

## A Few Remarks on Roman Cookery.

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*Prebendary of Wells.*

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THE finding of a Roman kiln at Shepton Mallet, in November, 1864, with fragments of pottery, as well as entire vessels, in and around it, as described in the *Proceedings of the Somersetshire Archæological and Natural History Society* for the year 1865-6, pt. ii. p. 1, may well lead up to an enquiry respecting the culinary and other utensils used by the Romans in domestic life. It is not necessary here to mention the other places where Roman pottery kilns have been discovered; it is enough to say that in many places considerable relics have been found, and more remain yet to be uncovered. I propose therefore rather to touch upon a subject which has hitherto had little attention paid to it, viz., the improvement introduced by the Romans into the culinary art in Britain. As this island owes its horticultural acquirements to its former Roman masters, so does it owe its advance in the culinary art to the introduction of Roman refinement.

If the villa had its hypocaust and tessellated floors, so had it also its cooking stove, with the furniture needful for the preparation of food, and for adapting to the use of the family that which was reared on the farm, or cultivated in the garden.

This subject has happily been taken in hand by the able author of the *Romans of Britain*, and by certain French savans, and lately in a very able paper, on the subject of "The Formation of the English Palate," by Mr. Ferguson, of Carlisle, who traces the rise of cookery from its first beginning, as far as we can gather it from incidental historical notices, to

its perfect development in the age of Claudius and the later Roman Emperors.

The habits of the Briton at the coming of Cæsar, are summed up by him in a few words. He distinguishes between the people dwelling on the coast and those of the interior. The former cultivated their lands and reared cattle. They did not eat the hare, the fowl, or the goose; not deeming it lawful to do so; but kept them as we do peacocks, Guinea fowl, and Canary birds—as objects of amusement and for decoration. The latter, those inhabiting the interior of the Island, did not even sow their lands, but lived on milk and flesh.

The examination of Kitchen-Middens has made us pretty well acquainted with the food of our pre-historic ancestors. In these we find bones of the goat and sheep, the short-horned ox, the horse, the pig, and the dog. Bones of calves, apparently only a few days old, have been found in barrows in Norfolk, by Canon Greenwell. We know from Strabo that the Britons did not know how to make cheese, and it is doubtful if they could make butter; though they may have had clouted or scalded cream—perhaps churned in a skin.

The cultivation of grain, to a certain extent, appears from the terraces still remaining on the sides of hills, and from the numerous hand-mills discovered in the most ancient earth-works, and the pebbles used for pounding the grain. How rude their cookery must have been is apparent from the wearing down of the teeth which remain in the jaws of the skeletons discovered in barrows.

All the British pottery is found to be unglazed. The makers had not arrived at the art of closing up porous earth, or preventing milk or other liquid being tainted by the earthy flavour of the bowl. Bronze vessels for cooking are rare, and these are formed of thin plates of bronze, hammered and rivetted together.

The ancient Briton was not a bee keeper, as has been

shewn by Professor Rolleston. He depended on the wild bee for his honey, and with this he sweetened his metheglin or mead. In the days of Caractacus, says the Professor, they cooked without sugar. They do not seem to have had any oil, which enters so largely into foreign cookery, and which is represented in our own by the use of butter.

The Romans got their knowledge of cookery from the Greeks, and the Greeks seem to have got theirs from the Lydians; from whom they also derived many civilized arts,—as weaving, dying, and the working of metals, the use of gold and silver money, and musical instruments.

The earliest book which treats of cookery as an art is that of Athenæus, the grammarian; and only a fragment of his book has been preserved to modern times. He gives an account of a banquet at Rome, at which Galen, the physician, and Ulpian, the priest, were present. He preserves the names of several writers on cookery, whose works have been lost. Cookery was then held in high estimation, and considered to rank with the practice of physic. Cookery and healing were closely allied. It is remarked by Mr. Furguson, that the Latin word, *Curare*, signifies both to dress victuals and to cure a malady, and he quotes two Latin sentences which were in common use,—*Culina medicinæ famulatrix*, and *Explicit coquina quæ est optima medicina*,—and remarks that this conjunction of cookery and medicine continued to the end of the 17th century. And this reminds me of some advice given me by an old lady in Bath, not to send for a doctor when ailing, but to have recourse to a good cook. I do not know that this advice is of general applicability, or that it ought to be followed on all occasions; but there is a certain measure of truth in it, as not a few of our maladies arise from imperfect cookery, even in the 19th century. Dyspepsia is not an uncommon ailment, especially among sedentary men.

That the art of cookery was highly valued among the Greeks appears from a couplet preserved by Athenæus, and

quoted by him from a play of Euphron (I take it as given by Mr. Furguson)—

Οὐδὲν ὁ μάγειρος τοῦ ποιητῶν διαφέρει,

Ο νοῦς γὰρ ἔστιν ἑκατέρῳ τούτων τέχνη.

This is high praise, but the word *μάγειρος*, a cook, is said by Lexicographers to have its origin in *μάσσω*, *μάζα*, because *baking* bread was the chief business of the ancient cook. (Cf. Pliny, 18, 28.) And this is probable, as we read of the *chief baker*, or cook, of Pharaoh, in the time of the Patriarch Joseph, but the same word is used also by classical writers to signify a *butcher*, because in early times the cook was butcher as well as baker.

The ancient Roman dinner was very simple. It is described by Pliny:—Lettuces, shell-fish, eggs, garlic, olives, cucumbers, and similar succulent products, which suit the climate of a southern country, and these are in use at the present day; but the national dish of the ancient Roman was *puls*, a pottage, made of Alica or Simila,—wheat grits or Semolina,—flavoured with herbs. Children are brought up upon this in the island of Capri, and in South Italy, and appear strong and healthy.

Sausages and smoked meats were also much used by the ancient Romans,—Lucanicæ, Botelli, Farcimina,—and upon this simple cookery the Greek art is supposed to have been engrafted, and Asiatic-Greek sauces made to improve the flavour.

About the year B.C. 189, the victories of Cnæus Manlius Vulso in Asia, are said by Livy (lib. xxxix. c. 6) to have introduced into Rome a more luxurious style of living, “*Epulæ quoque ipsæ et cura sumptu majore apparari cæptæ; tum coquus, vilissimum antiquis mancipium, et æstimatione et usu, in pretio esse; et quod ministerium fuerat, ars haberi cœpta.*” The victories also of Lucullus over Mithridates and Tigranes helped to introduce sumptuous living. New delicacies for the table began to be cultivated, and we learn from Columella (*de re Rustica*), that the sea-eel and other fishes were cultivated for

the table. In consequence of this sumptuary laws were enacted, no one was allowed to have more than *three guests* to dinner, and birds brought from foreign countries (the pheasant, woodcock, Guinea fowl), as well as dormice and shell-fish, were prohibited.

As the Romans had used all possible means to improve their agriculture by the adoption and publication of foreign books on that subject, causing a Carthaginian treatise to be translated into Latin, so the ten books of Apicius Cœlius upon viands and sauces, or the art of cookery, attest the care they took to improve this art among themselves. Apicius flourished under the Emperor Tiberius, and though he did not write the book which bears his name, yet he was considered to be the leading authority in Rome at that time on matters connected with the dinner-table. From Pliny we learn that he first introduced the *Cymæ et coliculi*, or Brussell's sprouts. It is not known who wrote the work which bears the name of Apicius, but it became the leading book on cookery in Rome and elsewhere. It has gone through several editions, though not much known to scholars. The best edition is said to be that published in 1705 by Dr. Martin Lister, *e Medicis Domesticis Serenissimæ Reginæ Annæ*.

Roman utensils for cookery are plentifully found in Britain, as may be seen from the list of Catini,<sup>1</sup> bearing the maker's name, "Vasculis variis, patellis et similibus impressa," contained in Hübner's vol. of *Corp. Insc. Latinarum* (vol. vii.) But those who would go more fully into this subject should examine the museum at Naples, formed from discoveries at Herculaneum and Pompeii. Mortaria are the best known Roman culinary vessels in England, and are certain to be found wherever a Roman villa is uncovered. Saucepans have been found; a set is said to be preserved at Castle Howard.

The Roman cooks made great use of *honey*, especially for

(1). Also *Pătina*, Greek *πατάνη*, from *πατέομαι*, to eat, or *pateo*, to spread out—a shallow bowl or pan, usually of earthenware—sometimes of metal, used principally for serving of food.

perfecting their sauces. We use *sugar*, but cane-sugar was hardly known to them. They clarified their honey with the white of eggs and by other means. The Romans made much use of wine in cookery, as the English did in mediæval times. The wines were boiled down in different degrees, sometimes with honey. Potherbs were largely used, and there is little doubt that they were introduced into this country, and largely cultivated by the Romans. Many of our potherbs bear Roman names, as, for instance, sage, cummin, coriander, rue, anise, mint, thyme, fennel, parsley, asparagus; also, the names of seeds and berries; these are enumerated by Mr. Fergusson. As the Romans had learned the use of spices from the east, so did they diffuse their use through the west.

The quantities of oyster shells found near Roman stations and villas attest the general use of the oyster—a luxury unknown to our British ancestors. The cultivation of fish in Britain, is also due to Roman influence—we have minute rules for preparing and cooking this diet. This was fully developed in mediæval times in the different monasteries—the remains of their preserves still bearing witness to the use made of fish as an article of food. Roman fish-hooks, of all sorts and sizes, are frequently found among Roman remains: the Guildhall Museum in London possesses some very interesting examples.

When we consider the arrangements of a Roman villa, similar to that recently uncovered near Yatton at the cost of the owner, Mr. Smyth Pigott, on whose estate it was found, and who has been at great pains to preserve and to record whatever has there been unearthed; when we look at the plan of the rooms and their elegant pavements, the art and refinement shewn in their decoration, as seen in the fragments of wall-plaster still remaining, we cannot doubt but that the masters of these villas, which were surrounded by well-tilled and well-stocked farms, were not wanting in the art of cookery and all that pertained to a well-served table. If we would picture to ourselves the manner of serving up an entertainment in a Roman

house, we have only to read the eighth satire of the second book of the *Satires of Horace*, where we shall find the courses described and the different viands that composed them,

“Da, si grave non est,  
 Quæ prima iratum ventrem placaverit esca?  
 In primis *Lucanus aper*; leni fuit austro  
 Captus, ut aiebat cœnæ pater; acria circum  
 Rapula, lactucæ, radices, qualia lapsum  
 Pervellunt stomachum, siser, allec, fæcula Coa.”

Here we have the *boar* served whole, as is still the case in Italy, a practice not wholly unknown in England, as the feast of the “boar’s head” at Queen’s College, Oxford, testifies. Then we have the accompanying side dishes, vegetables, etc.—turnip-radishes, lettuces, parsnips, with pickles and sauces of different kinds, in which the Roman delighted. The sauce known by the name “*gärum*”<sup>1</sup> is supposed to have been a thick sauce with a delicate salt flavour. We have the tables cleared and wiped by slaves, and the fragments removed from the floors, and wine of different kinds brought in the “amphoræ,” of which so many remains are found in this country. The company usually consisted of nine persons, and, if we examine the living rooms in the villas uncovered in Britain, we shall see that the *Triclinium* was not large, but sufficient to accommodate this number with comfort. The reclining sofas or settles (couches) formed three sides of a square, and the table was placed in the middle, the fourth side being for access to the servants. The top was called *medius lectus*, on the right was the *summus lectus*, and on the left the *imus*. The seat of honour was the corner seat of the *medius lectus*. In this style the Roman magistrate, or civic functionary or military commander, entertained his guests, and gradually introduced among the natives of Britain a taste for the refinement of social life—as different from the primitive life of the ancient Briton, as the luncheon of a shooting party is from the

(1). *Gärum* or *Gäron*, Greek γαρου, thick sauce made of small pickled fish. See Plin. 31, 7, 43; Hor. S. 11, 8, 46; Martiale, 13, 102; Sen. Ep. 95.

elegancies of an English nobleman's or gentleman's table. The numerous tusks of the wild boar, found near and within the precincts of the Britanno-Roman villa, show how the products of the British woods and forests furnished the dish so much relished by the Roman. The Roman had a particular liking for pork, and even fattened his pigs upon the fruit of his fig tree. We learn from Pliny that pork was the most lucrative dish in the cooks' shops in Rome, and that they could give it nearly fifty different flavours; Apicius gives eighty recipes for cooking it. We have, I think, something yet to learn from the ancient Roman, in cookery as well as other matters, but that I may not extend this notice beyond reasonable length, I will only add that I hope the subject has not been quite unworthy of attention.

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