Food and Drink – Greek Military Cuisine
Nick Sekunda

Many important ingredients of today's Greek cuisine had not yet arrived in Greece. Tomatoes and potatoes were to come much later. Oranges and lemons from India only started to appear in the eastern Mediterranean in the Imperial and Byzantine periods. So the ancient Greek diet looked somewhat different from that of modern Greece.

Barley was the staple food eaten by the common man. It was either made into unleavened bread, or eaten as alphita, barley groats. This was a kind of porridge made of husked and ground barley boiled into a thick paste. In his play entitled Lysistrata (561-4) the Athenian comic Aristophanes jokingly protests at the way the city of Athens is full of the military, who terrorise the other inhabitants of the city. He pokes fun at a phylarch, one of the ten Athenian tribal cavalry contingent commanders, who buys alphita from an old woman in the market and then eats it out of his bronze helmet, and a Thracian armed with javelins and pelta, who terrifies the woman on the fig stall as he gulps down her ripe figs. This carbohydrate 'filler' would be accompanied with 'something to be eaten with the cereal' to which the Greeks gave the generic title opson, which is normally translated into English as 'relish'. This would most commonly be some kind of fish, fresh fish if possible, or, if not, salt-fish. As well as being a staple source of protein for the poor, salt-fish was served as a first course at banquets in order to whet the appetite, and especially to sharpen the taste buds before the first cup of wine.

In the Greek household a wide range of sauces might be prepared to give this rather basic diet some taste, but the Greek hoplite would have been unlikely to have the time or opportunity for complicated cooking in the field. However, the meal would have been enlivened with whatever seasonal fruit or vegetables were available. Figs and grapes were the most heavily consumed, but apples, pears, mulberries and dates were also widely eaten.

Salt-fish, called tarichos, was imported into the cities of Greece in huge quantities, especially from the Black Sea. The Black Sea was teeming with all kind of fish, especially with shoals of the carnivorous tunny, which migrated round the inland sea and through the Bosphorus as they switched their hunt from one species of victim to another. Tunny could be caught in huge quantities, salted in order to preserve it, then exported to the hungry cities of Greece. Fish preserved in this way remains edible for about a year, though it suffers a 50 per cent weight loss, 15 per cent protein loss,

and a 50 per cent vitamin B loss. The tunny can grow to an exceptional size. Pliny (9. 17. 44) records one being caught which weighed 15 talents (about three tons) and with a tail measuring two cubits and a palm (a yard and four inches). The largest tunny had the most oily flesh and Athenaeus (3. 121 b) tells us that these were cut up to make an especially prized type of salt-fish called melandrya 'black oak'. According to Pliny (9. 18. 48) these strips of tarichos received this name because they resembled oak-wood shingles in size and colour.

Strabo (7. 4. 6) tells us that in the Classical period Greece imported most of its supplies of tarichos from the Sea of Azov, known in Antiquity as Lake Maeotis, lying between Crimea and the mouth of the Don. This was undoubtedly true of fourth-century Athens, which had close diplomatic links with the Bosphoran Kingdom, which straddled the Kerch Straits and thus controlled the fishing in the Sea of Azov.Such was the demand for tarichos in the cities of Greece, it was even imported from the western Mediterranean and beyond. The Carthaginians exported tarichos in specially produced amphorae, and examples of these vessels have been uncovered during archaeological excavations at Athens and Corinth in contexts dating to the fifth century.

Undoubtedly it was these cheap staple foods which would most commonly be packed as rations by the Greek hoplite. This is confirmed by Aristophanes' comedy The Acharnians, first performed in 425 BC. In an invaluable passage (lines 1097-1101) Aristophanes describes how the Athenian general Lamachos, who is being satirised at this point in the play, hastily packs his kit to join a panic mobilisation to oppose an anticipated raid on Attica by the Boeotians. Into his gylion, a wicker pannier that carried the hoplite's or traveller's rations, he packs salt mixed with thyme, onions, and tarichos wrapped in a fig leaf. Aristophanes has failed to mention the barley groats that most hoplites would also take, but onions and tarichos are just the sort of non-perishable foodstuffs we would expect the Greek hoplite to take on campaign. The whole purpose of hoplite warfare was to inflict as much damage as possible on the agricultural infrastructure of the enemy, so the hoplite would also hope to supplement the rations he carried with whatever he could capture. Therefore the hoplite might also carry a set of iron spits to grill any meat he might pick up over the campfire.

The salt mixed with thyme mentioned by Aristophanes was carried as a relish to add taste to the rather uninspiring food, perhaps starting to rot, that the hoplite was forced to eat during the campaign. In his Natural History (31. 87) Pliny mentions how salt was mixed with aromatic substances 'creating and sharpening an

appetite for every kind of food'. Elsewhere (21. 157) he says thyme 'pounded, with the addition of salt, it is used for loss of appetite'. In his Cyropaedia (6. 2. 31) Xenophon recommends that the meats to be taken on campaign should be sharp, pungent and salty, 'for these not only stimulate the appetite but also afford the most lasting nourishment'.

Do any recipes survive which show how the hoplite might vary his uninteresting diet of salt-fish? Salted cod is, after all, a highly esteemed dish in Portugal, where it is prepared in a multitude of ways. The only ancient cookbook to have survived into modern times is The Art of Cooking (De re Coquinaria) by one Apicius who lived during the reign of Tiberius (see OMJ 2.4, Roman Food and Drink). The work, which has survived under the name of Apicius, is not in its original form, but is preserved in a later edition prepared in the fourth or early fifth century AD. The later editor wanted to combine recipes for the wealthy with other recipes more appropriate for people of more modest means. So, even though Apicius is credited as being the book's author, in fact the work contains between its covers recipes gleaned from a number of other sources of varying date, both Greek and Latin. Consequently the more humble recipes it contains, such as those for salt-fish, may be handed down from much earlier Greek sources. Under 4. 2. 25 Apicius lists a recipe for Fish with Sweet and Sour Onions Lucretius. The identity of this Roman Lucretius is unknown, but the recipe may in any case be much older:A hoplite might just about be able to manage to find these ingredients on campaign, but the recipe for Sauce for Baked Young Tunny-Fish listed under 10. 1. 13 might stretch locally available resources. '[Mix] pepper, lovage, oregano, green coriander, onion, pitted raisins, raisin wine, vinegar, fish sauce, boiled wine, and olive oil. Cook. If you wish, add some honey. This sauce can also be served with poached [tunny-fish].'

Not all campaigners lived so frugally however. King Antigonos Gonatas was once accompanied on campaign by Antagoras of Rhodes, epic poet and epicure 'a terrible fellow to coin strange words' and famous for his repartee. In camp one day the king came upon Antagoras assiduously engaged in preparing a dish of conger eels, stirring them in a casserole with his own hands, rather than composing an epic celebrating the king's martial virtue. Gonatas asked the poet if he thought Homer would have ever composed the Iliad celebrating the exploits of King Agamemnon if he had spent all his time in cooking conger eels. Antagoras replied that Agamemnon would never have performed any of those exploits if he had spent all his time wandering about camp finding out who was cooking conger eels. The exchange, preserved in a fragment of Athenaeus (8. 340e-f) perhaps took place during some otherwise unknown

campaign of Gonatas in the Balkans, for Antagoras of Rhodes was only present at the Antigonid court from 276 to 274 BC, and no other fighting at that time is known. Under Apicius 10. 1. 9 the following rather terse recipe is preserved, for a sauce for baked conger eel. 'Pepper, lovage, oregano, onion, pitted raisins, wine, honey, vinegar, fish sauce, and olive oil. Cook'. For all we know this may have been the recipe which Antagoras was working on when he was so rudely interrupted by King Antigonos.

Antagoras is not known to have recorded any of his recipes, but numerous cookery books were written in ancient Greece, though none have survived. Their compilers would travel throughout the Greek world and even outside it in search of new regional recipes. One of the most famous of these ancient Greek 'galloping gourmets' was Archestratos of Gela in Sicily. He is known to be a contemporary of Aristotle and the Pythagorean philosopher Diodorus of Aspendos, and so ate his way around the world in the age of Alexander the Great. He wrote an account of his gastronomic journey in the form of a poetic oeuvre. A fragment of this work surviving in Athenaeus (7. 314 f) has a military flavour, for it lists where the tastiest swordfish are to be eaten. Archestratos especially recommends the swordfish caught off Byzantium, and especially the joint cut right from the tail. 'This fish is also good in the straits off the edge of the jutting headland of Peloros' that is in the Strait of Messina between Italy and Archestratos's native Sicily. Athenaeus continued the military savour as he remarks that there is no one who is such a careful critic of a menu or such a careful tactician as Archestratos. Just as a contemporary writer of Taktika would describe the way an army is drawn up, Archestratos would draw up the ingredients of his recipes rank upon rank.

The trend for increasingly exotic ingredients and increasingly complex dishes seems to have started among the Athenian elite in the middle of the fifth century BC. The conquests of Alexander opened up Asia and Africa to the Greek world, and vastly increased the range of foodstuffs available for luxurious consumption. Apicius collected and designed new recipes for the tables of the fabulously wealthy Roman elite during the period of Rome's greatest wealth and power. He made a fortune out of his skills. According to legend Apicius died in the following way: one day he was counting his fortune and he worked out that he had so far spent a hundred million sesterces, mainly on food, and only had ten million sesterces left. So he poisoned himself rather than renounce his gourmet life-style. The tongues of flamingo were especially prized by gourmands such as Apicius. Perhaps the recipe for cooking flamingo whole which Apicius gives at 6. 6. 1 is of his own invention.'Free the flamingo of its feathers Wash, dress, and put it in a pan. Add water,

salt, aniseed, and a little vinegar. When the bird is half cooked, bind a bouquet of chives and coriander and cook (with the flamingo). Before the bird is fully cooked, pour boiled wine over it for coloring. [To make the sauce] put into a mortar, pepper, cumin, coriander, laser root, mint and rue. Bruise [these seasonings together], pour vinegar [over them], and add some dates and gravy from the pan. Empty the contents of the mortar into the same pan [with the flamingo]. Thicken the sauce with starch and pour it over the bird. Serve. The same method is used for parrot'.

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About the author

Nick Sekunda was born in 1953 in Mansfield, Nottinghamshire; his father is Polish. After studying Ancient History and Archaeology at Manchester University, he went on to take his Ph.D. in 1981; and he has taken part in archaeological excavations in Poland, Iran and Greece. After a few years working in the electronics field, Dr. Sekunda decided to return to full time academic work, and began with a research project on ancient Persian warfare for the British institute of Persian Studies. While continuing his research work he has published numerous academic articles, and Osprey's Men-at-Arms 148: The Army of Alexander the Great.

Further reading

Translation of the recipes preserved in the cookbook, which goes under the name of Apicius, is not a straightforward matter. Many of the sauces used by the Greeks and Romans cannot be exactly reproduced from modern ingredients. Consequently they have to be re-created by a process of trial and error. Furthermore the recipes contain no quantities for the ingredients. In this article I have cited J. Edwards (ed.), The Roman Cookery of Apicius Translated and Adapted for the Modern Kitchen (London 1988) both for the translation of the recipes and for the quantities to be used. I have slightly adapted the translations in one or two places however. In particular Edwards translates the Latin liquamen or garum as 'fish-pickle', whereas I have used the term 'fish sauce'. As Edwards explains in his introduction 'The preparation of garum began with the gills, intestines, and blood of the mackerel. This was put in an open jar and saturated with salt. Vinegar, parsley, wine and sweet herbs were added. The mixture was then exposed to the sun until the fish parts liquefied (liquamen), resulting in a thick sauce. After two or three months the sauce was bottled and used'. On page 305 he gives a recipe for the preparation of a fish-pickle to imitate liquamen, but it so closely resembles the fish sauce currently used in Southeast Asia, I have given 'fish sauce' in its place.