

I. BREAD AND THE BODY

Bread was born in ashes, on stone. It is older than books, older than writing. Its first names are carved on clay tablets, in bygone languages. Part of its past is buried under ruins. Its history is divided among countries and peoples.

The story of bread is rooted in the past and in history; it is connected to both, while identifying with neither.

Perhaps it was a brick that provided the first bread-maker with a model. Earth and dough sat side by side on the fire, on the far side of memory. The connection between bread and the human body goes back to our very origins.

No one knows when or where the first ear of grain sprouted. But its appearance must have attracted attention and aroused curiosity. The ordered distribution of the grains on the stem provided an example of harmony, measure, perhaps even equality, while the variety and quality of the various cereals revealed their differences, their virtues, and probably also a hierarchy.

Traces of the first cereals can be found on several continents. In ancient times, they thrived in the plains of the "Fertile Crescent", a region that spanned modern-day Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, Jordan, the northeast and Nile valley regions of Egypt, together with the southeastern region of Turkey and the western fringes of Iran. Over the Euphrates shone a star called Anunit; over the Tigris it was the "Swallow star". Their brilliance, it was believed, contributed to the fertility of Mesopotamia. Wheat grew in the Horn of Africa, between the Great Sea and the Sea of Reeds, near Aksum, Asmara, Addis Ababa. The desert ends in the plateaus of Ethiopia and Eritrea, where the climate is milder, the earth more fertile. Nearby is the source of the Blue Nile, which flows down to meet the other tributary of this wonderful river, the White Nile. The region enjoys an abundance of sunshine. "Bread is the fruit of the earth blessed by light," says the poet.

Perhaps it was to Egypt that cereals first came from the Middle East, but they followed other routes as well. Carbonized seeds have been discovered in the western parts of the African desert, in fire pits more than eight thousand years old; here too somebody had once sown and reaped. Desert tribes from the Sahara, which once resembled the savannah, approached the Nile by trying to follow the riverbank. They found it crisscrossed with streams where nomads could quench their thirst and camels and

gazelles could drink water. And so the Bedouins stopped in the oases, before continuing on their way, These journeys and stories, too, are older than history.

The origins of bread go back to the times when nomads became settlers, hunters became shepherds, and both farmed. Some moved from hunting-ground to hunting-ground and from pasture to pasture; others cleared and worked the land: the vocation of Cain versus that of Abel. The nomadic life veered towards adventure, while the life of the settler required patience. Those wall drawings discovered in caves which were once used by nomads often depict long or broken lines that come from somewhere and lead somewhere else; moving from the unknown to the unknown. The drawings done by farmers, on the other hand, tend to be rounder, the spaces more delineated, with a discernible centre.

The sowing and reaping divided time into periods, the year into months, then into weeks and days. Routes shortened distances between places. Huts were built in the valleys, while denser dwelling areas were constructed by rivers. The digging of furrows changed the appearance of the fields, and allowed ears of grain to cover the land. The landscape changed from one generation to the next.

“The Epic of Gilgamesh”, written in cuneiform script around 1800 BCE, mentions the bread eaten by the protagonist Enkidu, a skilled hunter who was accustomed to eat game. This mountain man who ate grass with the gazelles and sucked the milk of wild beasts, was surprised when he tasted bread for the first time. The journey from raw to cooked grain was a long one, and the man who made bread was different from his ancestors: He found himself standing on the threshold of history.

Since the beginning of cultivation, the farmer had to keep his eye on the ploughed land, waiting for a yield. He scanned the sky, fearing for his crop, and he understood that the earth and the sky raised questions but offered no answers. As a result, different explanations and different belief systems came into being and spread. “Bread belongs to mythology,” said Hippocrates.

In the Garden of Eden, Eve picked the fateful apple and offered it to Adam, incurring God’s punishment: “By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread”. The division of labour was dictated by necessity. The man worked in the field, the woman worked in the garden. He sowed and reaped, while she kneaded and baked. “Women sprinkled much white flour upon it – a meal for the labourers,” it says in “The Iliad”, while in “The Odyssey”, the author

underscores the difference between those who eat bread and those who eat lotuses – the “lotophagi”, or the “barbarians” who couldn’t even speak properly. While some salted their meals and others refrained from it, both bread and salt were unknown to the Cyclops Polyphemus.

According to the Old Testament, Gideon’s defeat of the Midianites was inspired by a dream one of his soldiers had about barley bread: “he made unleavened cakes of an ephah of flour” – one of which tumbled down into the enemy camp. Pausanias also left to posterity the legend of the man who helped win the Battle of Marathon, midway between Athens and Karystos: “A man of rustic appearance and dress” charged at the overpowering Persians, brandishing his ploughshare, doubled over like a reaper. No one knew who he was or where he came from, not even the oracle of Delphi. When consulted, it merely responded with this sibylline message: “Honour Echetlaeus (he of the Plough-tail).” Pausanias then goes on to tell us that “a monument of white marble” was erected in his honour.

Herodotus used the image of an ear of corn when recounting how Periander, the tyrant of Miletus, sent a messenger to Thrasybulus in Corinth with advice on how best to rule: *Cut off all the tallest ears of wheat and throw them away*. Thrasybulus understood, followed his advice and killed the most prominent citizens of Corinth. According to the “Book of Genesis”, the pharaoh also dreamt of bread: “In my dream there were three baskets of white bread on my head” and “seven ears of corn, rank and good”, threatened by the thin and hollow ones. Joseph reminded the pharaoh that after abundance comes austerity, and he proposed building huge storehouses for the grain, to secure bread for the lean years.

And so we see the ear of grain and images of bread move from reality to dreams, and from dreams to reality, finding their place in the soul and in the body.

The prophet Isaiah foresaw a time when people “shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks”. But as we know, the heavens did not heed the prophet’s words. The earth turned a deaf ear and faith failed to disarm the warrior. The power structures gave more support to soldiers than to the sowers.

Since time immemorial, parasites have been a threat to grain and flour, to bread and the human body that it nourishes. Their names have come to symbolize misfortune,

trouble, devastation. Darnel, ryegrass and weeds are mentioned in the holy scriptures, as is mildew, a blight that is also referred to as rust or soot. Caterpillars and cockroaches plagued crops, rats and rodents infested granaries. We do not even know the names of some of these pests, but ants are not among them. Naturalists of the past, like Darwin, certainly paid them tribute. Everybody knows that an ant carries a load that is heavier than its own self, and those industrious insects have certainly taught us lessons, inspired comparisons and even metaphors: in order to survive, farmers were “as industrious as ants”; they gathered “like ants” in the field and on the threshing floor; and a good man wouldn’t step on an ant. Perhaps it is these very insects themselves that gave an example to people of how to gather and store grains for the coming days.

“The universe begins with bread,” Diogenes Laertius quotes Pythagoras as saying. Preserved remains of grains and bread have been discovered next to sarcophagi and urns in graves, in pyramids, in places where one bid farewell to this life in the hope of a celestial, eternal life. There are also numerous vestiges and legends to show that separating the wheat from the chaff and weeds, the grain from the chaff and hay, the flour from bran and particles, the pure from the impure, are all age-old actions.

Bread is the product of both nature and culture. It was the condition for peace and the cause of war, the promise of hope and the reason for despair. Religions blessed it. People swore by it. Countries without enough bread experience discontent, but then again countries with nothing but bread do not fare much better, which calls to mind the adage, “One cannot live on bread alone” - a phrase that has echoed down through the centuries.

Food security, however, has always been an issue associated with bread. Century after century famine raged in various parts of the world, disturbing the natural connection between the body and bread. “Gilgamesh” already mentions the “seven years of drought” in Uruk, when not a grain was to be found in the husk. Both the Talmud and the Bible comment on the “seven lean cattle” and “seven lean years”. In the Old Testament, the “I Kings” writes: “if there be in the land famine, if there be pestilence, blasting, mildew, locust, or if there be caterpillar...whatsoever plague, whatsoever sickness there be.” At the turn of the Middle Ages, the Byzantine polyhistorian Procopius of Caesarea described crowds of people roaming around, emaciated and sallow-faced, so hungry that sometimes they ate each other.

During the reign of the Ikchidites, Islamised Egypt, too, experienced periods of famine and misfortune, each worse than the last: in the years 341 and 343 of the Hijra, and again in 352 and 360 of the same calendar. Poor harvests were the consequence of many factors: the low water level of the Nile, conflicts between proprietors and slaves, corrupt scribes and clerks, the impoverishment of villagers and peasants, the revolt of the Bedouins, and all sorts of contagions that spread through the cities and villages. An Arabic record noted that there were so many bodies they didn't even manage to bury them all. Year 18 of Hijra was proclaimed in Medina "the year of drought" – *am al-ramad*. According to the writings of Ibn Said, inhabitants of the desert even mixed crushed bones with their bread flour. During the reign of Al Mustansir Billah, the famine lasted a full seven years.

The fateful number seven is often associated with similar disasters.

Famine continued to decimate the population under the rule of sultan Al Nasir Muhammad bin Qalawun, in the eighth century of Hijra, (fourteenth century according to the Gregorian calendar). Historians have recorded that every bakery had four guards to protect the millers and bakers. They carried clubs and were ready to stop anyone from stealing grains and flour. Matters got even worse under the sultanate of Al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh, when almost half the population died of starvation. It was during this time that bread was given such ill-boding names as *hubz al-kurud* ("monkey bread"), *hubz al kalb* ("dog bread"), *hubz al dub* ("bear bread"). If you wanted to help or save the life of a friend or a guest, you would give them a "guarantee loaf" – *raghifu emani*.

Even today, in Egypt the Arabic and Coptic word *aysh* means both bread and life – the body that immortalises life.