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Sweets without taboo – about food at the human and celestial table.

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ABSTRACT: This article deals with the subject of history of nutrition in Antiquity as well as with surviving traditions of preparing special sweets in Mediterranean and Near Eastern practices. Especially in case of sweets named “halwa” we can find Mediterranean, Arabian and Indian traditions by using ingredients which are defined by special nutrition factors as well as by special religious meaning. Mentioned as components of the so-called antique symposia such sweets survived until modern times thanks to their former religious importance as food without taboo that could be enjoyed regardless of individual religious believes or preferences.

KEY-WORDS: ambrosia, antique culinaria, Greco-Roman kitchen, halwa, medical treatment, nectar, Oriental food, symposium

Sometime ago I was invited to a good friend's table.¹ After we enjoyed a tasty menu – partly with meat, partly vegetarian –, and beverage, the final proposal for culinary caused a lively change of the subjects we were talking about. A dark brown cream tasting after several aromatic ingredients was announced to be a variation of what commonly is known as *halwa*, a tasty Oriental confection, in that case brought from Oman. Following the traditions of formal rules of ancient *symposium*, as we know from 3rd century CE author, Athenaios' *Deipnosophistai* (i.e. the philosophers of food)², one of the most important books on *culinaria* and ancient encyclopaedic knowledge about lifestyle of nutrition, we wondered about the possibility of surviving traditions of food beside special or individual preferences as they can be found between eaters of meat, vegetarians or the manifold religious groups. Is there still an agreement about a special kind of food free from any restrictions?

How to find an answer for that in any kind delicious subject? From point of view of ancient history our research brought us to the field of mythology, religious practises and ancient medicine, because it is a well-known fact that basic ritual or medical knowledge is fixed and traduced into cultural heritage by tales, myths and the belief in "celestial facts". To find out the basic roots and the cultural melting-pot of several traditions, ancient Mediterranean records as well as recent kitchen traditions provide a lot of interesting information about the ingredients and their meaning. In case of home-made sweets there are several lines which, e.g. for Mediterranean culture, depend from the local distance to cultural meeting places or centres of trade roads to and from the Near or Far East, the Arabian trading roads and from the Mediterranean centres.

A look into the kitchen

As it is known that this *halwa* which originally caused this study was a composition of several ingredients, was the first step to find out the variations in order to name those which basically were not changing because of special function or meaning.

For the tasted Omani *halwa* there are for ingredients³:

sugar (arab. skr)	سكر
starch (nsha')	نشاء
water (arab. ma')	ماء
ghee (arab. samna/smnh)	قنميس
rose water ⁴ (arab. ma')	ماء الورد
alwrd	هيل مكسرات

¹ For his invitation in April 2014 I am glad to thank Prof. Dr. Efim A. Rezvan (Museum-Peter-the Great/Kunstkamera/Saint Petersburg) who also informed me about the ingredients of Omani *halwa* by correspondence from 21.04.2013.

² Dalby (1996) 166sq.; cf. Treu (1985).

³ See ann. 1.

grated cardamom ⁵ (arab. hyl mksrat) saffron ⁶ (arab. z'efran)	زعفران
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There could be also a composition added with nuts and ghee⁷; the last mentioned as a special cooked and cleared butter in style of the Indian kitchen⁸ as it is still known with variations from Anatolian tradition⁹, too. Thanks to this special prepared butter that can be stored for a long time, the food is ritually kept pure: in India such can be prepared, sold and eaten in public and nearby to the temples: “*Das Kochen mit Wasser, Öl, Gewürzen setzt das Gekochte der Gefahr der Verunreinigung aus, das Kochen mit Butterfett immunisiert die Speise. Deshalb kann alles mit Butterfett gekochte, vor allem Fettgebäck und Süßigkeiten relative frei von Befleckungsgefahr in der Öffentlichkeit, etwa bei religiösen Festen, auf Märkten, in den Basaren und vor den großen Tempeln angerichtet, verkauft und gegessen werden*”.¹⁰ (on Indian spiritual tradition see below).

Because of the possibility of long-lasting traditions it was obvious to involve into this research not only the written records but also the practical experience by housewives from several Mediterranean, Anatolian, Near Eastern and North African descent who invited me in their homes and who informed me in several talks about special traditions and meaning of a group of sweets named *halwa* (translation means both cake and sweets¹¹).

⁴ For medical use cf. Pliny, nat. hist. 25,40.

⁵ See below.

⁶ Medical use: Zohary (1953) 206sq.

⁷ Internet: <http://www.omanet.om/english/culture/halwa.asp?cat=cult&subcat=cult2> <29.04.2013> mentions: “The main ingredients which go into the making of halwa are: starch, eggs, sugar, water, ghee, saffron, cardamom, nuts and rose water from the Jebel al Akdhar. The ingredients are mixed, in proportions and quantities known only to the skilled halwamaker, and cooked in a mirjnl (large cooking pot used especially for halwa) for a time of not less than 2 hours. The cooking can be done over a gas or electric stove, but the preferred method is over a wood fire made up of snmr wood, known for its durability, smoke and odourfree properties. After cooking, the halwa can be preserved for more than four months without losing its quality, and without the need for refrigeration or preserving agents.”

⁸ Kumar (1994) 11.

⁹ I am gratefully for the practical experience displayed by Hatice Cevik, Worms/Germany. Cf. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghee> <04.09.2013>

¹⁰ Based on Michaels (1998), *Der Hinduismus. Geschichte und Gegenwart* (München, 1998), pp. 199–207 and the publication of Rösler (2015) 7 (citation). Stubbe-Diara (1995) 117sq. on butter/ghī: healing, purification, resurrection.

¹¹ I like to thank for their great help Hatice Cevik and Fatma Duran (Turkey), Khadriye Ferik (Bulgaria), Mounira Ünen (Tunisia), Ahlam al-Ibrahim (Kuwait), Aisha Qanta (Pakistan) and Ahmed el-Messaoudi (teacher of Arabian language, Morocco).

These sweets prepared by cooking as mentioned below (cf. ann. 7), but depending from the proportions of ingredients (esp. the proportions of eggs and flour, semolina or starch) will have a more creamy or buttery and dark character (like *halwa* from Oman), or after cooling down the sweets get a light-brown colour and can be either cut into small rectangular pieces or formed by hand into oval pieces. Shaped as small cakes, this kind of sweets will be prepared for festival events, such as marriages and honeymoon.¹²

It is worth to mention that in Tunisia several oils from black-cumin¹³ or honeysuckle (*Caprifoliaceae*, used against fever; germ. *Geißblatt*, arab. زهر), olive oil¹⁴ with minced dates¹⁵, resins, black figs or cloves and ginger are taken for ingredients. Commonly special kind of preparations with individual character for the special need of men or women (possibly preserving a tradition of aphrodisiac use for both, e.g. cardamom) is known as well as medical need: such sweets were told “to cure nearly every disease¹⁶, except death”¹⁷. In Pakistani tradition children receive a daily spoon with *halwa* for health care (e.g. with minced carrots which provide Vitamin A for eyes). The ingredients of the Greek variation (χαλβάς/*chalvas*¹⁸) such as cinnamon, honey, licorice¹⁹ and sesame (contains calcium and phosphorus)²⁰ are also known because of their medical and dietary function.²¹

All examples show on the one hand special combinations of aromatic ingredients, but on the other hand basically the sweet taste depends from the measure of sugar or honey. Especially the honey seems to be the more typical and traditional

¹² On the cultural meaning of sweet wedding cakes see Charsley (1992) 20sq. (Europe), 27 (Egypt); 42sq. 104sq. 107–111 on the coherence of dreaming and divination. Cf. internet: <http://traumhochzeit-magazin.de/tipps-infos/informieren-organisieren/hochzeitstorten> <21.04.2013>

¹³ The subject is also discussed in journals for popular Muslim education, e.g. “Schwarzkümmel heilt jede Krankheit – außer den Tod”, *Nuuruddin. Magazin der Majlis Khuddam-ul-Ahmadiyya Deutschland*, May 2012 (Frankfurt am Main, 2012), pp. 36–39, esp. 37.

¹⁴ Variations with oil and almonds are mentioned for Persian receipts: <http://www.persian-recipes.com/persianrecipes/2009/09/03/persian-halva/> <17.06.2013>; <http://www.iranchamber.com/recipes/dessert/halva.php> <17.06.2013>

¹⁵ But dates are never mixed with honey as I was informed by Ahlam al-Ibrahim (Kuwait), wife of specialized producer of sweets (; she mentioned that typical and traditional *halwa* from Oman is named after the city of Muscat, *halwa* from Bahrain is named after the family that is the unique producer there: Shweitr شويطر).

¹⁶ On digestive system: Forth et al. (1992) 468sq.

¹⁷ As mentioned by Hatice Cevik and Mounira Ünen.

¹⁸ Internet: http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Griechische_K%C3%BCche <29.04.2013>.

¹⁹ On pharmacology with literature: <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lakritze> <17.06.2013>.

²⁰ Schwarz (1995) 28.

²¹ Brunken (2012) 25–65, esp. 29sq. (saffron), 33sq. (ginger), 35sq. (cardamom), 38sq. (cinnamon), 45 (pepper), 46sq. (cloves, cf. Garam Masalam in India); Ziethen et al. (2012) 66–83, esp. 66sq.

way to create a sweet taste, originally mentioned by Hesiod (works and days 232sq.) because of the multifunctional use of honey.²² Beside of an uncertain evidence of the sugar plant mentioned in Strabo's Geography (15.1,20 citing Eratosthenes), the typical sugar, already known in prehistoric India, first was used to replace honey for sweets possibly in Andalusia (8th century CE) but mostly up from Middle Byzantine period followed by Ottoman and Turkish kitchen traditions.²³ Originally the *saccharon* was known in Mediterranean region about 3rd/2nd century BCE, but defined as medicine similar like "some kind of honey" (cf. Pliny, *nat. hist.* 12,32 "ad medicinae tantum usum")²⁴, which is also mentioned with rosewater in context of gynaecology (Pliny, *nat. hist.* 25,40).

The table of the gods – from rituals of celestial meal to healthy nutrition

A look to the vegetarian and non-bloody sacrificial practices known from ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern cultures shows a two-parted tradition during a tasty ritual with cakes or sweets. Generally the Greek and Roman sacrifice depends from a gift of grain: barley²⁵, wheat or spelt (Latin: *far*)²⁶ which are the basic parts of healthy nutrition for all kind of organic functions, mostly because of the mineral Selen and many others.²⁷ They are prepared for special cakes and they were offered as ritual gift during wedding ceremonies. Many popular practices (cf. Latin *mola salsa*, *puls/polenta*, *panis*) and rituals²⁸ followed these traditions, and finally a widespread system of philosophical and religious rules of life²⁹ existed.

In traditional and agricultural societies which normally also deeply are devoted to their specific religious belief, the system of human nutrition and the nutrition of their leaders³⁰ naturally was connected with the nutrition of their deities: the basic roots of gastronomy.³¹ Based on East Mediterranean traditions and mostly recorded in sources from ancient the Near East (3rd-1st millennium BCE), it was the duty of human beings to take care for the nutrition of the gods in their homes (e.g. sacred places, buildings, temples; cf. the epic of Gilgamesh). From Mediterranean

²² Dalby (1996) 47.

²³ Dalby (1996) 191sq., 199sqq.; Brothwell (1984) 100–105.

²⁴ Brothwell, Brothwell, *Ibid.*, pp. 104.

²⁵ Orth (1910) 1275–1284, esp. 1282 on ingredients, cf. Turkish arpa/arpa bulguru.

²⁶ The marriage ceremony in ancient Italy: Leonhard (1901) 862-864.

²⁷ Brothwell (1984) 119–135, esp. 123sqq.; Schwarz (1995) 28sqq., 39sq.; Orth (1929) 1600–1609, esp. 1609.

²⁸ Newton (1998), 207sqq. (Roman traditions), 231sqq. (Greek traditions).

²⁹ Auffahrt (2008) 147–170, esp. 152, 153: „Eine ganze Reihe von Kulturen zeigt die Differenz zu den anderen gerade im Verzicht auf das blutige Opfer; dazu gehören etwa die „philosophischen“ Lebensregeln der Pythagoreer sowie die meisten ‚orientalischen‘ Religionen“.

³⁰ Dalby (2000) 133–144, esp. 137sqq. on Greece.

³¹ Dalby (1996) 30, 47 (honey), 170.

places like Cyprus (7th-6th century BCE) we can find cakes, beverages and sweets³² on special prepared tables for festival context where the offerings of the sacralised food was displayed in precious metal bowls.³³ The Mediterranean customs of picnics in open air have their roots in these traditions.³⁴

As seen from this cultural and religious background it takes no wonder that special bread and cakes (mostly with the above mentioned ingredients) were named after the gods³⁵ (ψωθία/*psôthía* made from barley, oil and honey; μύλλου/*mylloi* made from barley, sesame and honey) or scarified also in their temples³⁶. In the same way such food also was granted from side of the gods, but humans were not allowed to probe the gods' wisdom about the secrets of creation, when Prometheus took the fire from this celestial "alimentary regime"³⁷ or Tantalus fatally had done when he was invited to the gods' table and meal.³⁸ According to such nutritious gifts by grant of the gods and vice versa as gifts to the gods, many folk traditions from Bronze Age up to later periods depend from such sacrificial practices, including the later folk tales and their beliefs in "speaking bread".³⁹

Finally from religious belief in ancient Greek traditions all this food, prepared by human hands but from basically celestial origin, can be understood as something like a copy of what ancient sources described as the sacral food granting health, fertility (esp. Zeus) and immortality to the Olympic gods, as they were representing a celestial system of belief (sun, moon, stars in Indo-European line). Such celestial nutrition was mentioned as *nectar* and *ambrosia*⁴⁰, both food and/or beverage or vice versa: elixir of life and against death mentioned in Greek texts since the Homeric

³² St. M. Maul (2008) 75–86, esp. p. 84: "Aus der Gemeinschaft der Gottesernährer wird so auch eine Gemeinschaft, die mit Götterspeise nicht nur den Gott, sondern auch ihren König und sich selbst ernährt." – Patrier (2008) 41–70, esp. 50 (fruits).

³³ Karageorghis (2007) 257–262, esp. 258-261.

³⁴ Karageorghis (2007) 261.

³⁵ Schwarz (1995) 44 with ann. 52 on Athenaios: cakes named after Zeus Atabyrios, after goddess Athena and Iris (see below), cake with surrounding torch lights named after Artemis.

³⁶ Dalby/Grainger (1996), p. 68 (offered to Iris, goddess of sunrise): made from wheat, honey, 1 fig and 3 walnuts. In modern nutrition eating of three walnuts a day or using oil from walnuts is known to be very healthy, too. – Medical use of Propolis/Honey: <http://www.bio-bienengarten.com/unsere-bio-produkte/wissenswertes-%C3%BCber-honig-propolis-bl%C3%BCtenpollen> <05.07.2013>

³⁷ Garnsey, (1999) 65 with ann. 6

³⁸ Haas (2004) 59-63, esp. 60.

³⁹ Haas (2004) 60.

⁴⁰ Liddell/Scott (1843, 1953) 79 (ambrosia); 1166 (nektar); Wernicke (1894) 1809–1811, 1812sq. on men named Ambrosius, Nektarios in 1st–4th century CE; obviously in Christian context these names were used in context of salvation: the non-Christian miracle was broken by overtaking the words. Could there be another reason when naming a man after a special food? From point of ethnology: Müller (2003) 50sq., 138sq. on the magic of eating rituals (including the Christian religious traditions).

period (mid 7th century BCE). Possibly coming from an elder Indo-European heritage connected with the true energy of life (*soma*)⁴¹, which is mentioned also from Indian culture and religious belief, Greek ambrosia was known with consistence like unguent, perfume, antidote, as mixture with water, oil and various fruits. Especially it was the thoroughly written study by W. H. Roscher, who argued that the basic substance of this celestial food must be honey: the activities of honey producing bees (including their celestial descent) are connected with the rise of Pleiades (May/June), a well-known fact to all beekeepers until today.⁴² The Pleiades are connected with summer as period of harvest and fertility, the period of travel, naval navigation and many other items, too: the possibilities of life in many fields of human activities. From point of medical and spiritual use, the definition of what is true honey or what can be defined elsewhere as honey or “celestial food” in general very early caused the idea about a connected line with “*manna*” mentioned in early context of the Bible. It was John the Baptist, who recognized wild honey tasting after manna, but similar like oil-cake (Mt. 3,4).⁴³ Originally the biblical Manna was dropping down resin-likely from a tree named *Tamarix mannifera* and other trees (e.g. Oriental oak) because of interaction of special insects⁴⁴. From this experience a system of theological exegesis⁴⁵ began with a wide ranging field of lexis and various etymology of “*manna*”⁴⁶, which was in Greco-Roman medical sources defined as “small pieces” (e.g. incense; special medicine) and others⁴⁷.

Although there was a cultural difference between daily Greek food, based on bread, wine and oil⁴⁸, and environmental conditions of nutrition in region of ancient Israelite tribes, the connecting point of special nutrition from both sides mentioned in written sources seems to be what they named “honey”, including the description of the land of “milk and honey”⁴⁹.

In the opposite, for later Christian discussion about the sacrifice and meaning of meat, the Christian critics on food traditions argued against the sacrifice of meat (as Greeks and Romans did), the special environment of common meal⁵⁰ and in the same way the consumption of meat (sheep) in ancient Palestine⁵¹. So finally sweets based on healthy ingredients remained untouched from religious restrictions, because there

⁴¹ Stubbe-Diarra (1995) 87sq. (ambrosial context of herbs which are harvested in night: they can give resurrection to the passed).

⁴² W. H. Roscher (1883) pass., esp. 20, 22, 26 (*soma*), 48sq. (pharmacology, medicine), 56sq., 64; Roscher (1884) 280–283.

⁴³ Domagalski (2012) 48–56, esp. 52.

⁴⁴ Roscher (1883) 16sq.; Maiberger (1983) 267–438; Fonck (1900) 11–15.

⁴⁵ Borgen (1965); Malina (1968).

⁴⁶ Maiberger (1983) 299–308 (Arabic sources), 356–365, 407sq. (Persia and Sinai, natural environment).

⁴⁷ Maiberger (1983) 290–298.

⁴⁸ MacDonald (2008) 19–24.

⁴⁹ MacDonald (2008) 3, 7, 36, cf. p. 98sq.; Jahn (1797) 385sq. ch. 86.

⁵⁰ Stein (2008) 37, 77sq., 157sq.

⁵¹ MacDonald (2008) 71sq.

was no theological reason to except them from the common meal, neither from religious context, nor from common meeting.

Finally it seems that from the discussed traditions of sweets there are two groups which basically met each other in the Eastern Mediterranean region: one side preferring butter and the other preferring oil, but there is consensus about the importance of honey/sugar and aromatic ingredients with useful pharmacological function for human body – without any religious or cultural restrictions.

Let us return from the kitchen to the delicious entry of this study and the friend's table: the place was at the best, the menu was exquisite – and the sweets were marvellous!

G.Z.

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