

## FOOD AND EATING IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

EAT, DRINK AND  
BE MERRY

Even more so than today, food and eating were among the most important aspects of life in Antiquity. Rich or poor, in the city or in the countryside – a lot of time, effort and money was spent on food. It was not only a necessity, but also important in politics, in religion, for building social structure and, of course, for leisure.

By Manon Henzen

**T**hese days, it's easy to buy just about any food you'd like at your local supermarket, year-round. It's a big difference from ancient times, where seasonal availability, location, and cost were the key factors determining what you ate and when you ate it. And let us not forget *where* you ate it as well. It made quite a difference whether you lived in a city or in the countryside, especially for the common people – which brings us to another comparison. The image that most of us have today of food and dining in Antiquity – lots of food, great variety, served by slaves, dined on in a horizontal position – is an image that was only the reality for a small percentage of the population. Common people didn't have lavish dining rooms, fancy furniture, or even a kitchen. Dormice sprinkled with honey, fresh mullet, or spiced wine were only for the very wealthy. The gap between the rich few and the rest was a big one, and food brings this to light.

#### Written sources about food

So what are the sources that tell us about food in ancient times? First, it must be said that it was a common topic in Antiquity. From the earliest periods, there are inscriptions to be found on clay tablets and even wooden sticks, as seen in the article from Sarah Rijziger. These inscrip-

tions mention agriculture, crops, production and food offerings. There are also a few notes on papyrus from Egypt and, of course, many texts by classical authors. All these writings give us pieces of the ancient food puzzle.

Plato and Aristotle, along with writers of satire like Martial and Juvenal, tell us about the social settings and opinions of various foods in their time. The connection between food and health – which was very strong in Antiquity – is explained by Galen. The works on agriculture by Cato, Columella, Varro, Anthimus and Bassus (*Geoponica*) give us information about food production and ingredients, as does Pliny the Elder, from whom we learn about *garum* (fermented fish sauce), which is covered in an article by Erich B. Anderson. Anderson tells us about the history, types, trade and production of the most commonly used condiment in Roman recipes.

For recipes and taste we turn to the Apicius collection *De re coquinaria*. This is a collection of 468 recipes – or maybe it is better to say 468 'shopping lists' – from the first to fourth centuries AD. You can cook a Roman meal following Apicius, thanks to the author's recipes included in this issue of *Ancient History*. Although the Apicius collection is by far the most important source for those wishing to cook a Roman meal, sometimes we find a recipe or reference to a recipe in other texts, such as the

recipe for *epityrum* – an olive paste – in Cato's *De agricultura*, or the recipe for *moretum* – a ground herb cheese – in a poem called *Moretum*. Additionally, Athenaeus collected many ancient Greek texts that provide us with some interesting information on bread (among other things). Bread was one of the most important foods in Antiquity, as we can read in the article by Owen Rees. He tells us about the wondrous process of bread making, the types of bread, and the related art of beer making.

### Food and archaeology

More information concerning food can be found in ancient art: frescoes, mosaics and vase paintings all give us clues. What was the shape of an ancient bread loaf? Which tables were used for dining and how was the food served? This brings us to archaeological sources, which give us detailed information about food and dining at a specific place and time. They also provide us with scarce information about the eating habits and ingredients of common people. Excavated dining rooms, kitchens, production centres, inns, and shops tell us about how food was produced, prepared and eaten. Matthew Beazley takes us to such a Roman dining room and gives a vivid account of the foods and eating habits at the dinner tables of the rich.

Thanks to the thousands of amphorae and amphora sherds found throughout the Classical world, we know that ingredients and prepared foods such as wine were widely transported. Matthew Lloyd's article looks at this most important of ancient drinks, from its role in social gatherings to how the Greeks and Romans viewed one of wine's most infamous side effects: intoxication.

Finally, organic materials give us information about which ingredients were eaten in a specific location, and sometimes even how they were combined. Mackerel bones in an earthenware vase from the south of Spain in a waste pit in the Netherlands: where would we be without archaeology?

### Taste of antiquity

This combination of sources gives us much and sometimes detailed information about



Fish and vegetables hanging up in a cupboard, from a Roman mosaic created in the second century AD. Now on display at the Vatican Museums.

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food and dining in ancient times. Unfortunately, there are two things that have not been preserved from history: smell and taste. Our conclusions on ancient food inscriptions, writings, objects and organic finds are interpretations. Mostly, we agree with each other in these conclusions.

How different it is with the taste of ancient food. It is a certainty that when we give ten people a recipe from the Apicius collection, we will get ten different meals. However, we can learn a lot from this form of experimental archaeology, and it can be very inspiring for our cooking and the way we look at and think of food today. So I suggest that in the next few cold months you should try to make your own *garum*, create a comforting *aseed*, spice up your wine, make your own ancient bread starter (and bake a beautiful loaf of bread with it), and cook one of Apicius' meals. Then invite all of your friends to dine – horizontally if you wish – on all the beautiful food, while waxing lyrical on ancient eating habits. **AH**

### ► DID YOU KNOW?

Manon is responsible for the recreations of ancient Roman recipes spread throughout this issue. She runs her own company, *eetverleden* ('Eat the Past'), which offers cooking classes, tasting sessions, and lectures for a variety of historical periods. She also develops historical food products, that she sells in her webshop. You can find out more on her website [www.eetverleden.nl](http://www.eetverleden.nl)