

**Memories of the Roman food heritage: a reflection****Memórias do patrimônio alimentar romano: uma reflexão****Memorias del patrimonio alimentario romano: una reflexión****Received: 30/03/2020****Approved: 11/09/2020****Published: 14/11/2020****Tatiana Raquel Vieira Silva<sup>1</sup>****António Raposo<sup>2</sup>****Otília Maria da Silva Freitas<sup>3</sup>**

It is a reflection, based on historical studies, and with the aim of reflecting on the food evolution and rituals of the ancient Roman civilization. This reflection was structured based on the questions: *What is the food source of Roman civilization?; What dialogue exists between food and Roman culture?; and What are the dietary patterns of Roman society and the symbolic significance attributed to food?* The following thematic axes were presented: *Roman civilizational food origin; Aspects of Roman culture; Food patterns of Roman society; and Symbolic meaning of food.* It was found that there was a deficient diet, such as a lack of vitamins and minerals, due to social inequalities in poor communities, and an exuberant diet for the rich, which influenced the food style and way of life of the Roman people. Also, the expansion of the Roman empire pointed to a strong Greek, mystical and religious influence, as well as, in the disease health process. In the understanding of the progress of a society, food is an interpretative strategy of customs and values and, it increases the awareness of the memory of a people's past.

**Descriptors:** Diet; Culture; History; Roman word.

Trata-se de uma reflexão, com base em estudos históricos, e com o objetivo de se refletir acerca da evolução alimentar e rituais da antiga civilização romana. Esta reflexão foi estruturada a partir dos questionamentos: *Qual a origem alimentar da civilização romana? Que diálogo existe entre a alimentação e a cultura romana? Quais os padrões alimentares da sociedade romana e a significação simbólica atribuída aos alimentos?* Apresentou-se os seguintes eixos temáticos: *Origem alimentar civilizacional romana; Aspectos da cultura romana; Padrões alimentares da sociedade romana; e Significação simbólica dos alimentos.* Verificou-se que havia deficiente alimentação, como a carência de vitaminas e minerais, derivada de desigualdades sociais em comunidades pobres, e uma alimentação exuberante para os ricos, o que influenciou o estilo alimentar e a forma de vida do povo romano. Também, a expansão do império romano apontava forte influência grega, mística e religiosa, bem como no processo saúde-doença. Na compreensão do progresso de uma sociedade, a alimentação é uma estratégia interpretativa dos costumes e valores e, amplia a tomada de consciência da memória do passado de um povo.

**Descritores:** Dieta; Cultura; História; Mundo romano.

Esta es una reflexión, basada en estudios históricos, y con el objetivo de reflexionar sobre la evolución alimentaria y los rituales de la antigua civilización romana. Esta reflexión se estructuró sobre la base de las preguntas: *¿Cuál es el origen alimentario de la civilización romana? ¿Qué diálogo existe entre la alimentación y la cultura romana? ¿Cuáles son los patrones alimentarios de la sociedad romana y el significado simbólico que se le atribuye a la comida?* Se presentaron los siguientes ejes temáticos: *Origen alimentario de la civilización romana; Aspectos de la cultura romana; Patrones alimentarios de la sociedad romana; y Significado simbólico de los alimentos.* Se encontró que había una alimentación deficiente, como la falta de vitaminas y minerales, derivada de las desigualdades sociales en las comunidades pobres, y una dieta exuberante para los ricos, que influyó en el estilo de alimentación y el modo de vida del pueblo romano. Además, la expansión del Imperio Romano indicaba fuertes influencias griegas, místicas y religiosas, así como en el proceso salud-enfermedad. Para comprender el progreso de una sociedad, la alimentación es una estrategia interpretativa de las costumbres y los valores y amplía la conciencia de la memoria del pasado de un pueblo.

**Descritores:** Dieta; Cultura; Historia; Mundo romano.

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## INTRODUCTION

**F**ood is considered an integral part of the material and immaterial heritage of humanity<sup>1,2</sup>. The basis of food consists of the preparation and use of food, making it edible through the art of cooking, which has been practiced since the beginning of human existence.

Contrary to what most people think, diet refers to the set of food substances that constitute the nutritional behavior of living beings, which may vary according to: individual factors, culture, social environment, and it is not just a product of fashion, and can be a way of maintaining a healthy lifestyle combined with health.

Food goes far beyond a solitary and autonomous act of human beings or a guiding thread of society or even a body requirement to maintain and balance its vital functions<sup>3</sup>.

Each civilization has its standard foods, its specific cuisine, its customs and combinations in the art of everyday food creation. Since the very first civilizations (such as the Roman civilization), populations have been increasingly concerned with the implementation of good food and nutrition, with the relevance of nutritional balance.

In the ancient Roman civilization, food, in addition to a need for survival and a vital need common to humans<sup>4</sup>, had an upward connotation and a broad meaning in sociocultural terms. The Romans interpreted dietary routines as culture and social, religious and spiritual influence<sup>4</sup>. Thus, this work aims to reflect on the food evolution and rituals of the ancient Roman civilization.

## METHOD

This is a reflection, which brings the descriptive memory of food as a heritage of the ancient Roman civilization, linking culture with meanings of food rituals.

The descriptive memory was guided by the following questions: *What is the food source of Roman civilization?; What dialogue exists between food and Roman culture?; What are the dietary patterns of Roman society and the symbolic significance attributed to food?*

The evolution of dietary patterns of Roman society over time is described in permanent dialogue with the socio-cultural heritage: origins, values and customs, habits and stratigraphic modeling differentiations.

## RESULTS

Considering the guiding questions, this study was organized in the following thematic axes: *Roman civilizational food origin; Aspects of Roman culture; Food patterns of Roman society; and Symbolic meaning of food*. 13 references were considered as basis in the presentation of the material.

## DISCUSSION

### ***Roman civilizational food origin***

Since the origins of peoples, cities and religions, they are normally associated and linked to legendary episodes and events, mystical and religious ancestors, although the majority of reports are based on true aspects<sup>5</sup>.

In the past, the use and recurrence of the divine combined with human reality was acceptable and common so that, in a simpler and clearer way, the origin of cities, peoples and regions could be explained and ennobled<sup>6</sup>.

The mythological explanation associated with the origin of Rome is based on the myth of Romulus and Remus<sup>5</sup>, an event that occurred after the fall of Troy. The legend is about twin brothers, one of which, Romulus, would be the founder of the city of Rome and its first king.

In turn, Amulius was a tyrant king and, upon learning of the twins' birth, threw them into the Tiber to cover up the sacrilege committed by his mother. The current threw them to the bank of the river and they were found by a she-wolf, who suckled them in the Lupercal cave, southwest of the palatine hill until they were found by a shepherd named Faustulus, who raised the brothers as his own children, along with his wife<sup>5</sup>.

This myth is directed towards the Roman food culture, marked by an agricultural and pastoral economy<sup>7</sup>. As a characteristic of the time, agriculture leveraged the production of food used by the populations, called "*from the land*"<sup>8</sup>.

In this period of rural economy and subsistence, there was a development of agricultural machinery, similar to an industrial revolution, which triggered a migratory movement to cities, in search of better living conditions. This urban demographic explosion has unleashed marked social problems in this civilization, with the emergence of various social strata and unemployment, which, among other things, led to nutritional deficiencies.

This historic event refers to the Bread and Circuses Policy<sup>1</sup>, created by the emperor, which consisted of offering food and entertainment to the people, aiming to distracting the population and avoid expressions of discontent<sup>9</sup>.

Poor diet, such as a lack of vitamins and minerals, as a result of accentuated asymmetries in social strata, influenced the food style and way of life of the Roman people.

### ***Aspects of Roman culture***

Culture, in its broad sense, encompasses knowledge, beliefs, art, law, morals, customs and habits, not excluding food, and skills acquired by human beings as individuals and integral members of a family, group and society<sup>4</sup>.

Roman food culture encompassed different aspects with broad meanings, namely in the areas of: economics, politics, sociocultural, religion and spirituality, ethics and morality, cognitive and aesthetic<sup>3</sup>.

Rome was one of the greatest empires of antiquity and promoted the agglomeration of various cultures, having been strongly influenced and determined by Greek culture<sup>8</sup>. The Romans, in their eating habits, were influenced through: interpretation of works, art, painting, architecture<sup>5</sup>.

Food is a frequent theme in Roman artistic representations and architecture<sup>1</sup>. Figure 1 elucidates the Greek influence on Roman painting<sup>10</sup> enlarging a banquet in a Roman mosaic found in Carthage.

**Figure 1.** Fragment of a Roman mosaic found in Carthage.



Source: Campos A<sup>10</sup>.

Figure 2 illustrates details of the exedra floor of the "*House of Triumph of Dionysus*" in *Hadrumetum* related to food, thus confirming the influence of food on the architecture of the time.

**Figure 2.** Exedra floor from “House of Triumph of Dionysus” in Hadrumetum.



Source: Bustamante RMC<sup>1</sup>.

### ***Food patterns of Roman society***

In Roman society, men were classified according to their status and the differentiation between a “rich” diet and a “poor” diet, which was significant, referring to Brillat - Savarin (1825) that brought: “It says - tell me what you eat and I’ll tell you who you are”<sup>1</sup>. Inequalities formed the basis for the stratification of Roman society, demonstrating the distinction of its people based on food, so that the exuberance of some overlap the scarcity of others.

In Roman civilization, everyday eating habits were very standardized and characteristic. The dietary regime was discontinuous and irregular, with the possibility of passing from one extreme to another, that is, from the most basic simplicity, regardless of social strata, to the excessive excess during parties, moments in which overabundance was mandatory<sup>1</sup>. And, the inequality became more evident with the expansion of the Roman Empire.

The Romans had an extreme, repulsive, planturous, unrestrained and excessive diet<sup>5</sup>. The gastronomy was diverse, and it was dedicated to luxury and exuberance on a daily basis, which was exclusive to a minority population with high purchasing power and desire for new satiating palates.

In contrast, the population with less economic resources had a deficient diet regarding nutritional values, to the point that malnutrition brought diseases such as scurvy, rickets, avitaminosis and osteoporosis<sup>5</sup>.

Some of the most common foods of the ancient Roman civilization, with the exception of the basic food, cereal<sup>5</sup>, are quite comprehensive and diverse, among which: 150 species of seafood, like fish, molluscs, oysters, lobsters; and meats, like pig, boar, lamb, hare, rabbit, chicken, pheasant, goose, duck, pigeon, peacock, ostrich, bear and camel. Beef was uncommon in this ancient civilization.

The food of the primitive Romans, the poor and those who refused luxury on their table, consisted of vegetables, such as: cabbage, broad beans, lentils and chickpeas; and, in areas close to the sea or rivers, salted or dried fish was common for better conservation and for the days of greatest need. Seasonal fruits were also consumed and preserved, such as: pear, apple, fig; and also, nuts and olives<sup>5</sup>.

Cereals were the basis for bread or the most typical meal at this time, which was made a mixture of water and cereals (wheat or spelled), which formed a porridge, called Puls<sup>5</sup>.

With the evolution of the Roman Empire, various foods were introduced<sup>12</sup> in the Roman food culture such as chickpeas and beans. It can also be mentioned: ham from Belgium,

oysters from Great Britain, wild game from Tunisia, flowers from Egypt, lettuce from the Turkish region of the Cappadocia.

The diversity of foods in the ancient Roman civilization was already evident, except for the products that America later made available, namely: sugar, beans, potatoes, tomatoes, tea and coffee<sup>3</sup>.

The foods were prepared in a different way from the current one, associating sweet and savory flavors, as well as the excessive use of spices and aromatic herbs such as: pepper, cumin, garlic, parsley, oregano, onion, honey and saffron; likewise, rice was used as a sauce thickener<sup>5</sup>.

In ancient Rome, meals were divided into three parts: the Jentaculum, the Prandium and Cena<sup>1</sup>. The Jentaculum corresponded to the first meal of the day, consumed as soon as they got up. It consisted of bread, cheese, eggs and milk; and the bread could be soaked in heated wine or drizzled with oil and "rubbed" in garlic. The most consumed types of milk were goat or sheep milk, since donkey or mare's milk was reserved exclusively for medicinal and beauty purposes. Also, during the Empire and under the influence of some doctors, it was the habit of only drinking water in the morning<sup>1</sup>.

Around noon, the food was simpler and thus, the Prandium gathered a tasting of what was considered strictly necessary to recover strength, without any type of ceremony, often alone, and in any place, usually while standing. It could include leftover food from the previous day, cold meats, fruits and cheese, being accompanied with mulsum (wine mixed with water and honey to "break" the alcohol content, as it was ingested during the work period)<sup>1</sup>.

The Cena corresponded to the main meal of the day and began at the tenth hour, which corresponded to four o'clock in the afternoon, since the Romans counted the hours from the moment of dawn, extending until dusk<sup>1</sup>.

### ***Symbolic meaning of food***

The history of food has the challenge of focusing on food in its transcendence as a symbol<sup>3</sup>.

Roman mythology represented ways of explaining reality without scientific explanation. In Centeno's point of view, "*understanding the mentality of the first inhabitants of small towns (...) required clarification (...) of the entities that fill the sacred sphere of a Roman*"<sup>5</sup>.

The traditional Roman religion did not contain dogmas, it was practical and immediate, including cult to ancestors, public gods and the belief in auspices and wonders that consisted of divine manifestations through nature<sup>5</sup>.

Throughout the history of Roman civilization, food reached a symbolic importance in the fields of politics and religion, with food being a mark of distinction between different classes and nationalities. On the other hand, food contributed to socialization through the collective preparation of meals, to a feeling of homeland and local fixation of individuals or groups<sup>13</sup>.

Food has always been related to the health-disease process, since its abundance or scarcity called into question, even human survival.

At this time, there was a great importance on the cult of sacrifice of live animals, and only through this could meat be consumed and be considered suitable for consumption<sup>11</sup>. Meat was little consumed for various reasons, among which ethical-religious<sup>3</sup> since, whoever killed a bovine was subject to be punished with death or exile. However, cereals were considered "*sacred*" and the basis of foods.

Other transcendent symbols of the time are described as: spilling the salt shaker, which meant an omen of death; chopping of meat with the tip of a knife that represented the wound of the dead; food that fell on the floor and could not be swept away during the meal because it was thought that it belonged to the dead who were present; and, dreaming about drinking hot water, which meant an announcement of illness. Bitter almonds were also used medicinally, chewed before excesses, present in the belief that inebriation was avoided.

The food and diet of the Roman civilization were symbols of: identity; belonging; communication; and cultural, social and spiritual recognition.

## CONCLUSION

Through the descriptive historical memory of the food evolution of the ancient Roman civilization, there is hope for contribution to the dissemination of a part of the heritage of humanity that, through food founded on its roots, can preserve the previous experience manifested by habits or food and food memories. awareness of the past as such.

The geographical expansion, from the rural to the urban spaces, when the expansion of the Roman territory and the consequent agglutination of different cultures led to a globalization of eating habits.

Roman society started from agricultural and pastoral bases for its subsistence and migratory movements showed a significant discrepancy and differentiation in the stratification of social classes, with inequalities that generated their food modeling.

From a socio-cultural point of view, religion and the Greeks, socialization and communicative contexts influenced Roman society, bringing great impact to the table and eating habits. Food takes on broad cultural and social meanings, resulting from social conditioning, a psychological state and a way of maintaining life.

As limitations of this reflection, the historical, food and cultural focus of a civilization that can be explored in other aspects is pointed out. However, we sought to expand the knowledge and understanding of the historical evolution of Roman food, requiring studies and greater historical exploration, coupling multidisciplinary contributions there.

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#### CONTRIBUTIONS

**Tatiana Raquel Vieira Silva** worked in the conception, collection and analysis of data and writing. **Antônio Raposo** contributed to the design and review. **Otília Maria da Silva Freitas** participated in the design, data analysis, writing and review.

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