

## Lecture 5 - Food in Deir el-Medina

Contributed by Vladimira  
Thursday, 26 October 2006

"We eat to live, we don't live to eat" - a very wise modern saying goes. But to Ancient Egyptians, the food was everything - subsistence, wages, proof of wealth and social status.

And if the tomb paintings are anything to go by, they were certainly hoping to eat a lot in the Afterlife - even if they did not have enough food in the physical realm.

This lesson talks about the most common foodstuffs used in Ancient Egypt, which could have found their way to the dinner table (or mat) of Deir el-Medina villagers.

Food was received by the villagers in Deir el-Medina in a form of regular rations as a salary (mainly grain, with water and firewood, also beer, oils, ointments and garments). Food was also paid as a transferable pension - &ldquo;old workmen&rdquo; and their widows also receive sacks of grain. Workers also received irregular extras from the temples (part of the unused offerings after the Gods &lsquo;fed themselves on the essence&rsquo; &ndash; mainly bread and cakes) or rewards from the Pharaoh (on the occasion of his wedding, birthday or religious festivals) &ndash; these would consist of some more luxurious items such as vegetables, fruit, beans, meat, oils&hellip;) Sources for our knowledge:

- Core texts. Mainly delivery notes and receipts on ostraca and papyri.

- Artefacts found in the archaeological excavations. This includes real foodstuffs or herbs as well as their representations on offering tables. Mainly from the tombs like that of Kha or Tutankhamun, but also from the village site and the dump &ndash; this is where archaeobotany and zooarchaeology come to play.

- Tomb paintings and decorations, which show resources available to the Ancient Egyptians

Daily Food: Seven Key Texts

1. Ostrakon Berlin 11238 The Mayor of West Thebes Ramose informs the two chief workmen and their crews that he has received a message from the Vizier Paser, saying: Please let the wages be delivered to the crew of the necropolis, consisting of:

vegetables, fish, firewood, beer in small vessels, small cattle and milk.

Let nothing of it be postponed, so that I would be in arrears with their wages.

Be at it and pay heed!

2. Ostrakon Gardiner 59 (in Oxford) Written from the workmen to a Vizier:

To let our Lord (the Vizier) know:  
As regards the vegetables, oil, fish, our garments, our ointment and our grain rations, our Lord himself (Pharaoh) has provided us with these means of subsistence.

3. Ostrakon DeM 60 (in the French Institute in Cairo) What Neferhotep said, in the 3rd winter month, day 22 (Note: this is the 19th Dynasty):

Water deficit for the Left side:	Prehotep	1 ½ sack	Nebamante	1 ½ sack	
	Khabekhent	1 sack	The watchman	¼ sack	The servant woman Saroy
					½ sack
					Total of the Left side
					4 ¾ sack

4. Ostrakon Stockholm MM 14126 (water delivery, probably for one day) [House of] Nebamante ¼ sack House of Amenakhte, son of Dgdy ½ sack House of Mose ½ sack House of Pashedu, son of Harmose ½ sack House of Karo ½ sack [House of Pashedu], son of Hehnakht ¼ sack [House of] &hellip; ¼ sack [House of] &hellip; son of Sibe ½ sack etc.

25608 Giving rations for the second month of summer /1:	The chief workman	2 sacks (barley)	5 ½ sacks (emmer)	
	The scribe	2 5 ½	17 men, each	1 ½
			4	that is 25 ½ + 68
	½	1 ½	that is 1 + 3	The guardian
			1 ½	3 ¼
			The slave women /2	1 ½
				1 ¼
	doorkeeper	½	1	The doctor /3
			¼	1
			Total /4	32 ½
				84 ¾

Notes:

1/ Deliveries for the Left side only

2/ This is the total for all slave women

3/ The doctor was also a regular member of the crew, so this is likely an extra pay he received for healing

4/ In reality, the total is: 34 ¼ and 88 ½ . To be considered: Was this scribe bad at maths? Or did he cheat on purpose and keep the rest of the grain for himself? (There are other instances where the total written is lower than the real sum.)

6. Ostrakon Cairo 25504 Year 8 of Merenptah. On day 20 of the second month of the inundation season someone came to the workmen to reward the crew. He gave them as reward: 9000 loaves of bread 20 vessels of oil

9000 fish

20 sacks of salt and 400 blocks of it

Also beer and beans (3 sacks) and more that is lost. Finally, they received 10 pieces of cattle, which were slaughtered.

7. Ostrakon DeM 46 Mentions the delivery of the following articles on a particular day: 11 oxen

9 more received a few days later, which are said to be shared out The next month there came: 5 head of cattle: 4 for the crew and 1 for the three leaders, the chief workmen and the scribe That day also: 280 fish received.

What food? Grain Ordinary workmen were paid their monthly wages in grain: usually 1 ½ sack of barley and 4 sacks of emmer (Egyptian sort of wheat) Grain was used for making beer and baking bread or cakes, and was ground mostly by the slave women with a grinding stone (bits of the stone frequently mixed with the flour, which is one of the reasons for bad teeth). If you want to see more examples of the grain found in Egypt, just type barley or emmer in the &ldquo;Search the descriptions&ldquo; field in the Petrie&rsquo;s Online Catalogue. Bread Baked from emmer and barley, with various ingredients (dates and honey for sweet cake-like bread, or herbs and garlic for savoury). There are many different ancient Egyptian names for bread and many depictions of bread loafs of different shapes (round, oblong, triangular, with one or two holes&hellip;) Bread and cakes were often delivered as a reward for the villagers from the Temples. Vegetables

Garlic: We saw an extract from the documentary film &ldquo;The Gift of the Gods -- The Vital History and Multiple Uses of Garlic&rdquo; (70 minutes, David Douglas Productions, Cremorne, NSW, Australia, 1991) where Jack Janssen was talking about the use of garlic in Ancient Egypt and certain artefacts from the Petrie museum like the garlic models.

Onion (often consumed with bread and fish), lettuce (juice &lsquo;aphrodisiac&rsquo;) leek, beans & lentils, cucumbers, celeriac (top herb for flavouring) Fruit The Egyptians ate and still eat mainly dates and figs, which are an excellent source of energy and are used in many desserts. Apart from regular date palm, they consumed also a fruit from Sycamore trees, which gave smaller and yellower dates. The best example I found is this basket with dates and figs from the British Museum, but there is also a nice pottery dish with dates, from West Bank Thebes, possibly New Kingdom, now in the Liverpool Museum (M11908-909). The Ancient Egyptians also used fruit from another palm tree - it was a dôm-palm (Arabic name for Hyphaene thebaica), which gives fruit a bit like small pomegranates with a small nut inside, which contains a sweet oil (for more see Maniche Herbal pp.114-115)

Dôm-palm can be seen on a wall painting from Irinufer&rsquo;s Tomb TT 290 (Ramesside Deir el-Medina) &ndash; for the picture and more details about the tomb, see Waseda Theban Database.

Dom palm fruit example shown here is from the BM collection. There are also some dôm-palm nuts in the Liverpool Museum (M11123). Other fruit known by the Ancient Egyptians and perhaps eaten by the villagers in Deir el-Medina, at least on some special occasions: pomegranates (frequent on the tomb walls, but probably a luxury), grapes, rare apples and olives (Akhenaten&rsquo;s olive branch) Meat Ordinary villagers had meat rarely, as a treat, not daily, unlike the courtiers and nobles (check British Museum Compass for Box of food of Henutmehyt EA 51812). Meat figures frequently on the tomb walls, however this is usually a depiction of an ideal life in the Other world. They probably ate mostly fish &ndash; abundant from the river &ndash; and wild fowl (not chicken though, which was introduced much later, in Roman times).

Most common fish: mullet and bulti fish. Each side getting about 250 kg of fish every month. Fish were salted to preserve them, then baked or roasted. Depictions of fish on the walls of temples or tombs are frequent, like in Nebamun's collection (for more see British Museum Compass) or at Deir el-Bahri.

Other kinds of meat consumed: geese and ducks (plucked, cut, flattened and roasted), pigeons, quail&hellip;); cattle (small - sheep, goats; large - cows, oxen) and pigs (many pig bones found in excavation sites). They consumed also eggs and dairy (milk, clear butter and some cheese).

Seasonings Salt, juniper berries, cumin, cinnamon, celeriac herb For sweetening &ndash; mostly honey, date and fig pulp or syrups Beverages For various drinks check out this Internet source (with care, as always). Water Water for the villagers in Deir el-Medina was (supposed to be) delivered daily by the water carriers (see above, texts 3 and 4). It was measured in sacks &ndash; Khar - like grain, and used for drinking, cooking and personal hygiene (not for laundry, which was washed by the &lsquo;laundry men&rsquo; in the river). Consumption: 1 ¼ to 1 ½ sacks a day per household (approximately 6 people), that would be 16-19 litres a day per person. Water for drinking most likely from the river (mummies contain parasites known from the contaminated Nile water). There were several attempts to dig a well in Deir el-Medina, all unsuccessful and abandoned. Beer Thick soup-like consistency, very nutritious. Made from sour-bread partly baked, crushed and mixed with water, after the fermentation sieved. Scottish and Newcastle Brewing Group (Newcastle Brown Ale) did an experiment in 1996, which produced an Ancient Egyptian beer later sold in Harrods &ndash; some say it was undrinkable. The Newcastle experiment was supposed to be on this page (www.broonale.co.uk/ancient.html), but it is not accessible anymore - they might have removed it, since the resulting beer&rsquo;s sale wasn&rsquo;t that successful Other information about this project on the web is very scarce; everybody links to the non-existing article. But there is another article, which mentions the 1996 project - here.

Delwen Samuel, from the University of Cambridge, who participated in the Scottish & Newcastle research, has also published on ancient Egyptian baking and brewing (not my sources, off the web, please check).

"Investigation of ancient Egyptian baking and brewing methods by correlative microscopy" In: Science issue 273 (1996), pp. 488-490

"A new look at bread and beer" In: Egyptian Archaeology issue 3/1994, pp. 9-12. "Ancient Egyptian cereal processing: beyond the artistic record. In: Cambridge Archaeological Journal issue 3/1993, pp. 271-283. But - there is also a Japanese brewery Kirin, which tried to reconstitute Ancient Egyptian Beer and you can read more about this fascinating project on this page and also check out the recipe they are using. Another interesting extract is from the article on Ancient Brewing (on the Ancient History website) "In Ancient Egypt, the staples were bread, onion or other vegetables, and beer. There is some controversy over the ingredients of Egyptian beer; whether it used emmer wheat or barley, whether loaves of bread were prepared for beer making (and then soaked and fermented), and whether dates were the principle flavouring agent in lieu of medieval fruit herbs or modern hops. The Newcastle Brown Ale company, after running experiments, concluded that what is translated as "date" is really a word for any sweet and that there was no residue of what we call date in their samples. They also concluded there was no need to prepare bread before brewing because sprouted barley or wheat grains work just as well." Check out some supposedly Ancient Egyptian Beer quotes on this page (authenticity and the source need to be investigated)

"Do not cease to drink beer, to eat, to intoxicate thyself, to make love, and celebrate the good days."  
— Ancient Egyptian saying

"The mouth of perfectly happy man is filled with beer." — (possibly more modern) Egyptian proverb, although Muslims are not supposed to imbibe. Wine The most common jars for beer and wine had a sharpened bottom so that the jar could be stuck in the sand without a stand and the contents kept cool. We know of grape and date wine. In the tomb of Kha jars were found sealed and complete with basketry stoppers, signed with "neferw" (good, beautiful thing) = probably wine. Food as seen in the Tombs Wall depictions Frequent scenes on the tomb walls like plucking the geese, bringing the meat and fish. Check British Museum Compass for Nebamun: great scenes depicting the offering table or counting the fowl and cattle, various fish in the pool and more. There is also a nice limestone stela from the tomb of Kheti (Middle Kingdom, unknown site) in the KUNSTHISTORISCHES MUSEUM in Vienna, no. ÄOS 202. The description reads: "A depiction of the funerary offering. The standing couple receiving an ox leg from the man standing opposite. Offering table laden with the following items: a wild goose, a closed ceramic jug, a bunch of grapes, a calf's head, an unidentified white object with white stripes, a round cake, a bunch of spring onions, a flat dish with figs, and a gherkin (cucumber) covered by a palm leaf. Beneath the table a closed jar and a plate on a stand are shown." Offering tables and tomb models Offering tables show mainly breads, vegetables and fruit. Tomb models show the butchers, granary, grinding of the grain (beware of some models, which are assembled incorrectly in the museums). A fine example in the Petrie Museum is an offering table or "soul house" (pre Deir el-Medina, cca 11th Dynasty) with "water stand with four joints at back wall; ox-head to right of this; lying on tray: haunch; ribs; 4 circular cakes; a cucumber..."  
- Useful literature: Wilson, H.: Egyptian Food and Drink. Shire Publications 2001 [1988] Brewer, D.J.; Friedman, R.: Fish and Fishing in Ancient Egypt. Aris & Phillips 1989 Maniche, L.: An Ancient Egyptian Herbal. The British Museum Press 2006 [1989] Osborn, D.; Osbornová, J.: The Mammals of Ancient Egypt. Aris & Phillips [1998]

- Web: The Diet of the Ancient Egyptians Food: Bread, beer, and all good things

- Websites for Rubén: Cerveza en el Antiguo Egipto Comer y beber en Egipto Las viviendas egipcias: La cocina