (slide 18) we see a scene of the olive harvest: boys armed with sticks hitting the branches in order to bring down the olives, just as they still do today in Greece.

These olives may well be the produce that is being collected and weighed on another Greek vase (slide 19) where we see men placing containers of small round fruits or possibly nuts on what might be a scale. This brings us to the ancient marketplace known as the Agora (slide 20), which was not only a commercial area but also a place of religious shrines and civic buildings like lawcourts. One ancient author Euboulos states:

In one and the same place you will find all kinds of things for sale
together at Athens: figs— Policemen!
Grapes, turnips, peas, apples— Witnesses!
Roses, medlars, pomidge, honeycombs, chickpeas— Lawsuits!
Milk, curds, myrtle-berries— Allotment-machines!

Bulbs, lambs — Waterlocks, Laws, Indictments!

(trans. Edmonds)

The American excavations in the Athenian Agora have yielded, in addition to much civic equipment like the waterlocks and allotment machines mentioned by Euboulos, official state weights and measures, without which there can be no fair trade. These official bronze weights (slide 21) come in a series of denominations from a stater which is the largest and weighs 795 grams to a sixth which weighs 126 grams. Each has a symbol in high relief serving to identify the weight and to help the illiterate, and each is officially marked as property of the Athenian state. These containers (slide 22) are official dry measures and are inscribed with the word *Demosion* meaning they too belong to the state. And this amphora with an owl and the word *Demosion* (slide 23) may be an official liquid measure although only this single example survives. The letters delta-epsilon denoting *Demosion* or property of the state also appear on some simple wine cups and bowls found in the Agora. These relate to one of the perks of holding public office, namely dining at public expense during one's term of office. Meals took place in a special round dining hall at the southwest corner of the Agora (slide 24). At first these meals were fairly simple—cheese, barley cakes, olives, leeks, and wine, but by the late fifth century the menu also included meat and fish.

In addition to the official measures, other earthenware vessels were produced in Athens and elsewhere for certain commodities. The most ubiquitous in the ancient Mediterranean is the wine jar known as a transport amphora (slide 25). These have been found by the thousands especially in shipwrecks at the bottom of the sea (and in fact you can see a shell-incrusted one in the Rare Book Room of Smith Library donated to the University by Fred Crawford). The source of the wine can be determined both by the distinctive shape of the amphora, and also by the impression stamped on the handle— not unlike our wine bottles and labels. Another distinctive clay jar is the so-called Panathenaic prize amphora (slide 26)—a large container for olive oil given as a prize in the Athenian equivalent of the Olympics, a festival held every four years in honor of city's namesake Athena. Olive oil was one of the major export commodities of ancient Athens and these lucrative prizes—140 amphoras of olive oil for the victor in the chariot race— attracted the best Greek athletes to the city's quadrennial games. Finally a popular item in the fourth century BC was the fish plate (slide 27) which as its name and decoration imply was devoted to *frutta di mare* of all kinds, with a circular depression in the center for the sauce. These may have been made especially for the grave to ensure the owner of the most luxurious and expensive of ancient foods in the afterlife.

If fish was the most expensive food in ancient Greece, meat may have been the scarcest for it was only consumed on festival days. In an agricultural society like Greece a high value was placed on domesticated animals many of which were associated with deities, such as the god Pan who had the horns, tail and legs of a goat. One of Hera's epithets was "ox-eyed" and Zeus was worshipped in the form of a bull. Animals like sheep, goat and bovines were slaughtered not for everyday food, but only with great ceremony and as a thank-offering to the gods—in essence they were ritually sacrificed. It is clear from the rituals associated with animal sacrifice and from the types of imagery that the Greeks felt guilty and superstitious about the sacrifice of their domestic animals. The animal is conducted to the altar in a religious procession, as portrayed so sensitively on the frieze of the Parthenon (slide 28). Once at the altar the victim's head is sprinkled with water, so that it nods, a sign that it agrees to be sacrificed. Grains of barley are placed on the altar so the animal approaches it seemingly willingly. The knife which is hidden in a basket up to this point is then pulled out by the priest and the victim's throat is slit as women scream a ritual wail. Afterwards the knife is put on trial, found guilty, and cast away. The vase-painting images show only the preliminaries of the animal being led to the altar (slide 29), and, much later, the roasting of the meat (slide 30), but *never* the actual killing of the animal.

After the animal is butchered the bones are wrapped with fat and burned so that the pleasing aroma rises up to the gods. Being practical the Greeks save the meat for themselves, first boiling it and then roasting it. The more important the occasion, the more animals sacrificed. At the Panathenaic festival in honor of Athena a *hecatomb* or 100 cows were sacrificed. It is no wonder that Socrates associated this festival with indigestion!

I'd like to end with one last example of food imagery that speaks to the importance of agricultural products to Greek city-states. Many of them featured the commodity for which they were famous on their coinage. Thus, for example the silver coins of the city of Metapontum in the rich farming area of South Italy bear a stalk of wheat (slide 31). Another famous example is the silphium plant featured on the gold coins of the Greek colony of Cyrene in North Africa (slide 32). Related to fennel and celery, it was used, much like we use garlic, to flavor a variety of foods, marinades and sauces. It was considered indispensable in the classical Greek and Roman diet, but sadly we will never know its taste. It grew only in the wild in North Africa and was never successfully propagated artificially. Because the Romans unfortunately liked to eat the entire root and stem, it was overexploited and became extinct. Food crazes are obviously nothing new.

Recommended Reading

Phyllis Pray Bober, *Art, Culture and Cuisine: Ancient and Medieval Gastronomy*. University of Chicago Press, 1999.

Andrew Dalby, *Siren Feasts: A History of Food and Gastronomy in Greece*. Routledge, 1996.
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Peter Gamsey, *Food and Society in Classical Antiquity*. Cambridge University Press, 1999.
Oswyn Murray, ed., *Symptica: A Symposium on the Symposium*. Clarendon Press, 1990.
John Wilkins, *The Boastful Chef: The Discourse of Food in Ancient Greek Comedy*. Oxford University press, 2000.
John Wilkins, David Harvey and Mike Dobson, eds., *Food in Antiquity*. University of Exeter Press, 1995.