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Matt Maher

INTRODUCTION

According to myth, Prometheus was caught stealing fire from the gods and consequentially brought the harsh necessity of agricultural labour upon the Greeks. It was seen as a punishment imposed by a vengeful Zeus because without this labour seeds could not be converted into edible plants (Garnsey 1999). While this myth is concerned with the origins of ancient Greek agriculture, what is of greater interest to the aims of this paper is the actual diet of classical Greece.

Historians and archaeologists have long been interested in the study of food in classical antiquity. From the research I have done, it is clear that the majority of evidence related to food in classical Greece is archaeological in nature. Of course this would be expected when dealing with a civilization that existed over two thousand years ago. I propose that, although archaeological evidence should remain the primary source of information, it can be accompanied by classical literary material as well. For example, no one would argue that Virgil's *Aeneid*, or the story of Prometheus mentioned above, are legends. These legends, however, were written by real people, in real space, and time and I believe that they can reveal certain cultural truths that existed.

I will be using Homer's *Odyssey* as my literary source because not only is it abundant with references to food, but also because it continued "through all the centuries of the classical tradition, to fire

the hearts of all Greeks" (Marrou 1956:146). I will then look at the archaeological record for confirmation of whether or not the foods mentioned by Homer were actually consumed by the Ancient Greeks; specifically wine, cereals, olive oil, meat, fruits, and dairy (milk and cheese) (Garnsey 1999).

HOMER'S ODYSSEY

Before I proceed, an apparent contradiction in my thesis must be explained and justified. *The Odyssey* by Homer, in short, is an epic poem about the homecoming of the Greek Odysseus after the Trojan War. Here is where the contradiction is evident; why am I searching in a text conceived around 750BC that is based on events that are supposed to have occurred around 1250 BC when I am looking for clues about food being consumed in the classical period, approximately 480–300 BC? The answer to this question is simple, but often overlooked. *The Odyssey*, as mentioned, is an epic poem and was therefore recited orally for centuries and not written down until the invention of the book in the classical period. The poem was recited by *rhapsodes* (song-stitchers) from the time of Homer until the classic period (Marrou 1956). No one knows for certain when Homer lived or composed *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*, but it is fashionable to place the date around the middle of the eighth century BC (Rieu 1950). This implies that during the almost three hundred years that it was being

recited orally, these song-stitchers could add their own cultural touches depending on where and when they were located. Therefore, I believe the version of *The Odyssey* with which we are all familiar and the food mentioned within it is the accumulation of centuries of cultural elements from approximately 750 BC up to and including the classical period. Of course the food mentioned in *The Odyssey* is not fully representative of all the food choices available to the classical populations but their reference and repetition in the poem lead me to suspect that they were the most significant.

WINE

“...and a herald, going back and forth, poured the wine for them...” (Lattimore 1965:143).

“...grape cluster after grape cluster...” (Lattimore 1965:121).

The only drinks that were available to the Greeks in antiquity were water, wine, milk, and fruit juice (Craik 1997). Wine is mentioned over ten times in *The Odyssey*, and most involved feasts or religious ceremonies of some sort. In these ceremonies, the men drank the wine in moderation and only when mixed and consumed with the food. Wine, cereals, and olives are what Braudel called the *eternal trinity* and they provided the base of the traditional Greek agricultural and dietary system (Garnsey 1999).

Excavations on the island of Crete have provided archaeologists with many clues regarding the making, storage, and consumption of wine. There they have found residues in jars that indicate that they had once contained liquids, most likely olive oil or wine. Moreover, on the mainland in the ancient city of Tiryns, the only physical remains of food discovered were grape seeds. Because of the large

quantity of seeds, it is assumed that they were used in the production of wine (Vickery 1936). Further evidence of the use of grapes in making wine is furnished by a discovery made by British archaeologists near Sparta, where they found a seal from the mouth of a jar. The clay imprints clearly show that it had been covered with leaves that have been identified as grape leaves (Vickery 1936). Although this doesn't prove the presence of wine, the evidence of grape leaves in this context certainly allows for that possibility. .

Another place to look for evidence of the presence of wine is pottery. There are numerous amphora reliefs showing the consumption of wine. One such example is an Attic black-figure amphora dated to approximately 500 BC showing Dionysus, the god of wine, consuming his drink from a large cup. Besides the reliefs found on pottery, sometimes the actual shape of the pottery can dictate its function. For example, the *rhyton* is a ritual pouring vessel that sometimes appeared in the shape of an animal head and is believed to have been used to pour wine (Pedley 1993). There are numerous examples of these types of vessels; specifically, a rhyton in the shape of a bull's head from Crete and one showing a hilltop sanctuary from the city of Zakro (Pedley 1993).

By examining the archaeological data, supplemented by paleobotanical evidence, pottery art, and pottery function, it is clear that wine was known prior to and into the classical age.

CEREALS

“...housekeeper brought in the bread...” (Lattimore 1965:175).

“...there is wheat and millet here and white barley, wide grown...” (Lattimore 1965:604).

Cereals are the second group of Braudel's *eternal trinity* and must be seen as a whole group of seed crops, the most important cultigens being wheat and barley (Garnsey 1999). The ancient Greeks used cereals not only as domesticated food, but also and more importantly, for bread. There is a significant amount of archaeological evidence to show the importance of cereals.

At Knossos there are a number of indications that the ancient Greeks were heavy cereal eaters. In a small room later discovered to be a stable, archaeologists found stores of wheat, and it is interesting to note that it was not kept in a container (Vickery 1936). Vickery also claims that "wheat and barley certainly were the principle grains of the Aegean world" (Vickery 1936:112). In the north, in Thessaly and Olynthus, samples of millet have been found as well as what might be rye (Vickery 1936). Moreover, German archaeologists working near Melos have discovered what they believe to be a model of a granary (Pedley 1993). The cereals used in ancient Greece are a reflection of the variable Greek climate and soil quality; for example, barley is tolerant to poorer soils and a range of climactic conditions and was, therefore, probably grown in Greece; while the more intolerant wheat was most likely imported (Craik 1997).

Bread was a staple commodity to the ancient Greeks. Archaeological discoveries of certain pottery covers suggest that they had been used in ovens. Bread could be placed on a slab of stone or pottery ware, covered with a lid of the sort referred to, and placed in an oven or over coals. There is an ongoing argument to whether these ovens were known in Homeric times because mention of them is absent in his work (Vickery 1936).

According to archaeological and historical data, Garnsey (1999) believes that over the years barley lost ground to wheat, husked grains lost ground to naked grains, and eventually bread was preferred over porridge. Nonetheless, it is clear that cereals played an important role in ancient Greek diet.

OLIVES

"...oozes the limpid olive oil..."
(Lattimore 1965:107).

"...and the flourishing olive..."
(Lattimore 1965:116).

Olives represent the third and final element of what Braudel labeled the *eternal trinity* and were seemingly very important to the ancient Greeks' traditional agricultural dietary regime (Garnsey 1999). The olive needs a dry season in which to develop its oil content, and a cool winter in which to rest. Moreover, they are intolerant to frost and to elevations above 800 meters (Mattingly 1996). Thus in Greece, the olive thrived and soon found itself an integral part of the Aegean diet. The cultivation of the olive, and use of its oil, dates back to the early part of the bronze age, and fortunately there are many strands of archaeological evidence pertaining to the olive: paleobotanical data, traces of ancient orchards, olive mills and presses, and plenty of amphorae that were used to transport and store oil (Mattingly 1996).

On the island of Naxos, the actual remains of olive oil were found in a jug discovered in a tomb. Interestingly, two lamps were found alongside the oil leaving archaeologists to wrestle with the idea that the oil was actually fuel. Putting that thought aside, the discovery of an olive press and great quantities of storage jars leads us to believe that the oil was probably a Greek export (Vickery 1936).

It appears that the olives themselves were prepared for eating while the oil was used for cooking, salad oil, and applied to the skin for hygienic and cultural reasons.

Moreover, olives and olive oil are represented in the art of the ancient Greeks. In Cretan art, olive trees (at first questionable) are now being identified with confidence due to the quantity of examples. One such example is found on a painted ceiling block entitled, *The Diver*, dated to 480 BC that shows two distinct representations of olive trees (Pedley 1993).

Because of the extensive archaeological evidence, it can be said with a fair deal of certainty that olives already existed for centuries prior to the classical period. The olive tree was Athena's gift to the Athenians after she defeated Poseidon for possession of Athens (Mavromataki 1997). It therefore represented the strength, peace, and continuity of the Greek state. Although it is of great nutritional importance, its cultural significance must not be overlooked.

MEAT

"...and sacrifice our oxen and our sheep and our fat goats..." (Lattimore 1965:55).
"...where his herds of swine were penned in...sacrificed them..." (Lattimore 1965:73-74).

Small domestic animals such as fowl were most likely prepared and cooked privately in the home while the larger animals, like the ones listed above, were most commonly cooked publicly and eaten at festivals (Craik 1997). In *The Odyssey*, there are countless numbers of detailed descriptions of sacrificial arrangements, and they usually involved the blood letting of the animal followed by the consumption of the meat. Some of

these sacrificial elements are hard to trace in the archaeological record, but the actual consumption itself is easier to distinguish.

Bones of domestic animals have been found in such great quantities it is easy to assume that the ancient Greeks lived largely on meat, but this would be a mistake. Meat in the Aegean area was in relatively short supply (Vickery 1936). There is evidence that the Greeks domesticated and ate the flesh of sheep, goats, swine, and cattle. The three archaeological clues pointing to the fact they practiced domestication are "representations of men capturing cattle alive; evidence of the long-horned oxen being kept in captivity; and direct evidence of domestication" (Vickery 1936:14).

An example of one of the numerous sites found that contain animal remains is Thebes. Here archaeologists have discovered the processed remains of sheep, swine, cattle, wild boars, rabbits, and even small amounts of fish vertebra (Vickery 1936). These vertebrae represent a rare find because, to the ancient Greeks, fish was more of a delicacy than a regular part of the diet (Craik 1997).

Other forms of archaeological evidence can be found by examining reliefs found on both walls and pottery. A beautiful fresco from Corinth dated 500 BC shows a procession approaching an altar with a sheep for sacrifice (Pedley 1993). Another good example is the Dionysus amphora mentioned above, which also shows two maenads holding up a slaughtered hare to their wine god (Pedley 1993).

Meat and other foods of animal origin in the Greek world were in relatively short supply and, therefore, were probably of minor importance in the diets of the population (Garnsey 1999). Meat was never a staple to the ancient Greeks and although its dietary importance was relatively small, its cultural significance

(i.e., sacrifices, rituals, etc.) was much greater.

FRUITS AND VEGETABLES

“...pear trees and pomegranate trees and apple trees...” (Lattimore 1965:115).
 “...rows of greens, all kinds, and these are lush...” (Lattimore 1965:128).

The four main fruits listed in *The Odyssey* are apples, pears, grapes, and figs. Grapes and figs were usually dried for preservation because they are better adapted to this process than apples or pears (Craik 1997). Among vegetables, the ancient Greeks made the distinction between root vegetables and leafy greens and it appears that onions and garlic were the most popular. Herbs and spices were also present, and were not only used for food preparation, but were also often used for medicinal purposes (Craik 1997).

The archaeological evidence for the existence of these fruits and vegetables is interesting and worth presenting. At the ancient site of Dimini, there is a deposit that yielded the remains of wild pears and a large quantity of figs. Similarly, a site in Olynthus also yielded a significant quantity of figs (Vickery 1936). Furthermore, similar archaeological finds have revealed that the ancient Greeks consumed plums, apples, date palms, and pomegranates (Vickery 1936). Finally, as already mentioned in the section about wine, proof of the presence of grapes (for wine or other) has been identified in Tiryns and Sparta (Vickery 1936).

Vegetable remains are much more abundant in the archaeological record than are fruits. On the mainland, the use of leguminous vegetables is proved to go back centuries before the onset of the classical period. Excavations near Sedes have produced jars containing these dried leguminous vegetables, specifically peas

and beans. These and other similar vegetables were probably raised in the household gardens as they are grown today (Vickery 1936). Of the garden vegetables, only the legumes listed above could survive, so for the other types of vegetables we must rely on other forms of evidence.

In a fresco found in Praeneste, there is an image of a vegetable garden in front of a house (Pedley 1993). As for fruit, there exists a portrait of a priestess from Thera in which it appears that she is holding a vessel bearing fruit of some sort (grapes or berries) (Pedley 1993). Additionally, a painting from Andriuolo dated 350 BC shows a woman carrying an offering that contains pomegranates (Garnsey 1999).

Ultimately it is easy to assume that the presence of the fruits and vegetables in the archaeological record is proof that the Greeks consumed them but this would be a precarious assumption. Only through careful excavation, taking into account the context of the food and through cross-referencing with art and literature can it be said with any degree of certainty that these fruits and vegetables were actually eaten.

MILK AND CHEESE

“...baskets were there, heavy with cheeses...” (Lattimore 1965:219).
 “...he sat down and milked his sheep...” (Lattimore 1965:244).

As mentioned earlier, the people of classical Greece kept sheep, goats, and cattle. It is certain that the goats and sheep yielded milk, and it is probable that besides being drunk as sweet or soured milk it was also used for making cheese (Vickery 1936). Certain seals have been found that have illustrations depicting milk jars but there is no direct evidence of

the milk's source. Although it is likely that some cow's milk was used, the fact that there was a significantly larger quantity of goats, has lead archaeologists to believe that goat's milk was more common (Vickery 1936).

Furthermore, because milk and cheese are perishable and not easily transported, it was probably not kept in a regular supply (Craik 1997). A closer examination of the archaeological record can produce further evidence of the consumption of dairy. For example, German archaeologists discovered a late classic relief showing a peasant driving a goat to market with what appears to be a jar of milk and a sack of cheese (Pedley 1993). Moreover, there are countless reliefs showing the milking of sheep and goats.

Because of the short life and the perishable nature of milk and cheese, it will be extremely difficult (if not impossible) to ever find hard evidence in the archaeological record. In this situation, like that of the fruits and vegetables, proof must be sought in other media like art and literature.

CONCLUSION

"Between ancient history and modern social science there is a large *but* not unbridgeable gap" (Garnsey 1999:106) [emphasis mine]. I believe that this paper helps to vindicate this statement. It would appear that with the exception of nectar and ambrosia the food of the gods, the seven major components of the Greek diet mentioned by Homer withstand the scrutiny of scientific archaeological examination. The archaeological record in Greece provides strong evidence that wine, cereals, olive oil, meat, fruits, and dairy (milk and cheese) did exist in the period from approximately 750BC up to, and including, the classical period.

Mentions of these products in *The Odyssey*, therefore, were not just modifications in the verse over time or liberties taken with the translation.

I believe that since every food mentioned by Homer was found in the archaeological record, certain aspects of classical literature could be applied to anthropological research. I am not suggesting that one attempt a search for Hermes' sandals or Jason's golden fleece, but I am suggesting that the archaeological record can verify certain cultural truths found in classical literature. Clothing, custom, ritual, geography, and of course food can be sought in classical literature and eventually substantiated by archaeology.

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