



# A SECOND-CENTURY AGAPE

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## FOOD IN THE HELLENIZED WORLD

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Foodways resembled much else in the Roman Empire—they were borrowed from, and built on, earlier Greek practice; and, while much regional and local variation existed, a common culture existed which stretched from Scotland to Nubia, and from Wales to Armenia. The Roman genius for organization and engineering created a network of roads and ports; the Empire's power on land and sea permitted their use for trade, allowing those posted to LONDINIUM (London) and COLONIA CLAUDIA ARA AGRIPPINENSIVM (Cologne) to eat the olive oil and drink the Greek and Italian wines they knew and loved; whilst the inhabitants of ANTIOXEIA (Antioch) and ΕΦΕΣΟΣ (Ephesus) could eat exotic delicacies from the other end of the world as well: Rhenish wines and mussels from Britain. Archeology—such as the deposits in a Centurion's privy in Holland and the sewer under a block of unprepossessing flats at Herculaneum—confirms, in the most irrefutable way, they actually did.

What was this food like, then? Its basic division—taken from the Greeks—was into “bread,” ΑΡΤΟΣ (*artos*) and “things you eat with bread,” ΟΡΣΟΝ (*opson*). Bread was the foundation of the diet both nutritionally and functionally (as we shall see). In composition, the ancient diet was very much like its successor—

the newly-famous, so-called “Mediterranean Diet:” lots of carbohydrates and vegetables (therefore intimately connected to the seasons); lots of fish (if you had access to it); and very little red meat. How did it taste? The one surviving Roman cookbook is notorious for its long lists of spices in almost every dish, which led generations of scholars to foolishly presume these expensive ingredients were a species of conspicuous consumption; the food, secondary, and almost inedible. Practical experimentation has since shown the number of spices involved is unimportant; as in Indian cooking, it is their *balance* that matters: both cuisines are highly spiced, but based on an elegant sense of proportion. The dominant flavors are pepper and sweet-and-sour, and almost everything seems to have had fermented fish sauce in it (for those, like myself, not fond of fish—don’t worry: almost all the “fishiness” is removed in cooking: the sauce appears to have been included to provide salt and the basic flavor known as *umami*, sometimes translated as “savoriness”).

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## TABLE BEVERAGES IN THE HELLENIZED WORLD

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Wine was quintessentially the beverage of the ancient Mediterranean, as bread was quintessentially its food: the intense symbolism of the Eucharistic elements becomes somewhat attenuated once one crosses the Alps. Our knowledge of the specifics of ancient wines is sadly lacking; we have many descriptions of famous varietals and vintages—but wine terminology was as artful then as now and once the tradition (and the wines) are lost, we have little to go on. The ancients famously watered their wine (the mixed cup of the Christian Eucharist is a survival of this every-day dining practice of the ancient world), and reserved unmixed wine—*MERVUM*—for religious purposes. But a host of sub-literary sources suggest this was not as scrupulously observed as generations of classicists have solemnly assured us. Archeology concurs: a large corpus of beakers exists which are painted with various drinking-related phrases such as *MIX FOR ME*; *SPARE THE WATER*; and...*DA MERVUM: GIVE IT TO ME STRAIGHT!* So feel *quite* free to drink your wine uncut, if you prefer! Flavored wines were extremely popular; the only common survival of this fashion is Greek *Retsina*, which will be our white wine; the red will be an Italian regional based on some ancient varietal such as *Greco di Tufo* or *Sangiovese*. Water was also drunk at the table, either straight or mixed with honey as *HYDROMEL*.

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## TABLE MANNERS AND PRACTICES

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We imagine the ancients reclining to dine; and so they did—some of them, some of the time. Reclining was a feature of up-scale and/or formal dining (for which they also had special “dinner jackets” and such). However, for most people, almost all—and for the upper classes, many informal—meals were taken sitting at table, just as we do. For every-day dining it was usual to have one’s own cup and perhaps plate; but—among the lower classes—sharing was also common. Spoons were the only utensil regularly used by diners at table and only when absolutely required, as for soups; foods were brought to the table either in bite-sized pieces or reduced to thick pastes or sauces. Everything was brought to the mouth from common serving bowls or chargers with, or on, small portions of broken bread; this is the context of Jesus’ statement at the Last Supper *he who dips his hand with me in the dish...* As in the modern Middle East, food was taken with the right hand only, and it was considered extremely poor manners (and we know it to be very poor hygiene!) to reuse a sop of bread to take a second portion from the communal bowl.

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## THE FOOD OF THE COMMON MAN

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Generations of scholars defined the diet of the working man in ancient Rome as bland, consisting of little but porridge, beans, and bread; but that sewer in Herculaneum—excavated in the 1990s—has put “paid” to that: the inhabitants of this middling commercial neighborhood ate a healthy and varied diet rich in seafood, poultry, eggs, and fruit. What common people ate—then as now—depended on many things; but regarding its preparation we can say, in general, that urban dwellers did little cooking at home: most lived in flats having no built-in kitchens. Small portable braziers were very much in use, however, allowing quick and modest cookery; bread came from the bakeries to be found on almost every corner; while (on every *other* corner) TABERNÆ and POPINÆ were to be found, the fast-food and take-away restaurants of the ancient world. These establishments were where many of the working classes either ate, or bought cooked food to take home, or to bring to the COLLEGIA. Paintings in the catacombs show that many of the breads Christians bought to bring to feasts were the smaller PANIS QVADRATVS loaves, scored into four sections (rather than six or eight, as were the larger loaves), and thereby unintentionally marking them with the sign of the cross.

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## NON-EUCHARISTIC COMMUNAL MEALS

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The first real mention we have of the Christian meals sometimes called *agapes* comes from Paul's First Epistle to the Church at Corinth, written around 55 AD—his purpose being to correct the very sort of abuses which first drove these meals out of churches (when such buildings appeared) and finally (by the 8<sup>th</sup> century) to extinction. In the first centuries, however, such meals were common, being mentioned in Scripture (not only by Paul, but also Jude and Peter) and, outside of it, both by Christians (Ignatius and Tertullian) and pagans—notably Pliny the Younger, who as Governor of Bithynia (in modern Turkey) reports what the local Christians said of their activities around the year 110: *They were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god, and bound themselves to a solemn oath, not to do any wicked deeds...When this was over, it was their custom to depart and to assemble again to partake of a meal—but ordinary and innocent food.* At this period there was little or no uniformity across Christendom, but the early “Church Orders” give us a good idea of the general plan adopted together with some very interesting (if contradictory) details. Their prescriptions—some modeled or taken directly from Jewish practice, some clearly presuming the conventions of standard worldly dinner parties—show the issues the Church was struggling with throughout this period. In a word: where was the balance between *not destroying the Law, but fulfilling it* and *that Freedom which we have in Christ*. Should one eat pork? Did it matter that the meat might have come straight from the altar of a pagan temple (as a good deal of the meat in the marketplace did)? What about tableware decorated with nymphs or heroes? Even with all the inconsistencies—or perhaps, because of them—the information we have is more than sufficient to produce a reconstruction of one of these feasts called *Love* good enough that the Cloud of Witnesses looking over our shoulders will have little trouble recognizing it for what it is.

These were evening meals and, as such, began with or included a ceremonial lighting of the lamps accompanied by a prayer and/or song: this is directly derived from Jewish practice. The food was provided by an individual or was the community's own offering, either brought for the occasion or composed of the remainder of their morning oblation after the Bishop had distributed to the needy of the community. A blessing or blessings was said over the food either by the presiding individual, or, sometimes, by each diner over their own bread and wine: then the meal began. Edifying conversation; questions and answers; or silence are variously enjoined (everything except the silence would have

been a regular part of worldly banquets—there were even books of QVÆSTIONES CONVIVIALES to purchase, so as not to look too dull when your turn came 'round. Samples: *Which came first: the chicken or the egg?* (seriously); *Which God do the Jews worship?* (that must have been a stumper for the average Roman). Singing was almost always a part of these gatherings (as it was in pagan feasts): only the kind of song differed. The *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus, composed in Rome about 215, gives particularly detailed instructions: *after the meal they shall get up and pray, and the children shall sing songs, along with the virgins.*

We will use the liturgy from the DIDACHE, the earliest Christian liturgy we possess. By participating in this meal and liturgy, you will be performing the same acts as some of the earliest Christians of which we have any detailed knowledge. This meal is (or can be) a species of the Communion of the Saints, *incarnate*, and a Type of the Holy Catholic Church—if you fully enter into the experience. I pray that is what it will prove to be for each and every one of you.



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