
The Impact of Food on the Historical Events of the Roman Empire

Food is everything to a society. Sure, people need it to survive, but it is much more than that. Food has had countless cultural, social, and psychological influences on the state of mankind since prehistoric times. People eat with other to establish and maintain relationships. People eat to gain satisfaction and escape from the stress of the normal world. People eat because that is what humans have been doing for hundreds of thousands of years. For the Romans, eating food was more than just a means of survival. It was a social activity that they prided themselves in. For scholars looking back on Roman civilization in an effort to understand who they were as a people, food has served as a basis for trying to decipher how the Romans lived.

Mediterranean cuisine revolved largely around four main foods: vegetables, cereals, olive oil, and wine. For the wealthy, seafood, cheese, eggs, meat, and fruits were available, but more of a luxury. The Romans became pioneers in the field of preservation, relying heavily on pickling and honey. Spices, sauces, and herbs were used for flavouring food. Much of what we know about the Romans has been gathered less from the actual food itself and more from Roman texts and art. Romans used cereals often provided most of the bulk to the average person's diet. Barley and wheat were the most common, but oats, rye, and millets were also consumed. People used these cereals in porridges and dark, coarse breads ("Roman Food.") Roman technology, such as grinding mills, made it possible to grind these cereals up into much finer flour. Among fruits and vegetables, apples, figs, grapes, beans, lentils, and peas were more commonly seen in Roman cuisine. Pears, plums, cherries, peaches, onions, cabbage, turnips, and garlic were also present. And of course, olives and olive oil have cemented themselves as a cornerstone of the cuisine of the region. Meat was more expensive than other foods because it had to be preserved. For this reason, meat was commonly prepared in small portions or in sausages. Poultry, pork, veal, mutton, and goat were available, but many people hunted wild game for food. Chefs of the wealthy often prepared dishes with exotic and unique birds such as doves, flamingos, peacock, parrots, and ostriches. All of this meat was preserved by salting, smoking, drying, pickling, or being stored in honey. Seafood was less common, but people still used the same preservation practices. The Romans ate saltwater fish, freshwater fish, crustaceans, and shellfish ("Food in the Roman World.") As the city of Rome grew, so did the demand for food. Food was mostly imported from the Italian mainland and surrounding islands. These foods saw a lot of room for experimentation, and the way the Romans used cooking utensils helped to optimize the different types of dishes the Romans could prepare.

While consuming and preparing these different types of food, the Romans used several different

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cooking utensils. Some of the most prevalent items found in the average Roman kitchen were bowls made of terracotta, thin sheet metal, or bronze. These bowls could be used to cook meat, vegetables, porridge, and fish. They were often placed on a tripod or right over the fire itself. In addition to these bowls, metal kettles of varying shapes and sizes were also used for cooking purposes. Surprisingly, the Romans did not use forks or spoons, and they only used knives for carving meat at the dinner table (Harcum.) They mostly ate with their hands. The Romans tried to only eat during certain parts of the day, in a very similar fashion to the modern concept of the meal.

The Romans, much like modern civilizations, liked to split their food consumption up into meals. Throughout the evolution of the society, the people also saw an evolution in their meals. The Romans usually ate some sort of breakfast-time meal known as ientaculum. This meal was light and would be considered a snack by today's standards. Consisting of bread, cheese, or fruit, this helped every Roman start his or her day. In addition to ientaculum, a lighter meal later in the day known as vesperna. However, when the Roman's main meal moved to later in the day, vesperna was replaced with a lunchtime meal called prandium. This lunch was light and usually consisted of vegetables, fish, and eggs. The main meal in Roman culture has always been called cena. Towards the beginning of the Republic, cena was held during lunchtime. As the years progressed, people started eating cena later and later, until it became an evening meal. Cena became a huge meal that usually had three parts to it. The first part was the appetizers; this stage of the meal was called gustatio. During this portion, eggs, olives, and fish were usually consumed. To wash it all down, the Romans would drink wine that was sweetened with honey and diluted with water. After the appetizers came the main meal. Sometimes containing as many as seven course, this portion of the meal was where most of the food was consumed. The main dish was usually some sort of meat or fish, and the rest of the dishes were different depending on the household. If a host wanted to impress his dinner guest, he would present them with exotic dishes during this part of the meal ("The Roman Banquet.") Following the main stage was dessert or, as the Romans called it, mensae secundae. This portion of the meal was heavy with nuts, fruit, and sometimes even snails or shellfish. ("Food in the Roman World.") The Roman meal was a very social event and helped to embody the values of Roman culture.

In their humble beginnings, Roman dinner parties were all male, reserved for the elite, and often consisted in excess consumption of alcohol. After a while, these parties started to allow women and mixed the acts of drinking and eating ("The Roman Banquet.) Oftentimes these dinners were held in rooms that had built in cement dinner couches that were once covered by mattresses and cushions. With three main seating areas, these tricliniums often encouraged "status seating" was not uncommon among these dinner parties, and the hosts often gave preferential treatment to some guests (Brown.) Conservative romans may have segregated men and women in different rooms towards this transitional period of dining practices. According to

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some historians, the host family often sat right next to the higher-status guests and across from the lower-status guests. These three seating areas either each had their own table or shared a common lower platform that all the guests would share. There was often multiple courses in the meal. The first course was finger foods such as cheese, eggs, mushrooms, or sausages. Following that was usually salads, greens, or other vegetables. For the third and final course, it was usually a meat or seafood, often served with a vast array of sauces and condiments. Bread was served throughout the meal and wine diluted with either water or fruit juice was always on the table (“Unusual Historicals.”) Wine ended up becoming a very fundamental part of Roman culture, and that is easy to see through studying the practices of consumption.

Alcohol was a big part of life in Rome., and, as far as historians can tell, everybody drank whether it was the rich, the military, the sailors, or the peasants. Between the one million citizens and slaves that lives in Rome, it is estimated that the average person drank nearly three liters of wine a day. The early version of wine was most likely made from grapes coming off the vines of the wild Eurasian grape. These grapevines would later be domesticated and made into self-pollinating plants that produced fruit that was much larger and much juicier than its undomesticated ancestors (Hayes.) Clearly, Romans considered alcohol to be very crucial to their society. As the society progressed, what started as innocent consumption in moderation slowly evolved into drinking in excess. People started to drink before meals, while their stomach was still empty, vomiting to consume more food and wine, and participation in drinking games that encouraged rapid consumption of large quantities of alcohol. In The House of Chaste Lovers in Pompeii, there is a mural that depicts a drinking game where one person is drinking and another is sitting in a couch, passed out. Alcoholism started to become the norm, and excessive drinking was something that many individuals took pride in. This destructive behavior continued until around 50 CE, when many displaced people started to flood into Rome. Large quantities of wine started to be distributed to the public and this excess drinking started to become reserved for festivals and celebrations (Hanson.) Because fruit juices had no way of being refrigerated, they quickly turned to wine (Hayes.) While Christianity started to spread, the teachings of Jesus Christ in regards to wine were taken more seriously. Wine was used in moderation, but being drunk was still looked down upon. Since wine was created by God, it was inherently good and often used for medical purposes. Individuals in the church could choose not to drink, but if some one showed a disdain for wine, that would be an insult to God. During the 5th century, the Huns ravaged Europe and temporarily destroyed the production of alcohol by burning vineyards, killing workers, and drinking all the alcohol in the cellars. When the Roman Empire fell, monasteries became the primary source for all things related to brewing and winemaking. Until about the 12th century, monasteries were one of the few places where an individual could get quality wine and beer (Hanson.) In addition to alcohol, some Romans also used other sorts of drugs, such as opium and cannabis, for pain relief (Hayes.)

Of course, when food is discussed in the Roman and post-Roman world, one must also

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address what how cities handle their food. Throughout the history of life on the Italian peninsula, governments often tried to supply food to their populace. This originally came from the view held by early Roman rulers that by securing food from provinces and allied states, one could easily win over the populace and gain favor from his or her citizens. Grain was often given out to citizens, and its price was fixed so that it was affordable enough for everyone to easily obtain. Through the evolution of the society, olive oil, pork, and pork were also given out to citizens. This became one of the core strategies for leaders in this area to ensure that their populace was happy and healthy throughout the centuries (“Food in the Roman World.”) Many, many centuries after this precedent was first established, during the “Great Famine,” there were mass shortages of food in a few states. In February of 1329, King Robert was forced to leave his office after an angry populace accused him of not supplying them with enough grain from the Kingdom of Naples. Later in the same year, all of Italy saw shortages and prices skyrocketed. One staio of wheat (83.31 liters) went from costing 17 soldi at the beginning of 1329 to 42 soldi by Easter of 1330. Eventually, the famine got so bad that governments could not be expected to supply any amount of food to their populace any longer (Jansen.)

Roman food was more than just a means of survival. The Romans took simple ingredients such as meat, fish, dairy, fruits, vegetables, grains, and spices, and made them their own, in classic Roman fashion. They relied on a myriad of different new and innovative tools to prepare these foods, and they ate them during certain times of the day in meals. These meals became the famous Roman feast, where they saw excess and splendor reign. The Romans drank in large quantities and had parties, feasts, and celebrations that helped to praise the attitude of grandeur and luxury they liked to exhibit, too. However, when famine hit, the Romans went back to their roots and took back what they thought they deserved. Food has helped scholars learn more about the Roman people than they could have ever known just by looking at a few buildings or other artifacts left behind.

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