CEREALS, BREAD AND SOCIETY

An essay on the staff of life in medieval Iraq

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Introduction

Medieval Islamic society is a complex mosaic. Its general contours are well defined although in places the design is obscured and elsewhere the detail has perhaps been permanently obliterated. Among the many intricate motifs of the mosaic, recent research has cast some light upon one, the material life of the medieval Middle Eastern world. The area is as yet undeveloped, doubtless owing in part to the very nature of the enquiry, material civilization being, in Braudel's words, "the repeated movements, the silent half forgotten story of men and enduring realities, which were immensely important but made so little noise." The present essay is an exploration into one of mankind's oldest routines: food preparation. Only one aspect of this process, however, will concern us for the moment and that is with certain cereal preparations, particularly with bread making.

Why bread and cereals? The answer lies partly in the period and place focused upon in this study, that is urban Iraq in the ninth and tenth centuries. Iraq was the fertile heartland of the Abbasid Empire and its capital Baghdad the cosmopolitan core of the Caliphs' richly
diverse and far flung domains. Baghdad was the center, par excellence, of imperial politics and the high cultural tradition of Islam: even during the decades of decline in the tenth century, its cultural influence remained powerfully diffuse. Baghdad, too, displayed a material culture which, in the culinary sphere, could be described in Goody’s phrase as “a truly differentiated cuisine, marking a society that is stratified culturally as well as politically.”

Here we attempt to examine in detail one commodity of these ‘differentiated’ food traditions which was a common denominator in the diet of every individual of the urban populace, namely bread—the staff of life. In this context, however, bread proves upon examination to be a very complex commodity. First, there was not only one bread for the rich and one for the poor, but rather many types of bread for consumers in each class. Moreover, bread in the generic sense appears in this specific urban setting to reflect several historical traditions of cereal preparation, although these are not always easily discernible and the impact of each tradition was unequally absorbed into that urban setting. The result is that bread seems to possess an unsuspected ‘dynamic’ character changing shape, as it were, from one cultural and social context to another. Nevertheless, it is evident, for example, that the most ancient tradition was that created by the neolithic revolution, whether or not one accepts the view that cereal cultivation originated in the land of the Tigris-Euphrates river valleys. Hence in the following account we commence with the ‘indigenous’ influence of early Mesopotamian bread traditions. A second influence is then investigated, that of central Arabia, since it too lent to the context of urban Iraq something more of its cereal-use traditions than just the term for the commodity, khubz. Finally, we turn to a discussion of the bread and cereal food traditions of Baghdad which mirror the quite different political, social and cultural conditions by which these earlier influences appeared in a transformed state. At the end, by