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# Levantine Legends and Histories of Bread

*Translated from Croatian by Russell Scott Valentino*

**I**T WAS BORN IN ASHES, on stone. Bread is older than writing. Its first names are etched in clay tablets, in dead languages. Part of its past has been left in ruins. Its history is shared among countries and peoples. The story of bread draws upon both the past and the story of the past. It accompanies both without becoming one with either.

Brick was perhaps the model for the first baker of the first loaf. Earth and dough found themselves together on the fire, on the far side of memory, before legend. The link between bread and body was realized from the start.

Where and how the first ear of wheat sprouted may remain forever a mystery. Its presence attracted the gaze, awakened curiosity. The classification of grains—their ordering in an ear—offered a model of harmony, measure, perhaps even equality. The kinds and qualities of wheat pointed toward differentiation, virtue, and, likely, hierarchy.

**GRAIN WAS HARVESTED ON VARIOUS CONTINENTS.** It succeeded on the plains of the “fertile crescent” in ancient times. Along the Euphrates the so-called Star Anunit shone bright, along the Tigris the Star of the Swallow—whose sheen, it was believed, contributed to the fertility of Mesopotamia. Wheat grew at the Horn of Africa between the Great and Turkish Seas, within reach of Axum, Asmara, Addis Ababa. In the highlands of Ethiopia and Eritrea the desert fades, the climate grows milder, the soil more moist. Nearby the Blue Nile takes form, descending into the rift it shares with that other, “white” source of the miraculous river. There is much sunlight here.

“Bread is the fruit of the earth blessed by light,” read the words of the poet.

From the Near East cereals were first brought probably to Egypt. But they took other routes as well. Fossilized seeds have been found in the western portions of the African desert, on hearths more than eight thousand

years old—here too someone once sowed and reaped. The desert tribes approached the Nile, keeping close to its banks. They rose from the Sahara, which once resembled a savanna. It was laced with streams, where the nomads, along with the camels and gazelles, would quench their thirst.

The Bedouins would stop at its oases before continuing on their way. They too are older than history.

THE HERITAGE OF BREAD is linked to the transformation of the nomad into the stationary person, the hunter into the shepherd, and each of these into the farmer. Some moved from one pasture to another, one hunting ground to another; others cleared and plowed the meadows. Cain clashed with Abel.

Nomadism sought adventure; stationary life required patience. In the graffiti discovered in caves where nomads once took refuge, lines of long dashes predominate, leading from one unknown place to another. Farmers' lines are more inclined to encircle, to bound space, where shelter and centering are discernible.

Sowing and reaping divided time into segments, the year into months, weeks, days. Roads brought what was distant nearer. Huts were erected in the valleys, pile dwellings along the rivers. Furrows transformed the look of the fields, which were covered in grain.

The landscape changed from one generation to the next.



THE *EPIC OF GILGAMESH* REMARKS on the bread consumed by the hero Enkidu, who was skilled in the hunt and accustomed to wild game: "The mountain man who had nibbled at the grass alongside gazelles and sipped the milk of wild beasts was surprised the first time he tasted bread."

The road was long from raw grain to cooked, from ground grain to baked. The man who prepared bread differed from his ancestors. He found himself on the threshold of history.

The farmer surveyed the plowed land, awaiting its yield. He looked up at the sky, fearing for his crops. Both the land and the sky posed questions without offering answers, and a variety of ideas and beliefs sprouted and spread.

"Bread belongs to mythology," read the words of Hippocrates.

Necessity divided the labor. The field fell to the men, the garden to the women. Eve picked the fatal apple in the Garden of Eden and of-

ferred it to Adam, and divine punishment fell upon them: to eat their bread by the sweat of their brow. He sowed and reaped; she kneaded and baked. In *The Iliad* we read, "The women carefully mixed the white flour, preparing supper for the reapers." *The Odyssey's* singer emphasizes the difference between those who consume bread and the *lotophagi* or "lotus eaters," "barbarians" who do not even know how to speak properly.

Some used salt in their meals. Some did not. The Cyclops Polyphemus knew neither bread nor salt.

ACCORDING TO OLD TESTAMENT legend, Gideon defeated the Midianites with the help of a dream about barley: "From a large quantity of barley he formed enormous loaves" and set them rolling down into the enemy camp. Pausanias has conveyed to posterity the story of a farmer who contributed to the Battle of Marathon, midway between Athens and Karystos: "A man of peasant mien and attire" attacked the numberless Persians, waving a plow and twisting at the waist like a reaper. No one knew who he was or where he was from, not even the oracle at Delphi, who, in place of an answer, pronounced in sibylline fashion, "One must honor the *Ehetleia*" (the plow-wielder). A "monument in white marble" was erected in his honor, according to Pausanias.

Herodotus makes use of the image of wheat and grain when he tells the story of Periander, tyrant of Corinth, who sent a messenger to Thrasylbulus, tyrant of Miletus, asking about the most successful way to rule: "When one ear grows taller than the rest, it must be cut down and discarded." Periander took his advice and had Corinth's most prominent citizens killed. According to the Book of Genesis, Pharaoh, too, dreamed of wheat ears and bread loaves: "In the dream there were three baskets of white bread" and "seven heads of full, healthy wheat" that were swallowed up by seven scorched and emaciated ones. Joseph advised the ruler that after abundance follows famine and suggested that he should build enormous warehouses to store the grain so that there would be bread even during lean years.

Wheat and bread cross from reality to dream and return from dream to life, finding a place in spirit and body.

The prophet Isaiah foresaw an age in which swords would be "beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks." But the sky did not heed the prophet's words. The earth remained deaf to their call. Faith failed to disarm the combatants. Power favored the soldier over the sower.

But despite everything, bread became part of human destiny.



PARASITES HAVE since the very beginning been a threat to grain and flour, bread and the human body that it nourishes. Their names became symbols of failure, ruin, and ill-fortune. The darnel, tare, and ear cockle were named in sacred writings along with blight—also known as rust, scab, blotch—and with chaff and mold. There were also locusts and cockroaches, not to mention worms and beetles, which infested the crops, while rats and other rodents contaminated the granaries. Many were the pests whose names we don't know, too, though ants were not among them. It was these perhaps who showed man how to collect and store grain for the days to come, a hypothesis suggested by natural historians of centuries past, the young Darwin included. We owe to ants a variety of sayings, comparisons, and metaphors: In order to survive, farmers needed to be “as industrious as ants” and “to gather on threshing floors and fields like ants,” and it was said that a good man would not harm even an ant.

The ant carries more than its weight.

Clearing the wheat fields of tares and chaff, separating the grain from straw and darnels, and the flour from twigs and bran, what was clean from what was not—these are all ancient practices that have left traces and traditions that continue today and continue to be improved upon. The remains of grain and bread have been preserved in sarcophaguses and urns, in the Pyramids, in places where the dead were wished farewell in the hope of eternal life.

“The universe begins with bread,” read the words of Pythagoras, conveyed to posterity by Diogenes Laertes.

BREAD IS THE PRODUCT of both nature and culture. It has served as condition of peace and cause of war, pledge of hope and source of despair. Faiths blessed it. The people swore their oaths upon it. Unhappy were the lands where there was not bread for all; nor were those happy where bread was all they had.

“One does not live by bread alone,” has been repeated through the ages.

Knowledge of grain and of bread was passed from generation to generation. The ancestors bequeathed tools and techniques to their heirs, similar in their appearance, familiar in their uses. The kneading trough for dough resembled the cradle in which newborns were rocked, the bed in which one lay down to sleep, the coffin in which the body was laid

out after death, the boat that ferried it from this shore to the other. The sifter and the sieve are close relatives, as are the filter and the net, just as the retina (from the Latin word for *net*) of the human eye filters the light and carries the image through.

These various means and mechanisms passed through long, uncertain times: from the tinderbox and fire ring to the hearth and the oven; from the sharpened stone to the knife; from the deer antlers that were probably first used to plow the barren fields to the wedge and then the true plow; from foot stomping and grindstones, for which the jaw may have served as a model, to the millstone turned by water or wind, by mules and by slaves. These tools, each according to its nature and function, characterize bread's past and its present. As do the amphoras, baskets, bags, and buckets in which the grain and flour were carried and transported. In the stone- or brick-lined oven the dough would acquire its finished form. It became a loaf of bread—served on a table, offered at a feast, blessed on an altar, given as alms on the street, robbed on the highway.

Accompanied by song, prayer, and plea.

Bread's history is sometimes different from the history that accompanied it, from the past that gave it birth. Many of the traces left behind affirm that growth and development are not always in accord. These are often scattered or slight, and the story of the past tries to collect and give shape to them. Memories of bread are often better than bread itself.

The body of the loaf is mortal.



SOWING AND REAPING were performed in different seasons with greater or lesser rainfall, wind, or frost. In the Nile River valley rye was sown toward the end of autumn and harvested toward the middle of spring. It matured quickly, leaving space in the fields for other crops. The star that the Egyptians called Sotis—which might be the same as our Sirius—announced the rise and fall of the river and warned of potential flooding. Wheat was grown in furrows after the autumn rains so that it could be harvested by summer.

Ripening and yield were measured according to the cycle of the zodiac, the positions of the sun and moon, the stars, and the constellations. The “shepherd's star” rose in late dusk and set in early morning. Wheat was sown under Virgo, harvested under Leo. Barley's cycle was shorter, beginning almost simultaneously under Virgo, but ending under Cancer. Rye's growth was even quicker, lasting just a hundred days, from Aries

to Leo. A variety of meanings were attributed to Virgo, “when shooting stars visit the heavens, and archangels the earth,” which were linked to the spreading of seed, conception, fertility, and birth.

Beliefs about how the phases of the moon might influence the dough and the leavening inside it—just as they affect the tides and our bodies and minds—were common along the coasts and in the hinterlands. The belief that the zodiac signs and patterns were true and effective was likely more important than the signs and the star patterns themselves. The Levant measured time and counted years according to lunar calendars long before the creation of solar ones.

Anaxagoras of Lampsacus, one of the first of the ancient sages to identify and describe the relationship between bread and the body, wrote, “Let us consider bread. Composed of vegetable matter, it nourishes the human body. But the body is composed of numerous different elements: skin, flesh, veins, tendons, bone, cartilage, hair. How is it possible for so many different components to stem from the uniform composition of bread? Given that the properties themselves are unchanging, we must conclude that the various substances in the human body are contained in the bread that we consume.” The translator of this old Greek text in Rome tried to supplement its meaning: The philosopher is attempting to move from bread to grain, from grain to the earth, from each of these to water, fire, the first elements and principles of the world. The body and what is consumed by it can in this way be connected to types of temperament: the sanguine, the choleric, the phlegmatic, and the melancholic.

Those of different temperaments do not usually eat different bread, though they sometimes eat the same bread differently.

In Cappadocia, the early Christian theologian Gregory of Nyssa noted the relation of bread to the body in much the same manner as had the materialist Anaxagoras: “In bread we can truly see the body, for when it enters the body, we can truly see it become body.”

It has often been said that bread and body understand each other.

ALL THE SENSES, each in its own manner, are linked to bread. Its aroma stands out. After reaching the nostrils, it passes into the body, leaving its traces therein, and connecting with memories acquired in one’s family, one’s home, in childhood and youth.

Its taste too is closely associated with memories, near and far, sometimes the most distant of all. Is it now what it once was? Worse or better from what we remember, or the same, or even true? Why is it the same

or no longer the same as we remember, as how it ought to be?

Nor is the touch of bread something one forgets. The crust smooth or rough, the inside soft or dry. How you take it in your hand, your palm, your fingers. How you grasp it, break it apart. When and to whom you offer it. How and where you do so.

Vision too has its measure. How the loaf before us looks now, how it might look or ought to. Is it like what we've seen in nature or imagination, in waking or in dream? The eyes have often cried over bread.

Its connection to hearing is perhaps the hardest to discover. Bread is silent, mute. It does not make any noise—people who gather around it make noise. When a slice falls to the floor from the table or your hand, it is almost inaudible. Perhaps there's a sign in this too. There are moments when bread does make a sound. As the baker or woman of the house would take it from the oven, they knew to flick the crust with a finger to check whether it had baked through. In response they would hear a thud or a murmur, telling them it was or was not ready.

“You need to pick it up from the floor.” Once upon a time mothers would tell their children that when doing this, they should give it a kiss.

WHEN BREAD WAS PLACED on the table properly and in a timely manner, one might expect to see the remains of an old ritual, more or less remembered. The Hebrew or Christian laying of hands upon it demonstrates the relation of bread to the body. In some Islamic countries, they imprint a finger on the dough before placing it on the hearth or in the oven, showing in this way that it is the product of human hands. The bread's “heart”—the soft extreme interior—was once placed on cuts to stem the bleeding and heal the wound. The wounded body accepted and conformed to it.

In times of peace, when the people were fighting neither with others nor among themselves, bread crumbs would be collected in the palm of the hand, saved, and left for the birds.