

# Food categories and their symbolic baggage

**Us: food & drink**

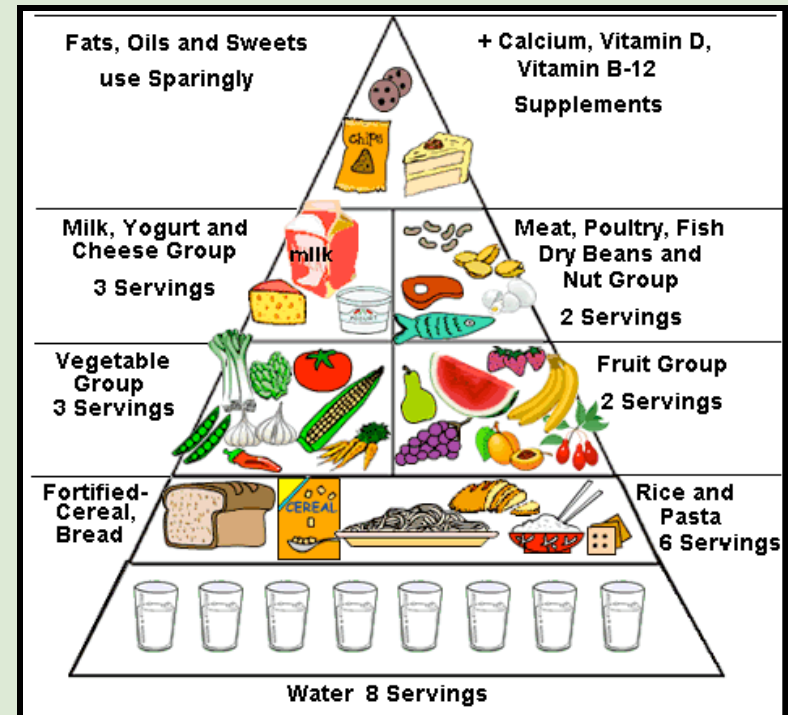
**vs.**

**Them: staples & relish & drink**

**ARCH0770  
Food & Drink in  
Classical  
Antiquity**

**Staples:  
sitos (Greek); puls (Latin)**

**Relish:  
opson (Greek);  
pulmentum (Latin)**



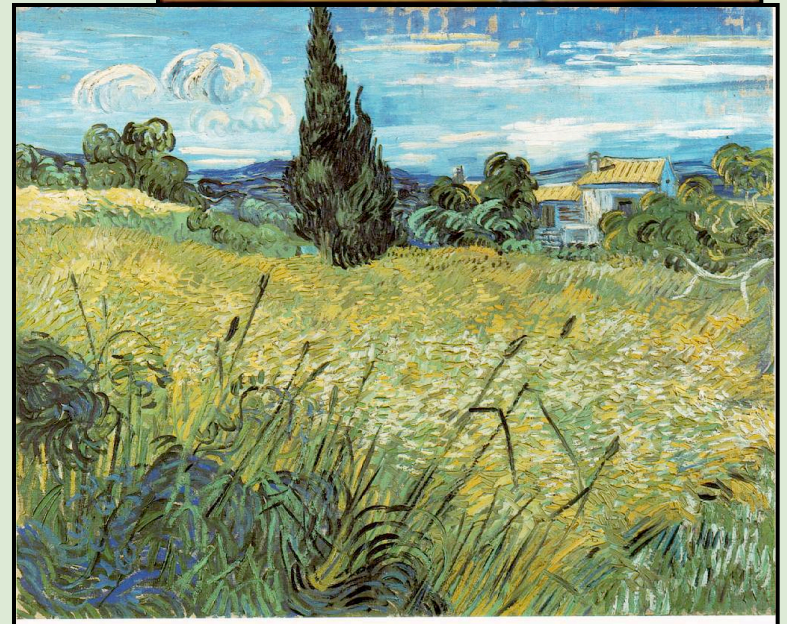
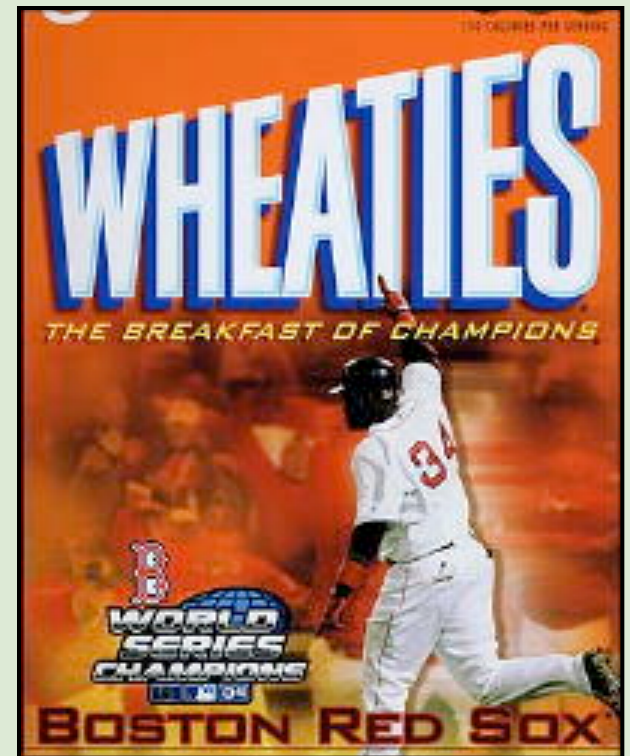
# Staples (*sitos*; *puls*)

Cereals: 70% of caloric needs  
people.. 'eaters of flour' (Homer)

**barley** (for poor, for Spartans)



wheat preferred,  
But riskier





- breads (raised, flat, with additives)
- porridges; gruels



Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae*  
(The Dining Professors),  
44 varieties, shapes of bread

# Bread... the staff of life

- ...and for their nourishment [men] will provide meal from their barley and flour from their wheat, and roasting and kneading these they will serve noble cakes and loaves on some arrangement of reeds or clean leaves (Plato, *Republic*, on the design of a perfect society, fourth century BC)**
- .. most doctors seem to me to be showing sound judgment in beginning their prescribed program of teaching with wheat, since not just among Greeks but also among barbarians this is the best and most useful crop (Galen, physician, second century AD, author of *On the Properties of Food Stuffs*)**



**Life cycle: life, death,  
rebirth/resurrection**

**Eleusinian Mysteries  
Demeter; Persephone  
eternal life to initiates**

A time to be born, a time to die  
A time to plant, a time to reap  
A time to kill, a time to heal  
A time to laugh, a time to weep

To everything (turn, turn, turn)  
There is a season (turn, turn, turn)  
And a time for every purpose, under heaven  
Book of Ecclesiastes (adapted)



Demeter, Triptolemus and Persephone. Eleusinian relief c. 440 BC.  
Photo © Maicar Förlag - GML





**Rape of Persephone (by Hades) +  
Grief of Demeter  
= Changes of season**





Man does not live by bread alone.. (Matthew 4.4)

# Opson/pulmentum: 'what one eats with bread'

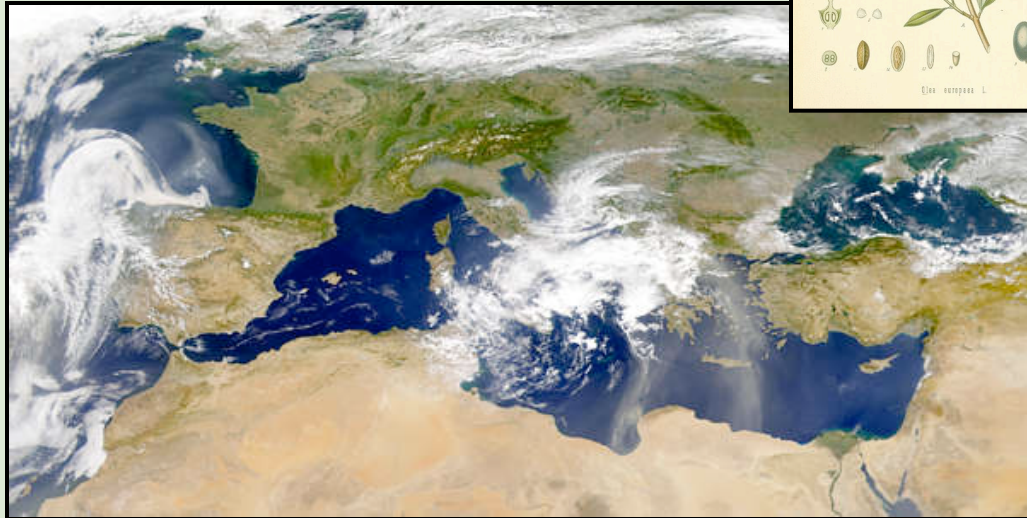
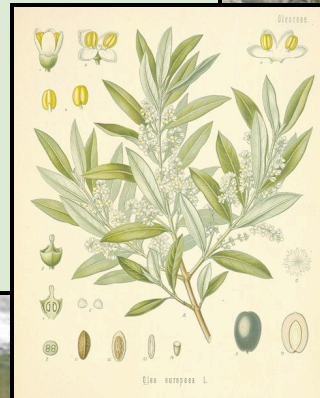
Olive:

'the queen of all trees'

8 years to mature

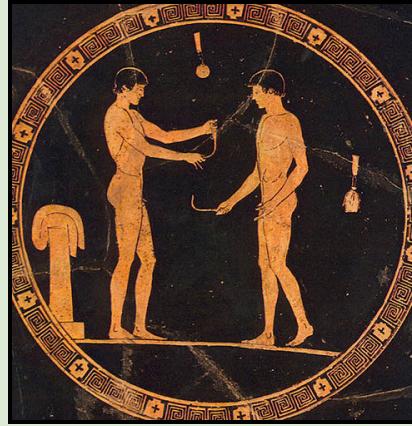
biennial fruiting

importance of storage



**Olive's role in  
Mediterranean diet  
green (for eating)  
black (for oil, more  
vital)  
oil = oleum (Latin)**

**strygil**



**petroleum = rock oil**





**Panathenaic amphora, prize in the Panathenaic games, full of oil**





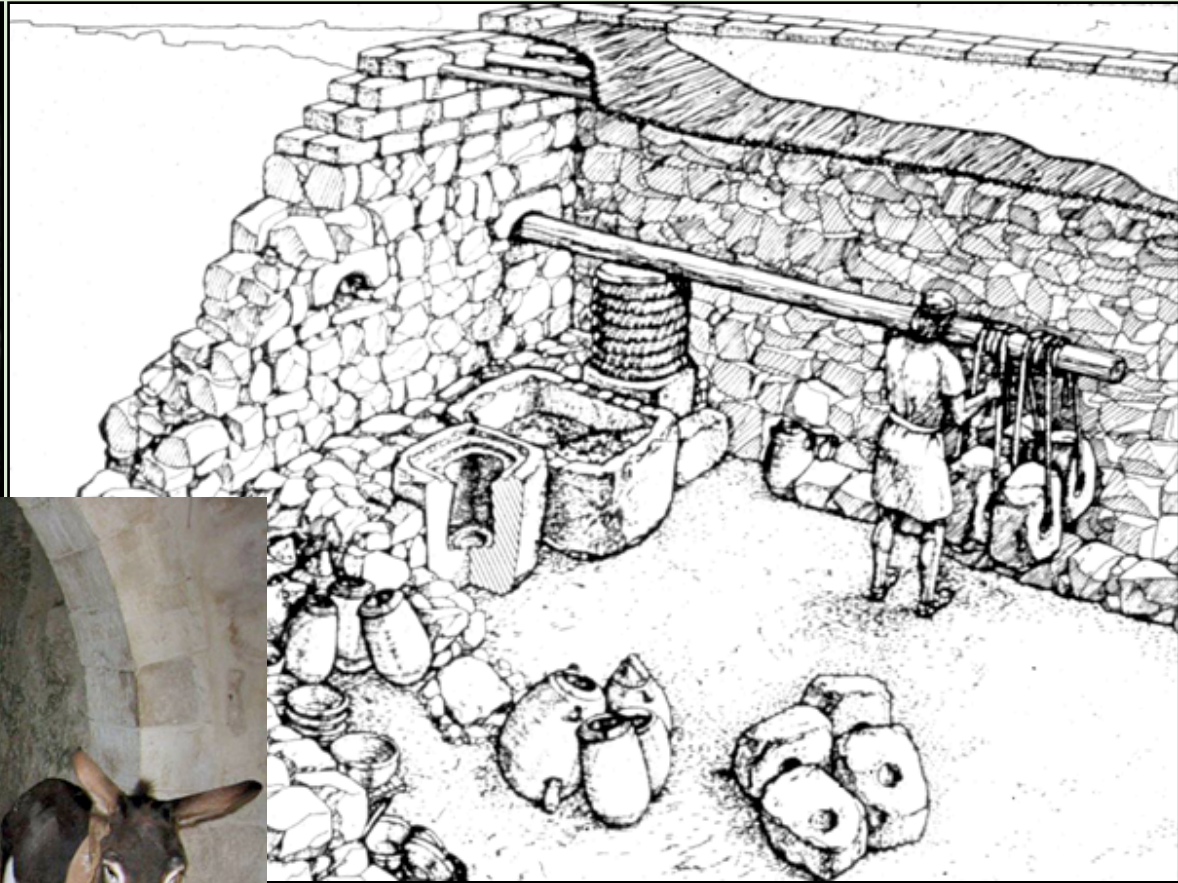
strygil



Panathenaic amphora, prize in the Panathenaic games, full of oil



# Olive press, olive pressings: from extra-virgin oil to *amurca*



# Olive 'symbolism'





# Olive 'symbolism'

## Athena and Athens

### Parthenon; acropolis





**Olive ‘symbolism’  
‘the queen of all  
trees’**

**Romulus and Remus**





# Other opsa (plural of opson)

**Cheese (goat, cow)**

**Legumes** (bean, chickpea, lentil) ; 'those grains of Demeter  
out of which bread is not made'

**Garden stuff; vegetables**

(asparagus, carrots, salsify, lettuce, onions, radish)

**Fruit** (figs, dates, plums, peaches, apples, less citrus)

**Nuts and berries**

salsify!





# Other opsa (plural of opson)

Honey: beekeeping = apiculture  
golden sweetener,  
also a preservative  
associations with  
truth, divinity







**Meat:**

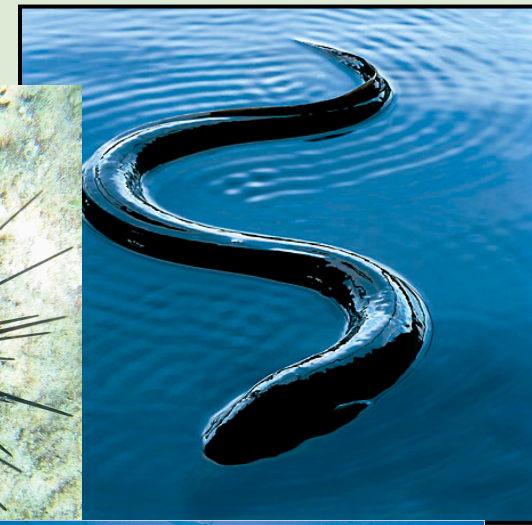
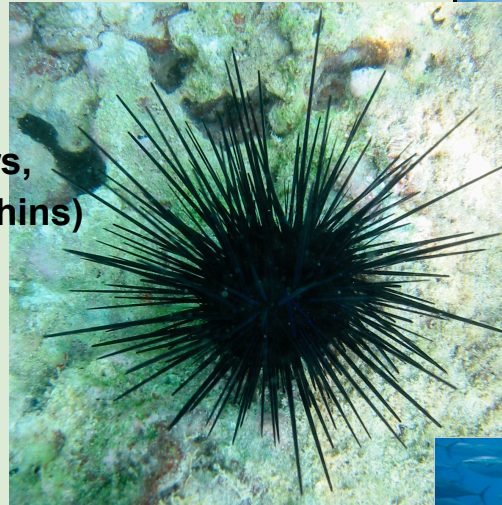
**Blood  
sacrifice**



## Fish and shellfish

(sprats, tuna, mullet, grouper, eel, crabs, lobsters, prawns, octopus, squid, sea anemones, sea urchins)

Modern Greek = psari from opsarion ( 'little relish' )



## Sign of wealth, power, luxury (*truphe*)

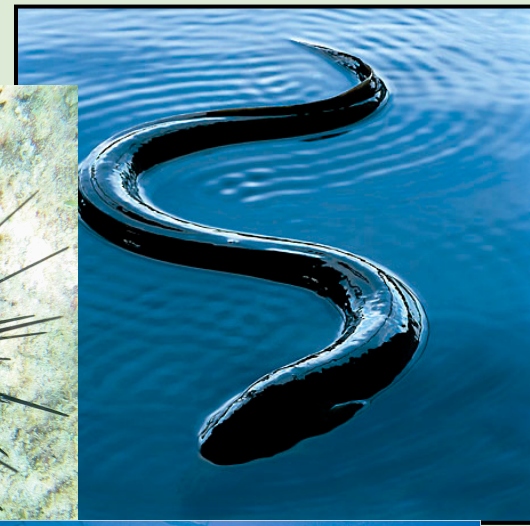
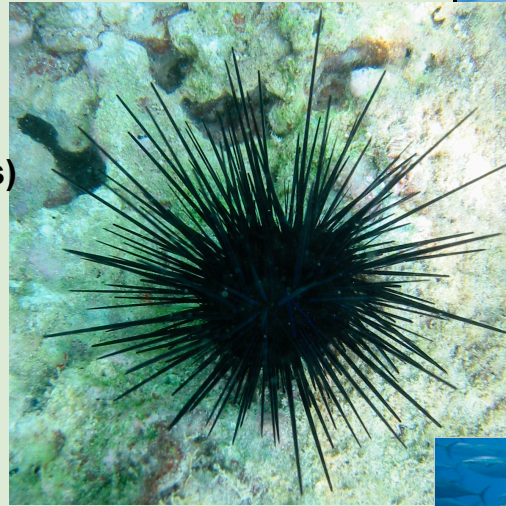
These things the poor cannot buy: the belly of a tuna, the head of a bass or conger, or cuttlefishes, which I think even the blessed gods do not despise... (Athenaeus, Deipnosophistae 302e)



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A Spartan was invited to a banquet at which sea urchins were served at table, and took one. He did not know how this food was eaten and did not notice how his fellow diners handled it: he put the urchin in his mouth, shell and all, and cracked it with his teeth. He was getting on badly with his helping, having not come to terms with its surface resistance, and said: “Pestiferous dish! I’ m not going to weaken and let you go now — but I’ ll take no more of your kind!” (Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* 91c-d)

# The ambiguity of fish

Who eats who?

Lie there among the fish who will heedlessly lick the gore off your wound. Your mother won't mourn you, laying you on the bier: Skamander (river near Troy) will carry you off, whirling you down to the broad gulf of the sea. There, when it catches sight on you, some fish will dart over, beneath the dark and rippling surface of the waves, and eat Lykaon's glistening fat.

Homer, *Iliad* 21, in which Achilles threatens (and, pitilessly kills) Lykaon, who will 'sleep with the fishes', unburied

