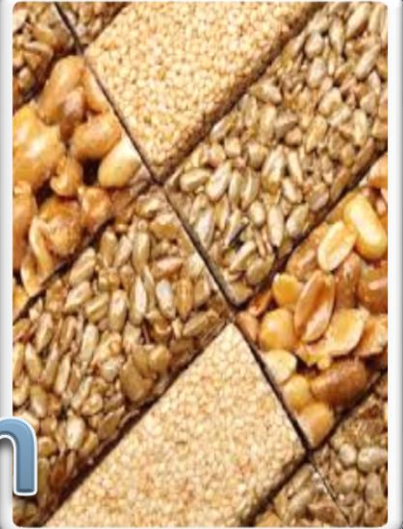


Comenius Project 2013-2015

“Living Our Common Ancestry”



ART SCHOOL OF GERAkas, ATTIKI, HELLAS



Food & Nutrition in Byzantium



The Byzantine Empire
at its greatest extent in
555 AD under
Justinian the Great



The Byzantine Empire during the reign
of **Manuel I Komnenos, 1179 AD**

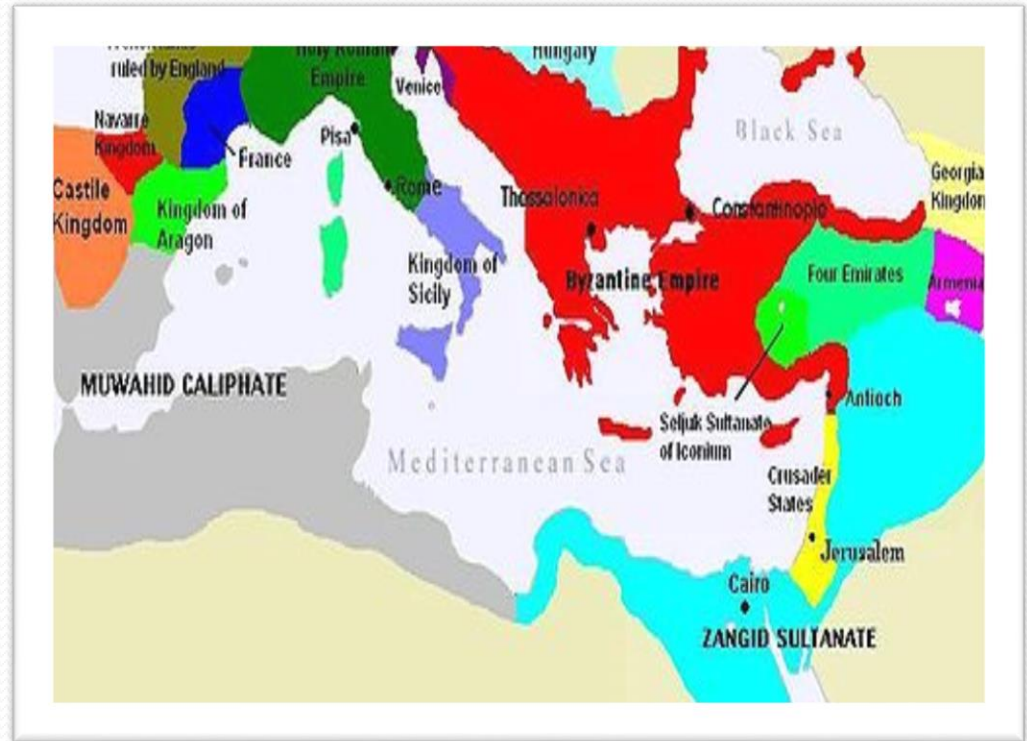


The Byzantine Empire at the accession of
Alexios I Komnenos, 1081 AD

The Mid Byzantine period (8th-12th century)

... is known as an era of political, economic and social change. After the loss of the western part of the Empire, the state achieves homogeneity. The rulers of the Byzantine Empire from AD 1081 onwards and for the next 128 years come from the Komnenos Dynasty.

With their ambitious foreign policy, the 5 Emperors of the Dynasty tried to restore and maintain military, economic and political power for the Empire, thus ensuring the dominance of Byzantium in the Eastern Mediterranean area.



Map of the Byzantine Empire
under Manuel Komnenos, 1170.

During this time, most big cities of the early Christian period gradually shrank or were abandoned because of the financial crisis which was due to attacks by enemies, epidemic diseases, earthquakes.

They were replaced by **Castle cities.**

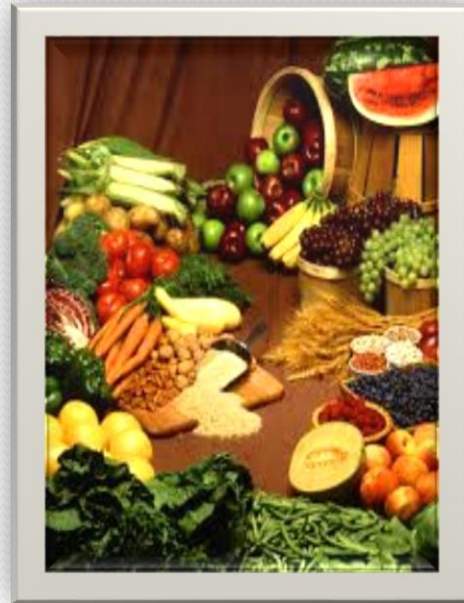
Moreover, during this last period of growth, rural populations suffered from heavy taxation which led to massive movements of people from the countryside to the castle cities.

This movement meant a dramatic demand for food to support the population, and led to a lot of pressure by the landowners on the farmers so as to increase the amounts of rural produce.



Castle City of Mystras, Laconia, Peloponnese

The dietary practices



- of the Byzantine population seem to have more in common with present day practices and less with those of the Middle Ages in Europe.
- We have a lot of information that concerns food and nutrition in Byzantium (what, where, how much food they consumed); however, we have little knowledge of the way the Byzantines prepared food, as there is little evidence coming from written sources and very few recipes have come down to us in written form.



- Hagiographers of the 11th and 12th centuries give us information about food; still, this only depicts a traditional religious attitude that emphasizes the importance of *fasting* in the Christian religious practice.



- Other written sources, less conservative, provide essential information that shows a great interest in food and proves the availability of raw materials.

The Byzantine Cuisine had three distinct types:



Ascetic

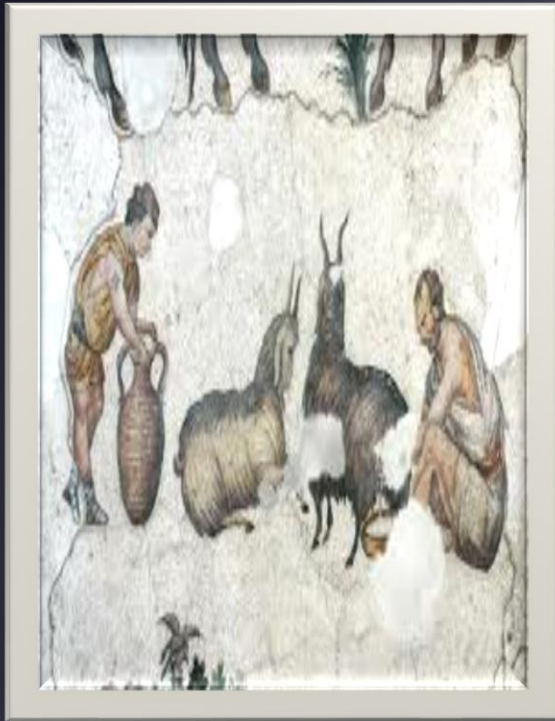


Imperial



Folk

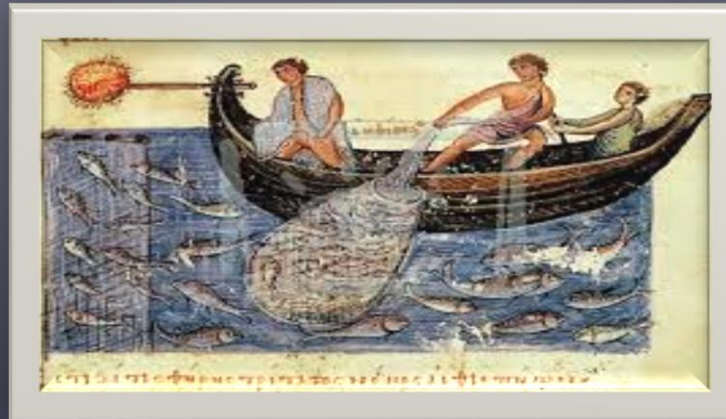




The factors that influenced the variety and quality of food include agricultural production and cattle farming in an area, financial situation in a family and religious interference.

For instance:

2. Fish was consumed by everybody, the difference being in the amount and size, with rich people eating big, expensive fish.



3. Crustaceans, sardines, squid, sand smelt, cuttlefish and other kinds of salted fish were affordable to everybody.

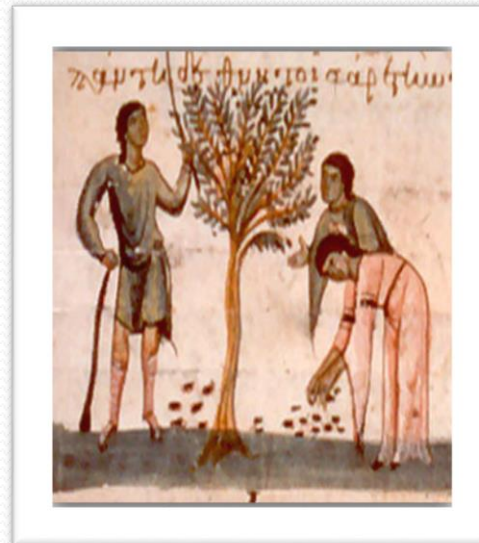
1. Meat was not frequently consumed either because of *fasting* or because the lower classes could *not afford* it, as it was considered a luxury.

The Byzantine **culinary practices and habits** were determined by important **factors** such as the following:

- CLIMATIC CONDITIONS AND AGRICULTURE
- ATTACKS AND CONQUESTS BY ARABS AND SLAVS
- NEW WORDS, NEW CONCEPTS
- RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL DIFFERENTIATION
- PREPARATION AND COOKING METHODS

CLIMATIC CONDITIONS AND AGRICULTURE

Differentiation in food choice was often the result of location and weather conditions. A gradual decrease in the temperature, in a period of numerous attacks by enemies, had negative consequences for agricultural production. From the 7th century on, cattle farming grew significantly, a fact which led to the abandonment of traditional plantations. The staples of the Byzantine diet included vegetables and mountain greens, bulbs, legumes/pulses, fruit, dairy products, fat, meat and game, wheat, wine, oil, eggs, fish, condiments. Olive oil, was produced in very few areas of the Empire, therefore, there was shortage of this product for the Byzantine population (the monks being an exception), as, due to weather conditions, there were no olive trees cultivated in the Northern parts of the Empire and in the interior of Asia Minor. Olive oil was rarely used even in Crete, where olive trees became more commonly grown after the 14th century. So, instead of oil, in certain areas people used animal fat, dairy products and brine.



ATTACKS AND CONQUESTS BY ARABS AND SLAVS

This was a crucial factor that affected the Byzantine diet in the 8th to 11th centuries. The area of Asia Minor is in constant turmoil and insecurity with tremendous consequences for the fishing industry as well as the plantations and trading - distribution of products.

The loss of Egypt, which provided the Empire with wheat, makes bread and wheat difficult to find and their consumption is evidently decreased. The same holds for oil after the loss of Syria and Cilicia, the main oil producing areas.

Byzantium also loses control of the Red Sea area and the trading of condiments – spices that were necessary for the preparation of rich, thick sauces consumed by the Byzantine Court and Aristocracy. Also, the appearance of Slavic populations in the Greek peninsula brings different, though not unknown, culinary practices. In the Peloponnese for instance, a primarily wine producing area, there is evidence of barley ale consumption in the 9th – 10th centuries.

This fact was regarded negatively by the Byzantines as ale was considered the drink of barbarians. Wine was extensively consumed, the most popular being the varieties from the Aegean islands and the area of Bithynia. Oranges first appeared in the 12th century; the name *orange* comes from the Italian word *portogallo*, but oranges were first introduced from the area of present day Spain.



Monastery of Town, Istanbul, Turkey Mosaic

NEW WORDS, NEW CONCEPTS

There is gradual adoption of new lexical items in the folk idiom for words such as *boiled*, *fish*, *wine*, *oil*, *broad beans*, which are now preferred to the older forms that came from the archaic and more formal Hellenic language.

After the 11th century there is also evidence of new vocabulary items for new food types such as caviar, rusk, orange, sour orange, aubergine, herring.



RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL DIFFERENTIATION

Man in Byzantium is different from Man in the late antiquity. Life is strongly influenced by Christian beliefs concerning religious fasting, abstinence, prohibitions and negative attitudes towards drinking and self-indulgence. The sofas of ancient Symposiums are now replaced by long tables and seats and the way feasts and meals are prepared is gradually changing for the Aristocracy. Table rituals and manners are considerably different from those practiced by Latin, Frank, Slav and Arab contemporary populations, who ignored and were surprised to see the use of cutlery, embroidered tablecloths and hand towels, but also, resinated wine, spices, brine, rusks and biscuits.



PREPARATION AND COOKING METHODS



Saint Nikolaos Temple,
Hellas, Thessaloniki
Wall Painting, Byzantine Dishes

- As of the 9th century, we have evidence that people cooked vegetables such as cabbage with oil, legumes with or without oil or with grounded nutmeg.
- During the Komnenos Dynasty, there were more complicated dishes with sweet, sweet and sour or intensely sweet flavors of pork, hare and salty meat.
- There is no information about the preparation of mustard sauce (perhaps it was a mixture of black pepper and mustard grains to add flavour to fish and cooked pork meat) or about how they preserved or salted pastrami, they prepared meat balls or sausages.
- We have some information about the use of vine leaves and cabbage leaves to prepare wrapped meat balls, a dish known in the ancient times and still popular nowadays.

The method of curing:

The most common way to preserve meat in the 12th century, was probably to dry it under the sun rather than smoke it. Cured meat was meant mainly for lower classes while upper classes afforded and enjoyed fresh meat.

Poultry ...

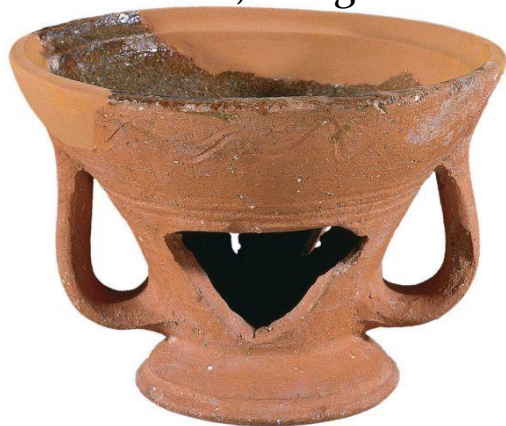
was popular among the Byzantines, with goose meat and liver being especially favoured. This meat came from geese fed with whey, soaked cereals and dry figs for 20 days, so as to have a pale, soft liver. When the liver was removed from the bird, it was placed in a pot full of warm water which was changed two or three times. There is evidence that this kind of food was known in the early Byzantine years and is now known with its French name, foie gras.

Other birds such as pheasants, ducks, pigeons, partridges, blackbirds, thrushes and even peacocks were in abundance (especially for the upper classes) and were consumed roasted, fried or boiled.



Seasoning

- Anything that could improve the taste of food was used by the Byzantines but their favourites included olive oil, animal fat, garlic, dairy products, vinegar and sauces.
 - All these were used to garnish fish, meat and vegetables.
 - Brine was the most popular seasoning.
- To prepare it, they used the inner parts of fish or whole small fish which they placed in a pot with plenty of salt and preferably oregano. Then they covered the pot and exposed it to the sun's rays for two or three months, stirring the content frequently. Later, they strained it and they took a thick liquid substance, the brine, into which they added water, wine, vinegar and oil. They kept it in a special pot which was always on the table, ready to sprinkle on their food.

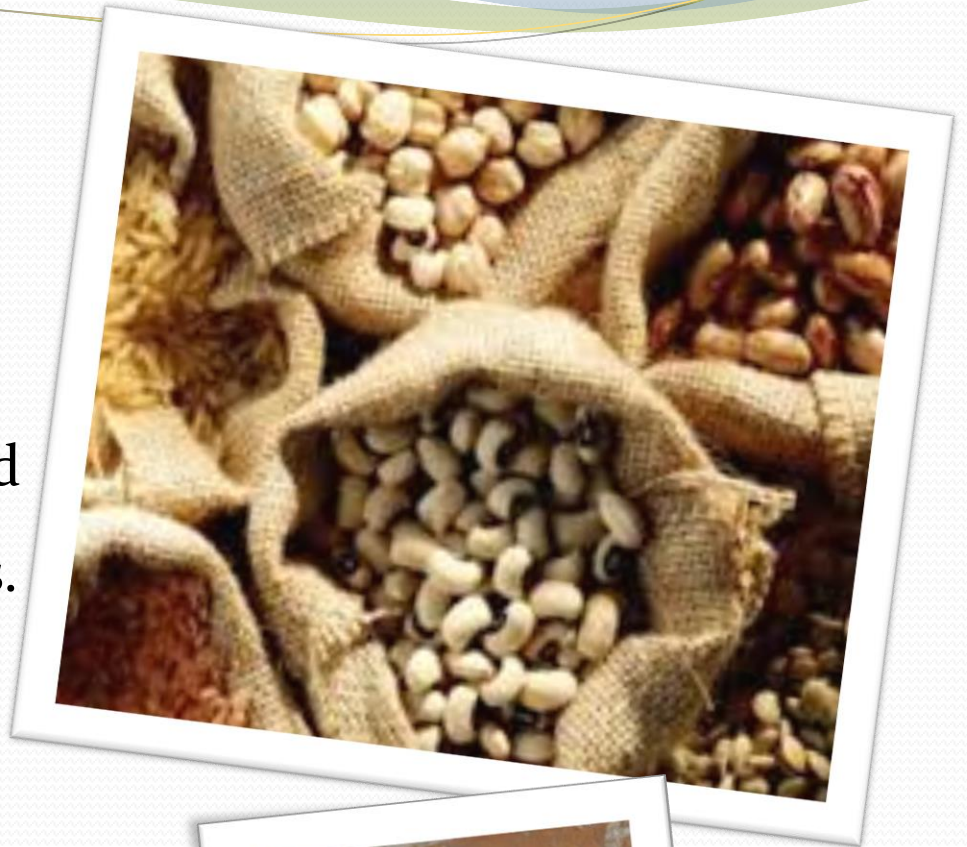


Storage pots
for sauces and seasonings



Legumes / pulses

- The most widespread were fresh and dried beans, broad beans, lentils and chickpeas.
- A popular dish was the so called *angels' bean soup*, served with ground nutmeg.



Meat ...



was consumed roasted, boiled or cured. Lamb and kid meat were favourites but also people cooked pieces of hare with pork and deer meat to make the former more tasty and easier to digest.

Pork meat was roasted on a spit or cooked in a terracotta pot after it had been treated with a mixture of wine and honey.

Beef was mainly boiled. Hare was popular in a dish with wine, pepper and spices that added a special taste. In the 12th century people used to chop meat into very small pieces, something similar to today's ground meat.

Eggs were consumed fried, boiled or baked as we find in a description given by the 12th century poet Theodore Prodromos, the so called Ptohoprodromos, who shows a lot of enthusiasm for an omelet dish. Cheese was made of sheep, goat and cow milk and was also consumed fried. People also made cream cheese and a type of hard cheese (myzithra) as well as yoghurt and butter. Buffalo milk, which was particularly fatty, was also consumed.

Fish ...

- had a special place in the Byzantine diet and was also eaten as an ingredient of pies. Sea fish was preferred to river or lake fish. Fish was roasted, fried or boiled with spices and herbs such as nard, coriander, anise, onions, leeks. Cured or salted fish was also consumed. Other seafood was also popular; squid, octopus, shrimps, mussels, oysters, scallops, limpets, urchins, all eaten raw or cooked.





Vegetables



Fruit and sweets

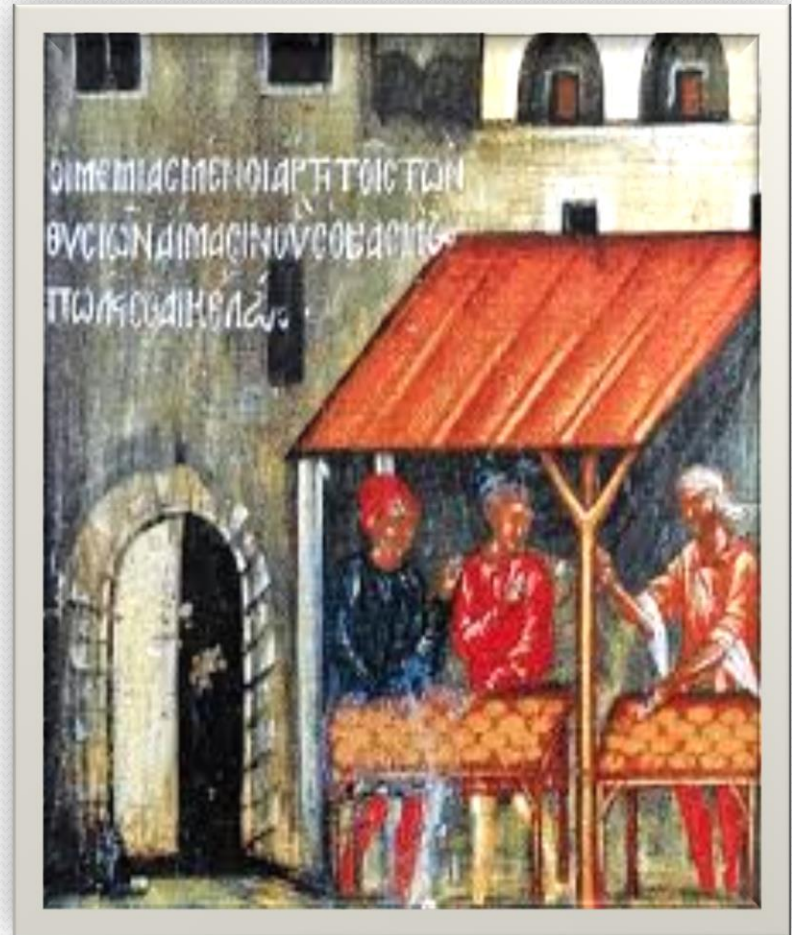
- ...supplemented the Byzantine diet. For the poor though, it was staple food. They ate cauliflowers, beetroots, zucchinis, artichokes, notch weeds, asparagus, lettuce, chicory, and eggplants. Carrots, mainly roasted, onions and garlic with their therapeutic effects were a must at every kitchen. Tomatoes and potatoes were unknown food for the Byzantines.

- Pomegranate was highly appreciated and was kept in the store room so as to last longer because it was commonly used to garnish certain dishes, giving a sweet and sour taste. Honey was also extensively used. It was poured on top of sweets and so was pomegranate juice. Sesame with honey (still popular and known as pasteli), boiled or baked wheat with honey, sweet pies, mixture of flour, honey and raisins, nut and honey sweet, must jelly, quince sweet, rice pudding with honey, pancakes and a sweet resembling baklavas, made with fine layers of dough, almonds, nuts and honey were common sweets.



Bread ...

....was always considered the main staple food and there were various types of bread made of wheat or barley, differing in quality according to the flour that was used and the way the cereals were ground. Rich people enjoyed the most expensive bread type, the so called *pure bread* which was made of wheat or semolina. There was also a variety that was called *semi-pure* and a third type of *bran bread* meant for the poor. People who lived in villages made their own bread while in the cities people bought bread from bakeries. People also made rusks which lasted very long.





Breakfast Time

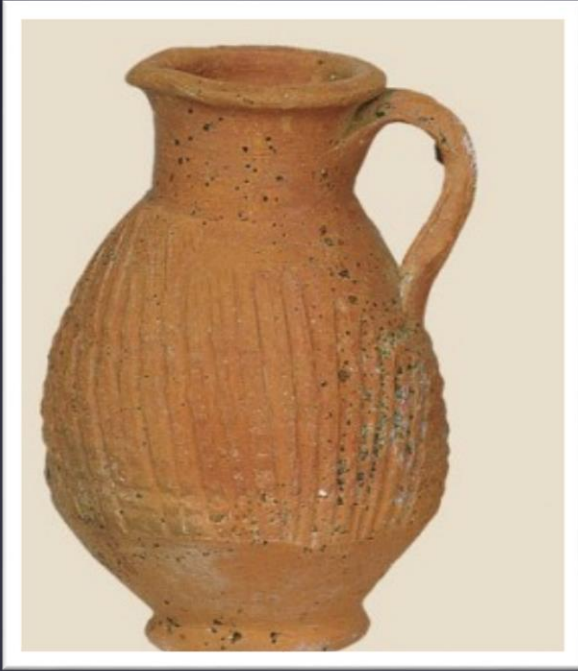
At breakfast time or as a snack, the Byzantines ate bread with cheese and other dairy products such as cream cheese or even myzithra, a variety of hard cheese, which was considered of lower quality. Cheese was considered by doctors of the time particularly difficult to digest.

Olives were also consumed at breakfast or as a snack.

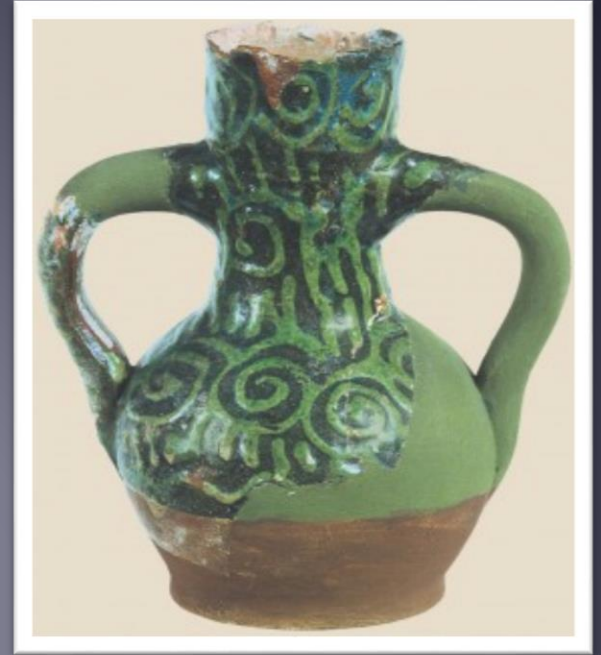
Drinks

Wine had a special place on the Byzantine table, as it was also used for the sacred purpose of the Holy Communion in the church, symbolizing the Blood of Jesus Christ. It was often thinned out with warm water and was considered a luxury as in the ancient times. They also produced wine from myrtle, pomegranate, apples, pears, quinces. They made a special drink by mixing old wine with honey and pepper.





Clay Jugs ,
Byzantine & Christian.
Museum,
Athens, Hellas



Glazed Ceramic plates, Byzantine & Christian Museum, Athens, Hellas

MEAL TIME RITUALS:

- A lot of care was taken so as to ensure cleanliness and comfort before a meal was served.
- The hostess cleaned the table with a sponge soaked in water or balsam. The tablecloth was of the finest quality fabric, embroidered and decorated with precious stones, a practice totally unknown to Western Europe at that time.
- The diners had to leave their shoes outside the dining room, to wear slippers and to wash their hands, observing the habit of the ancient Greeks.
- Emperors and aristocratic upper classes followed the ritual and the habits of the ancient Greeks (till the 10th century) when they organized feasts with meals. They lay on couches similar to those at the ancient symposiums, all around the table.
- Before starting their meal they said their prayers, in both aristocratic and lower class homes.
- In official meals the Patriarch or other high clergymen were present and blessed the food. To eat, they used their hands but also a variety of utensils such as spoons, knives and forks with two, three or even five sharp ends.
- Various other utensils placed on the table included pots and pans made of terracotta, wood, glass, silver or gold (for Emperors and Aristocracy) glasses, bottles, wooden bowls, plates, cups, sauce pots, water and wine jugs.



- During the meal, married men would eat together with their wives, relatives and close circle. The role of the woman during the meal was important as we learn from written sources such as the Heroic Poem of Digenis Akritas, where the hero always waited for his mother to take a distinguished seat at the table before he started eating. However, when it came to symposiums, things were different; men and women, especially young, unmarried ones did not eat together for reasons of decency and decorum.

As a lot of food was eaten with the hands, people used soap and warm water to wash their hands in a special basin after the meal. They also used hand towels and then they put on some perfume or aromatic oil such as myrrh.



Symposiums

When symposiums were organized, the host invited his guests and determined each person's seat according to social class or office. This seating arrangement was extremely important and the seat next to the host was considered honorary. So much importance did the Byzantines attribute to this arrangement that in order to avoid misunderstandings and insults they were the first to establish the round table. Educated and upper class guests also used to make toasts.



During symposiums, both private and official, dinner was followed by singing. The songs had love inspired content or were relevant to symposiums or the theatre.

There were musical instruments such as flutes and guitars to accompany the songs and there was also dancing at the sound of drums, rattlers and cymbals.

On special occasions, the chanters of Aghia Sophia, (the church of Holy Wisdom) and Aghioi Apostoli (the church of saint Apostles) were invited. They sang responses accompanied by the organ, praising the Emperor and calling out “long live the King”. Then everybody danced around the royal table.

At the end of the meal, the king used to offer his guests gifts, such as food, drinks, clothes, valuable table articles or even gold coins.

It is obvious that the rich had a great variety of dishes, while the poor only had staple food.



EATING HABITS OF THE BYZANTINES

The daily diet included three meals:

breakfast

lunch

dinner

Each main meal (except for meals during fasting periods) consisted of

- a) starters (bread, cheese, olives and fish with brine sauce)
- b) main course (meat and other cooked food) and
- c) dessert (sweets and fruit).

There were always sauces, olives and salads on the table.

Pork was very popular but also a lot of poultry and fish were consumed.

Soups were common too and cheese along with fruit (apples, melons, figs and grapes) were also well liked.

Some simple, lower quality foods included pork broth, bread with cheese, olives, mountain greens, eggs and legumes/pulses.

During fasting periods, meat was not allowed, especially on Wednesdays and Fridays.

Infants' and Babies' food

- Regarding the diet of infants and babies we know from written sources that in the 10th century a common food was a soup of barley flour, water and honey.
- Later, when children started to walk their diet included cereals, vegetables and a small amount of white wine.



FIVE BYZANTINE INNOVATIONS

Eureka !!!
That's It!



1. Wine Testing Rod

- The testing rod for wine was reminiscent of the one Jesus Christ dipped in a wine jug.

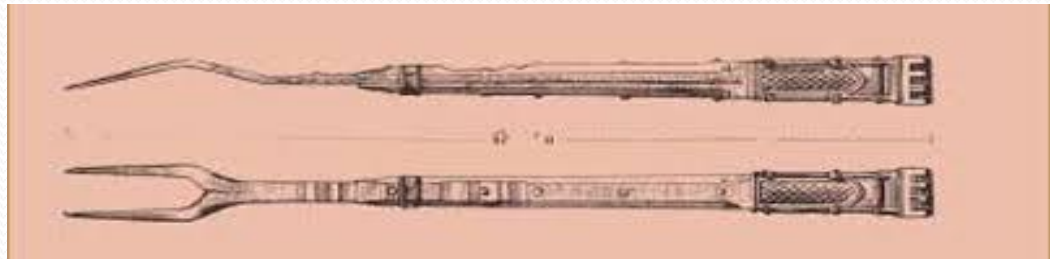


2. Forks

...with two ends, were used by the Byzantines together with spoons or knives, showing a transition from common to individual meals. Western chronicle writers report that forks were introduced to Western Europe in the 10th century, when the Byzantine Princess Theodora Douka, coming to Venice as a bride, brought her personal items which, however, were considered dangerous innovative luxuries and were therefore destroyed.

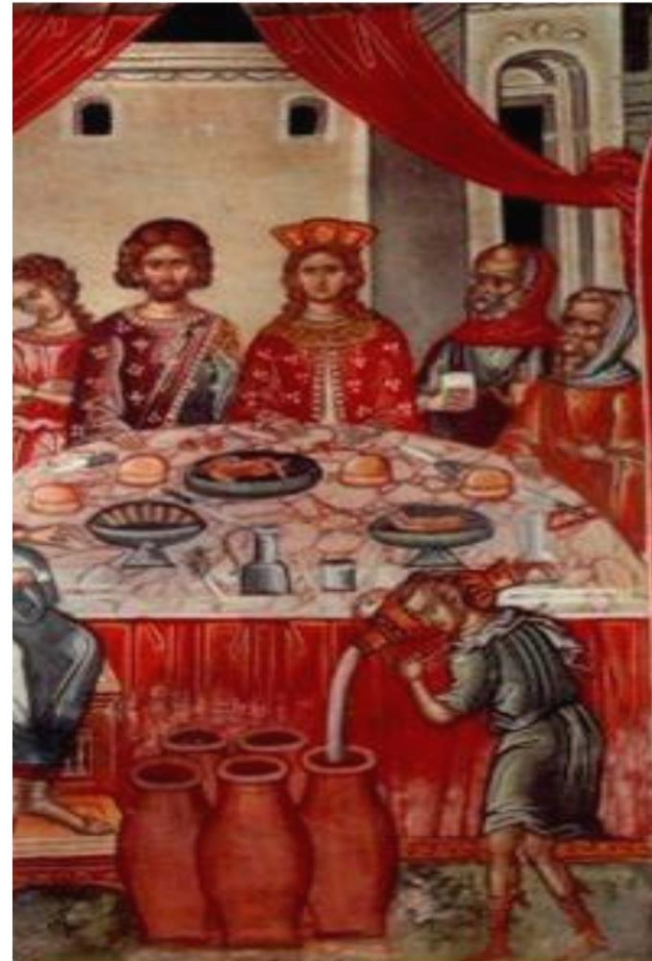


For Poseidon's sake !!!
Don't believe the Byzantines.
I WAS the inventor of fork.
Obvious, isn't it?



3· Round or Rectangular Dining Table

The introduction of the **round or rectangular dining table** (called tavla or trapezi, words on which modern languages built and made table and trapeze). Different dishes were placed on the table in such a way that all the diners had access to everything, that's why this innovation was of practical importance. The dining table was in a separate room, called the dining room.



4· Tablecloth

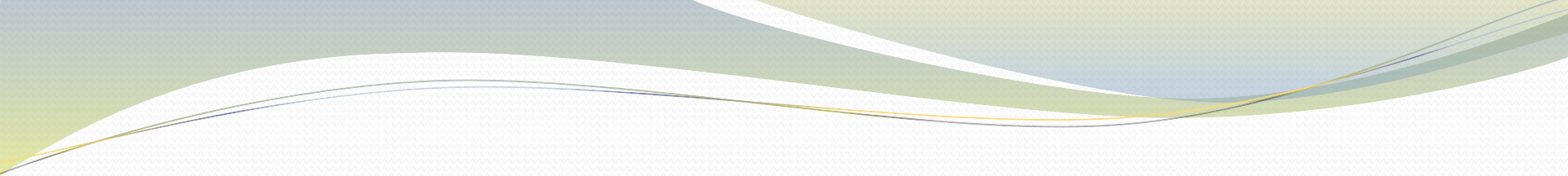
Before laying the dining table, the hostess or the servant had to clean it carefully, with a wet sponge. Then the table was laid with a tablecloth (called mensalion, from Latin: mensa, meaning table), signifying the economic and social state of the household. There were also hand towels placed on the table for the diners to clean their hands. These were made of linen.



5. Maitre and Butler

- A lot of household personnel were involved in the procedure of serving food. There was a maitre, called *Domestichos*, and wine attendants to serve wine. In the 10th century, there were also butlers who were in charge of the seating arrangement and also had to know the title of each officer and seat them accordingly.



- 
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