

## The Social Identity of Peoples of Ancient and Medieval Societies in the Context of Food

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of the article is to examine the social identity of the peoples of ancient societies in the context of food, and to reveal the functions of different levels of feasts. It is noted that one facet of identity is food, i.e. in this case we can say that food distinguishes people. The literature review shows that Central Asian researchers have not specifically studied the topic of food in the context of belonging to strata and the social functions of the meals of the poor and the rich. The article reveals food markers in the context of social identity in early and medieval societies. Archaeological artefacts are presented as evidence for this fact. It is shown that meat was rarely consumed in the meals of the lower strata, and full access to it was only available during feasts. At other times they ate mostly plant food. It has been noted that such foods as meat, white bread, salt and sugar were a criterion of prosperity. A separate rank is given to the diet of a stratum of society such as warriors. The ration of Timur's warriors included dried meat and flour made of millet or barley to make stew. Genghis Khan's warriors also drank blood. Participants of the crusades had bread in their allowance, as well as live meat: cattle followed the wagons. The article describes alcoholic drinks and narcotic plant substances. The functional role of tonic substances in poor and rich feasts is shown. In conclusions the author of article marks, that food markers defined belonging to different strata, where such parameters as "good" (qualitative) and bad food, testifying a membership in "prestigious" or "non-prestigious" social group have the classifying value. The functions of feasts have been established, which in some cases are military strategy and perform diplomatic functions, for example, the conclusion of peace treaties.

**KEYWORDS:** food social stratum, feasts, wine, meat, food identity.

### INTRODUCTION

The study of human nutrition is an extremely broad and diverse topic, which includes, among others, food identity. What does the term mean? Identity is a concentrated feature of the human psyche that describes how a person perceives himself or herself as belonging to various social, economic, etc. groups or other communities. One facet of identity is food, which in this case we can say that food distinguishes people. The aim of the article is to examine the social identity of the peoples of ancient societies in the context of food, and to reveal the functions of different levels of feasts.

### METHODOLOGY

The article uses social identity theory to interpret the sources.

## EXTENT OF STUDY OF THE PROBLEM

An important place in the study of food is taken by the works of Central Asian and foreign archaeologists in which the remains of the food of early people found during excavations are described and its composition analyzed. [2, 17, 37] Histories of wine and narcotic substances determining the function of feasts are presented in the works of a Tajik researcher [26] and a group of foreign scholars [35, 36]. Annals contain materials describing the diet of Central Asian and European peoples, including in the context of rich and poor food. [5, 6, 7, 22] However, it should be noted that among Central Asian researchers the topic of food in the context of social identity and the functions of dining at various levels has not been specifically studied.

## FOOD MARKERS

Food can be said to be a nutritional marker of a nation, serving as an important distinction, for example, in characterising particular social groups and strata. Both the quality and quantity of food consumed can characterise a social group and its individual members. In this sense, parameters such as 'good' (quality) and 'bad' food are of particular classifying importance, indicating belonging to a 'prestigious' or 'non-prestigious' social group.

## RELATIONSHIP HIERARCHY

In early societies, status food was defined by such a phenomenon as gerontocracy<sup>1</sup>. Here we can also talk about the conflict of generations associated with various factors related to the struggle for power, among others. P. Worsley wrote, for example, that among Australian Aborigines *"distribution (including food - G.Z.) was usually presented as a means of maintaining gerontocratic power of elders (or, rather, mature adult men, because in reality old men usually did not occupy the leading position in the society) over young men. This was because the active young men, who naturally produced most of the food, might not only outnumber the elders in production but also try to replace them in the leadership of the society. The forced transfer of food to the elders to distribute it and the deliberate weaning of the hunter from receiving his own prey represented a way of disciplining him, contributing to his power over him"*. [21] It can be assumed that in this case we are talking about a "rudimentary" form of status food. Y.I. Semenov notes that *"in the early primitive community distribution was carried out according to needs, according to requirements"*. [23]

The hierarchy of relationships and social roles can be suggested by the rich tableware, e.g. sets, egg-shaped stemmed glasses [20] or e.g. kitchen and tableware. [2] Thus, it can be assumed that in rich houses servants cook in the kitchen, rich tableware is used by householders, such artefacts may also be related to the gender distribution of roles - a woman is a housewife preparing food, a man is its consumer; items in the economic premises of the temple about religious ministers, festive and everyday tableware indicates the status of a person in various situations, as well as the region in which the person lived (the excavation site).

Another interesting fact about wealthy strata of population in the studied area is a dish found at the excavations in Akhsikent, dated X - XII centuries, on which Kofi writing (Arabic script) is written *"Nobleness of the rich is refusal of desire to get rich"*, indicating that part of wealth should be gratuitous material aid to the poor. [32]

<sup>1</sup> a form of social order in which power belongs to the oldest, deeply elderly people

## RICH AND POOR FEASTS

In medieval chronicles much attention is given to feasts, which are presentations of rich feasts. So, Ibn Batuta describing a reception of an emir in Khorezm writes, that trays with food have been brought to him: fried hens, cranes and young pigeons, pies kneaded in oil, called kulicha, biscuits and various sweets. Other trays were brought with fruit - peeled pomegranate seeds in gold and silver vessels with gold spoons, and some in Iraqi glass vessels with wooden spoons, grapes and amazing melons. [11]

If we turn to the diet of the poorer strata of the population, we see that simple nomads rarely consumed meat. D. Breen notes that meat was quite an expensive dish, and one carcass of ram was divided between quite a large numbers of people. [4] Ordinary people had to make do with dairy products, which were in abundance. Carpini observed this: *"In summer, having then enough mares' milk, they seldom eat meat, unless they happen to be presented with it, or they catch some beast or bird on the hunt"* [12]. This is confirmed by Clavijo as well: *"If there is abundant food, they eat, but if not, they make do without bread, [only] with milk and meat; and are very accustomed to meat, but can [live] without it..."* [13].

Further he goes describing cooking a sour milk dish, which, judging from the text, was quite widespread among the simple nomads: *"They make this dish so: they take a large cauldron with water, and when water boils, take pieces of sour milk like cheese, put into a jug, dissolve with hot water and pour into the cauldron; and this milk is as sour as vinegar. Then they make very thin tortillas of flour, cut them finely, and [also] throw them into the cauldron. When it boils a bit, they take it off [off the fire]. With one crust of this [brew], without bread and meat, they are quite content. In general, this is a dish that they eat daily, more than [anything] else... And this dish that I have described to you, they call khas (ash)".* [13] Another very convenient dish for camping conditions is sheep cheese (kurt<sup>2</sup>), in which salt was added (possibly without it), rolled into small balls and put in the sun to dry [4]. The resulting hard cheese balls are nutritious and very long-lasting, being prepared for the winter in bags.

According to sources, among Turks only rich people ate meat. The poor ate meat only on great feasts. [8] At the dawn of the human civilization the eating of wild plants (and only vegetable food in general - G.Z.) was considered a sign of poverty. Alexides, an ancient Greek poet of IV-III centuries B.C. wrote *"we are all covered with waxy pallor from hunger. All our food consists of beans ... and herbs ... There are turnips ... and acorns. There are ... Pear, peas..."*. [19]

Scientists have established that plant foods were more important in the diet of Neolithic populations. [31] In medieval Europe, bread was not only the basis but also a major part of the diet of medieval man - grain and flour were easy to store, transport and prepare. Bread was cheap and available to all segments of the population, wheat could be grown in all European territories, and even in case of a bad harvest, millet, oats, bran and even acorns could be milled with the remains of grain, and the result was still some edible bread. [25]

As the sources note, the food of the peasants of medieval Europe was based on lower quality grains and legumes, and sometimes chestnuts. *"The poor man usually has no bread to eat except a small quantity of rye or barley"* [33] remarked the Chancellor of the University of

<sup>2</sup> In Uzbekistan, dried cheese is called Kurt. In Mongols it is called Aruul, only the cheese is cut into thin slices

Paris, himself a former (by birth) peasant, Jean Gerson (1363-1429).

White bread was a luxury and unaffordable for most of the population. Guillaume of Aquitaine (12th century) (poet, musician -G.Z.) puts it on a par with the incredibly expensive pepper and good wine at the time. [24] Wheat bread of sifted flour was mainly on the table of the rich. [24]

### The diet of the warriors

As Napoleon noted, an army marches as long as its stomach is full. [30] The marching ration of Timur's warriors can be judged from Sharaf-ad-din Yazdi's Zafar-namea: "*Timur uttered a command, and the emirs-temporaries, thousand men, hundred men, and tens men were announced and taken away subscriptions (tormentor) that not a single soul in the camp should prepare any bread, tortillas, or dumplings, No noodles, no rishta (kind of vermicelli), no dumplings, or anything like that, but that in the part of boiled food they should be content with barley stew*" [29] which was prepared on water that was transported in a wineskin. Timur's warriors were also saved by dried meat. Probably this diet was related to military strategy, when one could not expose oneself to enemies by lighting fires. Amir Timur used to say that a chief whose power was weaker than a whip and stick was not worthy of the rank. Nevertheless, he paid his warriors a salary, unlike Genghis Khan's army, which spurred victory.

Genghis Khan's warriors were provided with dry meat (basturma<sup>3</sup> or sujuk<sup>4</sup>), which was carried under the saddle, and live blood. Thus Ibn Batutta writes that one of the spies of Jalal al-Din Sinjar, son of Khorezm Shah, who was the king of Khorezm, Khorasan and Maverannahr, saw how a warrior of one of Genghis emirs took out a dried gut that was with him, wet it with water, bled his horse and filled it with guts, then tied and roasted it on fire, and it was his food. [11] Thus, Marco Polo writes that each soldier of the Mongol army in the XIII century could have up to 18 horses for his personal needs. During fast marches for strategic purposes and because of the lack of time blood became the main diet of the warriors. [34] The animal would be tied up, rolled on the ground, a vein incision made near the neck, and the blood would be decanted into a container, or sometimes the blood would simply rest on the lips of the incision and be drunk directly from it. No more than 300 grams of blood could be drawn from it at a time without pain for the animal, and it would regain that loss in a few days. A dose of this size was sufficient as a daily ration. As a marching food, blood was extremely convenient because it required neither special transportation nor special preparation. [10]

Medieval soldiers who took part in the Crusades received about a kilo of bread and about 400 grams of corned or smoked meat per day. Fresh meat was also in their diet, but only before big battles: it ran on its own feet behind the troops: cattle were taken with them and slaughtered only in the most extreme cases. Also in the soldier's diet were dried or salted fish, onions, garlic and vinegar. [27]

The presentation of a rich lifestyle was the amount of sugar and salt consumed in food, which were considered condiments.

**Sugar.** Cane sugar was an expensive product, so in England sugar was introduced by

<sup>3</sup> beef dried corned beef

<sup>4</sup> nomadic sausage made of horse meat

crusaders who brought it from the East in the 12th century. Even at the end of the Middle Ages sugar was still extremely expensive and rare, it was considered a "spice" and was carefully stored in a locked box or pantry. [3]

**Salt.** In ancient times, salt was difficult and expensive to obtain. It was often the object of trade and exchange between the peoples of different countries. [14] Salt on the table denoted the wealth of the host. [14] It is known that ancient saltworks already existed on the territory of Europe and anterior Asia, as well as on the Black Sea coast in Bulgaria. Settlements date back to the 6th millennium BC and represent major centres of table salt production. [14]

**Drinks.** Wine and beer were literally foods, as they enriched the food with calories and were especially important where food was poor and monotonous. To add to this, wine was ascribed a therapeutic effect: it was used as the basis for the production of medicines and also to disinfect water. [24] Speaking of the poorer sections of early and medieval societies, it should be noted that alcohol was consumed at the lower levels of society, albeit cheaply. Agriculture gave farmers an opportunity to make alcohol from fermented bread as - firstly access to the well or spring and boiled water was limited and raw fresh water could be infected with various harmful microorganisms, so people resorted to drinking from fermented wheat and millet grains for fear of falling ill. Secondly, people turned to alcohol because of social conditions, like poverty, as strong drinks at least temporarily dulled feelings of hunger and warded off sorrow. As Kozlovskaya writes, chronic malnutrition combined with hard labour is a situation typical of farming populations from ancient times until recent times. The tonic components of nutrition therefore take on a special significance. Already since antiquity, people have used drugs and drinks containing alcohol. [15]

Thus, William de Rubruk describing the feast of Mangu-Khan<sup>5</sup> notes that he "*ordered to ask us what we wanted to drink, wine or terracina, i.e. rice beer, or karakosmosu, i.e. light mare's milk, or bal, i.e. honey drink*" (medonemex melle). [6] Sharaf-ud-Ain Ali Yazdi in Zafar - nam, describing a feast arranged by Amir Temur in honour of marriage of his princes, notes, "*wherever you look, you see a cupbearer, like a fresh spring flower, holding out red wine in a golden bowl*". [29] In addition to wine they make boda, kumyz, honey drink, vodka and drink muadd<sup>6</sup>. The tsarevitch, one by one standing up, drink and pour the drinks into golden vessels, to the throat of which are set drinking bowls made of jasper stone or crystal, decorated with pearls or jahontz. [28]

Archaeological excavations suggest that a fairly high culture of wine-making existed in ancient times in Central Asia too. For example, in the Khorezm oasis at the excavations of the fortress Koy-Krylgan-Kala, grain was lying in the pantries and grain pits of the economic premises of the temple, and wine and oil were kept in huge vessels - hums, dug into the ground. [16] In the II century BC Ferghana was producing grape wine. [1] The Chinese sources of the II century B.C., reporting on the preparation and consumption of wine in Ferghana, say that the local people loved wine like their horses loved alfalfa. [5] After the adoption of Islam, the production and consumption of wine decreased sharply, but not disappeared completely, although they could not drink it openly. According to the sources,

<sup>5</sup> Khan of the Golden Horde Mengu-Timur

<sup>6</sup> all drinks listed here are spirits. Boda is dry wine with sugar, kumyz is horse milk which produces alcohol when cooked in a special way, the word vodka is translated here as arak, the drink muadd is fortified by boiling on fire Mangu

the wine was drunk in large quantities in the court circles, and secret drinking parties were organised also by the students of madrasah. [18]

In Paul Horne's book "History of the Persian Literature" the information is given that "*Zoroastrians were engaged in vine-growing with great effort, and after the introduction of Islam it was not so easy to wean them off this life-giving drink, therefore the most ancient Persians with rapture and delight extol wine*". [26]

The link between alcohol and drugs and the conquest of territories is shown by the findings in the highlands of Peru, which between 500 and 1100 AD belonged to the large Huari empire. Like the Incas, this nation was able to spread its culture over a vast territory.

Findings from a Peruvian settlement suggest that the Huari formed political alliances during feasts at which they served the local elite beer with the drug. This allowed them to expand the boundaries of their empire during a single feast. In addition, narcotic beer feasts were held for the local population, allowing the rulers to consolidate their power. Interestingly, excavations have revealed only dried seeds of a narcotic substance (a hallucinogenic plant called *Anadenanthera colubrina*, also locally known as willka), but no weapons were found. [9]

Treating guests with alcohol and food is known to strengthen the patron-client relationship, forming a debt that confirms the elevated position of the hosts. [34] At the feasts of the upper Huari, alcohol infused with willka was offered, which guided the participants into the spiritual realm. However, the guests could not reciprocate this experience, who did not have access to imported willka seeds and knowledge of how the drink was prepared. Beer, consumed together, was a powerful tool in the management of the Huari. The willka-filled drink brought people together for a shared psychotropic experience, while ensuring the privileged position of Huari leaders in the social hierarchy as purveyors of hallucinogens. [36]

## CONCLUSION

It follows from the above that food markers determined membership of a social group, where rich and poor food mostly correlate with the plant/animal food opposition, a way of life of different strata. Rich meals, apart from presenting the host, are also in some cases a military strategy and perform diplomatic functions, e.g. concluding peace treaties.

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