Tell Me about the Bakeshops: Toward a Social History of Baking and Bread in Ancient Greece

Bread was the dietary staple in ancient Greece. Thucydides, for instance, included one hundred and ten women for the baking of bread in the garrison of Plataea at the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War in 431 along with four hundred Plataeans and eighty Athenians (2.78). Seas of ink have been spilled on the quality of the different grains (e.g. Jasny 1942; Salares 1991), the equipment of baking (e.g. Frankel 2003), and the interrelated questions of the amount of grain that Greek cities (particularly, but not exclusively, Athens) would have had to import in order to sustain their populations and the mechanisms of the grain trade (e.g. Ampolo 1989; Bissa 2009; Bravo 1983; Foxhall and Forbes 1982; Garnsey 1988; Garnsey and Morris 1989; Jameson 1983; Moreno 2003; Moreno 2007). In contrast to work on the Roman world, however, focus on the social dynamics of food in ancient Greece often falls on the consumption and status of luxury goods such as meat and fish or two legs of the Mediterranean triad, wine and olive oil. Even in scholarship that acknowledges the existence of public bakeries (e.g. Sparkes 1962), the focus remains on the domestic kitchen.

The third component of the Mediterranean triad, bread, is subject to more assumption than scholarship. As evidenced by the above Thucydides passage, for instance, one might assume that most baking was domestic labor done by women and slaves. There is good reason to believe that this was indeed common. Fifth-century Boeotian terracotta figurines show women at kneading troughs and Socrates elevates the household skill of baking bread to equal status with other artisans in Xenophon's *Memorabilia* (2.7.4–6). And yet, as is often the case with the Greek domestic ideal, this tells only one side of the story.

In Aristophanes' *Frogs* of 405, when Dionysus is planning his trip to Hades to recover his beloved Euripides, he demands that Heracles describe the route—or rather, that he describe the harbors, bake shops, brothels, springs, and inns along the way (112–15). Couched in a comic exchange between two gods about traveling to a place where people no longer need to eat is reference to a social institution of bread baking outside the home. Nor is this an isolated example. Later in the same play, Dionysus offers another glimpse into the kitchen when he describes how poets abuse each other like one abuses pans used for baking bread (857–9), while Plato name-drops Thearion, a baker of some renown, in his Gorgias (518b), and Thucydides says that the Athenians hired bakers from mill-houses to accompany expedition to Sicily (6.22.3). Moreover, Athens installed a bureaucratic apparatus to regulate the price not only of grain, but also of baked bread (e.g. Arist. *Ath. Pol.* 51.3). What begins to emerge from these examples is an often-overlooked aspect of the Greek city: a public face to bread and baking.

In this paper, I will reconstruct this setting of bread baking, showing that, much like animal sacrifice, it played a central role in the social life of the community.

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