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Comfort Food in Ancient Colchis¹

Comfort food is the one that is considered to be the most delightful for everyday use and also easy to make. Also, it can be defined as the one that is pleasant and acceptable for every type of guest and therefore is a “rescue plan” for the hosts to meet them. In our paper, we will discuss every possible food that was made in ancient Colchis and can be considered as a comfort food.

Graeco-Roman civilization left a long-lasting effect not only in different aspects of culture but also on everyday life. The periphery of this civilization was also very much influenced by them. Dietary peculiarities of Colchis were predominantly influenced by the Greeks; in fact, Greek influence defined dietary preferences in Western Georgia up until the Columbian Exchange. After the Columbian Exchange, ingredients of some comfort food were partially changed, while the form stayed the same.

First of all, we will discuss how do we know about food in Ancient Colchis. We have narrative sources at our disposal – Aristotle (4th c. BC.), Strabo (1st c. BC-1st c AD.) and Xenophon (5th-4th cc. BC.). Aristotle’s fragments give us information about geographic characteristic and animals used as food. Strabo and especially, Xenophon, who travelled through historical Colchis and described the region, informs us about comfort food. As for archaeological materials, reports about archaeological excavations of Vani, Pichvnari, Nokalakevi are the most important. These materials were studied by specialists of paleobotanical studies, specifically by E. Kvavadze, M.

¹ The report was given at the 14th Celtic Conference in Classics. Panel 27 “Comfort Food in the Greek and Roman Worlds”, July 11-14, 2023, Coimbra (Portugal).

Chichinadze, M. Bokeria, etc. Palynology gives us precise information, while ethnographic materials can fulfill some gaps in reconstructing the history of food. However, a researcher needs to be careful in using them, since stratum after Columbian Exchange should be carefully separated, although in some cases, there is no need of it and we can say that foods used today on a regular basis are preserved in their authentic forms. Palynology is very helpful in claiming their authenticity, since, for example fossilized remains of different vegetables alongside with grinded nuts used to season them assure us that the food was made in the same way as they are today. Finally, as geography determines diet, taking geographic determinants into consideration can give us an additional clue.

First, the empiric level – what do we know?

The climate and natural environment in Colchis created a unique zone with its peculiarities: the long vegetation period, which lasts for 180-200 days in the coastal line of the Black Sea (140-160 days near the mountains), contributed to the diversity of plants grown here and the development of animal husbandry. Plants such as millet, foxtail millet, flax used for oil, etc. became the most common ones. They became dominant for a long time up until the Columbian Exchange. On the other hand, some plants endemic to Caucasus, for example, wheat and barley, could not be produced massively here because of high humidity, which prevented Colchians from using bread as a comfort food. Only one species of wheat – Emmer seems to be used for bread. Also, mild and warm climate made it possible to develop unique species of vine, like Ojaleshi, characteristic only to western Georgia.

Social stratification in Ancient Colchis, which was a protofeudal society,² defined a major difference in diet between upper and lower classes. While upper classes living in Vani were major recipients of Greek imported food on a regular basis, especially in the 5th-4th cc. BC., lower classes only adapted the food once introduced by the Greeks and started to produce it locally since geography made it possible to produce it easily.

Wheat, as mentioned above, was rarely produced in Colchis; only inhabitants of one region – historical Colchis, which was located on the coastal line between modern Batumi and Trabzon – used it. Xenophon informs us: “In plundering the strongholds, the Greeks found in the houses ancestral stores, as

² T. Dundua, N. Phiphia. Georgia and the Outer World – the “Creation” of Europe and Historical Forms of European Integration. Tbilisi. 2009, pp. 149-171 (in Georg.).

the Mossynoecians described them, of heaped-up loaves, while the new corn was laid away with the straw, the most of it being spelt”.³

This is considered to be Emmer, which is also mentioned by Columella, who believed that wheat and emmer wheat were the most acceptable crop as a food for humans.⁴ He believed that these two species of wheat should be stored and he outlined that wheat can be produced in more dry areas, while emmer wheat can survive the humidity. Pliny also agrees with him and additionally mentions that Emmer wheat can survive harsh winters.⁵ Archaeobotanical evidence suggests that wheat was produced rarely in the rest of Colchis, in Western Georgia, as a result it was used only for special occasions and the crop itself represented with species, which have low productivity and long vegetation.⁶ Production of wheat was hard even on Samos, as outlined by P. Garnsey because of high humidity.⁷ The same applies to western Georgia in classical period.

The bread mentioned by Xenophon could be made of chestnuts: “And on the upper floors of the houses there were large quantities of flat nuts, without any divisions. Out of these nuts, by boiling them and baking them into loaves, they made the bread that they used most”.⁸ Xenophon also encountered one interesting fact: “And when the Greeks, as they proceeded, were among the friendly Mossynoecians, they would exhibit to them fattened children of the wealthy inhabitants, who had been nourished on boiled nuts and were soft and white to an extraordinary degree, and pretty nearly equal in length and breadth, with their backs adorned with many colours and their foreparts all tattooed with flower patterns”.⁹ These tattooed children could be the servants of fertility gods/goddesses. In the north, on the territory of modern western Georgia, specifically in Vani, such comfort food is made mostly of millet. Typically, the ingredients of comfort food are used as a sacrificial food. In Vani, near the altar

³ Xen. Anab. 5.4.27.

⁴ Columella. 2. V-VII.

⁵ Plin. NH. 18.19.

⁶ M. Bokeria, B. Ammann, N. KEBULADZE. Archaeobotanical Evidence from West Georgia (South Caucasus). 2009. Bulletin of the Georgian National Museum. Natural Sciences and Prehistory Section. №1, p. 114.

⁷ P. Garnsey. Famine and Food Supply in the Graeco-Roman World. Responses to Risk and Crisis. 1998. Cambridge University Press, p. 13.

⁸ Xen. Anab. 5.4.29.

⁹ Xen. Anab. 5.4.32.

of a temple, the vessel full of millet was discovered, which is considered to be a sacrifice.¹⁰

Rye was another plant used to make comfort food in ancient Colchis. Rye seems to have reached Europe via Transcaucasus.¹¹ The use of rye is attested by ethnographic¹², as well as by archaeobotanical materials.¹³ Palynological remains of rye were found on dishes, while ethnography reveals that modern comfort food in Samegrelo - Kvari (boiled pie with cheese), initially was made of rye. Another comfort food made of rye was Chvishtari – baked pie made of rye and cheese. In the beginning of the 20th c. maize was also an ingredient of it¹⁴. Its predecessor in the classical era could be foxtail millet (*setariaitalica*), which was cultivated in Samegrelo back then. Today it is also made of maize and cheese, but its Megrelian name, Chvishtari indicates that initially it was made of Chvia/Chvavi – rye. Linguistic analysis indicates the connection between the two words. A recipe of a similar food, “*libum*,” was recorded by Cato the Elder; it’s the so-called Cato’s Cheesecake: “Cheese should be chopped, wheat flour should be added, and also an egg. Then it should be rolled into leaves and baked on low fire”.¹⁵ The recipe is almost similar; the only difference is that rye is used instead of wheat, and the reason is obvious: wheat is not massively produced in western Georgia.

Another massively used cereal grain was barley; however, humidity in Colchis also limited its spread. Barley is found in palynological remains on different archaeological sites in Georgia. Xenophon mentioned that he encountered “barley wine” (beer) in upper Colchis,¹⁶ while Trapezuntines also gave him barley flour along with wine and oxen.¹⁷ Barley is quite resistant to humidity, however not so strong to be widespread in ancient Colchis, so in our opinion, it could be spread only in the low highlands of western Georgia. The

¹⁰ Ot. Lordkipanidze. Vani. I. Tbilisi. 1972, p. 29 (in Georg.).

¹¹ T. Sadunishvili, O. Maisaia, K. Batsatsashvili, Sh. Sikharulidze, T. Darchidze. Agrarian Culture of Georgia. Tbilisi. Academy of Sciences of Georgia Publishers. 2021, p. 121 (in Georg.).

¹² Material for the History of Household Production and Craftmanship. Edited by I. Chkonia, Tbilisi. 1986 (in Georg.).

¹³ M. Chichinadze. Paleoecology and Economics of Central Colchis in Classical Antiquity (Based on Palynological Study of Archaeological Sites). Dissertation to obtain doctoral degree in Life Science. Tbilisi. Ilia State University Press. 2013, pp. 117, 127 (in Georg.).

¹⁴ Material for the History of Household Production and Craftmanship. Edited by I. Chkonia, Tbilisi. 1986 (in Georg.).

¹⁵ Cato. De agricultura. 75

¹⁶ Xen. Anab. 4.3

¹⁷ Xen. Anab. 4.8

best geographic conditions for its vegetation are in the south-western part of historical Colchis, where we have natural drainage and the best climate for it. This grain had a secondary role in Ancient Greece, while in Rome it was considered to be the food for animals or for poor people.¹⁸ In the lowlands of central Colchis, it was not used at all, while in highlands it was more widespread. The ‘beer’ described by Xenophon was quite thick but liquid; supposedly it served as a food and as an alcohol.

The most common comfort food made in Ancient Colchis was Ghomi which was a porridge made of foxtail millet (*setaria italica*). Today, Ghomi is made of maize, but even in the beginning of the 20th century, some families still were making it in more traditional way – out of foxtail millet. Ghomi was the easiest to make, as it requires just washing and boiling of a foxtail millet. After, it was used as a main food but was accompanied with different foods made out of meat as well as of vegetables. Ghomi (*setaria italica*) was a dominant plant in western Georgia in classical antiquity, which is attested by palynological materials. Different archaeological sites reveal its fossilized remains.¹⁹ Earlier archaeological sites in Georgia do not reveal their use. N. Lomouri correctly outlined that unlike millet, which was introduced from the east, foxtail millet was brought from the west.²⁰ We believe it was introduced by the Greeks in the 5th century BC as a result of intense relations between the Colchians and the Greeks. Anyway, the existence of fossilized remains of Ghomi/*setaria italica*/foxtail millet is evident in the 3rd-2nd cc. BC layers of Vani. They are found on places for sacrifice, and in order for a food to become a part of sacrifices, it should be an ingredient of already well-established comfort food; however, *terminus ante quem non* should be 6th c. BC when the Greeks first appeared in Colchis. Ghomi was cultivated exclusively in the lowlands of western Georgia, as the vegetation of this plant requires a stable, warm climate and humidity.²¹ It should be noted that Columella mentions a food – a porridge made of foxtail millet and milk.²² Similar food was made in western Georgia historically – *chemkva* – additional ingredient was cheese, similar to mozzarella.

¹⁸ P. Garnsey. *Famine and Food Supply in the Graeco-Roman World. Responses to Risk and Crisis*. 1998. Cambridge University Press, pp. 50-51.

¹⁹ M. Bokeria, B. Ammann, N. Kebuladze. *Archaeobotanical Evidence from West Georgia (South Caucasus)*. 2009. Bulletin of the Georgian National Museum. Natural Sciences and Prehistory Section. №1, p. 144.

²⁰ I. N. Lomouri. *Cereal Crops. II (Millet)*. Tbilisi. 1950, pp. 230-232 (in Georg.).

²¹ I. N. Lomouri. *Cereal Crops. II (Millet)*. Tbilisi. 1950, pp. 230-232 (in Georg.).

²² Columella. 2. IX, X.

Analogous food is considered to be the most delicious comfort food in modern western Georgia – *elari*. Today it is made of maize and cheese, it seems, again the Columbian Exchange played a role in changes in recipe.

Another plant intensively used in comfort food, was millet, specifically *panicum miliaceum*.²³ Fossilized remains of it are discovered even in Neolithic archaeological layers in Georgia, and they are found in all later archaeological sites.²⁴ Millet, *panicum miliaceum*, can resist high humidity as well as drought and extreme climatic changes; therefore, it was produced even in the highlands of western as well as eastern Georgia.²⁵ Mchadi, another comfort food, was made by everyone in Western Georgia, according to ethnographic material. Bread made of millet is mentioned by Columella: the bread made of millet can be eaten without disgust as long as it is not cold.²⁶

As we can see, millet and bread made of it were not really popular among the Greeks and the Romans.²⁷ It mostly represented “insurance” grain and food in case of low harvest of wheat. Since millet has a short vegetation period, it could fill the shortage of wheat. The higher the level of urbanization, the more important was the role of ‘insurance’ grain.

Unlike Greece and Rome, only a few species of wheat could be produced in western Georgia; therefore, foxtail millet and *panicum miliaceum* became the major ingredients of comfort food in western Georgia.

Comfort food was made of vegetables too, but usually was seasoned with different nuts. Studies of fossilized remains found on dishes from different classical sites reveal that seasoning of vegetables was popular in Ancient Colchis. The major ingredient was either walnut or nut. Breads made of millet were less tasty, and it seems, in order to cover its taste, walnut and nut should be added to it. Also, different salads made of vegetables were filled with them—archaeobotanical studies revealed remnants of different plants, specifically nettle, *Chenopodium/goosefoot*, leaves of *tiliacaucasica*, also

²³ M. Bokeria, B. Ammann, N. Kebuladze. Archaeobotanical Evidence from West Georgia (South Caucasus). 2009. Bulletin of the Georgian National Museum. Natural Sciences and Prehistory Section. №1, pp. 140-142.

²⁴ M. Bokeria, B. Ammann, N. Kebuladze. Archaeobotanical Evidence from West Georgia (South Caucasus). 2009. Bulletin of the Georgian National Museum. Natural Sciences and Prehistory Section. №1, pp. 140-142.

²⁵ N. I. Chkhenkeli. Annotation of Breaded Millet. Tbilisi. 1948, pp. 32-34; I. N. Lomouri. Cereal Crops. II (Millet). Tbilisi. 1950, pp. 230-232 (in Georg.).

²⁶ Columella. 2. IX,X.

²⁷ P. Garnsey. Famine and Food Supply in the Graeco-Roman World. Responses to Risk and Crisis. 1998. Cambridge University Press, p. 24.

poppy, etc.²⁸ They all are prepared with walnuts and nuts, and no different form of its use is attested ever.

As for the sources of animal protein and food made of it, we have one fragment of Aristotle that informs us about “small cows near Phasis that give ample amount of milk”.²⁹ Aristotle’s emphasis on quantity of milk is interesting. In the lowlands of Colchis, milk lactation of cows is decreasing due to the piroplasmosis, hot climate, and different parasites that hinder the production of milk.³⁰ The cows recorded by Aristotle are best for milk, which at that time would not be attainable without selection and use of highland pasture. Thus, we have a narrative account about sources of dairy products. Milk is part of several comfort food mentioned above: Chvishtari, Chemkva.

Fish was another source of animal protein in ancient Colchis. We have direct and indirect evidence about it. Indirect evidence is dish with a specific form to serve the fish, as are fishing weights found on archaeological sites, while more direct account we have from Polybius who mentions salted fish imported from the Pontic Sea,³¹ albeit we cannot be sure whether he means Colchis or not. Fishing weights discovered in coastal lines are bigger, while smaller ones are found in hinterland. Possibly, Greeks living along the coastal line procured fish in an open sea,³² while rivers were the sources of fish in hinterland. A lot of dishes for fish are discovered in Vani, which is considered to be the residence of a local ruler, while the city also served a major city of temples. Fish was used not only in central Colchis but in south-western Colchis too. Xenophon mentions the dolphins used in diet: “They also found slices of dolphin salted away in jars, and in other vessels dolphin blubber, which the Mossynoecians used in the same way as the Greeks use olive oil”.³³

Small settlements found on the coastal line of the Black Sea on the territory of Ancient Colchis became a matter of debate. Some scholars believed that they were for the production of magnetite, while others believed that they were the places for producing salt. These archaeological sites reveal two types of vessels, one is of bigger size and could be used for salting fish, while another

²⁸ M. Chichinadze. *Paleoecology and Economics of Central Colchis in Classical Antiquity* (Based on Palynological Study of Archaeological Sites). Dissertation to obtain doctoral degree in Life Science. Tbilisi. Ilia State University Press. 2013, pp. 117, 157 (in Georg.).

²⁹ Arist. III.

³⁰ G. Khelaia. *Hygiene of Nomadic Pastoralism*. Tbilisi. 1965, p. 7.

³¹ Polyb. Hist. 31. 24.

³² A. Kakhidze, M. Vickers. *Pichvnari*. I. Batumi-Oxford. 2004, pp. 141-142.

³³ Xen. Anab. 5. 4. 28.

– the so-called vessel with textile imprint, which has quadrilateral form³⁴ and looks like the ceramic vessel, could be used for producing salt. Discovery of these types of vessels together on the coastal line indicates to production of salted fish.

Thus, we can say that Foxtail millet and Ghomi made of it, also, different foods made of millet, along with vegetables seasoned with walnuts and nuts, made up the major comfort food in Ancient Colchis. Also, it should be mentioned that these comfort foods were formed as a result of interaction between the Greeks and local Colchians, and their influence was so long-lasting that even after the introduction of maize, which replaced earlier plants as a major ingredient, recipes and forms of food remained the same.

³⁴ G. Tavamaishvili. About the Function of Coastal Sites. Monuments of South-Western Georgia. Bulletin of Georgian SSR Academy of Sciences. Tbilisi. 1991, p. 30 (in Georg.).