

A CULTURAL HISTORY OF FOOD IN ANTIQUITY

EDITED BY PAUL ERDKAMP

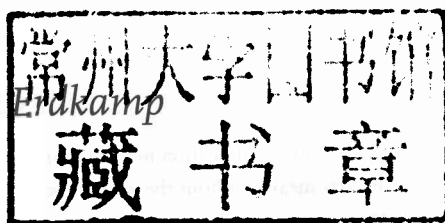


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OF FOOD

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VOLUME 1

Edited by Paul Erakamp



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**A CULTURAL HISTORY
OF FOOD**

VOLUME 1

A Cultural History of Food

General Editors: Fabio Parasecoli and Peter Scholliers

Volume 1

A Cultural History of Food in Antiquity

Edited by Paul Erdkamp

Volume 2

A Cultural History of Food in the Medieval Age

Edited by Massimo Montanari

Volume 3

A Cultural History of Food in the Renaissance

Edited by Ken Albala

Volume 4

A Cultural History of Food in the Early Modern Age

Edited by Beat Kümin

Volume 5

A Cultural History of Food in the Age of Empire

Edited by Martin Bruegel

Volume 6

A Cultural History of Food in the Modern Age

Edited by Amy Bentley

SERIES PREFACE

GENERAL EDITORS, FABIO PARASECOLI
AND PETER SCHOLLIERS

A Cultural History of Food presents an authoritative survey from ancient times to the present. This set of six volumes covers nearly 3,000 years of food and its physical, spiritual, social, and cultural dimensions. Volume editors and authors, representing different nationalities and cultural traditions, constitute the cutting edge in historical research on food and offer an overview of the field that reflects the state of the art of the discipline. While the volumes focus mostly on the West (Europe in its broadest sense and North America), they also draw in comparative material and each volume concludes with a brief final chapter on contemporaneous developments in food ideas and practices outside the West. These works will contribute to the expansion of the food history research in Asia, Africa, Oceania, and South America, which is already growing at an increasingly fast pace.

The six volumes, which follow the traditional approach to examining the past in Western cultures, divide the history of food as follows:

Volume 1: A Cultural History of Food in Antiquity (800 BCE–500 CE)

Volume 2: A Cultural History of Food in the Medieval Age (500–1300)

Volume 3: A Cultural History of Food in the Renaissance (1300–1600)

Volume 4: A Cultural History of Food in the Early Modern Age
(1600–1800)

Volume 5: A Cultural History of Food in the Age of Empire (1800–1900)

Volume 6: A Cultural History of Food in the Modern Age (1920–2000)

This periodization does not necessarily reflect the realities and the historical dynamics of non-Western regions, but the relevance of cultural and material exchanges among different civilizations in each period is emphasized.

Each volume discusses the same themes in its chapters:

1. *Food Production*. These chapters examine agriculture, husbandry, fishing, hunting, and foraging at any given period, considering the environmental impact of technological and social innovations, and the adaptation to the climate and environment changes.
2. *Food Systems*. These chapters explore the whole range of the transportation, distribution, marketing, advertising, and retailing of food, emphasizing trade, commerce, and the international routes that have crisscrossed the world since antiquity.
3. *Food Security, Safety, and Crises*. We cannot have a complete picture of the history of food without discussing how societies dealt with moments of crisis and disruption of food production and distribution, such as wars, famines, shortages, and epidemics. These essays reflect on the cultural, institutional, economic, and social ways of coping with such crises.
4. *Food and Politics*. These chapters focus on the political aspects of public food consumption: food aspects of public ceremonies and feasts, the impact on public life, regulations, controls, and taxation over food and alcohol production, exchange, and consumption.
5. *Eating Out*. The communal and public aspects of eating constitute the main focus of these essays. Authors consider hospitality for guests, at home and in public spaces (banquets and celebrations), and discuss public places to eat and drink in urban and rural environments, including street food, marketplaces, and fairs.
6. *Professional Cooking, Kitchens, and Service Work*. These chapters look at the various roles involved in food preparation outside the family nucleus: slaves, cooks, servants, waiters, *maitre d'hotel* etc., investigating also the most relevant cooking techniques, technologies, and tools for each period, giving special consideration to innovations.
7. *Family and Domesticity*. The acquisition, shopping and storage, preparation, consumption, and disposal of food in a domestic setting

are among the most important aspects of food culture. These chapters analyze family habits in different periods of time, paying particular attention to gender roles and the material culture of the domestic kitchen.

8. *Body and Soul*. These chapters examine fundamental material aspects such as nutritional patterns, food constituents, and food-related diseases. Furthermore, spiritual and cultural aspects of thinking about and consuming food are highlighted, including religion, philosophy, as well as health and diet theories.
9. *Food Representations*. These essays analyze cultural and discursive reflections about food, which not only contributed to the way people conceive of food, but also to the social and geographical diffusion of techniques and behavior.
10. *World Developments*. These brief chapters overview developments, dynamics, products, food-related behaviors, social structures, and concepts in cultural environments that often found themselves at the margins of Western modernity.

Rather than embracing the encyclopedic model, the authors apply a broad multidisciplinary framework to examine the production, distribution, and consumption of food, as grounded in the cultural experiences of the six historical periods. This structure allows readers to obtain a broad overview of a period by reading a volume, or to follow a theme through history by reading the relevant chapter in each volume.

Highly illustrated, the full six-volume set combines to present the most authoritative and comprehensive survey available on food through history.

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Introduction

Food and Commensality in the Ancient Near East

PAUL ERDKAMP

AGRICULTURAL REVOLUTION

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* tells the story of the primitive Enkidu and of Gilgamesh, a citizen of the city of Uruk. Enkidu, a wild man from the steppes, is to be civilized by the woman Shamhat, who teaches him the sophisticated ways of love and introduces him to the refinements of more civilized ways of life. She brings him to the home of some shepherds, who offer him the food of their table. However, Enkidu does not know this unfamiliar food and hesitates to touch it: “Enkidu did not eat or drink, but squinted and stared....Enkidu knew nothing about eating bread for food, and of drinking beer he had not been taught.” Shamhat encourages Enkidu, who is said to have been used to sucking the milk from wild beasts, to eat these civilized foodstuffs: “Eat the food, Enkidu, it is the way one lives. Drink the beer as is the custom of the land.” In the end, he enjoys the beer—seven jugs of it!—and the bread, and he even takes a bath, the first of his life.¹

Two points may be taken from this story. First, the food one eats is viewed as a sign of one’s civilization, or lack of it. In other words, the

food one eats indicates one's place in the world. Bread and beer are seen as defining the people to whom Shamhat and the shepherds belong: They are "the custom of the land." Second, cereals dominate the diet, as both items of this everyday meal are made from grain. There is no difference in this regard between city and countryside. The people of Uruk were just as much grain-eaters as the shepherds in the countryside. The difference emphasized is between peoples who know agriculture and peoples who do not.² Many thousands of years after the introduction of arable farming, people who did not plow and harvest could still be encountered in the early city-states of the Near East.

Throughout most of his existence, modern man lived by taking edible goods from the wild, gathering wild cereals, fruits, legumes, and nuts, and by hunting and fishing, including shellfish and insects. Such an existence is not necessarily harsh and frugal. One should be wary of making comparisons with modern hunter-gatherers who have been pushed by more powerful neighbors to marginal habitats. The introduction of agriculture is likely to have resulted in more labor than before, so one may ask why hunter-gatherers turned into agriculturalists in the first place. Part of the answer should be that no one ever invented agriculture. Agriculture was the result of gradual changes in hunting and gathering activities that led to more direct interference in animal and plant life. As gatherers concentrated on particular plants and got more and more involved in these plants' growth cycles, they gradually domesticated and changed the nature of these plants. Wild cereals shed their seeds easily and have very hard husks, while gatherers favored cereals that held their seeds better and had thinner husks. Over the centuries, wild cereals turned into emmer wheat, barley, and other grains. Similar changes occurred in the herds of wild animals, as hunting changed their age and sex structure. In a long process, mankind domesticated goats, sheep, and cattle, while other animals, like gazelles, were still hunted in large numbers. These changes may have been stimulated by population growth, which forced people to intensify the use of available resources.

From around 9,000 B.C.E., settlements of agriculturalists emerged in the so-called Fertile Crescent, stretching from Palestine and Anatolia, through Syria and northern Mesopotamia, towards western Iran. The agricultural revolution entailed many fundamental changes in society.³ First, it stimulated sedentary ways of life, as a large part of the community was now

forced to stay near fields and stocks, even though other members of society still migrated seasonally with domesticated animals or after wild herds. Second, the units in which people lived became larger. While hunter-gatherers lived in groups that comprised no more than a few dozen people, the early villages could number several hundred inhabitants. Neolithic Çatal Huyuk and Jericho may have boasted populations of a thousand people. Third, while the labor intensified, the productivity of the people working the land allowed others to turn to non-food related activities. Agriculture resulted in increased division of labor and specialization, which in turn stimulated technological levels and social distinctions. Differences in status and influence were expressed in material goods, encouraging trade and manufacture. These transformations of human life unfolded over thousands of years. In the fourth millennium B.C.E. it culminated in the emergence of cities of several thousand inhabitants, governed by local rulers (kings), whose power was based on their control of the main stuff of life: food.

It should be noted that the origins of agriculture lay neither on the banks of the Euphrates and Tigris nor in the valley of the Nile. An important shift occurred when agriculture spread into southern Mesopotamia in the sixth millennium B.C.E., which had been a vast marshy area, regularly flooded by the Euphrates. The annual flooding of the countryside as a result of rainfall in the mountainous areas to the north offers the key to the developments that occurred in this region. Agriculture had arisen in regions that depended on rain to water the crops. In southern Mesopotamia, precipitation is much too low to allow arable farming, so irrigation is vital. It is likely that population pressure in the neighboring regions compelled peoples to apply their expertise in farming in this much more difficult terrain. The combination of irrigation and fertile soil resulted in much higher levels of productivity than possible in the regions of rain-fed agriculture. Larger settlements, higher levels of specialization, and larger degrees of social and political differentiation were the result. Similar developments occurred in the Nile valley, where circumstances were even more favorable than in Mesopotamia, in that the flooding of the Nile occurs before the crops are sown, while the Euphrates begins to rise during the crops' growth cycle.

The Mesopotamian and Egyptian societies were based on labor-intensive arable farming. Livestock depended on access to fodder, but outside the zone of irrigation, natural grazing in Mesopotamia and Egypt is sparse and

frugal. Livestock therefore remained secondary and consisted primarily of sheep and goats, which thrived better on the frugal grazing than cattle did, and of pigs, which ate waste and therefore competed little with humans for the use of soil. Arable fields were interspersed with olive groves, garden plots, and palm trees. The natural resources of river and lakes were exploited too. It is important to realize that rain-fed agriculture continued to be undertaken and developed in neighboring regions. During the early Iron Age, complex farming estates emerged next to small-scale subsistence farming in regions like Palestine and Syria. In the vicinity of Jerusalem, undoubtedly sparked by the city's demands, terraces were formed to allow a more intensified cultivation of this hilly country.

City-states emerged in southern Mesopotamia in the fourth millennium B.C.E., with Uruk as the world's first metropolis. At the end of the fourth millennium B.C.E., the majority of the people in southern Mesopotamia lived in towns and cities, but most of them were still directly involved in working the land. It has been claimed that the planning involved in irrigation was a stimulus of state formation in Egypt and Mesopotamia, but it is also likely that in the face of the constant threat to the food supply, larger social and political institutions were better able to offer stability to wider groups within society. Any disruption of the flooding of the Nile or Euphrates threatened social stability.

The palace and the temple, and the estates of the elites, were at the heart of this civilization. Sumerian clay tablets depict male and female workers laboring under the supervision of an official cadre. They performed specialized tasks in the fields and in the workshops, where the edible and nonedible products of land and livestock were processed. The control of production, processing, and distribution of edible and nonedible goods required a complex administration, which gave rise to an innovation that changes our understanding of these societies dramatically: the development of writing.

While archaeology continues to be important, it only goes so far in answering the questions that we have concerning political, economic, social, and cultural developments on its own. Written documents allow us more in-depth knowledge of the food that members of these societies ate, better appreciation of the various processes that created this food, and more awareness of the cultural factors that shaped attitudes toward food and its

consumption.⁴ These topics will be discussed in this chapter regarding the Near East from around 3000 B.C.E. to the beginning of our era. Since most of the subsequent chapters in this volume will deal with classical antiquity, this introduction will deal with preclassical civilization, in particular Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Israel. Developments in the wider world will be dealt with in chapter ten.

DIET AND EATING HABITS

Food plays an important role in the goods that are depicted in Egyptian tombs, and many foodstuffs were included among the material goods supplied to the dead. However, these goods and depictions do not directly reflect the Egyptian diet. Wishful thinking regarding the afterlife may cause some dishes and food items to be overrepresented. Other foodstuffs may be depicted often, not so much because they were eaten in large quantities, but because of their symbolic value. Moreover, the exceptional may draw more interest in these sources than the mundane. Royal meals say little about the everyday meals of the common people. Regarding Mesopotamia we rely very much on administrative documents, but while some foodstuffs may have been of less interest to administrators than others and thus occur less often in the texts, we cannot say that their role in consumption was small.

Despite these problems, we have a good idea of the usual fare of the elites and the common people. One constant factor throughout the Near East is the predominance of cereals. Take for example the so-called *Tale of the Eloquent Peasant*, which sheds light on the everyday fare of common people in Egypt. Before he goes on a voyage, the main character says to his wife: "Look, you have twenty gallons of barley as food for you and your children. Now make for me these six gallons of barley into bread and beer for every day in which I shall travel."⁵ Although the wife and children probably ate other foodstuffs too, the husband limits himself to barley to indicate that they are provided for in his absence. In addition, in Mesopotamia, bread is seen as basic nourishment. One Akkadian proverb goes: "Let a poor man die, don't let him live, when he finds bread, he finds no salt, when he finds salt, he finds no bread." In other words, it is a sign of extreme poverty if one has either salt or bread, but not both of them.⁶ Furthermore, the fact that the rations—or, rather, salaries-in-kind—specified in the clay

tablets consist primarily of barley, beer, and bread reflects the predominance of cereals in the food supply. In this nonmonetary society, grain, and in particular barley, was so very common that it was used as means of payment.⁷ The sources from Jewish society confirm this picture, both in the days of the Old Testament and the Babylonian Talmud. The meal of the harvesters that Ruth is invited to take part in consists of bread dipped in “vinegar” (sour wine) and roasted grain (Ruth 2:14), while the Babylonian Talmud condemns eating of wheaten bread as wasteful as long as barley bread is available.⁸ These sources show that bread, in particular that made from barley, is the main ingredient of the food of the common people. The wealthy and powerful also ate mostly bread, but this is not to say that their table was dull and unvaried. Lists of words—a typical genre in Mesopotamia and Egypt—indicate the existence of over 40 types of bread in Egypt, while over 200 varieties of bread are known for Mesopotamia. The sources on the royal meals of the rulers of Mari indicate a large variety, depending on the way the dough is kneaded and the ingredients that are added to it, such as cracked grains, legumes, and nuts.

The common people supplemented their cereal-dominated diet primarily with food that was rich in proteins, in particular legumes such as lentils, fava beans, peas, chickpeas, and broad beans. A good indication of their role in the daily sustenance is provided by the Jewish Mishnah, which ruled (approx. 200 C.E.) that a husband had to provide specified amounts of grain, lentils, oil, and figs to his wife. In addition, servants in Mari (early second millennium B.C.E.) were given figs, as well as plums and pears. Although beekeeping was already known in third-millennium Egypt, the honey in the land of milk and honey was made of figs and dates. Honeyed dishes and fruits were important items on the royal table in Mari. Since milk, usually goat milk, was difficult to keep, dairy products were consumed mostly in the form of butter, cheese, and ghee. They were part of the rations mentioned on early Mesopotamian clay tablets. According to the Old Testament, vegetables were common in Egypt. After their flight from Egypt, when crossing the desert, the Israelites complain: “We remember the fish we used to eat freely in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic” (Num. 11:5).

This passage refers to another source of protein, which was probably very common along the Nile: fish. Meat, on the other hand, was regarded

a luxury throughout the Near East, although it is difficult to say exactly how uncommon it was. On the one hand, meat was included in the rations mentioned on the clay tablets of Mesopotamia. Moreover, sheep, goats, and pigs were common enough in Egypt and Mesopotamia not to have been exceptional. In one Mesopotamian story, for instance, a commoner presents an old goat to a local official, who rejects the present as too lowly.⁹ It is clear, though, that only the rich had access to large amounts of meat, and especially exotic kinds of meat. At the core of festive meals in Egypt were stews and roasted meats. Moreover, the kings of Mari feasted upon meat, including venison and rare birds such as ostriches. The picture is similar at the Persian court in mid-first millennium B.C.E.: Xenophon's depiction of royal meals emphasizes that meat was seen as the part of the meal that provided the most status.¹⁰

As we have seen, beer was the common drink in Egypt and Mesopotamia, and it remained so throughout antiquity. Barley beer was relatively light, and it was drunk by all members of society. It could be brewed at home (see the *Tale of the Eloquent Peasant* discussed previously) or at the brewery. Wine became known, too. The sources from Mari tell us that in the early second millennium B.C.E., the king drank a mixture of red wines. The Israelites did not drink beer, but did drink wine, including cheap, sour varieties. According to Genesis 9:20, Noah was the first to plant vines and the first to become drunk. Since the Greeks and Romans were wine drinkers too, wine also became an acceptable drink in Christianity. Beer never became a common drink among the people in Palestine. The deep rift that divided Palestine from Mesopotamia in this respect is reflected in the two traditions in the Talmud. While Palestinian rabbis condemn the drinking of beer and praise the beneficial effects of wine, their Babylonian colleagues censure the drinking of wine—instead of beer—as wasteful.¹¹

While the sources offer a reasonable idea of what people ate, they are less clear as to when and how often meals were eaten. Regarding Egypt, we are totally in the dark. In Mesopotamia, wealthy people seem to have eaten four meals a day: a light one and a larger meal before noon, and a light and heavy meal after midday; however, we do not know in which order these meals were eaten. The clay tablets on the royal meals at Mari indicate that the king had two meals a day, but the sources may limit themselves to the official, ceremonious meals.¹² According to an Akkadian proverb, men but