

THE ETRUSCAN AND THE MEDITERRANEAN DIET

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In chapter three of his book entitled "Daily Life of the Etruscans", Etruscologist Jacques Heurgon says that the Etruscan society was an archaic one which, unlike neighbouring societies that were gradually obliged to transform their structures, remained rigidly conservative.

The Etruscans did their best to maintain a social organization which, anachronisms apart, could be defined as almost feudal.

In Rome, shortly after the setting up of the Republic in 493 BC, the plebes created their tribunes, which were entrusted with the task of protecting them against the oppression of the patricians, and this gradually granted them access to state magistrature.

Though attempts were made to curb the trend, the ascent of the lower classes was uninterrupted.

Instead, up to its very disappearance, the Etruscan civilization knew only masters and slaves.

In Etruria, below the ruling class there were only slaves. Town buildings, farms, mines and workshops in industrial areas abounded in an immense servile population, whose members appear here and there in the background in figurative monuments and historians' accounts.

Therefore, it is clear that if one wishes to deal with the topic of the diet of the Etruscans seriously, one has to set aside the idyllic picture that has become part of the Etruscan myth - that of Etruria Felix, the happy land. One must erase from one's mind the vision of refined, yet slack, gluttonous, at times overweight Etruscans, who are said to have sat down twice a day to opulent meals, accompanied by the sound of the flute and the zither and surrounded by pretty dancing girls. This certainly does not depict the daily life of the vast majority of the populace.

It may represent the life led by a very limited number of

aristocrats, the very same and sole elite group that could afford the splendidly painted tombs which, if we exclude the scant literary evidence available, are the only sources of limited information we have to gain insight into the customs and traditions of the Etruscans.

Especially insofar as the late-Villanovan and archaic-Etruscan periods are concerned, we must imagine a food economics very similar to that of the rest of the Mediterranean basin during the same period, in other words, similar to that of the Greeks, the Phoenicians and the Iberians.

This food economics lasted for a number of centuries and, with subsequent, inevitable modifications, we could say that it has come down to the present day, at least in certain geographic areas.

This economic system was based almost exclusively on agriculture, which was rudimentary in nature at first and

then grew increasingly sophisticated, as new methods of cultivation and new products were introduced. It was a subsistence agriculture, coupled with the harvest of wild plants and fruits, hunting (which was most certainly carried out and surely abundant), fishing, and the breeding of farmyard and grazing animals.

This food economics was linked to the social structure of the archaic age: the village. The village was an autonomous, self-sufficient unit and guaranteed its few inhabitants good quality and, above all, varied food.

The setting up of early towns, urbanization and the consequent depopulation of agricultural areas and the establishment of the latifundium greatly modified the social structure of the countryside and, consequently, the diet of the peasant population.

Over the centuries the peasants lost ownership of the small plots of land they tilled and were no longer able to run their farms independently and reap the fruits of their labour or the gifts bestowed by nature. They had become subordinates, slaves to the urban or rural aristocracy, and the latter had a totally different view from that of the small farmers as regards agricultural planning and the use of farmland. With the help of

sophisticated analytical technology, a number of paleo-nutritional surveys have been carried out since the early 1980s by Italian and foreign scholars in an attempt to classify the food economies of the ancient Italic peoples.

Results have shown that the sample Etruscan populations studied all belonged to food economies of the agricultural sort. It has also been seen that the transition from the archaic to the Hellenistic age implied a change in the diet of these populations, namely a reduced animal protein and an increased vegetal protein intake (cereals and legumes). This coincided with the social transformation that led from the egalitarianism of the archaic period, which saw limited social differences (the village, subsistence level food economy and self-sufficiency) to the highly stratified hierarchy of the period that follows (latifundium).

In Etruria, as in Greece, the countryside had to cater for the growing urban population and farmland was exploited more and more intensely, to the detriment of a more family-based use of fields.

The formation of an elite urban class probably coincided with a lower quality of diet for a number of farmers, and was marked by a decrease in the consumption of meat

and an increase in the consumption of bread and oil.

It is likely that, in general, the worsening of the standard of living of many rural Etruscans of low social standing was inversely proportional to the improvement in the standard of living of the emerging classes.

As far as diet goes, from a geographical, cultural, socio-historic and climatic standpoint, Etruria falls under the typical Mediterranean triad of wheat, olives and vines.

In Italy, olive trees and vines were grown in a systematic manner only after the advent of the Etruscan state system, between the 9th and 7th centuries BC. However, these two plants are certainly native to Italy, as they are to Greece, and were present even before local agricultural systems took root.

These two products on their own were able to cover the minimum calorie requirement for sustenance.

Proteins were provided by cereals and legumes, which were available in abundance. Cereals consumed included spelt, wheat, barley and millets, whereas legumes eaten comprised broad beans, lentils, chick-peas and lupins.

The extremely useful association of legumes and cereals compensated for the essential aminoacid deficiency in both

above mentioned products (sulfurates, lysine and tryptophan respectively).

These two food products, considered singularly, have a protein content that is not particularly outstanding, but combined and eaten together, they raise the quality of the proteins, making them very similar to fish or meat, which provide noble proteins.

The protein intake of the Etruscans was sometimes integrated (especially during festivities, ceremonies and banquets) with eggs, milk, cheese, fish, and meat, if a hunt was successful.

Vegetables, wild and cultivated fruits and honey completed this three thousand year old traditional diet of the peasant class. From a nutritional point of view it is not dissimilar to that of the recently defined "Mediterranean diet".

The term "Mediterranean diet" has been coined of late by a group of American nutritionists to indicate the diet of the rural populations in central and southern Italy between the two World Wars and in the 50s. In those years the diet of the people in that area consisted mainly of complex carbohydrates (deriving from pasta, legumes and brown bread rich in fine bran) rather than the simple carbohydrates provided by pure sugar or sugar used as a

sweetener in cakes and drinks; it also entailed an abundant and regular consumption of vegetables, fresh and dried fruits, providing a fair amount of roughage, vitamin C and provitamin A.

The diet was also characterized by the following features: an almost exclusive use of olive oil, leading to a good lipemic condition and a non-predisposition to cardiovascular diseases, in that it contained a low amount of saturated fatty acids; the infrequent consumption of meat, prime source of saturated fatty acids and arachidonic acid - precursor of prostaglandin (type 2), leukotrienes and thromboxane (inflammation, allergies, cardiovascular risk); a moderate intake of eggs and fish. This picture was completed by large quantities of red wine, rich in OPC (proanthocyanidin), which has an antioxidant and vasodilative action.

This diet also foresaw the abundant use of garlic and onions, which are useful in the prevention of coronary diseases.

This nutritional model was varied, balanced and suitable for people of all ages and in keeping with the food tradition of Mediterranean countries. It drastically reduced the risk of the onset of so-called "Affluent Society

Diseases" (obesity, diabetes, arterial hypertension, dislipidaemia, coronopathy, arteriosclerosis, digestive problems, constipation, haemorrhoids, etc.).

However, there are some differences between the "Mediterranean diet" in vogue in the 20th century and that of the Etruscans in the 1st century BC.

First and foremost one notices the absence of the following ingredients in the Etruscan diet: pasta (at least pasta as we know it), rice (which was imported from the Far East only after Marco Polo's voyages), potatoes, tomatoes, sugar, beans (which were available in Europe only from the 16th century onwards, after Christopher Columbus's voyage to the West Indies). However, the crux of the matter does not change.

The nutritional bases of both these diet patterns consist of products of vegetal origin, cereals and legumes, as mentioned earlier, and the occasional consumption of animal products, which play a marginal, merely integrative role, if at all. This diet pattern is still widespread in the Mediterranean basin, especially in southern countries which are not yet economically, but by no means culturally, "developed".

European countries, on the other hand, seem to be losing this extremely healthy tradition. As we can see, progress does not always go hand in hand with the quality of life and healthiness.

The modern Western food model is increasingly similar to that handed down to us by Etruscan artists: scenes depicting the dining table of aristocrats of Tarquinia and Dodecapolis, overflowing with game, meat, and rich, succulent dishes.

This is all very attractive and appetising but certainly not in keeping with a healthy body and mind.

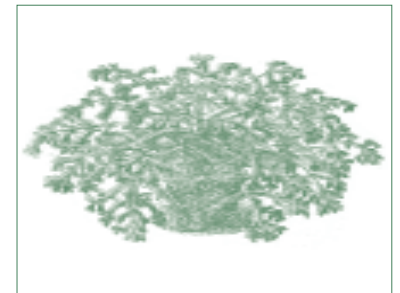
I think it is preferable by far to picture these ancient inhabitants of Italy, seated outside their homes in the countryside, consecrating a plate of legumes and spelt, seasoned with a little excellent olive oil from the Tuscia hills, with a glass of good wine in hand. I believe that, culturally speaking, this picture is much closer to us.

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