

## The Way to the Heart: Food's Impact on Culture in the Ancient World

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The way to a man's heart is through his stomach, and the best marker for what is in a man's heart is to look at the culture he creates. Food and water allow any animal to survive, humans included. From the first migration out of Africa to the Neolithic Revolution, humans characteristically followed what provided them the most food. Many communities, through agriculture, managed to achieve a level of food sustainment that allowed them to meet the requirements that modern-day historians consider a civilization. So, civilizations used agriculture to get enough food to sustain large populations and develop culture, but the story does not end there. With differences in environment between different ancient civilizations, differences in agriculture and crops follow. These differences in agriculture and crops yield different foods. Furthermore, differences in foods gave rise to cultural differences and divergent religious practices within the civilizations of Mesopotamia, ancient Egypt, ancient China, and among the ancient Maya.

Mesopotamia was situated between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, where the land was fertile enough to farm, hence allowing civilization to emerge. Yet even with these rivers, the land did not hold the best conditions for agriculture (which developed between the eighth and ninth millennium B.C.E.<sup>1</sup>), so the earliest farmers in Mesopotamia had to use intense irrigation. Parts of the land were "too salty for effective agriculture," but livestock used it for grazing.<sup>2</sup> Two civilizations dominated the region in ancient history (though at different times): Sumer and Babylonia. In Sumer, archeological evidence and written records show that those who lived here mainly farmed wheat and barley. Sumerians served barley in some form at almost every meal, making it a crop of high importance. Other staple crops included millet, chickpeas, lentils, beans, onions, turnips, garlic, lettuce, leeks, cucumbers, cress, and mustard. Fish also proved to be an essential part of the Sumerian diet, as shown from their many texts before 2,300 B.C.E., where authors noted over 50 different kinds of fish. As for livestock, mutton from sheep held a significant part of the common Sumerian's meals. Beef and veal were more expensive, but also a part of some diets.<sup>3</sup> Albeit rarely, animals that people in the modern-day West might consider taboo also held a place in the Babylonian diet, namely animals such as gazelle.<sup>4</sup> Of course, trade existed between different civilizations, varying the diet further. For example, sesame was first domesticated in India

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<sup>1</sup> John Wilkens and Robin Nadeau, *A Companion to Food in the Ancient World* (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 285.

<sup>2</sup> Kent V. Flannery, "The Ecology of Early Food Production in Mesopotamia," in *Science* 147, no. 3663 (1965): 1247–1256 at 1248.

<sup>3</sup> Reay Tannahill, *Food in History* (New York: Stein and Day, 1973), 60–62.

<sup>4</sup> Rosemary Ellison, "Methods of Food Preparation in Mesopotamia (c. 3000-600 BC)," in *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 27, no. 1 (1984): 89–98 at 93.

and travelled to Mesopotamia in the early bronze age, meaning that the Mesopotamians had access to a variety of different foods.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the variety within their diet, nearly all parts of the Ancient Mesopotamian diet lacked caries, making them non-cariogenic, meaning their diet would not cause much tooth decay.<sup>6</sup> Specific results vary depending on region. For example, teeth from the northern part of Mesopotamia had more caries than from the southern part of Mesopotamia.<sup>7</sup> The lack of caries on the teeth holds significance because that means the Mesopotamians left their teeth behind for archaeologists to find and therefore analyze via dental pulp. The dental pulp of ancient Mesopotamians confirms that their diet consisted of products of agriculture and that they received an abundance of natural sugars from their diets, especially from date palms and figs.<sup>8</sup>

Ale held a particular significance in Sumerian society. Sumerians used wheat and barley to create this ale and supposedly made eight types of ale from barley, eight from wheat, and another three from mixed grains. In fact, according to Greek myth, Dionysos, the god of alcohol, had to flee from Mesopotamia because its inhabitants were too addicted to ale.<sup>9</sup> Incidentally, despite the civil rights they lacked, Mesopotamian women held control of ale-making and breweries. Even in *Hammurabi's Code*, the tavern-keepers are referred to as women and using she/her pronouns.<sup>10</sup> Continuing the theme of grain's significance in Babylonian society, the surplus of grain was so great that records show it being used in loans and sales. As one author states, "In documents of all kinds, the topical focus on food production seems to define it as a (if not the) central concern of state society."<sup>11</sup> The creation of ale led to taverns, which famously sold the beverage. Tavern life and ale was so significant that King Hammurabi included laws about them within *Hammurabi's Code*. One involves ale pricing: "If a [female] tavern-keeper does not accept corn according to gross weight in payment of drink, but takes money, and the price of the drink is less than that of the corn, she shall be convicted and thrown into the water." It is also worth noting that Hammurabi barred religious women from going to taverns for a drink. While the tavern life of Mesopotamia

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<sup>5</sup> Dorothea Bedigian, "History and Lore of Sesame in Southwest Asia," in *Economic Botany* 58, no. 3 (2004): 329–353 at 331.

<sup>6</sup> Lucio Milano, *Paleonutrition and Food Practices in the Ancient Near East: Towards a Multidisciplinary Approach* (Padova, Italy: S.A.R.G.O.N., 2013), 55.

<sup>7</sup> Milano, *Paleonutrition and Food Practices in the Ancient Near East*, 62.

<sup>8</sup> Milano, *Paleonutrition and Food Practices in the Ancient Near East*, 55.

<sup>9</sup> Tannahill, *Food in History*, 63.

<sup>10</sup> King Hammurabi, *Hammurabi's Code of Laws*, ed. And trans. L. King (New Haven: Lillian Goldman Law Library, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Seth Richardson, "Obedient Bellies: Hunger and Food Security in Ancient Mesopotamia," in *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 59, no. 5 (2016): 750–792 at 753.

cannot be determined with certainty, it can be assumed that it served the same purpose that bars, taverns, and pubs have served for thousands of years: as a gathering place and a place for recreation, and, on occasion (though outlawed), to promote conspiracies.<sup>12</sup>

Food maintains a significant role in Sumerian and Babylonian religion and culture. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, which may date as early as 3,000 B.C.E., food symbolizes civilization. When Enkidu, a character who once lived in the wild, was presented with bread and beer for the first time, he did not know what to do. He was later told what he needed to do by a temple prostitute named Shamhat:

“Enkidu, this is the food and drink men eat and drink. Eat and drink your fill.” So Enkidu ate his fill of the cooked food, and drank the beer. Seven jugs of the beer and he was suddenly joyful, and sang aloud. Then he washed his hairy body, anointed himself with oil, and dressed his body in new clothes, so that he looked as beautiful as a bridegroom.<sup>13</sup>

With the new discovery that Enkidu liked beer and bread, he became what the Sumerians considered “civilized.” This suggests that, for the Sumerians, the more complex the food, the more complex the society.

Meanwhile, in ancient Egypt, the land proved to be much more fertile. The Nile River ran through Egypt and yearly floods deposited silt to keep land fertile and sustain the crop yields. Ancient Egyptians utilized flaxseed not only as food, but as a medicinal crop.<sup>14</sup> Grains of various kinds grew and continue to grow well in the soil of the Nile. Bread quickly became a staple of the Egyptian diet. In fact, many scholars say that ancient Egyptians were the first to discover bread; however, there is little evidence for this claim other than the fertility of the land.<sup>15</sup>

Due to the surplus of food, customs in Egypt’s religious practices can be observed that cannot be identified in many other civilizations, and especially not in ancient societies. The Egyptians buried their dead with food because they believed that the dead would need it in the afterlife. Depending on the significance of the person, large quantities of food could be found in just a single tomb. Nobles were buried with a decent amount of food, but royals laid alongside buffets. For example, in King Tutankhamun’s (more commonly known as King Tut’s) tomb,

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<sup>12</sup> King Hammurabi, *Hammurabi’s Code of Laws*, Laws 108–110.

<sup>13</sup> Anonymous, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* trans. Andrew George (London: Penguin Classics, 2003).

<sup>14</sup> Ankit Goyal, et al., "Flax and Flaxseed Oil: An Ancient Medicine & Modern Functional Food," in *Journal of Food Science and Technology* 51, no. 9 (2014): 1633–1653.

<sup>15</sup> Tannahill, *Food in History*, 66–67.

British archaeologist Howard Carter found “48 boxes of prepared food.”<sup>16</sup> The food found inside tombs held so much importance that it was considered a “sin” to take it. This may be seen in the ancient Egyptian *Negative Confession* (a declaration sworn before Osiris, the god of the afterlife, in the Hall of Judgment asserting the innocence of the deceased): “I have not stolen the cakes of the dead.”<sup>17</sup> These sorts of practices would not be found in places like Mesopotamia due to the area’s much more restricted food supply.

Art and sculptures of foods, cooking processes, kitchens, and other food-related things can be found in many tombs as well, showing the significance food had on Egyptian culture. The making of food was significant enough that a wood carving was found in King Ramses III’s tomb that depicted a scene of a bakery.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, in the tomb of the Egyptian chancellor Meketre, archeologists found a miniature model of a kitchen.<sup>19</sup> These scenes must hold some significance to Egyptian culture and society if those in charge of Ramses’s and Meketre’s tombs felt compelled to include the aforementioned pieces of art in these kings’ burial spots, and subsequently these kings’ afterlives.

Moving east, the ancient Chinese saw an entirely different agricultural setting, leading to a very different culture than the likes of ancient Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt. In ancient China, agriculture actually sprouted up in two different locations. One began along the Yellow River in the north, where the earliest crops were millet, with millet being the name for most grains with small seeds. The southern agricultural movement started around the Yangzi drainage, where these peoples also mainly grew forms of millet.<sup>20</sup> The most popular millet throughout China was called *Chi*, which was so important that the founder of the Chou clan called himself Hou Chi (a.k.a. “Lord Chi.”) A millet called *Shu* (soybeans) also proved popular in the north, appearing on oracle bone inscriptions of the Shang dynasty (1,766 – 1,122 B.C.E.).<sup>21</sup> Diviners used oracle bones to give prophecies to their leaders, so such things being recorded means significance, even to a religious level. Though agriculture in the north may have started as early as 9,000 B.C.E., millet did not

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<sup>16</sup> “Card No. 62.” *Tutankhamun: Anatomy of an Excavation. The Howard Carter Archives*, by Howard Carter (Oxford, UK: The Griffith Institute, 2000).

<sup>17</sup> Anonymous, “The Negative Confession,” in *Ancient Egyptian Literature: A Book of Readings / Compiled by Miriam Lichtheim* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1975) , 2:124–26.

<sup>18</sup> *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, s.v. “King Ramses III Bakery.”

<sup>19</sup> Magda Mehdawy and Amr Hussein, *The Pharaoh’s Kitchen: Recipes from Ancient Egypt’s Enduring Food Traditions* (American University in Cairo Press, 2010), 6.

<sup>20</sup> E. N. Anderson, *Food and Environment in Early and Medieval China* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 36.

<sup>21</sup> Kwang-chih Chang, *Food in Chinese Culture: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 26.

become a staple of Chinese diet until around 5,500 B.C.E., as shown by the bones of people, animals, and pigs having increased C<sub>4</sub> carbon metabolism, which is mostly found among tropical grasses (regular grass tends to only have C<sub>3</sub>.)<sup>22</sup> These numbers align with ancient China's transition from the Neolithic Age to the Bronze Age, which started around 5,500 B.C.E.<sup>23</sup> Other food sources of the ancient Chinese include leeks, various legumes, and cabbage; livestock such as pigs, chickens, and dogs; and wild game that consisted of deer and rabbit. Beef and mutton may have also been consumed, but sheep and cattle were mostly used for ritual purposes.<sup>24</sup>

In the north, when agriculture developed, the Yangshao community appeared, known for its farming villages and painted pottery. The Yangshao would later develop into the Lungshan in 2,000 B.C.E.; then the Shang in about 1,850 B.C.E.; and finally the Zhou civilization starting around 1,100 B.C.E. In the south, the Hoabinhian culture emerged alongside many Lungshanoid cultures, but the Shang and Zhou cultures from the north would migrate south as well.<sup>25</sup> The crops of China provide some context into these cultures and interactions both inside and out of ancient China. For example, one controversial crop brings to light what was once thought by historians and anthropologists to be an impossible interaction: peanuts. Peanuts have been found in sites from Lungshanoid cultures that have been carbon-dated to the third millennium B.C.E., though many are skeptical as peanuts originated in lowland South America. Once the Lungshanoids disappeared, though, peanuts disappeared with them until the sixteenth century C.E.<sup>26</sup> It remains unclear whether any interactions occurred between the ancient Chinese and the early Meso-Americans or even how the Lungshanoids obtained these peanuts, as this is the only existing evidence. In fact, some scholars claim that the peanut remains have been mistaken for beans or other legumes. Like other ancient cultures, alcohol proved to be a prevalent beverage, one that the ancient Chinese consumed at most meals. Four different alcoholic beverages can be identified from ancient Chinese texts: *li*, *lo*, *lao*, and *ch'ang*. All of these would have been made with grain, except for *lo*, which would have been made with fruit or berries.

The Chinese valued food very much, and poets even wrote of food helping lost souls find their way home. For example, one poet wrote, "O soul come back! Why should you go far away? / All your household have come to do you honour; all kinds of good food are ready." The rest of

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<sup>22</sup> Yuan Jing, Roderick Campbell, Lorenzo Castellano, and Chen Xianglong, "Subsistence and Persistence: Agriculture in the Central Plains of China through the Neolithic to Bronze Age Transition," *Antiquity* 94 (2020): 911.

<sup>23</sup> Jing, Campell, Castellano, and Xianglong, "Subsistence and Persistence," 901.

<sup>24</sup> Chang, *Food in Chinese Culture*, 28–29.

<sup>25</sup> Chang, *Food in Chinese Culture*, 25.

<sup>26</sup> Chang, *Food in Chinese Culture*, 27–28.

the poem simply lists different foods.<sup>27</sup> Finally, the ancient Chinese ascribed to a strict set of dining rules called the *Li Chi*. These rules specified that a person must eat with his right hand, and included instructions for eating meat, instructions for serving grains, etc.<sup>28</sup> The ancient Chinese had a clear respect for their food, and some parts of their cultural rules and even spirituality developed around it. This respect had even manifested itself in writings, which means it must have had some significance to the time.

The most detached civilizations from these other three cultures would be in the Americas. Specifically, the Native Americans of the Yucatán Peninsula held a significant role in humanity's early history. The Yucatán Peninsula provided less than ideal conditions for farming, but the Mayans developed a different kind of agriculture called swidden agriculture, more commonly known as the "slash-and-burn method," first by cutting down the trees and allowing them to dry before being burned to deposit nutrients in the soil, and then rotating plantings between fields left fallow for a few years to regenerate. It is estimated that a field created through this slash-and-burn method could have yielded as much as a 20% to 100% surplus of maize.<sup>29</sup> Very few Mayans regularly consumed meat, except for the elite, who ate turkey, deer, and seafood.<sup>30</sup> Without meat, ordinary Mayans relied on their produce. Root crops were popular among the common Mayan as well as squash, beans, tomatoes, mushrooms (during the rainy season), and maize.<sup>31</sup>

Maize easily proved to be the most significant to Mayan culture. Outside of consumption, in which maize was made into bread and other sorts of cooked foods, maize also held spiritual significance. Birth ceremonies involved cutting the umbilical cord over a maize cob. When a person died, maize flour would be put in his or her mouth.<sup>32</sup> The importance of corn in Mayan civilization goes back to their creation stories. According to the *Popol Vuh*, when the creators of the world, Tepeu and Gucumatz, failed to make man from mud and earth, their grandmother, Xmucane, made man out of a corn-flour and water mixture. They said, "O Maize, O Tzite, O Sun, O Creature, unite and join one another!" From there, according to Mayan legend, man was born.

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<sup>27</sup> Qu Yuan, "The Summons of the Soul," in *The Songs of the South: An Anthology of Ancient Chinese Poems by Qu Yuan and Other Poets*, ed. and trans. David Hawkes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959).

<sup>28</sup> Anonymous. *The Li Ki*. In *The Sacred Books of the East*, vols. 27–28, ed. by Max Muller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1885).

<sup>29</sup> D.E. Dumond, "Swidden Agriculture and the Rise of Maya Civilization," in *Environment and Cultural Behavior*, ed. Andrew P. Vayda (Garden City, NY: The Natural History Press, 1969), 332–49 at 333–34.

<sup>30</sup> Sophie D. Coe, *America's First Cuisines* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 153–54.

<sup>31</sup> Coe, *America's First Cuisines*, 164.

<sup>32</sup> Coe, *America's First Cuisines*, 121.

<sup>33</sup> Mayans also believed that maize had male and female spirits, leading to a belief system that gives Mayan women the most equality out of any ancient civilization. Indeed, Mayan women who gave birth were awarded warrior status because of the great struggle and risk involved in giving birth.

Obviously, a society's food supply is not the only factor by which a society develops. For example, ancient Egypt's lack of militarism in the Old Kingdom came from naturally secure borders. It is evident, though, that ecology and food source impacted many civilizations. A prime example is women's rights. Women held higher respect and rights in hunter-gather communities over agricultural societies, which demonstrates the impact that the transformation to agriculture had on women.<sup>34</sup> Mayans' beliefs involving the androgynous maize also provided their women with more rights than in other civilizations. Distinctions in food also explain some of the many differences between civilizations such as Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt. Other than women's rights, religion provides another clear example, namely, in how the people of a particular civilization characterize their deities. In Egyptian religion, deities were characterized as kind, but their favor had to be earned. The Mayans also worshipped relatively kind gods.<sup>35</sup> In Mesopotamia, however, deities were characterized as vengeful, unpredictable, and frightening. Not only was this due to frequent natural disasters, such as flooding, but also due to the resulting scarcity in food relating to those disasters as well as the natural environment. It makes sense for the civilization with a steadier food supply to worship deities that lean towards the direction of kindness rather than towards the direction of terrifying. Holistically, early religion depended on a culture's food supply. Cultures would develop later around their religion, sacrificing to the gods in order to keep their food supply steady. Religion has also been an important part of cultural identity, with religious art and literature dominating culture for thousands of years, starting with *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. The cultural leaps that allowed for art and literature to be made could not have been done without that culture's food.

While food demonstrates the differences between all these civilizations, it also brings their similarities to light. The early agriculture of these civilizations revolved around grain. Ancient Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt had grains like barley and wheat, ancient China had millets, and ancient Maya had maize. Each of these civilizations also had their own forms of alcohol. Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia had beers made from grains. The Chinese produced their four different

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<sup>33</sup> *Popol Vuh: the Sacred Book of the Ancient Quiché Maya*, English version by Delia Goetz and Sylvanus G. Morley from the Spanish translation by Adrián Recinos (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1950).

<sup>34</sup> Catherine Clay, Chandrika Paul, and Christine Senecal, *Envisioning Women in World History, vol. 1: Prehistory—1500, Explorations in World History* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2009), 7.

<sup>35</sup> Hartley Alexander, *The Mythology of all Races*, vol. 11: *Latin-America*, (Boston: Marshall Jones Company, 1920), 142.

types of alcohol, made of grains and fruits. The Mayans made a drink called *balche*, made of honey.<sup>36</sup> These similarities show not only parallels in the ecosystem, as shown with the grains, but also in the development of their cultures, as shown through the alcohol. Some of these civilizations lay oceans apart but still managed to develop similar methods of cuisine, just made with different (yet mostly similar) materials. These similarities provide an exemplary example of the human condition and how similar humans, across all cultures, can be.

In general, the resources available to a society can have a major impact on the cultural functions of that society. From complex religious ideals to business transactions to women's rights, they can all be broken down in large measure to the ecology of the land and what food, both flora and fauna, that ecology supports. Without ancient Egypt's fertile farming conditions, modern archaeologists would not find boxes upon boxes of prepared food in tombs. If Mesopotamia's ecology had been a bit more stable, then their gods might not have been characterized in such a terrifying light. Had the Chinese not relied so much on their foods, they would not have been so spiritually dependent on them and would not have enacted such strict codes and rules regarding them. If Mayans were not so reliant on corn, their society might not have revolved around it so much. The way that civilization relied so heavily on food proves that it only makes sense that their cultures developed around their diet. Truly, the way to a man's heart is through his stomach, and the way he expresses what is in his heart can be found in his culture.

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<sup>36</sup> Coe, *America's First Cuisines*, 126.



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