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Spartans and Sybarites at the Golden Horn: Food as Necessity and/or luxury

This short paper begins with the presentation of a simple diagram designed to illustrate which terms may be connected with nutrition and food and at what variety of levels. On the left-hand side you have designated the physical, on the right-hand side the cultural and cult necessities.

necessity (physical)	necessity (cultural)
F o o d	
diet (medical)	diet (religious, “ceremonial”) luxury courtesy

SOURCES

I will focus on two branches of Byzantine rhetorical literature: letters and speeches. Letters have been recognised as important sources for material culture, but our work is not done merely by listing realia and by putting them into categories of condition or material. One should also try to determine why realia are mentioned, or why something should be presented to a person¹. What does it mean when an individual receives dried fish? Is it diet (in a religious context), is it necessity (hunger being the reason), is it luxury (a special kind of fish) or is it even courtesy (cultural necessity)?

Speeches provide some insights into material culture with regard to court culture². Several speeches especially of the Komnenian period offer some information upon our topic.

In the limited space of this contribution, which is arranged in three main parts, some characteristic examples presented here shall serve to provide an outline and illustrate some tendencies. I am, of course, aware that a more detailed study of the sources would yield much more satisfactory conclusions. In general, the examples are connected with the emperor, both as a benefactor and as a beneficiary³.

¹ A. KARPOZELOS, Realia in Byzantine Epistolography X–XIIc. *BZ* 77 (1984) 20–37; IDEM, Realia in Byzantine Epistolography XIII–XVc. *BZ* 88 (1995) 68–84. See also P. MAGDALINO, The Literary Perception of Everyday Life in Byzantium. Some General Considerations and the Case of John Apokaukos. *BSI* 48 (1987) 28–38. On rhetoric and consumption see now L. GARLAND, The Rhetoric of Gluttony and Hunger in Twelfth-Century Byzantium. In: W. MAYER – S. TRZCIONKA (eds.), *Feast, Fast or Famine. Food and Drink in Byzantium (Byzantina Australiensia 15)*. Brisbane 2005, 43–55.

² See G. T. DENNIS, Imperial Panegyric. In: *Byzantine Court Culture from 829 to 1204*. Edited by H. MAGUIRE. Washington, D.C. 1997, 131–40.

³ See in general K.-H. LEVEN, Festmähler beim Basileus. In: *Feste und Feiern im Mittelalter. Paderborner Symposium des Mediävistenverbandes*. Hrsg. von D. ALTENBURG. Sigmaringen 1991, 87–93.

I. Necessity

The necessity of food is often described in historiographic sources. In an exhaustive study recently published, Dionysios Stathakopoulos examined the relationship between diseases and the shortage of food in the early Byzantine Empire (up to the eighth century)⁴.

Because it is not a *topos* of the genre, rhetorical texts seldom include statements or reports concerning the need for food⁵. But necessity can trigger the creation of a rhetorical text, as was the case in 1168/69 when a severe winter combined with a water shortage in Constantinople caused Eustathios Kataphloron, later bishop of Thessalonica, to address a speech full with biblical reminiscences and quotations to Emperor Manuel I. Eustathios appealed to Manuel to take action against the state of emergency, and it seems the rhetor's effort was rewarded: evidence in the historical sources tells us that an aqueduct was repaired⁶.

More often, wishes and desires are expressed in letters to the emperor. In contrast to middle Byzantine letter-writing, a characteristic feature of late Byzantine epistolography seems to have been appeals to the ruler or to high officials for something, as Karpozilos has pointed out. Collections of the Palaeologan era provide rich material for studies on *realia*.

The 1420s were a period of poor harvests and famine; these circumstances are reflected in letter-collections of the time. Michael Gabras sent several letters to the ruler and to state officials requesting wheat and barley. It is quite likely that the letters were written during a period of famine in Constantinople. He also asks for salt. In a letter to the supervisors of the salt-works (ἀλῶν φύλακες), the brothers Chrysoloras, he requests a free shipment of salt⁷. On the other hand, he never thinks about taking gold from the imperial treasury. But one must keep in mind that Gabras was a person who always wanted to receive things for free⁸.

Several letters of Demetrios Kydones deal with products from the garden he owned in Constantinople⁹. Every year he sent apples (μήλα) and medlars (μέσπιλα; modern Greek μούσμουλον)¹⁰ to the Emperor Manuel II¹¹, to the Empress Helena Palaeologina¹², and to his friends¹³. These gifts were not only given out of courtesy, but it seems that there was a certain need for Kydones' products at the court. He had to excuse himself for only sending a limited quantity to his friends, because the emperor had such a large claim on his grove¹⁴ and he had some trouble in filling all his orders¹⁵.

Kydones is not a unique case. Also Eustathios of Thessalonica sent his own horticultural products to the emperor and to his friends¹⁶. It seems that there was a certain need for fresh products in the Constantinopolitan palace during these centuries¹⁷.

⁴ D. STATHAKOPOULOS, *Famine and Pestilence in the Late Roman and Early Byzantine Empire: A Systematic Survey of Subsistence Crises and Epidemics* (*Birmingham Byzantine and Ottoman Monographs* 9). Aldershot 2003.

⁵ As the author of begging poetry Ptochoprodromos should be mentioned. See H. EIDENEIER (ed.), *Ptochoprodromos. Einführung, kritische Ausgabe, deutsche Übersetzung, Glossar* (*Neograeca Medii Aevi* 5). Cologne 1991, especially poems I and II. R. BEATON, *The Rhetoric of Poverty: The Lives and Opinions of Theodore Prodromos*. *BMGs* 11 (1987) 1–28.

⁶ See the interpretation of P. KAZHDAN – S. FRANKLIN, *Studies on Byzantine Literature of the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries*. Cambridge 1984, 122. Cf. K. ÇEÇEN, *Sinan's water supply system in Istanbul*. Istanbul 1992, 20. – Repairing aqueducts is a *topos* in the imperial rhetoric, see F. H. TINNEFELD, *Kategorien der Kaiserkritik in der byzantinischen Historiographie von Prokop bis Niketas Choniates*. Munich 1971, see e.g. 33, 176. Cf. also the contribution of E. Kislinger in this volume.

⁷ G. FATOUROS, *Die Briefe des Michael Gabras* (ca. 1290–nach 1350). I–II (*WBS* X/1–2). Vienna 1973, II 695s. (ep. 454).

⁸ See KARPOZELOS, *Realia in Byzantine Epistolography XIII–XVc.* (see n. 1), 75.

⁹ Edition by R. J. LOENERTZ, *Démétrios Cydones, Correspondance* (*StT* 186, 206). Vatican 1956–1960. See now G. T. DENNIS, *Reality in the Letters of Demetrius Cydones*. In: *Porphyrogenita. Essays on the History and Literature of Byzantium and the Latin East in Honour of Julian Chrysostomides*. Ed. by Ch. DENDRINOS – J. HARRIS – Eirene HARVALIA-CROOK – Judith HERRIN. Aldershot 2003, 401–10.

¹⁰ See DENNIS, *Reality in the Letters of Demetrius Cydones* (see. n. 9), 402 fn. 11.

¹¹ Demetrios Kydones, ep. 424 (LOENERTZ).

¹² Demetrios Kydones, ep. 143 (LOENERTZ).

¹³ Demetrios Kydones, epp. 29, 295, 405.

¹⁴ Demetrios Kydones, ep. 186 (LOENERTZ) (to Constantine Asanes).

¹⁵ Demetrios Kydones, ep. 81 (LOENERTZ).

¹⁶ Th. L. F. TAFEL, *Eustathii metropolitae Thessalonicensis opuscula*. Frankfurt am Main 1832 (reprint Amsterdam 1964). On Byzantines and their gardens see A. LITTLEWOOD (ed.), *Byzantine Garden Culture*. Washington, D.C. 2002.

¹⁷ For fresh vegetable in general see J. KODER, *Gemüse in Byzanz: Die Versorgung Konstantinopels mit Frischgemüse im Lichte der Geoponika* (*Byzantinische Geschichtsschreiber, Ergänzungsband* 3). Vienna 1993; cf. IDEM, *Fresh vegetables for the capital*. In:

2. Diet

I use the term diet in the sense of “a particular selection of food especially as prescribed to improve the physical condition, to cure a disease”. Diet implies a rule to follow. It constitutes an important part of religious life. For monks, fasting was an ideal, but also commoners had to abstain from food at certain times. The Byzantine ecclesiastical year recognises four fasting periods (i. Christmas, from Nov. 15th to Christmas [40 days], ii. Easter [40 days], iii. fasting from the Orthodox All Saints day, to June 28th, and iv. fasting from August 1st to 15th, Koimesis). Altogether, a pious person in Byzantium fasted for nearly half a year (170 days). Leaving out a discussion of religious restrictions on diet, I shall now turn to other forms of diet defined by cultural necessities.

The Byzantine emperors had to conform to ideals, including the ideal of modest nutrition¹⁸. In the eulogion of Anna Komnene, George Tornikes writes that Anna’s father Alexios I followed the ideal of ἐγκράτεια (self-control), sitting at a luxuriously laid table¹⁹. Writers sometimes criticize a ruler’s intemperance, for example when Niketas Choniates calls Isaakios II a Sybarite²⁰. On the other hand, Isaakios’ predecessor, Andronikos I, is described as a modest eater²¹.

Theodore Dukas left a letter collection that gives some insight into his private life, including his dietary habits. We can read what foods the emperor particularly enjoyed. He often suffered from epileptic seizures and was therefore on a strict diet – a diet for medical reasons! In one of his letters to Akropolites he writes that he mostly missed oysters (ὄστρεα = food of the angels), cabbage (which was cooked and then placed in brine and vinegar), and the sharp taste of cardamom. He also enjoyed various kinds of gruel (γρουτικά), caviar (χαβιάρια), botargo (ὠσotάριχα), sturgeon caviar and Samian wine²².

Let us return to the epistolography of the tenth century. A part of the correspondence between Theodore, metropolitan of Kyzikos, and Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos has come down to us²³. The epistolographic contact between these figures is characterized by affection and courtesy, and by a richness of gift exchange. The correspondence opens with a letter from Constantine, accompanied by gifts for the holy man, who is celebrating some unidentified event. Constantine sends fine wine (ἀνθοσμίαν οἶνον) and fine bread (ἐκ σεμιδάλεως πυροῦ τοῦ ἀρίστου λεπτοτάτους κρικέλλους), two common foodstuffs exchanged during the fasting period²⁴.

Constantine addresses Theodore as Ὀλυμπιακός, which indicates that the cleric is on the Bithynian holy mountain²⁵. Constantine describes the whereabouts of Theodore in the manner of a „locus amoenus“ (in terms of his supply of fresh air, water and food)²⁶. Theodore responds, “even if fresh winds from the mountains are blowing and the coldness of water scares away the heat and the use of lettuce lightens the hot weather, nothing more than a letter from Constantine will comfort me.”²⁷ And he presents to the emperor along with the letter, lettuces from Olympos, and these he calls ὀλύμπια δῶρα. He also presents a golden Arabian (cup)²⁸.

C. MANGO – G. DAGRON (eds.), Constantinople and Its Hinterland. Papers from the Twenty-Seventh Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, Oxford, April 1993 (*Society for the Promotion of Byzantine Studies, Publications* 3). Aldershot 1995, 49–56.

¹⁸ A. KAZHDAN – G. CONSTABLE, People and Power in Byzantium. An Introduction to Modern Byzantine Studies. Washington, D.C. 1984, 55: “One of the aspects of wealth is diet”.

¹⁹ J. DARROUZÈS, Georges et Démètrios Tornikès, Lettres et discours (*Le monde byzantin*). Paris 1970, 237, 24ss.

²⁰ Nicetae Choniatae historia. Rec. I. A. VAN DIETEN (*CFHB* XI/1–2). Berlin 1975, 441, 10. – The motif of Sybaris is very common in Byzantine literature (e.g. Gregory Antiochos letter, ed. DARROUZÈS, *BSI* 24 [1963] line 75: Βουλγαρία καὶ Σύβαρις διεστήκατον).

²¹ Nicetae Choniatae historia 351, 56ss. (VAN DIETEN)

²² N. FESTA (ed.), Theodori Ducae Lascaris epistulae CCXVII (*Pubblicazioni del r. istituto di studi superiori pratici e di perfezionamento, Sezione di filosofia e lettere*). Florence 1898, ep. 54.

²³ J. DARROUZÈS (ed.), Épistoliers byzantins du X^e siècle (*Archives de l’Orient chrétien* 6). Paris 1960, 317–41.

²⁴ See KARPOZELOS, Realia in Byzantine Epistolography X–XIIc. (see n. 1), 27: „It appears that during and after a prolonged fasting period it was the custom to send to someone who was undergoing the rigours of abstinence bread, wine and fruit“ (Karpozelos includes several examples); contrary to Karpozelos Th. PRATSCH, Zum Briefcorpus des Symeon Magistros: Edition, Ordnung, Datierung. *JÖB* 55 (2005) 71–86, 76, offers a different interpretation and argues that the emperor sent wine and fruit at the beginning of his reign.

²⁵ Constantine VII, ep. 10, 2 (DARROUZÈS).

²⁶ Constantine VII, ep. 10, 3s. (DARROUZÈS).

²⁷ Theodore of Kyzikos, ep. 11, 2–12 (DARROUZÈS).

²⁸ Theodore of Kyzikos, ep. 12, 3ss. (DARROUZÈS).

Was lettuce such a precious thing, that it is worthy of being presented to the emperor? In any case Constantine receives it with pleasure, and he writes to Theodore an emphatic letter. The first words of Constantine form a pun on Theodore's name ("we know you as a gift of God, Theodore from God")²⁹ and he builds up a religious connotation from the beginning. He writes: "I thank the sender for receiving lettuce from the mountains and I esteem them *more than honey and honey-comb*."³⁰ Darrouzès briefly remarks upon this letter, that fruits from the mountains, herbs, salad etc. are popular in the Orient up to this day. He asks: « N-y a-t-il pas aussi l'indication d'une gêne domestique? »³¹

Contemporary sources provide further illumination upon this problem. Liutprand of Cremona comments on a banquet at the court³². He mocks the emperor Nikephoros II Phokas for eating lettuce. Little did he know that Nikephoros perhaps ate lettuce as part of pious imperial ideology, which proscribed simple and modest living³³. In contrast to the Byzantine ideal, western rulers were expected to be big eaters, as good appetite symbolised strength and power³⁴. Liudprand idealizes Otto I because of Otto's fondness for large meals.

To sum up, this interaction between two friends (a cleric and the ruler) likely took place during a fasting period. The religious background seems clear when we put the letters together. As Karpozilos notes, "It appears that during and after a prolonged fasting period it was the custom to send to the individual who was undergoing the rigours of abstinence bread, wine and fruit"³⁵. And as for the Arabic wine cup? Perhaps Theodore was hinting subtly at his need. In any case the emperor did indeed send him wine ...

3. *Luxury*

What is luxury? It is easy to detect Byzantine luxurious and precious artefacts in modern museums (golden reliquaries, silk, etc.). They survived during the centuries, because every era appreciated them as luxury objects³⁶.

It is more difficult, however, to grasp the idea of luxury in written sources. First we have to attempt to separate the extraordinary from the usual, the average, the every-day. In modern times, this might mean the difference between delicatessen foods and plain fare. Admittedly, this differentiation is easiest to achieve when looking at the circumstances. Nevertheless we can use things surrounding the imperial court as a starting point for further investigations in other milieus.

The sphere of the Byzantine emperor is defined by luxury as belonging to his status (as well as to that of every other ruler), in contrast to that which his subjects could afford. Insignia and ceremony used to demonstrate the ruler's power were particularly important in this system. Liutprand, for instance, was overwhelmed

²⁹ Δῶρον σε Θεοῦ, ἴσμεν, ᾧ Θεοῦ Θεόδωρε.

³⁰ Ep. 12, 3–5 DARROUZÈS: ἐγὼ δὲ τὰς ὀρεινὰς ἀπολαβῶν θρίδακας καὶ νοστήμους ταύτας ὑπὲρ μέλι καὶ κηρίον λογισάμενος ἠὲ χαρίστησα τῷ πεπομφότι.

³¹ Constantine VII, ep. 13, note 8 (DARROUZÈS).

³² Th. WEBER, Essen und Trinken im Konstantinopel des 10. Jahrhunderts nach den Berichten Liutprands von Cremona. In: J. KODER – Th. WEBER, Liutprand von Cremona in Konstantinopel (BV XIII). Vienna 1980, 71–99. – On the symbolism of meals see G. ALTHOFF, Der Frieden-, bündnis-, gemeinschaftsstiftende Charakter des Mahles. In: Irmgard BITSCH (ed.), Essen und Trinken in Mittelalter und Neuzeit: Vorträge eines interdisziplinären Symposions vom 10. – 13. Juni 1987 an der Justus-Liebig-Universität Gießen. Sigmaringen 1990, 13–25.

³³ O. TREITINGER, Die oströmische Kaiser- und Reichsidee nach ihrer Gestaltung im höfischen Zeremoniell. Darmstadt 1956, 101–4.

³⁴ See e.g. O. HOLDER-EGGER (ed.), Einhardus, Vita Karoli Magni (MGH SS 25). Hannover 1947 cap. 24: *In cibo et potu temperans, sed in potu temperantior, quippe qui ebrietatem in qualicumque homine, nedum in se ac suis, plurimum abhominabatur. Cibo enim non adeo abstinere poterat, ut saepe quereretur noxia corpori suo ess ieiunia. Convivabatur rarissime, et hoc praecipuis tantum festivitatis, tunc tamen cum magno hominum numero. Caena cotidiana quaternis tantum ferculis praebebatur, praeter assam, quam venatores veribus inferre solebant, qua ille libentius quam ullo alio cibo vescebatur.* "Charles was temperate in eating, and particularly so in drinking, for he abominated drunkenness in anybody, much more in himself and those of his household; but he could not easily abstain from food, and often complained that fasts injured his health. He very rarely gave entertainments, only on great feast-days, and then to large numbers of people. His meals ordinarily consisted of four courses, not counting the roast, which his huntsmen used to bring in on the spit; he was more fond of this than of any other dish." (S. E. TURNER, Einhard, The Life of Charlemagne. New York 1880).

³⁵ KARPOZELOS, Realia in Byzantine Epistolography X–XIIc. (see n.1), 27.

³⁶ See Leslie BRUBAKER, Material Culture and the Myth of Byzantium, 750–950. In: Europa medievale e mondo bizantino. Contatti effettivi e possibilità di studi comparati (Istituto storico italiano per il medio evo, Nuovi studi storici 40). Rome 1997, 33–41.

by the pomp of imperial ceremony. However he was less impressed by the dietary habits at court. Therein wealth and luxury are also detected through the foods that are served. A highly successful propaganda tool is and was to provide free food to the public while displaying the imperial affinity to luxury³⁷. I wish to point out some wedding banquets that took place in the imperial city. In the course of this feast, speeches were given: in one speech, Eustathios celebrated the wedding of Alexios with Agnes in 1180³⁸. The event took place in the hippodrome and the nearby area amidst huge crowds. Banks and tables were erected for the occasion, overloaded with luxurious dishes, mainly containing poultry. The emperor is said to have surpassed even the miraculous feeding of Israel in the desert, even though the heaven sent Manna. Wine flowed in great quantities and there were one or two cases where people had too much³⁹. A similar feast with an equally opulent meal was held to celebrate the birth of Alexios in 1169. A (still unpublished) speech was composed for the event by Samuel Mauropous, chartophylax of the Hagia Sophia⁴⁰.

In one of his letters, Eustathios of Thessalonica describes in detail a particular dish, which he received from the imperial kitchen, consisting of fried fowl stuffed with almonds and a sweet sauce. It took him nearly a whole letter to describe his delight. For the average Byzantine, it might have been a certain kind of luxury in itself to get anything from the imperial kitchen. But was it the same for someone with the social standing of Eustathios, who sent fruits of his own garden to the court?⁴¹

A similar example dates from the end of the thirteenth century. Theodore Laskaris sent an elaborate dish (ἔδεσμα) to his friend Akropolites, which his cooks prepared along with drinks. The emperor presented his luxurious gift, and such it was, out of courtesy to his friend⁴².

I have presented here only a few examples that show how food was perceived and presented in Byzantine rhetorical literature. This genre is valuable in discussions on aspects related to cultural history. Alas, we must probably endure a lot of detail on a rather limited list of food items until we obtain an exhaustive, coherent and comprehensive cultural history of food in Byzantium.

³⁷ TREITINGER, Die oströmische Kaiser- und Reichsidee (see n. 33), 229s.

³⁸ See now A. F. STONE, Eustathios and the Wedding Banquet for Alexios Porphyrogenetos. In: W. MAYER – S. TRZCIONKA (eds.), Feast, Fast or Famine. Food and Drink in Byzantium (*Byzantina Australiensia* 15). Brisbane 2005, 33–42.

³⁹ I. D. POLEMES, Ὁ λόγος ἐπὶ τοῖς θεωρικοῖς δημωτέλεσι τραπεζώμασι τοῦ Εὐσταθίου Θεσσαλονίκης. *Parnassos* 36 (1994) 402–20, 407, 13ss.: Ἐγεμον αἱ ἄμφοδοι τῶν ἀγαθῶν, αἱ λεωφόροι οὐκέτι τοῦτο αὐτὸ καθεωρῶντο, ζωοφόροι μὲν οὖν δι' ἡμέρας καὶ ἐκ παντοδαπῶν ἐδωδῖμων καὶ ἐπὶ συχνὸν ἐβρέχοντο κρεανούμεναι σάρκες ὡσεὶ καὶ χνοῦς καὶ κατὰ χύσιν ἄμμου πτηνὰ καὶ λοιπὴ δὲ πᾶσα σκευωρία γεῦσιν θέλγουσα καὶ ἦν τὸ χώριον τῆς ἀγορᾶς πλήρες χαρᾶς καὶ τρυφῶντων πανήγυρις.

⁴⁰ P. MAGDALINO, The Empire of Manuel Komnenos 1143–1180. Cambridge 1993 (reprint 2002), 464s.

⁴¹ Th. L. F. TAFEL, Eustathii metropolitae Thessalonicensis opuscula. Frankfurt am Main 1832 (repr. Amsterdam 1964), 310–1.

⁴² N. FESTA (ed.), Theodori Ducae Lascaris epistulae (see n. 22), 52, 77, 39–40.

