

Food and Drink - Medieval Period

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"Of the good things of this world the Muslims enjoy most sex; the Christians, money, the Persians, status; and the Jews, food." So runs an Arabic maxim, perhaps from the early Islamic era, that S. D. Goitein quotes in the introduction to his indispensable discussion of evidence regarding food and drink from the Cairo Geniza (*Mediterranean Society* 4.227). While the degree of interest of medieval religious communities in food, sex, or the like is beyond empirical verification, there can be no doubt that food was accorded great significance among Jews in the medieval Islamic world—as a physical necessity and a luxury; as a means of earning a living and an inspiration for poetry; and as a subject of religious, philosophical, and medical concern.

1. Diet

Jews generally ate the same foods and in the same manner as their neighbors, albeit with adaptations prompted by Jewish law and custom. The norms in various localities differed, however, as is apparent from the late-fifteenth-century travelogue by an Italian Jew, Meshullam ben Menahem da Volterra, who criticized the Jews of Egypt and Jerusalem for sitting on the floor at meals and eating with their hands out of a common vessel, using neither napkins nor knives (Ya'ari, *Meshullam mi-Volterra*, 55, 75, 76 = Adler, 169, 194, 195; cf. Goitein, 4.144–145, 149).

There was no single diet common to medieval Jews: consumption patterns varied in accordance with availability, local culture, and culinary fads, along with personal affluence and taste. The Jews of Yemen, for instance, were known to consume locusts, taking care to eat only biblically permitted varieties (Gaimani, "Ha-arbeh"). Information about exactly what medieval Jews ate, moreover, is sparse. Most primary sources on Jews and food from the Iberian Peninsula, for example, relate to Jewish life under Christian rule; retrojecting this information to periods of Islamic rule is problematic. The discussion that follows draws primarily on Goitein's chapter on food and drink, based on material from the Cairo Geniza (4.226–621). These sources only rarely capture dietary data beyond Egypt's urban centers. Many aspects of the Geniza Jews' diet, however, correlate with broader patterns in the medieval Near Eastern diet derived from other sources by Eliyahu Ashtor ("Diet of the Salaried Classes").

Bread was the dietary staple throughout the Mediterranean world. For that reason, access to affordable bread was crucial. As Goitein observes, “The quality of life in a city was defined in Geniza letters by the prices of wheat available to the common people. The frightening instability of supply, caused by nature as well as by human factors, made the daily bread a constant concern for everyone” (4.243–244). Indeed, Geniza sources indicate wide and sometimes rapid fluctuation of wheat prices. Grain and bread functioned in the Geniza community not only as foodstuffs but also, and for that very reason, as a form of currency: wages, salaries, taxes, and bribes were often paid in both cash and grain or bread (1.117–119; Gil, “Food Commerce,” 93–95). When possible, householders purchased a year’s supply of wheat at harvest time, bringing it to the local mill for grinding as necessary. Bread baked from homemade dough in the communal oven was less expensive than bread prepared by professional bakers, but the poor often needed to buy bread by the loaf because they were unable to stockpile their own wheat (Cohen, 158–161). Urban Jews in Egypt, unless extremely poor, never consumed barley; rice, in contrast, was in great demand (Gil, “Food Commerce,” 94–95). In Yemen, the staple grain was sorghum, a fact that led the Jewish community to ask Abraham Maimonides about the proper blessing over sorghum bread (Shemesh, “Ha-Durra”).

Bread, wine, and olive oil have constituted the legs of the “Mediterranean triad” of dietary staples from antiquity to the present. Middle-class Jews drank wine daily when possible, and especially on special occasions such as holidays, celebrations of life-cycle events, and after recovery from an illness. Wine songs, both popular ditties preserved in the Geniza and literary works by Andalusian Hebrew poets, reflect the fact that Jews enjoyed the same kinds of wine parties as their Muslim neighbors, Islamic prohibitions against alcohol notwithstanding (Goitein, 5.38–41; Scheindlin, 19–25). As attested by the Geniza, the official teetotalism of Islamic culture also influenced the widespread Jewish consumption of soft drinks made with ingredients such as fruit, flower petals, vegetables, and spices. Olive oil, a major source of fat often sopped up with bread or used to fry vegetables, was ubiquitous.

Vegetables were a major part of the diet, especially of those who were not affluent; some sources suggest that Jews were known for their fondness of vegetables. Items like greens, onions, garlic, and eggplant were commonly consumed by poor Jews in Egypt. An herb known as *mulūkhiyya* (*Corchorus olitorius*), made into a thick soup both in the Middle Ages and today, was commonly called *baqla yahūdiyya*, “the Jewish vegetable” (cf. its English name, “Jew’s mallow”). Geniza evidence attests to widespread consumption of nuts and fruit, the latter often imported. Dates, indigenous to Egypt, were an important source of calories.

Commoners typically ate meat only on the Sabbath and holidays, assuming they could afford it. According to Goitein, “A middle-class weekend without chicken was unthinkable” (1.124). The popularity and widespread availability of chicken reflect both its relatively low price and the fact that chickens were easy to raise and cook. Cooked chicken was regarded as an ideal food for infants and the sick. Mutton was preferred over beef, and the fat of the sheep’s tail was especially prized. Cheese, both local and imported, was also a significant element in the diet of Geniza Jews; other dairy products were not. Fish, less expensive than chicken, constituted another important source of animal protein.

The line between food and medicine was quite blurry in the Middle Ages. An unusual Geniza document provides prescriptions for several members of a household suffering from undisclosed ailments. Ingredients include chicory, chicken, fennel, lemon, liquorice, rhubarb, and spinach (Lev et al., “Chicken and chicory”).

Pepper held pride of place among the spices consumed in the Geniza community, due in part to its role in preserving meat. Pepper was also used to flavor wine. Geniza sources attest to the use of a wide variety of other spices as well (Goitein, 2.269–270). How these spices were used, however, is unclear: Goitein bemoans the absence from Geniza records of any description of a dish or a meal (4.227–229; on kitchen and dining implements, however, see 4.141–150).

Fifteenth-century Italian travelers (including the aforementioned Meshullam da Volterra) offer brief accounts of Jews' meals in the Islamic world. Obadiah da Bertinoro reports that Jews ate their Sabbath meals sitting in a circle on a rug and partaking with their hands from a common platter. He draws particular attention to the quantities of fruit and wine consumed as appetizers; the main course, a meat dish, goes undescribed (Ya'ari, *Iggerot*, 115 = Adler, 220–221).

2. Dietary Laws

Medieval Jews adhered to the traditional dietary laws as a matter of course. These included the biblical injunctions against eating certain animal species, consuming blood or the meat of animals that died of natural causes, and—according to Rabbanites—mixing meat and dairy. Karaite authorities, however, rejected the last of these prohibitions as an unwarranted expansion of the verse “You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk” (Exod. 23:19). This disagreement functioned in the eleventh century as a synecdoche for the differences between Rabbanite and Karaite law, one that some Rabbanites cited to justify their efforts to excommunicate the Karaite community *en masse* (Rustow, 200–236).

The differences between Karaite and Rabbanite dietary laws served to demarcate the two communities, but did not generally pose a serious obstacle to economic or social interaction. Indeed, marriage contracts preserved in the Geniza indicate that Karaite and Rabbanite spouses simply agreed in advance about whose communal norms would apply in their household (Rustow, 249–250). Karaites took a more conservative approach than Rabbanites to the biblical list of forbidden birds (Lev. 11:13–19). Rabbanites, by deriving the general characteristics of permitted fowl from the list and using them as criteria, permitted birds like chickens and geese that are never mentioned in the Bible. Karaites, in contrast, permitted only those birds explicitly identified as edible in the Bible, namely turtledoves and pigeons (Frank, *Search Scripture Well*, 39–61). On the subject of cheese, conversely, Rabbanites were more restrictive than Karaites, insisting that the rennet derive from a properly slaughtered kosher animal. Consequently, Rabbanites would only purchase cheese prepared by fellow Rabbanites, although Karaites sometimes played a role in its sale (Rustow, 283–286).

Rabbanites and Karaites also maintained different standards for proper slaughter with respect both to the requirements incumbent upon the butcher and the physical condition of the slaughtered animal. These distinctions—along with the fact that slaughterhouses were a steady source of income for the supervising authorities—prompted Rabbanite and Karaite communities to maintain their own slaughterhouses and often spawned conflicts within each community as well (Frank, “Karaite Sheḥiṭah Controversy”). The Rabbanite/Karaite disagreement regarding the status of animals with lung defects, defined as *ṭerefa* (unkosher meat) by talmudic authorities, was familiar to the Muslim jurist ‘Alī Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1064). Through his work, this issue entered into Islamic legal discourse on the permissibility to Muslims of meat rejected by Jewish butchers (Freidenreich, *Foreigners and Their Food*, 184–190).

Differences of opinion on borderline cases like *ṭerefa* meat notwithstanding, Islamic law usually posed no obstacle to Muslim patronage of Jewish butchers. This point should not be taken for

granted. Rabbanites and Karaites alike, after all, forbade Jews to consume meat butchered by gentiles. Medieval canon law similarly forbade Christians from patronizing Jewish butchers; when municipal authorities in Europe enforced this prohibition, local Jewish communities suffered. The Qurʾān, in contrast, permits consumption of meat butchered by People of the Book (Sura 5:5), a position affirmed by the vast majority of Sunnī jurists (Freidenreich, *Foreigners and Their Food*, 131–156). Only two Sunnī legal texts seek to prevent Jewish butchers from selling meat to Muslims (see García-Sanjuan’s discussion of a twelfth-century manual for market supervisors, and Little’s article on an oath imposed on Jewish butchers). Shīʿī authorities, in contrast, forbade not only meat prepared by Jewish butchers but also most foodstuffs touched by Jews, a rule that had severe consequences for Jews in Safavid Iran (Freidenreich, “Implications of Unbelief”).

Rabbanites and Karaites alike refrained from active cooking on the Sabbath. This practice posed only minimal challenges when preparing food for Friday evening, customarily a major feast, but had a distinctive impact on Saturday meals. Jews developed a wide variety of recipes for a slow-cooked stew—commonly called *ḥamin oradafina* in the Islamic world—whose active preparation took place on Friday but which continued to cook unattended until it was served hot at the midday Sabbath meal. Ingredients regularly included meat, eggs, legumes, seasonal vegetables, and spices. Passover entailed abstinence from bread and a host of related foodstuffs that had been leavened, but all holidays were customarily accompanied by distinctive foods (e.g., sweet foods and foods that symbolize fertility on Rosh Hashana).

Rabbinic law regulates not only what Jews may eat but also who may make or share food. These restrictions, often understood by medieval authorities as a means of preventing mixed marriages, apply not only to meat but also to wine and a variety of other prepared foods. The laws regarding wine associated with gentiles are especially severe: talmudic authorities, concerned about the idolatrous predilections of non-Jews, ruled that even passing contact could render wine forbidden for Jewish consumption. Many rabbinic authorities in the Islamic world, however, adopted a lenient stance toward wine touched by Muslims, on the grounds either that Muslims did not offer wine libations in their worship or that Muslims were not idolaters. Even so, these authorities express concern about socializing with gentiles over drinks (Freidenreich, *Foreigners and Their Food*, 211–216). The extent to which biblical and rabbinic food restrictions actually impeded social interaction with non-Jews is unclear.

3. Economic Aspects

Many Jews practiced agriculture during the early Islamic era. This declined as Jews urbanized, a process that began in the Near East as early as the eighth century, but gaonic responsa and Geniza sources indicate that Jewish involvement in agriculture and occupations related to food production persisted. Near Eastern Jews do not appear to have played a significant role as producers of vegetables but were engaged in growing, importing, processing, and selling fruit. Evidence from various sources points to persistent Jewish wine production in Palestine and Egypt. Jews owned mills, communal ovens, and olive presses; and cheese-making, as Goitein observed, features prominently in Geniza records (Mann, “Responsa,” 310–321; Goitein, 1.116–127). In Spain, where responsa regularly address agricultural issues, Jews were cultivators of both vineyards and olive groves (Ashtor, *Jews of Moslem Spain*, 1.265–271; Roth, *Jews, Visigoths and Muslims*, 152–153). Muslim writers associated Jews with such occupations as butchering, wine-making, and tavern-keeping; Jewish prominence in these fields may reflect the religious requirement that meat and wine be prepared by Jews (Gil, *Jews in Islamic Countries*, 597–606). Goitein, however, observes that Geniza sources make no reference to taverns, perhaps because of the Geniza community’s general aversion to the consumption of food in public (5.40).

Preparation of food for sale was the occupation of men, not women (Goitein, 1.129). Middle-class Jewish housewives availed themselves of the market to relieve some of the burden of preparing food for their families. Hand mills for grinding wheat at home were rare; women instead brought their grain to the local miller. It was also customary to bring homemade dough to a professional baker's oven (4.142). Members of the Geniza community took advantage of Jewish specialists who made a wide variety of meat dishes, relishes and other cold dishes, cakes, and sweets (1.113–115).

Goitein reports that Jews played a disproportionate role in Egyptian production and sale of sugar. He explains that the sugar cane industry was a relative latecomer to local agriculture and that many Jewish families in Egypt came from southern Iran and Iraq, from which sugar cane production was transplanted in early Islamic times. The Geniza preserves a partial inventory of a Jewish-owned store that sold ingredients for home-made candy, including fruit and sugar (Goitein 1.125–126, 4.246–247).

Jewish long-distance merchants bought and sold foodstuffs along with many other diverse commodities (Gil, "Food Commerce"; Goitein, 1.153–154). Medical and culinary plants constituted a particularly noteworthy aspect of Mediterranean trade. Geniza sources, however, only rarely attest to Jewish involvement in wholesale grain commerce or cattle dealing (1.209–211). Jews were active in the spice trade, an occupation that Goitein tellingly addresses under the heading "druggists, pharmacists, perfumers, preparers of potions" (2.261–272). The volume of commerce in pepper was such that Goitein uses it to illustrate the challenges and possibilities of using Geniza sources to reconstruct the history of price fluctuations (1.120–122).

Geniza letters written by or on behalf of the poor refer regularly to actual or anticipated starvation. Mark D. Cohen (161–162) estimates that the lowest-paid workers in the Geniza community would often need to spend 30 to 60 percent of their daily wage to provide food for their family. The truly destitute received a small ration of bread from the community, but not enough to meet basic nutritional needs (see also Goitein, 2.126–130, 5.88–89).

4. Literary Aspects

Moses Maimonides devotes considerable attention to legal, philosophical, and medical aspects of food (Rosner, 241–254). In *Guide of the Perplexed* 3.48, Maimonides declares that animals whose consumption the Bible forbids are unhealthy (Levinger, "Maimonides' Guide"). Chapter 20 of his *Medical Aphorisms* presents a lengthy list of Galenic aphorisms on nutrition and dietetics. Maimonides' law code includes a series of hygienic and medical prescriptions for healthy living, including when and how much to eat, the proper sequence of foods at a meal, and what foods should be avoided for medical reasons (*Mishneh Torah, De'ot*, chap. 4; see also Maimonides' *Regimen of Health*).

Maimonides was far from the first Jewish philosopher to condemn gluttony and espouse moderation—even asceticism—in one's diet. Predecessors include Sa'adya Gaon (*Emunot ve-De'ot* 10.5) and Bahya ibn Paquda (*Hovot ha-Levavot* 9; see Kreisel, "Asceticism"). Abraham Ibn Ezra composed a "medical poem" spelling out which foods should be eaten during which months of the year; this work was often ascribed to Maimonides during the Middle Ages (Yiṣḥaḳi, "Megamot didaḳṭiyot").

Themes of health and asceticism are treated in more light-hearted and ironic ways in Hebrew wine poetry from Muslim Spain. These poems, inspired by and performed at night-long parties, draw heavily on literary motifs common in Arabic wine poetry, among them the irreverent use of religious terms and concepts (Ratzaby, "Shirat ha-Yayin"). They generally promote a *carpe*

diem lifestyle as they capture the joy of drinking in a beautiful and aromatic garden filled with music and lovely women (Pagis, 254–267). Judah al-Ḥarīzī’s *Taḥkemoni* (ca. 1220) contains an especially brazen poem in praise of drinking throughout the year, even on fast-days that mourn the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple (Gate 5; Segal, 59–72, 549–553).

Al-Ḥarīzī is also among the poets who record notes of ambivalence regarding the merits of wine, both for one’s personal well-being and one’s Jewish identity (*Taḥkemoni*, Gate 27; Segal, 233–237, 548–551). Although al-Ḥarīzī’s ambivalence is clearly feigned, this is less evident in other works. Dunash ben Labraṭ (d. 990), the earliest known author of Hebrew secular poems in Spain, condemns drunken carousing in the conclusion to one of his poems in praise of wine:

I chided him: “Be still!

How can you drink your fill

When lost is Zion hill

To the uncircumcised.

.....

How can we be carefree

Or raise our cups in glee,

When by all men are we

Rejected and despised?”

(Scheidlin, 42)

Although this scolding voice has the last word in Dunash’s poem, Raymond P. Scheindlin (30–33, 43–45) observes that the author in fact leaves the underlying problem of conscience unresolved. In doing so, Dunash aptly reflects a core tension within the secular culture of Jewish wine parties that persists in later literary works.

See also:

Food and Drink – Modern Period - Algeria

Food and Drink – Modern Period - Egypt

Food and Drink – Modern Period - Syria and Syrian Diaspora

Food and Drink - Modern Period - Yemen

Food and Drink – Wine and Alcoholic Beverages

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