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## Eating Habits and Food of the Monks of Palestine in the 5th – 6th c.

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## ARTYKUŁY

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### Eating Habits and Food of the Monks of Palestine in the 5th – 6th c.

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#### Abstract

The article is concerned with the eating habits of the monks of Palestine in the 5th–6th centuries. It has been based on and draws from a number of contemporary sources. The staple in the monks' daily diet was bread, which would be usually eaten with salt. It was made in bakeries that were, along with the church, the most important buildings within the precincts of each monastery, several times during a year and then dried. In addition to the bread, the staple items of food included vegetables (cooked or fresh), most often grown in or near the monastery precincts, or possibly also provided by the faithful. The monasteries, both *lauras* and *coenobitic* establishments, had their own vegetable gardens, but the monks would also eat various wild plants. They would drink water, wine, as well as the *eukration* (a mixture of water and herbs).

**Key words:** diet, monks, Judean Desert, vegetables

**Słowa kluczowe:** dieta, mnisi, Pustynia Judei, warzywa

The aim of this article is to discuss the staple and holiday diets of Palestinian monks in the 5th–6th centuries. I shall make reference to the following primary sources: Cyril of Scythopolis – *The Lives of the Monks of Palestine*<sup>1</sup>, John Moschos – *Pratum Spirituale*<sup>2</sup>, *Life of Gerasimus*<sup>3</sup>, Dorotheus of Gaza – *Ascetic Writings*<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> *Vitae monachorum Palaestinensium*.

<sup>2</sup> PG 87.3,2847–3116.

<sup>3</sup> *Vita sancti Gerasimi anonyma*.

<sup>4</sup> *Dorothee de Gaza. Oeuvre spirituelles*.

Chariton, the founder of the first *laura* in the Judean Desert in the 330s, left this message to his fellow brethren: “One should eat once a day, in the evening, always in moderation so that your stomach does not become heavy with food... Bread and salt to eat, and spring or rain water to drink”<sup>5</sup>. This instruction would survive for the centuries to come. The literary sources agree that the basic foodstuff in the Palestinian monks’ diet was bread<sup>6</sup>, often eaten with some salt<sup>7</sup>. There is no specific information, however, on the daily rations of bread. Dorotheus of Gaza<sup>8</sup> speaks of his disciple named Dositeus, who would have a daily ration of about 1.2 kg of bread as a novice in a coenobium. Later on, he would gradually decrease that amount, finally reaching 200 grams for his daily portion of bread. John Moschos<sup>9</sup> wrote of a monk from the Towers *laura*, in whose cell, after he died, only one loaf of bread was found. Another monk, from the Faran *laura*, would only have some bread every four days<sup>10</sup>, while another one would only eat the holy bread taken at Eucharist every Sunday<sup>11</sup>.

Bread would be the most important foodstuff throughout the Roman Empire and, for this reason, the ethnic origin or the location of a specific monastery would not have a bearing on any particular eating habits or daily diet of the monks<sup>12</sup>. As noted, the bread would be often eaten with salt<sup>13</sup>. It was also the basic food served to the visitors arriving at the monastery, along with wine and olive oil<sup>14</sup>. The literary sources do not offer any specific information referring to the form of the bread. In the case of the monks who would only take the Eucharistic bread as their sole meal, it should be noted that in the East it would be somewhat larger than in the West<sup>15</sup>. Let us also stress that the sources which mention the monastic diet reduced to eating bread every few days do not speak of daily meals being taken at the monasteries of Palestine, referring only to the exceptional ascetic practices of some monks. It would apply to all the more extreme eating regimens as cited above.

<sup>5</sup> *Vita Charitoni* 16.

<sup>6</sup> *Vita Euthymii* 39. As for the diet of the Pachomian monks in Egypt, the monastic rule is very specific on what the monks may, or may not, eat, see M. Dembińska, 1985, p. 431–462; Y. Hirschfeld, 1996, p. 144–45, 150.

<sup>7</sup> *Vita Euthymii* 39.

<sup>8</sup> *Vita Dositheii* 5.

<sup>9</sup> *Pratum Spirituale* 9.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>12</sup> E. Patlagean, 1977, p. 38–44.

<sup>13</sup> *Vita Euthymii* 39: “Just as the bread cannot be eaten without salt, it is impossible to attain virtue without love”.

<sup>14</sup> *Vita Euthymii* 17; *V. Georgii* 37.

<sup>15</sup> R. de Journel, 1946, p. 85, n. 2.

Left-over pieces of bread would be collected and dried to be eaten at a later time or sliced into smaller bits to be eaten together with some leftovers from plates<sup>16</sup>. Dried bread could be taken to the desert during Lent<sup>17</sup>.

Due to the climatic and soil conditions prevalent in Palestine, most of the wheat from which the bread was baked in the monasteries of the Judean Desert would be purchased, but some of it would be provided by the local rural population who lived near the monasteries<sup>18</sup>.

The *Life of Gerasimos* recounts that the protagonist instructed the dwellers of his *laura* on the Jordan to eat nothing but bread, water, and dates<sup>19</sup>, but the sources referring to the region also make a mention of vegetables: cooked pumpkins<sup>20</sup>, peas<sup>21</sup>, beans<sup>22</sup>, St. John's bread<sup>23</sup>, figs<sup>24</sup>, cabbage<sup>25</sup>, lentils<sup>26</sup>, and onions<sup>27</sup>. Leguminous plants were commonly eaten, as they were relatively easy to grow and store, and could be cooked and served with vinegar<sup>28</sup>.

It is also possible that they would have been cooked to form a sort of pulp (as was the common practice in this part of the Empire)<sup>29</sup>, which would serve as the soup base (greek: *póltos*).

<sup>16</sup> *Vita Sabae* 44; *Vita Georgii* 43; *Doctrine universae* 8.

<sup>17</sup> *Vita Sabae* 12, speaks of two monks who set out on a month-long trek in the desert and took “a sack with ten loaves of dry bread” with them, which weighed about 10 ounces.

<sup>18</sup> *Vita Sabae* 45.

<sup>19</sup> *Vita Gerasimii* 22; 33.

<sup>20</sup> *Vita Sabae* 48.

<sup>21</sup> *Vita Sabae* 40. (gr. *pisarion*) says how peas would be prepared: they were cooked first, but any left-over peas would be dried in the sun and cooked again, most likely with some herbs.

<sup>22</sup> *Vita Sabae* 45.

<sup>23</sup> *Vita Sabae* 76.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 40; 76; *Doctrine universae* 99.

<sup>25</sup> Dorotheus of Gaza, *Doctrine universae* 121, mentions a certain kleptomaniac monk, where one can find out about the food stored in a typical monastic pantry as well as in an infirmary, such as broad beans, dates, figs, and onions.

<sup>26</sup> Dorotheus of Gaza, *Doctrine universae* 121.

<sup>27</sup> *V. Cyriacii* 8. Cyril of Scythopolis used the Greek word *skilla*, which would most often refer to the sea onion (Latin *Scilla*, *urginea martimia*) and it is interpreted as such by R. Rubin, 2002, p. 351. However, it is more likely that Cyril would have thought of the plant known as *Scilla hanburyi*, an endemic plant of very large tubers which grows in the desert areas of present-day Israel, Syria, and Jordan, see K. H. Batanouny, 2001, p. 131.

<sup>28</sup> Greek *óspria*.

<sup>29</sup> *Vita Sabae* 46; see M. Kokoszko, 2011, p. 486.

I have not found any mention of keeping chicken or other domestic fowl such as geese and ducks at the monasteries. It seems that the monks would sometimes get them as gifts. In any event, there must have been easy access to eggs, as the sources do attest that they formed part of the monastic diet. Besides, infirm monks would eat broth and soft-boiled eggs (the latter were supposed to be a cure for tuberculosis)<sup>30</sup>.

Efforts would be made not to waste any food. Antony of Choziba, the author of the *Life of Georgios of Choziba*, notes that Georgios would take some leftovers, including fruit and fruit seeds, back to his cell, where he would dry, squash, and form them into small pellets. Then he would soak them in water and eat them. Picking up any leftovers from meals in order to eat them later on was a fairly common practice<sup>31</sup>.

The monks of Palestine abstained from eating meat and, most probably, fish as well. It would be eaten by infirm monks only<sup>32</sup>. Eating meat and fish was not forbidden as such, but those would be in very short supply, and therefore could not be used as food for the entire monastic community. Besides, they were perishable foodstuffs and thus very difficult to be stored<sup>33</sup>. The monks would drink water, but occasionally also some wine and oil, the latter being available to everybody at both coenobitic monasteries and *lauras*. But those who had chosen to follow very strict ascetic practices would not use them at all. Wine and olive presses were found in many of the Palestinian monasteries, including those at the edge of the Judean Desert. The sources also refer to the grapevine planted and grown at the coenobitic monasteries as well as by the cells of *laura*-dwellers. The grapevine would be grown for grapes and to have some much-needed shade<sup>34</sup>. Apart from water and wine, the monks could drink the *eukration* (which means “mixture”), i.e., a beverage made from hot water, spiced with pepper, cumin, and anise. It seems that warm beverages were an important addition to the monks’ staple diet. Normally, they would be considered as sort of a luxury<sup>35</sup>.

<sup>30</sup> Dorotheus of Gaza, *Vita Dosithei* 9. Chicken and goose eggs, as well as eggs of wild birds, would figure as an important ingredient in the diet of the early-Byzantine population, see M. Kokoszko, 2011, p. 490.

<sup>31</sup> 43. Another example of saving as much leftover food as possible may be the following narrative: when a certain monk from the monastery of Sabas had thrown away some surplus amount of peas, Sabas picked up the discarded food and cooked it again (see *Vita Sabae* 40).

<sup>32</sup> *Pratum spirituale* 65.

<sup>33</sup> Y. Hirschfeld, 1996a, p. 82.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>35</sup> *Vita Johanni Hesychastae* 19; 44, 60; *Vita Cyriacii* 5; *Vita Gerasimii* 4,4.

Another source of food for the monks in Palestine, especially in the Judean Desert, were edible wild-growing plants. The literary sources mention three of them that were regularly picked by the monks, namely the *manouthion*<sup>36</sup>, salty shrubs<sup>37</sup>, and capers<sup>38</sup>.

*Manouthion* is a thistle-like plant of yellow blossom and thorny leaves; it grows in dense clusters along the edge of the desert areas. When it sprouts, in February or March, all of its parts (stalks, leaves, roots, flowers, and seeds) become edible, turn yellow and prickly. It is edible shortly after being picked; in summertime, the leaves turn yellow and become prickly, and any plants remaining after season, could be used as firewood. After being cooked, the young sprouts have a taste somewhat similar to artichokes<sup>39</sup>. Salty shrubs are evergreen plants with edible leaves, up to 2 m high and 3 m wide, similar to orach. It grows everywhere in Palestine as well as in the Judean Desert, its leaves can be eaten, both raw and cooked<sup>40</sup>. Capers<sup>41</sup> grow in all of Palestine, especially on stony soil, cliffs, and walls. Edible parts are flower buds and young fruit<sup>42</sup>. Another plant growing in the Judean Desert is called melagria<sup>43</sup>, whose roots were the basic source of food for the monks living there. The diet would be also supplemented by the plants such as *maloa*<sup>44</sup> and tamarisk<sup>45</sup>.

The literary sources mention the presence of the *boskoi* (grazers) in Palestine<sup>46</sup>. In the *Life of Sabas*<sup>47</sup>, Cyril of Scythopolis confirms the existence of the *boskoi* in the Judean Desert in the early 6<sup>th</sup> century. They would come to Sabas with the intention of joining his monastic community. It is worth noting that

<sup>36</sup> Whose Latin name is *Gundelia tournefortii*; *Vita Georgii* 19,119.2–3; 14,110.2; *Vita Sabae* 8, *Vita Euthymii* 50; Y. Hirschfeld, 1990, p. 25–28.

<sup>37</sup> *Vita Euthymii* 11; 56; Latin: *Atriplex halimus*.

<sup>38</sup> *Vita Sabae* 40.

<sup>39</sup> J. Binns, 1994, p. 107.

<sup>40</sup> A. Dafni, 1985, p. 81.

<sup>41</sup> Latin: *Capparis spinosa*.

<sup>42</sup> A. Dafni, 1985, p. 103.

<sup>43</sup> *Vita Euthymii* 38; Latin: *Asphodelus microcarpus* blossoms at the turn of winter and spring, its leaves are poisonous but roots are edible; see R. Rubin, 2002, p. 347–352.

<sup>44</sup> *Vita Euthymii* 56. Most probably, the name refers to mallow, which would be eaten as a vegetable in Antiquity; edible parts are leaves and bulbs, see M. Kokoszko, 2011, p. 527.

<sup>45</sup> *Vita Cyriaci*, 18.

<sup>46</sup> An example of such a hermit is Paphnoutios, who preceded Lazaros on Mount Galesion; see *V. Laz. Gal.* 39, AASS, Nov. 3:521: “«He took» his food from the plants that grew in front of the cave, and his drink was the water that trickled down from the rock above it and was caught by that below, lying stagnant where it was hollowed out a little”. On the *boskoi* in the Judean Desert, see J. Wortley, 2001, p. 37–49.

<sup>47</sup> *Vita Sabae*, 16.



the protagonists of Cyril of Scythopolis, Euthymios and Sabas, lived as *boskoi* for some time. Their continued presence is attested by John Moschos, who refers to the *boskoi* 11 times, describing them as people who wandered naked and fed on grass or wild plants. Hirschfeld<sup>48</sup> provides a good description of the “grazer” hermits of the Judean desert, who subsisted on wild plants such as melagria (asphodel), reed hearts, saltbushes, and wild caper buds, supplemented by bread and kidney beans brought to them from the outside world.

Gardens with fruit-bearing trees, such as olive and pomegranate trees, as well as vegetable plots, would usually adjoin the monastic establishments, both coenobitic monasteries and *lauras*. At the coenobia, wherever possible, they would be situated at the centre of the precincts, to protect the fruit against being stolen. Small gardens or vegetable patches would be located by the cells of *laura*-dwellers and hermits<sup>49</sup>. Archaeological excavation and survey work in the Judean wilderness have uncovered the remains of gardens attached to both hermitages and monasteries, identified by terracing or by the waterworks that irrigated them. One of the best examples is the vegetable plot of the hermit Kyriakos, known to us from his *vita* written by Cyril of Skythopolis. Cyril tells us that since the hermitage had no cistern, Kyriakos had made indentations in the rocks in which he collected sufficient rainwater during the winter to serve both drinking and irrigation purposes during the summer, specifically for watering his vegetables<sup>50</sup>.

As far as the sources of food are concerned, the monks were mostly self-sufficient, but, according to many accounts, they would receive food from the faithful, coming from the nearby villages or other regions of Palestine, which would complement their staple diet. Cyril of Scythopolis referred to the inhabitants of Madaba, who, out of respect for Sabas, supplied grain and beans to the Great Laura and the other monasteries he had founded. John Hesychast, who was living in the desert too, was visited by an old man who brought him some fresh bread, wine, oil, cheese, eggs, and honey<sup>51</sup>.

It was apparently traditional to give these food articles to monks, because, as the *Life of Sabas* reports, when the members of his community living at the Great Laura, and everybody else in Palestine, were starving for the second year in a row due to crop failure, some providers of food, called “the sons of

<sup>48</sup> Y. Hirschfeld, 1996a, p. 215.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 200–204; A.M. Talbot, 2002, p. 37–67.

<sup>50</sup> *Vita Cyriaci* 16. In fact, archaeologists found below his cave at Sousakim, a plot measuring ca. 25 m<sup>2</sup>, and at a distance of ca. 250 m a second plot covering an area of ca. 40–50 m<sup>2</sup>.<sup>40</sup> At the monastery of Chariton the remnants of terraced garden plots totalling more than 18,000 m<sup>2</sup> can still be seen. Y. Hirschfeld, 1996a, p. 200.

<sup>51</sup> *Vita Johanni Hesychastae* 12.

Sheshan”, came from Jerusalem with 30 pack animals, bringing wine, bread, grain, oil, honey, and cheese<sup>52</sup>.

It may be assumed that the products of animal origin (such as cheese, honey, eggs) were not available at the monasteries or obtained by the monks on a regular basis. However, when the monks received them, they would make a feast and eat the food given to their community. They could have been well aware that many of the products cannot be stored for longer periods of time or possibly tempted by sheer greed. It must be said that apart from many accounts of extraordinary asceticism, there also exist numerous descriptions of some Palestinian monks, so to say, “loosening the belt”<sup>53</sup>.

I would argue that most Byzantine monasteries must have grown herbs for medicinal and culinary purposes, despite the virtual lack of hard evidence. I have also found very little information on flowering plants and trees grown for aesthetic rather than practical purposes, such as are a common feature of modern Greek monastery courtyards. There are some archaeological indications at the monastery of Khirbet-ed-Deir in the Judean desert that vines were grown on a trellis to provide shade for the courtyard, and the *Lausiaca History of Palladius* describes a grapevine that grew all over the church at the Douka monastery near Jericho<sup>54</sup>.

It is evident then that the diet of the monks in Palestine would not have been very much different from that of the secular population of the Roman Empire. The cereals constituted 70–75% of the total amount of food consumed by the inhabitants of the Mediterranean in Antiquity as well as during the Byzantine era. The second in importance were the leguminous plants<sup>55</sup>, easily available but not as favoured as the grain<sup>56</sup>. As can be seen, the monks’ diet would not make much of a difference in this respect, perhaps with an exception for the food rations consumed. Vegetables were an important ingredient of the diet throughout Antiquity, as they were relatively cheap and easy to find. For this reason, even the poorest would be able to afford them. As regards the monastic communities, it is important that the monks would not have been constrained by any specific restrictions on religious grounds<sup>57</sup>.

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<sup>52</sup> *Vita Sabae* 58.

<sup>53</sup> *Vita Sabae* 64.

<sup>54</sup> *The Lausiaca History of Palladius*, vol. 2 (Cambridge, 1904), 143.3–7.

<sup>55</sup> M. Kokoszko, 2011, p. 474.

<sup>56</sup> K.B. Flint-Hamilton, 1999, p. 371–385.

<sup>57</sup> J.P. Thomas, 1987.



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